

# The Market-Based, Mixed-Delivery Child Care System

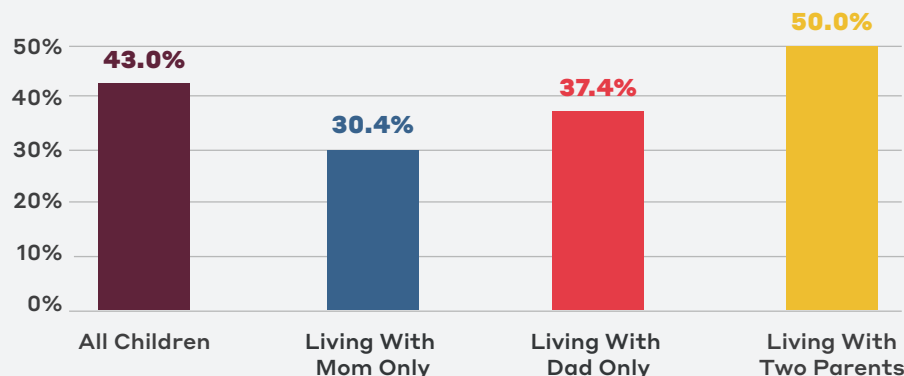
Child care is a market-based system where parents choose a provider based on a variety of factors, including quality, structure, cost, needs of their child, work circumstances, location, religious affiliation, and much more. Parents can choose between large child care centers, child care in the owner's home or in a faith-based setting, or care from a nanny or relative. Parents have the definitive choice of which setting best fits the needs of their family. However, certain factors might limit their options.

**60% of children younger than age 5 are in a regular child care arrangement their parent has chosen for them each week.**

## COST

Cost is the factor cited most often by families as the primary reason for difficulty finding child care.<sup>1</sup> The cost of child care is indeed often prohibitive, particularly for low-income, working families—in 33 states and Washington, D.C., infant care costs exceed the average cost of in-state college tuition at public four-year institutions.<sup>2</sup> While most parents cannot afford to pay more, providers are operating on razor-thin margins and most child care employees receive poverty-level wages.<sup>3</sup>

### Percent of Children Living With A Parent Working A Nonstandard Schedule, 2014<sup>4</sup>



## QUALITY

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In the early years, the human brain is exceptionally malleable and sensitive to experiences, for better or for worse, based on the quality of children's experiences.<sup>5</sup> The high-stakes nature of this period makes it critical that young children are in high-quality environments that are safe and socially, emotionally, and cognitively engaging. While parents seek the highest-quality option for their child, those are often the costlier programs and the hardest to find an open slot in.

## PROGRAM STRUCTURE

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Most center-based child care programs have limited hours and days of operation. Because many parents may work outside of a typical nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday schedule, families may need to choose a family child care or home-based option with more flexible or longer hours. Therefore, children may receive care in multiple settings throughout the week or attend a public program during the school year then a different type of child care in the summer. Other factors, such as religious affiliation or curriculum, may influence a parent's choice.

Mixed Delivery System includes center- and home-based providers, Head Start and Early Head Start programs and state prekindergarten programs across the public, private, for-profit, non-profit, and faith-based sectors.

## ACCESSIBILITY

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The market is poorly distributed, and demand often outgrows supply, leading families to join waiting lists for long periods of time. Finding care is particularly difficult for families in rural areas and parents of infants—nearly 40% of parents find the lack of an open slot the most difficult part of finding child care for their infant.<sup>6</sup> Other factors include the location of care (whether it is close to home, work, or whether they have that choice) and considerations for children with special needs.

### **The Takeaway**

Families are the building blocks of a productive society. Equipping families—especially young, first-time parents—with the tools, knowledge, and awareness to make better choices for their children takes so little and yet accomplishes so much. All families deserve the chance to set themselves up for success and to put their own children on the path toward a brighter future.

# Endnotes

1. Lisa Corcoran and Katrina Steinley, Early Childhood Program Participation, Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016: First Look, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, January 2019. Available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017101REV.pdf>.
2. Committee for Economic Development, “Child Care in State Economies Fact Sheet, 2019 Update,” 2019. Available at: [https://www.ced.org/assets/reports/childcareimpact/fact\\_sheets/revised/United%20States%20Fact%20Sheet%201312019.pdf](https://www.ced.org/assets/reports/childcareimpact/fact_sheets/revised/United%20States%20Fact%20Sheet%201312019.pdf).
3. U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, “Childcare Workers,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 12, 2019. Available at: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/childcare-workers.htm#tab-1>.
4. Parents Burning the Midnight (and Weekend) Oil,” U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, November 21, 2017. Available at: [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/11/parents\\_burning\\_the.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/11/parents_burning_the.html).
5. Center on the Developing Child, The Foundations of Lifelong Health Are Built in Early Childhood, Harvard University, July 2010. Available at: <https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9rwpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Foundations-of-Lifelong-Health.pdf>.
6. Lisa Corcoran and Katrina Steinley, Early Childhood Program Participation, Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016: First Look, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, January 2019. Available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017101REV.pdf>.