

## **Low-Income Women and Their Families: How They Benefit from Affordable, High-Quality Child Care and Struggle to Find It**

All of the child care challenges that families face are especially intense for low-income families. Yet these families are in the greatest need of affordable, high-quality care and confront the most difficulties in finding it.

### **High-Quality Child Care Is Important to Low-Income Children**

A positive early education experience helps low-income children overcome the barriers created by poverty by preparing them to enter school ready to succeed.

- Millions of low-income children could benefit from high-quality child care. In 2006, 12.7 million children under age eighteen (17 percent),<sup>1</sup> including 5.0 million children under age six (20 percent), lived in poverty.<sup>2</sup>
- A family of four that earns up to \$41,300 per year (equal to 200 percent of the poverty level in 2007) still faces significant hardships in meeting all of their basic needs—paying for food, housing, health care, child care and transportation. Without child care assistance, it is difficult for low-income families to meet all of these basic expenses. In 2006, 28.6 million children under age eighteen (39 percent),<sup>3</sup> including 10.5 million children under age six (43 percent), lived in families with incomes below 200 percent of poverty.<sup>4</sup>
- Low-income children often start behind their peers when they enter school. Studies show that low-income children may have more limited vocabularies, be read to less often, and live in homes with fewer books.<sup>5</sup> Without the strong start that they need prior to entering kindergarten to set them on the path to success, low-income children often fall even further behind their peers once they are in school. For example, first-graders from non-poor families are more likely to recognize words by sight than first-graders from poor families and twice as many first-graders from non-poor families are proficient at understanding words in context, multiplication, and division as first-graders from poor families.<sup>6</sup>
- Research shows that high-quality child care helps low-income children enter school ready to succeed. One study found that children who had enrolled in high-quality child care demonstrated greater mathematical ability and thinking and attention skills, and experienced fewer behavior problems than other children in second grade. Effects were particularly strong for low-income children.<sup>7</sup> Other studies have demonstrated that low-income children who enrolled in high-quality early care and education programs score higher on reading, vocabulary, math, and cognitive tests, are less likely to be held back a grade, are less likely to be arrested as youths, and are more likely to attend college than their peers who did not enroll in such programs.<sup>8</sup>

## **Child Care Benefits Low-Income Parents**

Reliable, stable child care programs, and assistance to help low-income parents pay for child care, enable parents to work and gain financial security for their families.

- Problems with child care can cause low-income parents to lose wages, be denied a promotion, be reprimanded for absenteeism, or even lose their jobs.<sup>9</sup>
- Single mothers who receive child care assistance are 39 percent more likely to remain employed after two years than those who do not receive assistance in paying for child care. Former welfare recipients with young children are 82 percent more likely to be employed after two years if they receive child care assistance.<sup>10</sup>
- A study revealed that 27.7 percent of families leaving welfare who did *not* receive child care assistance within three months of leaving returned to welfare, compared with 19.5 percent returning to welfare who did receive child care assistance.<sup>11</sup>

## **Low-Income Families Face Barriers to Finding High-Quality Child Care**

Although child care is particularly critical for enabling low-income families to improve their situation and give a boost to their children, these families are also particularly likely to face serious obstacles to getting the good-quality and affordable child care that they need.

- It is often difficult for low-income families to find child care in their communities. For example, statewide surveys in Illinois and Maryland showed that there were significantly fewer regulated child care slots per child in low-income areas than in wealthier areas.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, a study in California found that the number of slots in child care centers relative to the child population was 25 percent lower in low-income neighborhoods than in high-income neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup>
- It is more difficult to find child care during nonstandard hours,<sup>14</sup> when many low-income parents work. Over 25 percent of low-income working families work evening or overnight shifts, compared with only 17 percent of higher-income working families.<sup>15</sup>
- Even when care is available in low-income communities, the quality is often inadequate. Studies in Massachusetts and Philadelphia, for example, show that child care centers serving low-income children are less likely to provide good-quality care than child care centers serving moderate- and high-income children.<sup>16</sup>
- Low-income families find it difficult to afford decent child care. The average fee for full-time, center-based child care today ranges from approximately \$3,800 to \$14,600 annually, depending on where the family lives and the age of the child.<sup>17</sup> The majority of low-income families do not get help with these costs—only one in seven children eligible for child care assistance under federal law is receiving help.<sup>18</sup>

- School-age care is often in short supply in low-income communities. One study revealed that two-fifths of low-income working parents have difficulty finding care beyond school hours, including after school, or during the summer, vacations, or other school closings, for school-age children.<sup>19</sup> Before- and after-school care can also be very costly for parents struggling to make ends meet, with costs averaging \$3,500 per year.<sup>20</sup>

---

**Sources:**

<sup>1</sup> Ayana Douglas-Hall and Michelle Chau, *Basic Facts About Low-Income Children: Birth to Age 18* (New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007), 1, *available at* [http://nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_762.pdf](http://nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_762.pdf) (last visited Feb. 8, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Ayana Douglas-Hall and Michelle Chau, *Basic Facts About Low-Income Children: Birth to Age 6* (New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007), 1, *available at* [http://nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_764.pdf](http://nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_764.pdf) (last visited Feb. 8, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> *Basic Facts About Low-Income Children: Birth to Age 18*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Basic Facts About Low-Income Children: Birth to Age 6*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young Children* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1995); Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2007* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007), Indicator ED1: Family Reading to Young Children, *available at* <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/edu1.asp> (last visited Feb. 8, 2008); Pamela High, Marita Hopmann, Linda LaGasse, Robert Sege, John Moran, Celeste Guterrez, and Samuel Becker, "Child Centered Literacy Orientation: A Form of Social Capital?" *Pediatrics*, 103 (4), 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Kristin Denton and Jerry West, *Children's Reading and Mathematics Achievement in Kindergarten and First Grade* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), x.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen S. Peisner-Feinberg, Richard M. Clifford, Mary L. Culkin, Carollee Howes, Sharon Lynn Kagan, et al., *The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go to School* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Arthur J. Reynolds, Judy A. Temple, Dylan L. Robertson, and Emily A. Mann, *Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Children Parent Center Program*, Report presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Prevention Research in Washington, DC, June 2001; Frances Campbell, Craig Ramey, Joseph Sparling, Isabelle Lewis, Margaret Burchinal, Elizabeth Pungello, and Shari Miller-Johnson, *Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, 1999); National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, "Preschoolers Who Experienced Higher Quality Care Have Better Intellectual and Language Skills" (NIH Backgrounder) (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2001); W. Steven Barnett, Kwanghee Jung, Vivian Wong, Tom Cook, and Cynthia Lamy, *Effects of Five State Prekindergarten Programs on Early Learning*, (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Rima Shore, *Ahead of the Curve: Why America's Leading Employers Are Addressing the Needs of New and Expectant Parent*, Executive Summary (New York, NY: Families and Work Institute, 1998); Lisa Dodson, Tiffany Manuel, and Ellen Bravo, *Keeping Jobs and Raising Families in Low-Income America: It Just Doesn't Work* (A Report of the Across Boundaries Project) (Cambridge, MA: Radcliffe Public Policy Center and 9to5 National Association of Working Women, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Heather Boushey, *Staying Employed After Welfare: Work Supports and Job Quality Vital to Employment Tenure and Wage Growth* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002), 10-12 *available at* <http://www.epi.org/briefingpapers/128/bp128.pdf> (last visited Feb. 11, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Loprest, *Use of Government Benefits Increases among Families Leaving Welfare* (Snapshots of America's Families III Series, No. 6) (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003), *available at* [http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/310838\\_snapshots3\\_no6.pdf](http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/310838_snapshots3_no6.pdf) (last visited Feb. 11, 2008).

- 
- <sup>12</sup> J. Lee Kreader, Jessica Piecyk, and Ann M. Collins, *Scant Increases After Welfare Reform: Regulated Child Care Supply in Illinois and Maryland, 1996-1998* (New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, 2000), 23-25, *available at* [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_388.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_388.pdf) (last visited Feb. 11, 2008).
- <sup>13</sup> Bruce Fuller, Shelley Waters Boots, Emilio Castilla and Diane Hirshberg, *A Stark Plateau – California Families See Little Growth in Child Care Centers (Policy Brief 02-2)* (Berkeley and Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education and San Francisco, CA: California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, 2002), 9, *available at* <http://pace.berkeley.edu/reports/PB.02-2.pdf> (last visited Feb. 11, 2008).
- <sup>14</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Welfare Reform: Implications of Increased Work Participation for Child Care (GAO/HEHS 97-75)* (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1997); U.S. General Accounting Office, *Welfare to Work: Child Care Assistance Limited; Welfare Reform May Expand Needs (GAO/HEHS-95-220)* (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995).
- <sup>15</sup> Gregory Acs, Katherin Ross Phillips, and Daniel McKenzie, *On the Bottom Rung: A Profile of Americans in Low-Income Working Families* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2002), 5, *available at* [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/anf\\_a42.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/anf_a42.pdf) (last visited Feb. 15, 2008).
- <sup>16</sup> Nancy L. Marshall, Cindy L. Creps, Nancy R. Burstein, Frederic B. Glantz, Wendy Wagner Robeson, Steve Barnett, *The Cost and Quality of Full Day, Year-round Early Care and Education in Massachusetts: Preschool Classrooms, Executive Summary* (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Women and Abt Associates Inc., 2001), 4-5, *available at* <http://www.abtassociates.com/reports/ES-Cost-Quality.pdf> (last visited Feb. 14, 2008); *Improving School Readiness Project, Early to Rise: Improving the School Readiness of Philadelphia’s Young Children* (Philadelphia, PA: United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and School District of Philadelphia, 2001).
- <sup>17</sup> National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, *Parents and the High Price of Child Care: 2007 Update* (Arlington, VA: NACCRRRA, 2007), 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Jennifer Mezey, Mark Greenberg, and Rachel Schumacher, *The Vast Majority of Federally-Eligible Children Did Not Receive Child Care Assistance in FY 2000* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2002), *available at* [www.clasp.org/publications/1in7full.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/publications/1in7full.pdf) (last visited Jan. 10, 2008).
- <sup>19</sup> Jody Heymann, “What Happens During and After School: Conditions Faced by Working Parents Living in Poverty and Their School-Aged Children,” *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 6 (1), 2000, 5-20.
- <sup>20</sup> Karen Schulman, *The High Cost of Child Care Puts Quality Care Out of Reach for Many Families* (Washington, DC: Children’s Defense Fund, 2000), 6.