

PROJECT BRIEF

Evaluating Child Care Reforms in Illinois

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Project Description

The new 2014 Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act stresses the importance of evaluating the program's effectiveness including impacts on children. The planning grant enabled the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to develop a proposal for rigorously evaluating core aspects of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) program implementation.

Illinois will implement several policy changes in response to the 2014 CCDBG law. The planning grant proposal is focused on understanding the impact of two key policy changes: (1) extending the eligibility redetermination period to 12 months; and (2) implementing training and monitoring for license-exempt CCDF care providers.

Through the planning grant IDHS has developed an evaluation research proposal, and set the stage for its implementation, to answer important questions for CCDF policy design and planning and inform efforts to better serve the needs of low-income children and their families in Illinois.

Research Questions

The proposal poses research questions targeted towards two CCDF policy changes.

1) 12 Month Eligibility Redetermination Period:

- What are the effects of extending the redetermination period from six months to 12 months on: Parental employment and earnings? The number of different providers used by children/families? The use of subsidized center-based and/or licensed home-based childcare relative to other forms of subsidized care (i.e. informal or license exempt)?
- How do observed effects vary across specific sub-populations of participants (e.g. receiving cash assistance; rural and urban families)?
- What is the budgetary impact of the policy change to the 12-month determination? Does that policy change impact access of subsidized care and create waiting lists?

2) Training and Monitoring for License-Exempt CCDF Care Providers:

- What are the effects of the new health, safety, and child development training for license-exempt providers on the outcomes for children in their care in areas such as: reports of abuse and neglect, continuity of child care; school (kindergarten) attendance and readiness (if available); and referrals to other programs, (e.g. Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Early Intervention (EI))?
- What are the effects of the training and credentialing on license-exempt monitors' employment duration; probability of seeking additional training and professional development; continued careers in early childhood education; and earnings and participation in public benefit programs?

Methods

The proposed analysis presents a methodological strategy for assessing the two policy changes.

1) 12 Month Eligibility Redetermination Period:

To assess the effects of extending the redetermination period to 12 months on outcomes for parents and children, we will employ quasi-experimental methods, leveraging a natural experiment created by altered recertification periods for specific cohorts of program recipients. Specifically, a regression-discontinuity design has been planned.

2) Training and Monitoring for License-Exempt CCDF Care Providers:

The proposed analysis for this area of inquiry will be descriptive in nature. It will include the production of relevant descriptive statistics and the use of multivariate regression analysis to address the research questions.

Progress Update

Developing a research proposal required intra-agency cooperation to define a common goal around the key aspects that needed and could be evaluated in the context of the priorities set by the CCDF reauthorization of 2014. Key activities supported by the planning grant that contributed to production of the research proposal included:

- Holding several intra-agency meetings within IDHS and between the agencies involved and the research team at Chapin Hall.
- Development of an inventory of data resources. Chapin Hall conducted the inventory and designed a plan for its use in the context of the proposed evaluation.
- The planning grant has been instrumental in informing Illinois state policymakers and administrators about the critical issues related to implementation of the CCDF goals and how to evaluate the implementation.
- These decision-makers identified their priorities among the multiplicity of points of intervention, and researchers determined the most feasible rigorous approaches to answer the relevant research questions.
- The capacity of Illinois to carry out the proposed evaluations has coalesced under the planning grant and the state is poised to implement the research described in this proposal. Monthly cross-state activities facilitated by Center staff, attended by both state staff and the Chapin Hall researchers, have led to important internal discussions not only about research design, but also about how to communicate results to policymakers in ways that can lead to both understanding and clear implications for program and policy in Illinois.

There continues to be an open line of communication between Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) program staff and researchers to enable the clearest possible understanding of all aspects of the program, including the specific changes happening as a result of the CCDBG 2014 Act.

Implications for policy/practice

We envision several areas where policy implementation may be shifted based on results from careful data analyses and planning efforts.

Potential policy areas that may be targeted to undergo change include:

- funding priorities for investments in providers' quality of care;
- outreach strategies to enroll families from specific populations;
- licensing strategies to providers in the informal sector;

From a broader perspective, the planning grant process not only informs the current envisioned evaluation projects but also builds capacity for future work. It provides context for collaboration between IDHS and its public and private agency partners on the Early Learning Council and beyond.

Implications for research

The planning grant has facilitated the design of an evaluation research program that will address important, and heretofore unaddressed questions about the impact of key CCDF policy changes for Illinois families and also in generating knowledge to inform early childhood development programs and policies more broadly.

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