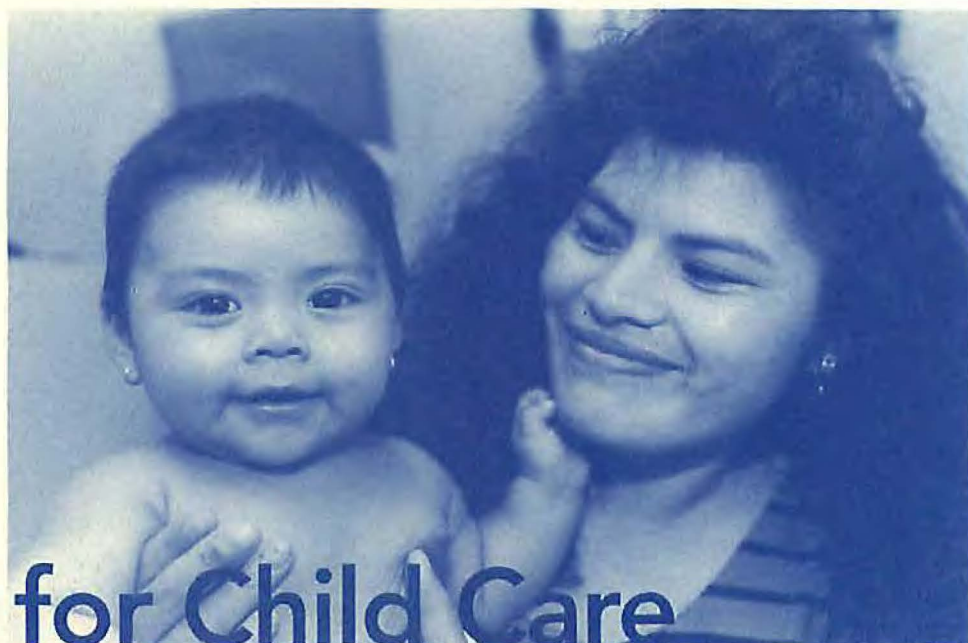


RESEARCH SERIES 98-3



Waiting for Child Care

How do parents adjust to scarce options in Santa Clara County?



Policy Analysis for California Education

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT INITIATIVE
SANTA CLARA COUNTY COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP



RESEARCH SERIES 98-3

Waiting for Child Care

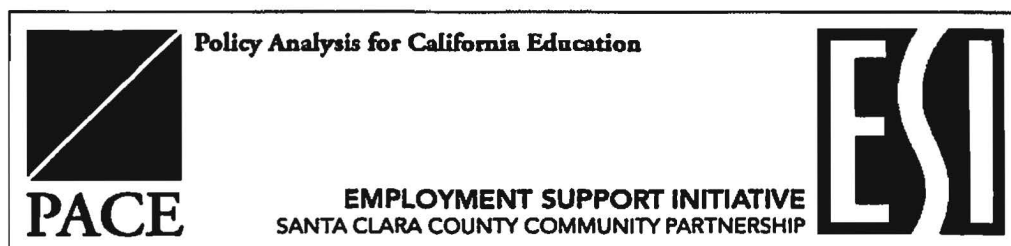
How do parents adjust to scarce options in Santa Clara County?

Casey Coonerty

Tamsin Levy

Policy Analysis for California Education
for the
Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

1998



This report stems from the *Growing Up in Poverty Project*, funded in large part by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Center for the Future of Children and by the HHS Child Care Bureau, Washington D.C. Steady support from Marie Young and Pia Divine is enormously appreciated.

Policy Analysis for California Education—PACE

University of California, Berkeley • Stanford University

3653 Tolman Hall • Berkeley, CA 94720-1670

Telephone: 510/642-7223

Web Site: <http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/PACE/pace.html>

CONTENTS

PREFACE	v
OVERVIEW	1
ENTERING THE MARKET	2
Assessing parents' demand for child care	
SACRAMENTO'S PUSH TO SIMPLIFY ENTRY TO CHILD-CARE MARKETS	3
Learning more about child-care demand	
HOW WAS THE PACE STUDY DESIGNED?	5
MAJOR FINDINGS	6
Who are these parents?	
What did we discover about child care and work?	
What types of child care do parents prefer?	
Debate over informal care	
Secondary child-care arrangements	
Hours children spend in care	
Finding child care	
The financial burden for working poor families	
How do parents view child-care quality?	
How do parents adjust while waiting for subsidies?	
CONCLUSIONS AND ACTION AGENDA	17
ENDNOTES	19

PREFACE

This ambitious survey of parents waiting for child care was led by Casey Coonerty and Tamsin Levy at the UC Berkeley PACE Center. They worked long hours, supervised a bevy of data collectors, and carefully crafted the report which follows. Their work will help Santa Clara County develop a more effective and fair way of connecting low-income and blue-collar parents to various child-care options. As this report so vividly reveals, getting on a waiting list for child care is simple. But the allocation of scarce day-care slots is hardly a quick or equitable process. Whether a family successfully receives a precious child-care space still depends on which waiting list their name appears. While waiting for aid, most parents are holding down a low-wage job and allocating a large portion of their take-home pay for child care.

First and foremost, the authors wish to express appreciation to the 300 women who agreed to be interviewed about their personal lives, jobs, and social relationships. The statistical analysis that follows does not fully capture these lives and the rich stories told by these women, but it provides a start. Special thanks also are due to Nancy Cohen for helping to design the interview protocol. Four women at PACE spent their evenings and weekends placing calls to 1,800 families who appeared on waiting lists: Trina McAlister, Sharon Terman, Meline Toumani, and Suzanne Van Steenbergen. Their dedication to this project and their perseverance were remarkable.

Staff at three major child-care organizations contributed time to assemble their waiting lists and voluntarily share this information. They included Barbara Kasnic at the Community Coordinated Child Development Council (4Cs); Yolanda Garcia, county director of Head Start; and Vivian Cooper at Choices for Children. They also reviewed earlier drafts of this report. Their openness throughout this endeavor has been much appreciated. In addition, staff at 4Cs conducted the Vietnamese interviews.

At PACE's Berkeley office, Diana Smith and Elaine Chen ensured that the logistics and support for the project continued to flow. Spanish translations were done by Sharon Terman, Pablo Sandoval, and Luis Huerta. Bob Hass worked on the elegance of the authors' prose, informed by reviews of earlier drafts by Gerald Hayward and Fran Kipnis. Katherine Huffaker Jones developed the layout of the document. Robert Dillman and Ms. Smith drew the graphics. Kate Welty provided

patient and helpful guidance on the local policy context in which family demand for child care was studied.

PACE conducted the survey and data analysis independently. This very fact is a tribute to the Social Service Agency's resolve to look at key pieces of the welfare reform puzzle with refreshing candor and a thirst for hard evidence. From PACE's perspective, we deeply appreciate being able to collaborate with a partner that is so committed to making welfare reform work and to strengthening the county's child-care infrastructure.

This important effort was built on this shared commitment and cooperative spirit of our colleagues. Thank you all.

Bruce Fuller
PACE Director
University of California, Berkeley

Jolene Smith
Child Care Coordinator
Social Services Agency

OVERVIEW

In winter 1998, the PACE research center began a phone survey of low-income and blue-collar parents. Most were mothers who had signed-up on one of three child-care waiting lists maintained by different agencies within Santa Clara County. This survey was conducted at the request of the county's Social Services Agency (SSA).

Our immediate aim was to help the agency simplify and streamline the fragmented process by which parents attempt to find child care. This mandate is contained within the state's welfare reform legislation that was approved by the legislature and governor in 1997. In addition, PACE and SSA initiated a four-year study to track CalWORKs parents who must find child care prior to entering the workforce. The present study allowed us to pilot test many interview questions.

The survey began with the three major waiting lists maintained by Head Start, the 4Cs Council, and Choices for Children. Because the 4Cs list was by far the longest, we only selected those parents who had signed up within the past two years to make the consolidation process manageable. After consolidating all three lists, our working file contained 5,238 names. We then randomly selected and interviewed 300 parents in depth about how they were coping while looking for work and waiting for a child-care slot. These women—often voiced in sharp and impatient tones—told us much about these facets of their lives:

- The character and basic demographics of their households.
- Their worries over maintaining employment and searching for child care.
- How they searched for interim child-care while waiting for a subsidized slot.
- How they struggled to pay for child care, and how they perceived the quality of care.

We begin by sketching the policy problem. Then we report on how these parents see their world and their limited child-care options.

ENTERING THE MARKET: ASSESSING PARENTS' DEMAND FOR CHILD CARE

Child care and preschool programs in California grew slowly between the second world war and the mid-sixties. This steady yet incremental expansion occurred mainly through centers and preschools which were often extensions of public schools. Then, as millions of women with young children moved into jobs and professions, the child-care system grew rapidly and took many different forms. This came to include licensed family day-care homes and vouchers, allowing a diverse mix of parents to hire relatives and paid baby-sitters—supported by rising public subsidies.

California was one of the first states to experiment with child-care vouchers. The intent was to respond quickly to the skyrocketing demand for child care, bypass bureaucracies, and widen parental choice. Since 1990 federal and state spending on child-care and preschool programs—with the important exception of Head Start and centers financed by the state department of education—has supported this market oriented approach, favoring the financing of child-care vouchers rather than building new centers. Sacramento now allocates almost \$2 billion annually to local governments and community organizations for child-care and preschool programs. Over half of this allocation is awarded to parents in the form of seemingly portable vouchers.

Within this policy context it becomes important to understand child-care waiting lists at the county level. Such lists represent the point of entry for thousands of low-income and blue-collar families who are trying to find a slot for their child, or a subsidy to help offset the high cost of care on the open market. Many middle-class families also sign-up on waiting lists as they attempt to penetrate the day-care market. But these families are often more successful in finding stable child care than are working-class and poor families.

Over the past year in Santa Clara County, some child-care advocates have estimated that between 8,000 and 14,000 families have applied but continue to wait for child-care assistance. Most of these families earn less than \$28,000 a year and therefore are eligible for financial aid. Indeed, without it these parents will be unable to meet the high cost of private care. Consequently they are likely to drop out of the labor force, remain on welfare, or simply be unable to hold down a job until their young child starts school at age five.

Local policy makers, parents, and citizens in Santa Clara County should worry about waiting lists—the front door of the child-care market—for three reasons. First, the fragmentation of waiting lists means that child-care slots and subsidies are allocated haphazardly, depending on which list a parent happens to sign up. Currently three major agencies maintain separate waiting lists. This duplication of

effort is costly for all three agencies and creates unwarranted confusion in the eyes of parents.

Second, waiting lists are used frequently by local policy makers and the media as indicators of the need for child care. Yet they may overstate true demand if a large number of families sign-up on more than one list, or if a sizable number of families secure child care but then do not request that their name be taken off the list. This was a major concern of the research team at the beginning of this study.

Local policy makers know very little about how much or within which neighborhoods the demand for child care will grow. Key factors driving growth and demand include the rate of job growth and the extent to which welfare reform succeeds in moving more low-income parents into long-term jobs, not simply cutting the welfare rolls. If waiting lists can be consolidated and more effectively organized, a single list would serve as a more accurate indicator of the need for additional child care.

Third, by studying how parents respond while waiting for subsidized child care, we can strengthen the system more thoughtfully. For example, our survey reveals that many parents do find an informal child-care provider while they are waiting for a subsidy. In doing so, however, they end up paying out-of-pocket fees. This additional financial burden reportedly disrupts their job search activities. Many parents also are waiting to win a slot in a preschool or center-based program, strongly believing that this option offers a richer educational setting for their young child. This helps to reveal their true preference for organized care, yielding a better understanding of family demand patterns.

Findings in all three of these areas can help guide local policy makers in reshaping the child-care system. Sacramento policy leaders might listen carefully to the voices of these working-poor parents, as well.

SACRAMENTO'S PUSH TO SIMPLIFY ENTRY TO CHILD-CARE MARKETS

In 1997 the California legislature passed Assembly Bill 1542, providing an ambitious blue-print for welfare reform. It also mandated that each county's child-care planning council create a method for consolidating its various waiting lists.¹ Legislators were concerned that multiple waiting lists contributed to parents' confusion over how to find care and could lead to unfair allocation of scarce slots. They also were worried that waiting list figures did not accurately reflect true demand for child care services. For example, a recent report in Santa Clara County stated that

the county has over 12,000 subsidized child-care slots currently in use, but an additional 14,000 parents on waiting lists, representing a lengthy queue for subsidies.² At first glance, it appears that a like number of additional slots are needed to serve these parents. However, since the county is not able to cross reference waiting lists maintained by the three major agencies, duplicate names likely appear on the lists. This could inflate estimates of the actual need for child care. But until the present study was conducted we didn't know the extent of this over count.

As pressure mounts to add subsidized child-care slots, it becomes more critical to determine the exact number of people waiting for subsidies. The state has placed much of this responsibility on local planning councils and their ability to successfully consolidate waiting lists.

For low-income parents, the impact of having to wait for child-care assistance is clearly seen in their daily lives. As parents move into the workforce or struggle to hold down a job, the need for affordable, high quality care is pressing. Recent research has shown that a child's environment during the early years of life has a direct impact on healthy brain development, as well as social skills and emotional well being.³ Without subsidies, however, many parents have to adjust job schedules and compromise their child-care choices in order to pin down any kind of affordable care. These compromises are seen in the quality of care utilized, parental stress, and worker productivity. We report below on how many low-income parents pay out a huge slice of job earnings for child care—while their name sits on a waiting list.

As parents move into the workforce or struggle to hold down a job, the need for affordable, high quality care is pressing.

Learning more about child-care demand

For low-income parents, the financial burden of child care is prohibitive, which explains why so many seek outside help to pay for it. Thousands of families have signed up on waiting lists throughout California, and these numbers are expected to grow as low-income welfare recipients who are re-entering the workplace begin looking for child care. But again, knowledge is sketchy on how many people are currently waiting within each county, since most counties maintain multiple waiting lists. And most local agencies do not have the capacity to update waiting lists, a problem which may further inflate estimates of actual demand for subsidized care.

By interviewing 300 parents in Santa Clara County on subsidy waiting lists, this report aims to address three specific issues:

- What types of families remain on child-care waiting lists? How many people are currently waiting for assistance?

-
- What is the quality and cost of care that parents are using as they wait for financial aid?
 - What is the overall impact of waiting for subsidies on the lives of both parents and children?

HOW WAS THE PACE STUDY DESIGNED?

The first component of the study involved the consolidation of three waiting lists—one from each agency—into a master list. We received waiting lists from the Community Coordinated Child Development Council of Santa Clara County (4Cs), the Head Start program, and Choices for Children.⁴ Unlike the other two agencies, 4Cs contributed names placed on their waiting list during the last two years. After consolidating the three lists, the new master list contained 5,238 names. Once duplicates were removed, only 4,810 names remained. See side box, “Elimination of Duplicates,” on page 8.

Our goal was to complete 300 parent interviews by drawing names from the consolidated waiting list.⁵ We randomly sampled 800 names from the list. Due primarily to a high rate of disconnected or wrong phone numbers (52% of all calls made), our initial sample of 800 proved too small to generate the 300 interviews needed. Consequently, we resampled 1,000 additional names, thereby creating a sample pool of 1,800 names in total.⁶

As an incentive to participate in the study, we offered each eligible parent \$10 upon completion of the full interview. The first portion of the phone interview determined whether or not the respondent fit the requirements of our study. To do so, the respondent had to have at least one child under the age of five, and she could not have received a subsidy for child care unless it began less than six months prior to the administration of the survey.⁷ If the parent had more than one child under the age of five, our interviewer randomly selected one of her children. The selected child then became one focus of the survey. There were 96 parents who did not qualify for the full survey. In most cases this was because their children were now over the age of five.

Participants answered a 30-minute phone survey consisting of structured and open-ended questions on a variety of topics. These included questions on present child-care quality and cost, parental stress, demographics, and arrangements made by parents while they were waiting for child-care subsidies. Of the 300 completed interviews, 12 were conducted in Spanish and two were conducted in Vietnamese.

Limitations in our capacity to fully pursue individuals from the waiting lists may

have created a bias in our results. If the phone numbers that were given to us were wrong numbers or nonworking numbers, we did not search further to make contact with these individuals. Therefore, the population participating in our survey over represents the most stable families appearing on the waiting lists. The discovery that these waiting lists are so out of date suggests that they are problematic indicators of unmet demand for child care.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Who are these parents?

Our next step was to ascertain the demographic characteristics of sampled families appearing on our combined waiting list. Our findings indicate that the ethnic diversity of respondents mirrors the diversity within Santa Clara County as a whole (Figure 1). Approximately 89% of the 300 respondents are mothers, 7% are fathers, 4% are grandparents, and less than 1% are guardians or foster parents. The

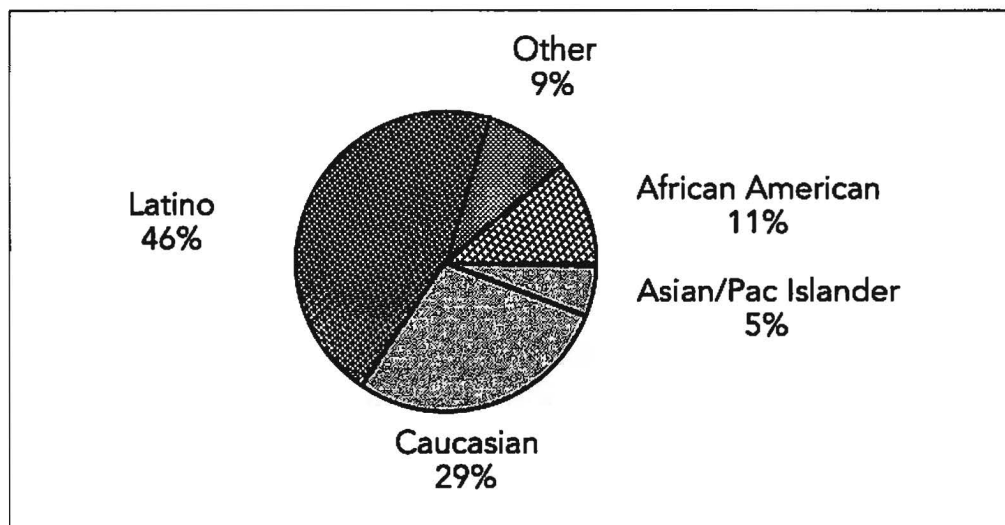


Figure 1

Ethnic background of participating families

Our findings indicate that the ethnic diversity of respondents mirrors the diversity within Santa Clara County as a whole

ages of the respondents range from 17 to 65, with a median age of 28. The median age of children in families surveyed is three years: 37% of the children are infants (ages 0-2), and the remaining 63% are over the age of two but younger than five. Although the majority of respondents (47%) gave birth to their first child between the ages of 19 and 24, one-third of all respondents first gave birth as teenagers (Figure 2).⁸

Forty-eight percent (48%) of the respondents have never been married, while another 26% are either divorced or separated. Therefore, 74% of the waiting list population are single parents. Among this group, 68% are currently working (Figure 3). Note that these parents are working despite the fact that they have yet to receive child-care subsidies.

A majority of respondents report a total family income of less than \$20,000, with 36% claiming earnings of less than \$10,000 (Figure 4). Most respondents have received some form of public assistance within the last two years. The programs most widely utilized include Medi-Cal, Food Stamps, AFDC, and WIC (Figure 5).

Figure 2

**Age at which mother
gave birth to first child**

*One-third of all
respondents first
gave birth as
teenagers*

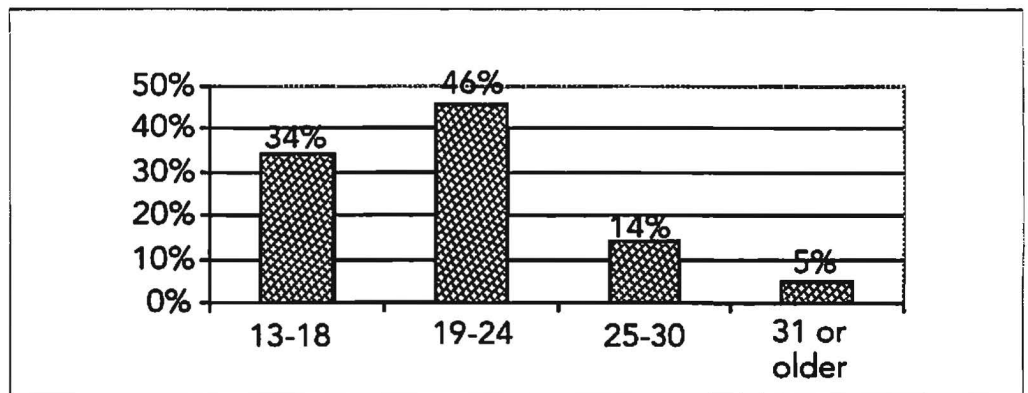
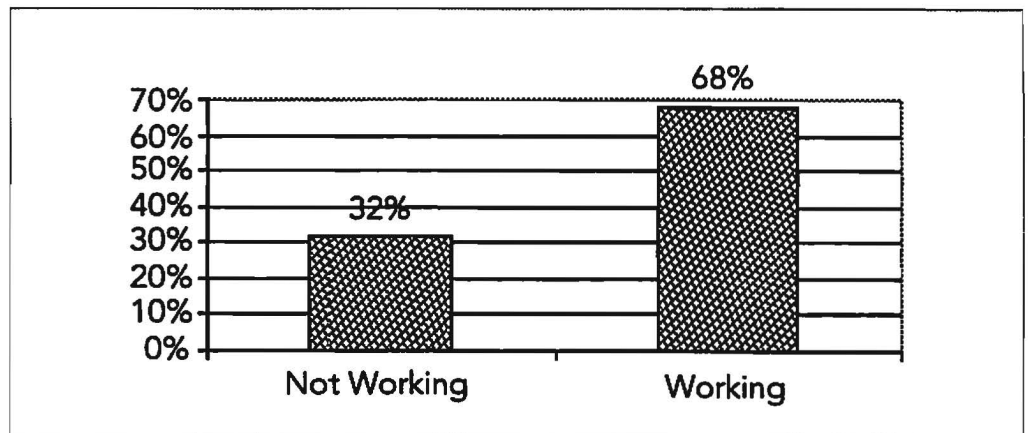


Figure 3

**Employment status
of parents**

*Among sampled
single parents, 68%
are currently working*



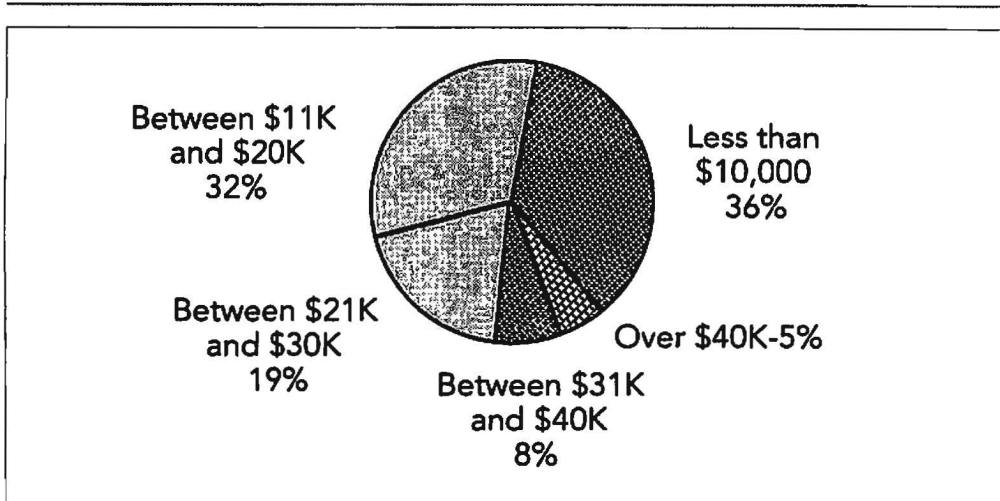


Figure 4

Family income of study participants

A majority of respondents report a total family income of less than \$20,000, with 36% claiming incomes of less than \$10,000

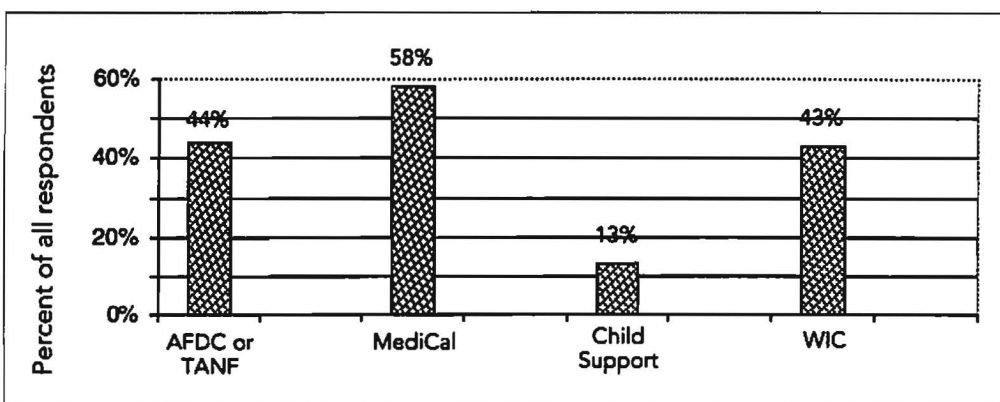


Figure 5

Public benefits received by study participants

The majority are not receiving cash welfare assistance

ELIMINATION OF DUPLICATE FAMILIES

Policy makers point to the number of parents on waiting lists as a measure of the demand for child-care subsidies. However, without the ability to link separate waiting lists the same parent could appear on multiple lists, leading to an exaggerated estimate of unmet demand.

In our study of Santa Clara County waiting lists, we found a 5% to 8% duplication rate on the consolidated waiting list of 5,238 names. The 5% rate signifies the elimination of all listings that shared an identical name and phone number, or the same name with a very similar phone number. The 8% rate occurs when also eliminating all listings with the same name, regardless of different phone numbers or other differences in identification. In total, 428 of the 5,238 names were removed. Although the duplication rate may differ significantly in other counties, in Santa Clara County it is quite modest.

What did we discover about child care and work?

Here are the major findings based on our interviews with 300 parents:

- County waiting lists are not up-to-date.

Our research team had to make almost 1,800 calls to complete 300 interviews. Once we reached the selected parents, all but a few agreed to participate in the half-hour interview. The problem was that the bulk of phone numbers had been changed or disconnected. It is common for low-income families to move or change their phone number fairly frequently. However, there is no way of estimating what proportion of these unreachable parents still reside in the county, are searching for child care, or would benefit from subsidies.

When child-care waiting lists are not kept current, their length does not accurately reflect need or unmet demand for child care in the county. Until these lists are consolidated and streamlined, the county has no reliable way of tracking true levels of excess demand.

- The three major lists contain relatively few duplicate names.

Only 428 parents—or 8% of the total of 5,238 families on the combined list of low-income families—had signed up on more than one waiting list.⁹ This fact does contribute to the list's validity as a rough indicator of child-care demand in the county, notwithstanding the out-of-date character of the lists.

Although our study did not directly investigate the potential inequity resulting from signing up on a particular waiting list, this issue is important to the consolidation debate. A family's ability to gain a child-care slot or subsidy remains driven in part by the particular list on which they sign up. A family with greater economic resources to cover day-care costs could be awarded a subsidy before a parent who is worse off, simply because the former parent happened to enlist with a particular agency. The existence of three different lists will increase the unequal allocation of scarce child-care subsidies for low-income families.

- Low-income Latino families were well represented, but Vietnamese families appeared to be starkly under-represented on the combined waiting list.

As a rough estimate, we counted the share of names that appeared to be Latino in origin. These represented 36 percent of the entire list. But of the 300 completed interviews, only 12 parents asked that we complete the interview in Spanish and only two in Vietnamese. These proportions are very small, especially in contrast to these groups' larger shares among all low-income families in the county. This may indicate that particular ethnic groups are not making their way through the maze of child-care agencies.

-
- A large number of families who sign up for child-care slots are living at or below the poverty level, yet they pay high out-of-pocket fees for care as they wait for assistance.

Over a third of parents interviewed earned less than \$10,000 annually; 58% were enrolled in Medi-Cal, the state's subsidized health-care program; and 44% were drawing AFDC welfare benefits, the program which preceded CalWORKs.¹⁰

Even though these families are quite poor, employed parents were on average spending about \$300 a month for care. This child-care bill represents a huge slice of parents' income which may undercut their ability to hold a job.

- A majority (75%) of parents on waiting lists have secured some kind of child care for their preschool-age youngster.

Two-thirds of sampled parents (200 out of 300) are working at least part-time. Another 59 are actively looking for work. The average family has placed their child in care for 32 hours each week. About 45% of these parents pay for all or some of their care out of their own pocket. This suggests that over half either receive free care from a kin member or a friend, or a select few have won a subsidy. However, many of these parents are still hoping to receive a subsidy in order to relieve the burden on their informal child-care provider or to afford a placement in a formal child-care setting.

- A majority of parents rely on unlicensed individual care providers. Among those parents who have found child care, about half (53%) are using an informal provider; 23% rely on a family day-care home; 22% use a center or preschool; and 2% are in a Head Start center. Although most are satisfied with the quality of their current care provider, 42% cite shortcomings in quality with 47% indicating that their child receives individual attention only sporadically (Figure 6).
- While waiting for a child-care slot or subsidy, parents have made significant adjustments in their work and private lives.

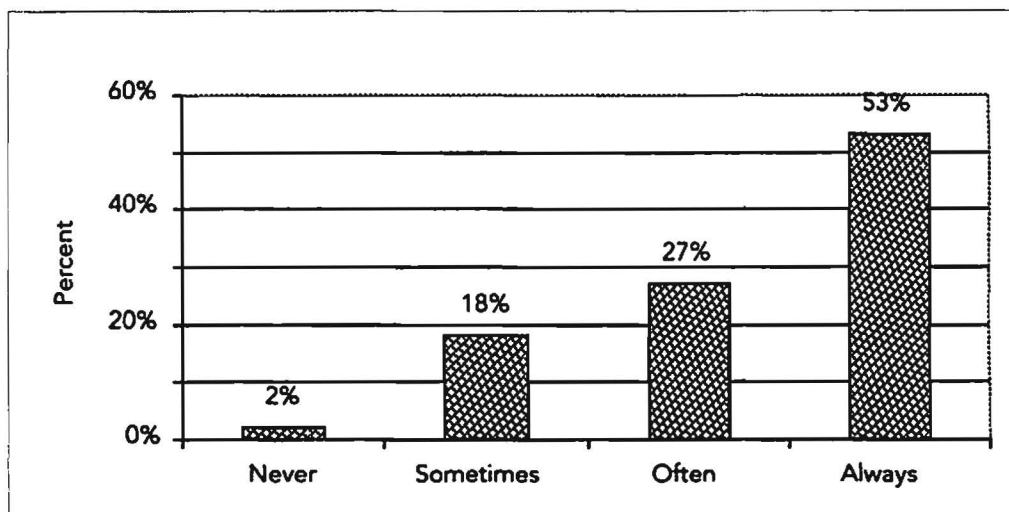
About half decided to search for cheaper care while waiting, usually with an informal individual provider rather than a center. About 40% report that they gave up looking for work because they could not find affordable care. Just under half report that they decided to work *more* hours each week in order to cover the private cost of care, since it seemed unlikely that they would receive a subsidy in the near future.¹¹ They had been on the waiting list for so long.

Let's turn to each of these findings and explore them in more detail.

Figure 6

Worries over quality

Many parents are satisfied with the quality of their child-care provider, but 47% indicate that their child receives individual attention only sporadically



What types of child care do parents prefer?

As parents search for appropriate child-care arrangements, they have to make important choices regarding types of care, levels of quality, and cost. Many choices that low-income families must make are subject to compromises. The possibility of finding an ideal child-care situation is constrained by the cost of care and the scarcity of nearby options.

We asked the 300 parents what their ideal child-care arrangement would be if cost were not a consideration. More than anything else, they mentioned a positive learning environment as the most important element in defining ideal care. Eighty-nine respondents felt that formal care—including preschools, centers, and family day-care homes—provides an optimal environment for their child. On the other hand, 57 respondents cited an “informal care” arrangement in which their child was watched by a relative or close friend. Only 38 reported that their current arrangement was ideal.

Debate over informal care

Policy makers continue to debate the merits of informal care as a means for responding to rising demand for child care in the wake of welfare reform. Informal care is not licensed or regulated and tends to be less expensive than formal care. For parents who are waiting for subsidies, informal care is most prevalent. Over half of the respondents (53%) are utilizing informal care as their primary arrangement.

Although little research has been conducted on the quality of informal care compared to licensed care, one recent study by Ellen Galinsky, Carollee Howes, and Susan Kontos suggests that the quality of informal care is lower than that of

licensed care.¹² Therefore, the quality of child-care environments that parents are using while on waiting lists may be less beneficial to the healthy development of their children than other arrangements, especially centers and preschools. The new PACE/SSA evaluation of CalWORKs child care will directly assess the quality of informal care.

We found that a higher share of younger children (age 1-2 years) was placed in a family day-care home and informal care instead of a center or preschool (Figure 7). Day-care centers and Head Start programs serve older children more often. Four years is the median age of children enrolled in these programs among families participating in our study. Median ages by type of care are in parentheses.

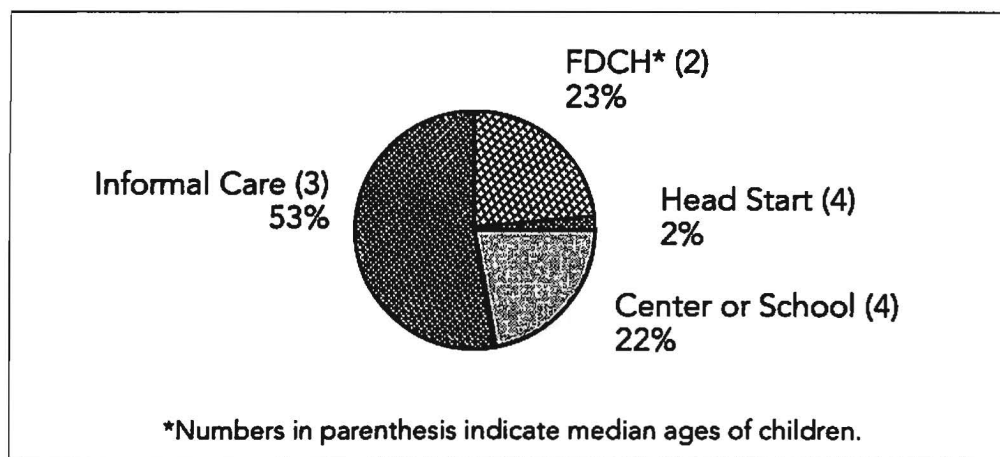


Figure 7
Type of primary child-care arrangement
Low-income parents use a variety of child-care arrangements

Secondary child-care arrangements

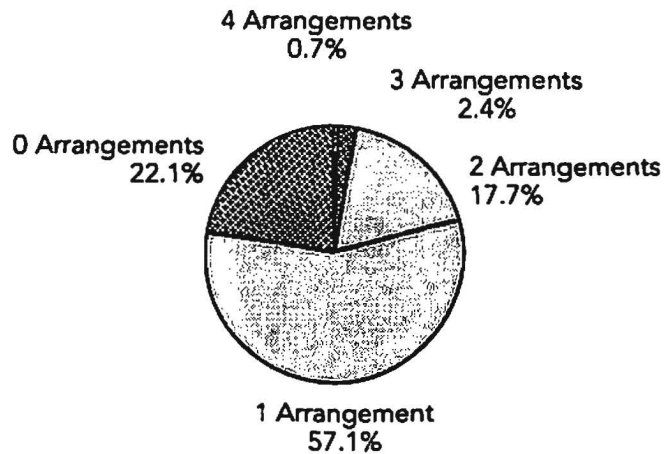
Over 20% of parents surveyed use at least one secondary child-care arrangement (Figure 8). Although 57% use only one care arrangement in a typical week, some respondents use up to four different providers. Reasons for using more than one arrangement may stem from the scarcity of full-time care or from providers' inflexible hours of operation.

For respondents who have more than one child-care arrangement, the need for adequate transportation between home, day care, and job is striking. Silicon Valley's transportation infrastructure is already stretched thin and transportation between several settings can be costly for low-income parents.¹³ Using more than one arrangement also raises concerns regarding the continuity of care for children. Not surprisingly, 50 respondents cite more flexible hours as a characteristic of their ideal child-care situation. In addition, since 85% of all respondents use informal care as their secondary arrangement, the debate surrounding the quality of informal care becomes even more pressing.

Figure 8

Number of child-care arrangements reported

43% of all parents used more than one arrangement during the week



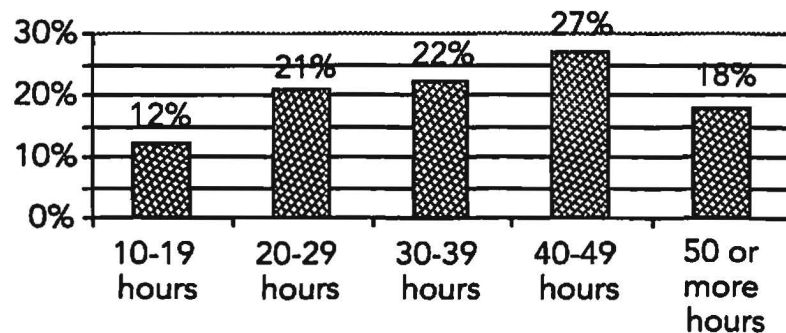
Hours children spend in care

On average, children of these working-poor families spend a large portion of their week in their primary care arrangement. Approximately 45% of sampled parents have their children in care for more than 40 hours a week (Figure 9). An additional 22% are in primary care for 30 to 39 hours a week. The amount of time spent in the primary arrangement does not differ according to the type of child care. Fully 46% of children in formal care attend for more than 40 hours a week, compared to 44% in informal care.

Figure 9

Hours per week in primary care arrangement

Two thirds of all children spend 30 hours or more in care each week



Finding child care

When parents are searching for child care, two main routes are traveled to learn about child-care options. Social service agencies give referrals to parents seeking care and also offer information to encourage more informed choices. Forty-one percent of all parents reported that information on subsidies was received from a public agency, including schools and social services (Figure 10). However, only 4% of respondents found child-care subsidies through resource and referral agencies. Instead, most respondents used referrals from friends and relatives. Remember that all 300 parents had contact with a child-care agency—at least to get on a waiting list. But most parents actually found their child-care provider through informal networks.

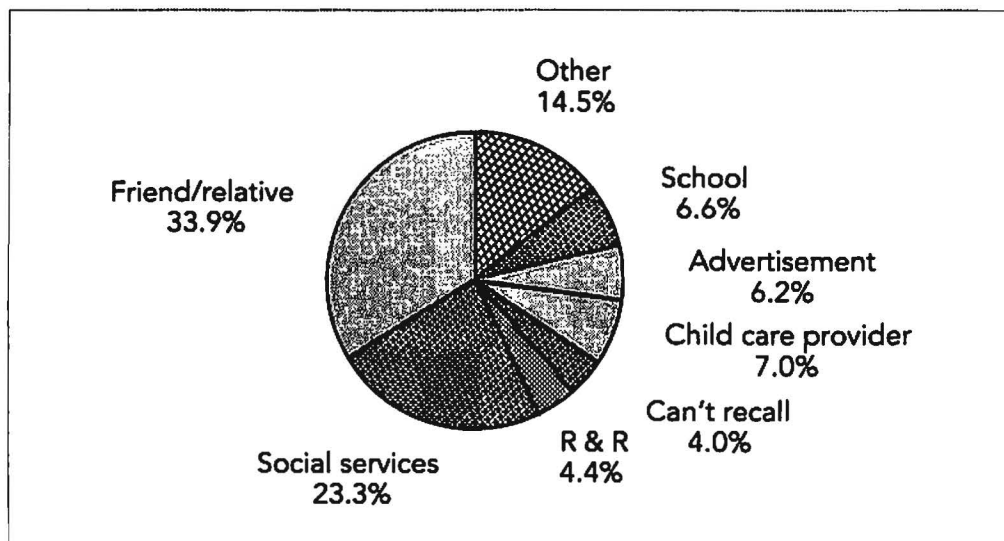


Figure 10

Information about child-care subsidies

Parents rely on a wide range of sources for child-care information

The financial burden for working-poor families

The cost of unsubsidized child care for people on waiting lists severely limits choices for low-income families. Since 68% of respondents have an annual income of less than \$20,000, the need for inexpensive care is critical. The financial burden of child care is even more pronounced in Santa Clara County than in other areas of the state, since the county has a high cost of living. One recent report estimated that about one-third of all jobs in Santa Clara County pay too little to keep a young single parent and child out of poverty.¹⁴

In our survey the median cost of care for one child per hour was \$2.45. At this rate, a day of care costs \$19.60 for working-poor parents, while a month (at eight hours a day, five days a week) costs just under \$400. This equals over 40% of a pre-tax monthly salary for a minimum-wage worker.

How do parents view child care quality?

We asked respondents to judge the quality of their primary child-care arrangement by using letter grades. Over half (58%) give it an “A,” while the remainder (42%) give it lower grades.

The lack of individual attention that children receive in their primary care arrangement may account for these mixed ratings. Among respondents, 47% say that their provider does not always give individual attention to their child, 27% say that the child receives individual attention often, and 18% say only sometimes. Regarding safety—another indicator of quality—a large majority of respondents say their children do feel safe and secure in their main child-care setting.

Another portion of the survey asked respondents who, besides themselves, is most involved with their child. We call this person a “co-caregiver.”¹⁵ By measuring the relationship between the parent, co-caregiver, and child, we hoped to gain a glimpse into each parent’s support system and determine the quality of care within this informal relationship. Forty-four percent cited a relative as the person most involved with their child. Another 40% mentioned the child’s father (or mother) as the person most involved in the child’s life. This is notable given that only 26% are married. Respondents seem to be more satisfied with the quality of care provided by the co-caregiver than with their primary care arrangement: 64% indicated they were “completely happy” with the care from the co-caregiver, while another 26% were “very happy” with this close relationship.

How do parents adjust while waiting for subsidies?

Waiting for child-care subsidies affects the lives of both parents and children—not only with regard to child-care quality but also in relation to work and family stress. Most respondents made some type of adjustment as they waited for a child-care subsidy (Figure 11). Cheaper care arrangements were sought by 140 respondents.

In the work arena, 105 respondents (35%) worked *longer hours* to earn more in order to pay for child care, while 96 respondents cut back on their work hours in order to care for their own children. In addition, 82 respondents were unable to work at all because they felt that they could not afford child care while awaiting a subsidy.

Among all respondents, 45% reported being late or missing at least one day of work or school in the last three months due to a problem with their child-care arrangement; 23% were late or missed two to three days; and 14% were late or missed four to six days. Just over two-thirds of all parents changed their child care while waiting (up

to two years) for a subsidized spot. One-third of these respondents said this new provider was not of high quality compared to the earlier caregiver.

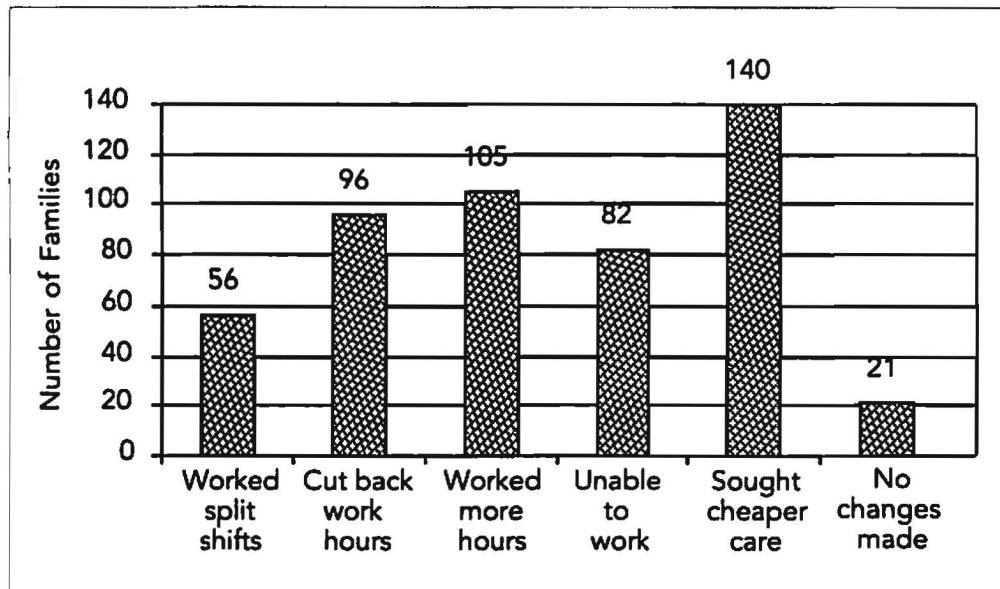


Figure 11

Adjustments made while waiting for subsidy

Parents commonly adjust work hours or seek cheaper child care

A majority of respondents (64%) felt that they received significant help as a parent from other kin members or friends, but the remaining share reported that "I'm alone as a parent." Although 74% of respondents are single parents, many draw on a support system, and 82% say they are living with one or more adults. Even so, additional help does not always alleviate the stress of parenting. Many respondents (34%) agreed that there are quite a few things which bother them about their lives, and a few (4%) strongly agreed with this statement (Figure 12). Only 17% of respondents strongly disagreed when asked whether there were "quite a few things which bothered them about their lives."

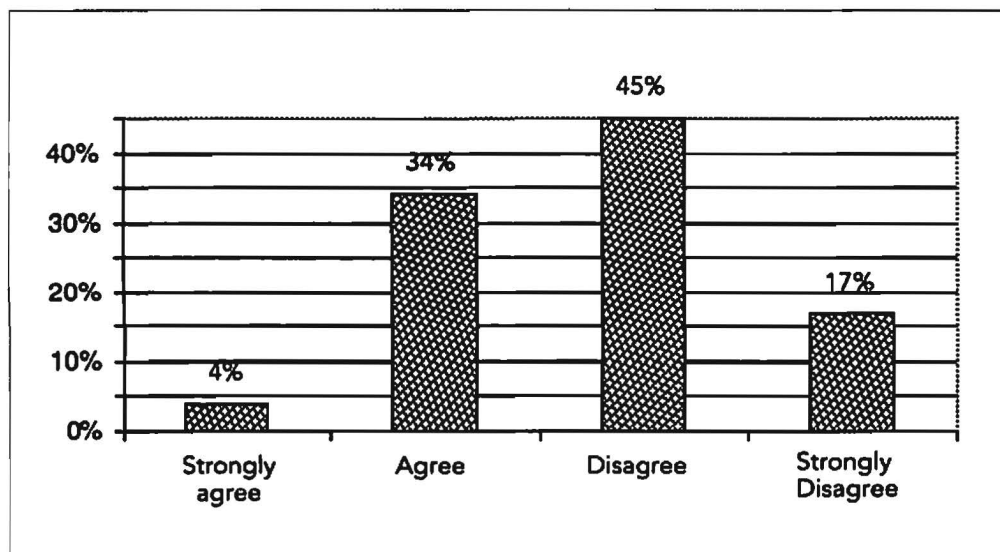


Figure 12

Quite a few things bother me about my life

38% express at least mild levels of depression

CONCLUSIONS AND ACTION AGENDA

Our findings detail why the California legislature's call for a county plan to consolidate waiting lists is so important, both for parents and local policy makers. Presently the county has no clear and valid way for assessing the extent to which family demand for child-care exceeds available supply. And given parents' concerns about quality, more work is required to understand their underlying preferences for their favored type of care. The robust growth in child-care vouchers is not yet responding to many parents' reported preference for organized center-based care.

At the same time the length of waiting lists leads to job instability and debilitating child-care bills for both low-income and blue-collar parents. Our study has focused mainly on parents' experiences as they wait for child-care subsidies and less on the direct impact on children and their development. Further research should examine the difference between unsubsidized and subsidized care and the long-term effect of those arrangements on children's early development and school readiness. Researchers also might look more closely at the impact of parental stress on the quality of care in the child's home environment, not to mention job instability experienced by parents.

Our study focused solely upon the experiences of families with at least one child under the age of five. Yet school-age care also is crucial in enriching learning environments for older children. Before and after school care has been found to simply keep many school-age children out of trouble during non-school hours.¹⁶

It remains to be seen whether access to child-care information and subsidies will be effectively strengthened by key local agencies. On the most basic level, our study has shown that the experience of waiting for subsidies has a direct impact on the overall quality of life for parents and children. Without clear improvements, the ability of low-income parents to hold down a job will continue to be severely constrained. The daily lives of their young children will remain equally uncertain and insecure.

Policy rhetoric persists about how the "market" of child-care providers, financed through organizational subsidies and vouchers, yields a rich array of child-care options and maximizes parental choice. But when a working poor parent must pay almost half of her take-home pay for child care, this family has few real options. New federal and state child-care monies are now raining down on counties. But until better information becomes available to poor and blue-collar communities and the allocation of subsidies is streamlined, the magic of market remedies will remain illusory. Low-income parents and their children will suffer from the limited willingness of local agencies to serve families' interests first. Lost work days will cut into the productivity of local firms. And taxpayers' eagerness for effective welfare reform will go unanswered. In strengthening the county's rickety child-care "system," much is at stake.

ENDNOTES

1. California Department of Education, Child Development Division. 1998. *Management Bulletin*. Sacramento.
2. Working Partnerships USA. 1998. *Growing Together or Drifting Apart?* San Jose.
3. Children's Defense Fund. 1997. *Key Facts About Child Care and Early Education: A Briefing Book*. 1997. Washington, DC.
4. We received 4,036 names from 4Cs, 937 names from Choices for Children, and 265 names from Head Start.
5. 297 interviews were fully completed, while three interviews were partially completed.
6. The two samples were not weighted differently for the analysis.
7. 17 respondents received subsidies within the last six months. Of the 17 respondents, six changed child care after receiving their subsidy. This disqualified the child-care portion of their surveys because their arrangements had changed since their names were first placed on a waiting list.
8. This statistic refers only to sampled mothers.
9. The 8% rate was found by eliminating duplicated persons on the list who had the same name, regardless of other differences in their identities (e.g. telephone numbers). Therefore, this percentage is a liberal estimate of the duplication rate.
10. The question pertained to what benefits respondents were receiving or had received in the last two years.
11. Respondents had the opportunity to select more than one adjustment.
12. Ellen Galinsky, Carollee Howes, and Susan Kontos. 1994. *The Study of Family Child Care*. New York: Work and Families Institute.
13. Working Partnerships USA. 1998. *Growing Together or Drifting Apart?* San Jose.
14. Working Partnerships USA. 1998.
15. In order to be considered a co-caregiver, the person had to be over 16 years of age.
16. Children's Defense Fund. 1997. *Key Facts About Child Care and Early Education: A Briefing Book*. Washington, DC.

Policy Analysis for California Education **PACE**

University of California, Berkeley • Stanford University

3653 Tolman Hall • Berkeley, CA 94720-1670

Telephone: 510/642-7223

Web Site: <http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/PACE/pace.html>