The mothers of the 2.7 million children living in poverty in the rural U.S. have difficult decisions to make when trying to balance earning a living with the care of their children. Although work and child care decisions are difficult for many parents, they are especially difficult for those living in rural poverty, where affordable options are literally few and far between. This research brief provides a summary of the findings of a study of the child care choices of low-income rural families.

Using data from the Rural Families Speak research project, 371 mothers with limited incomes from rural counties in 14 states, who had at least one preschool-aged child, provided information about the primary child care arrangements that they regularly used for their children. These mothers had a total of 872 children: 248 (28%) infants and toddlers, 190 (22%) preschoolers aged 3-5 years, and 434 (50%) school-agers.

### Who Is Caring for Young Children?

Figure 1 shows the choices that mothers made for the primary caregiving arrangement for their children under age 6. The most frequently used arrangement allowed mothers to be the primary caregiver. In this group were mothers who: 1) chose to postpone employment while their children were young; 2) alternated work shifts with a spouse or partner; 3) chose to work nights, weekends, or part-time hours; or 4) worked at home. Publicly funded programs included Head Start, public pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten. Approximately half of children in relative care were being cared for by their maternal grandmother. In addition to these primary arrangements, two-thirds of the children also had a second child care arrangement where they regularly were cared for.

**Figure 1.** Primary care arrangement of children under age 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caregiver Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicly funded program</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care center</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family child care</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend/acquaintance</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father/partner</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### How are Mothers Paying for Care?

Figure 2 shows patterns of payment for care arrangements for children who were not being cared for primarily by their mothers. Clearly, government programs that provide child care at no cost to low-income mothers are a major source of support. These programs take several forms, the most common of which are: child care subsidy payments that are received either by the parent or by their chosen care provider; Head Start and Early Head Start programs; public preschool and kindergarten programs. The child care subsidy program may also require parents to pay a co-payment, the amount of which depends upon their income. States differ in their program policies.
“My family has always been there whenever I needed it.”
“Whatever time we work, [mom] always watches them.”
“I don’t really trust [my son] with anybody…I know he’s always safe with [my mom].”
“I would have to say that [my mom] is my other half when it comes to parenting.”
“If I didn’t have my mom, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Next Steps

This work suggests several promising avenues of research that focus on regular child caregiving within a family context. More in-depth study is needed on the relationship between child care within a family system and: family dynamics; the well-being of child, mother and caregiver; the quality of care; and children’s cognitive, social and emotional outcomes. Given the large number of children from low-income rural families who are cared for within their families and the risk that poverty already places children in, this area of study would provide valuable information to educators, family support professionals, and policy makers concerns about their well-being.

References:


Acknowledgements:

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