

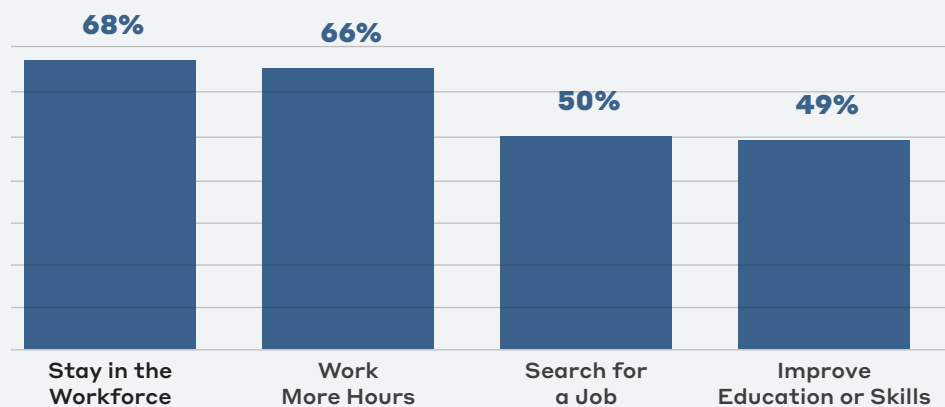
# Parent Perspectives on Child Care

Efforts to improve the child care system—whether at the federal, state, or local level—must be centered around parents’ priorities for child care. This requires a concerted effort to identify the needs and preferences of parents with young children and understand how the existing child care system meets these needs and where it falls short. While strong anecdotal evidence exists about how parents struggle to afford high-quality child care that meets their needs, a deeper understanding of how the child care system impacts families’ lives is needed to ensure family experiences can truly drive child care policy.

The Bipartisan Policy Center conducted four national parent surveys between October 2019 and December 2020 to bring parent data to the forefront of policy discussions.<sup>1</sup> The results of these surveys provide key insights into parents’ needs and preferences and how child care access affects families and our economy. Below are several key themes and lessons learned.

## Lack of Access to Affordable Child Care Affects Families

In 2019, being able to find child care impacted whether parents could:



**Child care is unaffordable.** In 2019, more than half of parents (54%) said that finding child care within their budget was somewhat or very difficult, and 17% of parents received financial assistance from a family member or relative to pay for child care expenses. To afford child care, parents said they...

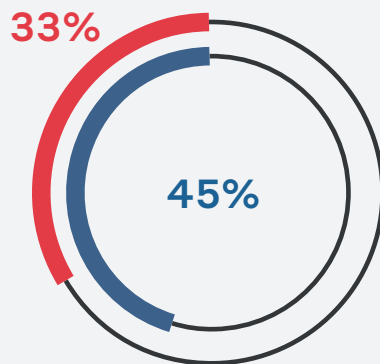
**45%** Tapped into Emergency Savings

**42%** Accrued Credit Card Debt

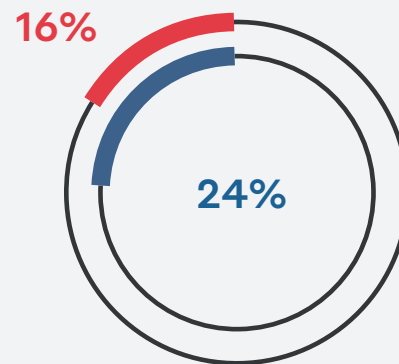
**43%** Delayed Setting Aside Money for Retirement

**Child care demands disproportionately fall on mothers.** In 2019, 34% of women and 26% of men reported reducing their work hours to help their families reduce their child care expenses.

In 2019, **mothers** and **fathers** said:



Finding child care had a large impact on staying in the workforce



They quit their job to stay at home with their child to help cover child care expenses

**The lack of affordable child care hinders the economy.** In 2019, some parents reported cutting back on workforce participation to reduce their child care expenses.

**30%** of parents reduced their work hours

**43%** changed their job in pursuit of more flexible hours

## Understanding What Parents Prefer and Need

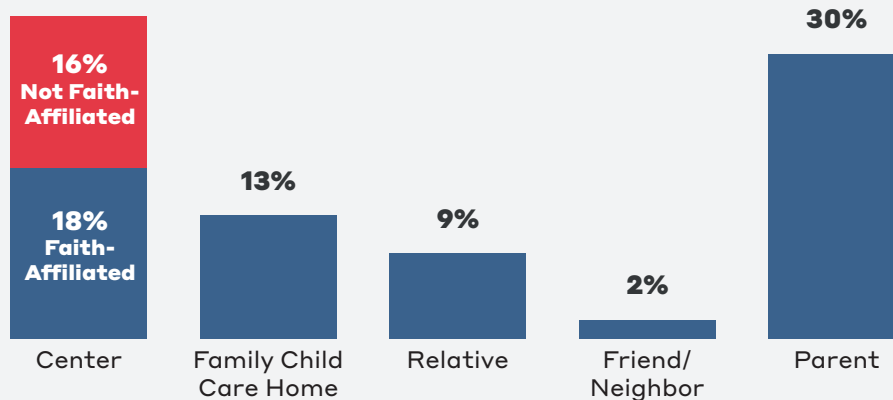
**Many parents need 30+ hours of child care per week.** In 2019, 63% of parents said they paid for 30 or more hours of child care each week. In August 2020, 44% of parents reported that they needed more than four full days of child care per week.

**Parents prefer child care closer to home.** In 2019, 60% of parents said they preferred child care closer to home, while just 27% preferred child care closer to their workplace or school. And to access child care, 86% of parents drive to their arrangement, but the distance they drive depends on community setting: 43% from rural communities, but just 30% from urban communities drive more than 10 miles.

**Parents rely on relatives and friends for care.** In 2019, 56% of parents said they relied on grandparents, family members, or friends for some of their child care needs. Families with incomes under \$50,000 and families with more children were more likely to rely on this informal network of support.

**Many parents—but not all—are able to use their preferred arrangement.** In January 2020, two-thirds (66%) of parents reported using a child care arrangement that aligned with their ideal child care type (if both price and accessibility were not factors).

### Ideal arrangements in January 2020 for families with a single parent or two working parents:



Faith-affiliated centers are an important component of the child care system and that many working families would prefer to care for their children themselves. Their responses also revealed that the term family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care does not reflect what parents actually want—parents overwhelmingly prefer to rely on relatives for child care rather than non-relative friends or neighbors.

## The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Care Needs

**Child care is necessary even during COVID-19.** Of the families with two working parents at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic...

**49%** are able to care for their children themselves

**18%** worked fewer hours to watch their children

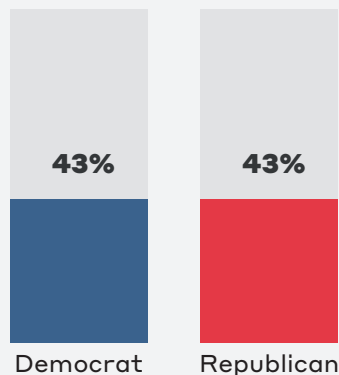
**23%** alternated work hours with their partner to provide care

**Widespread child care closures impacted access.** In August, 55% of parents reported that their previous provider was either closed temporarily, open with limited hours, or open with only limited spaces. Such closures persisted as 67% of parents reported the same in December. Strikingly, 9% of parents in August and 11% of parents in December reported that their previous child care provider closed permanently, causing long-lasting disruptions to the market.

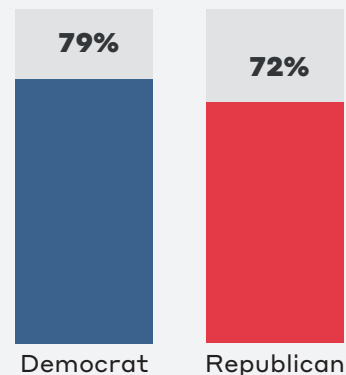
**Health and safety concerns are paramount as families return to child care.** About half of families said cleanliness/prevention of illness (51%), trust (48%), and a safe physical setting (43%) were among their top five most important factors when selecting their child care arrangement in December 2020.

**Parents on both sides of the aisle support public child care investments.** Despite differing political beliefs, federal support to ensure the child care system could rebound was something parents agreed on.

“Child care is an essential service that should remain open during COVID-19”



“The federal government is responsible for providing financial assistance to stabilize the child care market”



**The Takeaway**

These results are an important starting point to bring parent voices to policy conversations on improving child care. BPC's efforts to understand parents' child care needs and preferences are ongoing, and BPC encourages states and localities to engage parents in their communities to ensure a diversity of parent perspectives are heard.

# Endnotes

1. Bipartisan Policy Center, Parent Survey Resource Center, 2021. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/parent-survey-resource-center/>.