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TECHNICAL REPORT

Patterns of Child Care Use for Preschoolers in Los Angeles County

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Prepared for the First 5 LA



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Summary

This report examines patterns of child care use in 2000–2001 for children ages 0–5 who were not yet enrolled in kindergarten or first grade. Specifically, we report on whether or not non-parental child care was used, the primary type of child care used, the amount of child care used per week, the number of arrangements, the cost of care, and child-to-adult ratios in child care settings. We investigated the relationships between these child care measures and neighborhood, family, and child characteristics in Los Angeles County. We also considered the differences in child care patterns between the poorest families and others. The goal is to provide descriptive information on basic preschool child care use patterns in Los Angeles. The report is based on the results of the 2000–2001 Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A.FANS), which is a representative survey of the county of Los Angeles. Below we summarize the key findings.

Use of Non-Parental Child Care. Approximately 37 percent of children ages 0 to 5 who were not currently in school received some type of regular non-parental child care in Los Angeles County in 2000–2001. Non-parental child care was most common among older preschoolers and least common among infants. Our results show that differences in maternal education and employment were strongly associated with non-parental child care. Once these two characteristics are taken into account, Latino, low-income, and foreign-born parents were about as likely to use non-parental child care as other families. Mothers employed full-time were almost 10 times as likely to use non-parental child care as mothers who were not employed. However, the use of non-parental child care was not limited to working mothers: 17 percent of mothers who were not employed used non-parental child care. Conversely, not all employed mothers used non-parental child care: approximately 30 percent of children whose mothers were employed full-time received no non-parental child care. Mothers who were not married or cohabiting and teen mothers were also significantly more likely to use non-parental child care.

Primary Type of Child Care Used. Most parents reported using only one non-parental child care arrangement for their child. Among preschoolers in L.A.FANS receiving non-parental child care, relative and center care were the most common types: 37 percent used relative care, 24 percent used non-relative care, and 39 percent use center care. The type of care used varied considerably by age of the child: Children under age 1 were most likely to be cared for by relatives, while those ages 3 to 5 were most likely to have center care. Full-time maternal employment, ethnicity, marital/cohabitation status, teen motherhood, and the child's age were significantly associated with the type of child care used. Women who worked full-time used disproportionately more relative care than center care compared with women who were not employed. African-American families appeared to be *more* likely to use center-based care than white families, when other factors were held constant. Single (non-cohabiting) mothers were more likely to use non-relative care than center care compared with married women. Teen mothers use less non-relative care and more center care. Surprisingly, family income was not related to the general type of child care chosen.

There were also regional differences by service planning area (SPA) in the types of child care used. Compared with children in SPA 6 (South), children in several other SPAs were more likely to be in center-based child care and less likely to use relative or non-relative child care. This regional pattern may have been due to the characteristics of each SPA—although our analysis controls for many key

characteristics—or differences in the availability of child care. These regional differences may be a particularly important focus for initiatives to expand child care and preschools.

Amount of Child Care. For preschoolers ages 0–5 in L.A.FANS, 43 percent received part-time child care (less than 30 hours per week) and 57 percent received full-time child care (30 or more hours per week). Among children receiving non-parental care, the youngest children were most likely to receive full-time care. Seventy-seven percent of children under age 1 received full-time care compared with 50 percent of children ages 3 to 5. The results of the analysis showed that, not surprisingly, mothers who were employed full-time were more likely to use full-time care for their children. Perhaps more surprising is the result that boys were more than twice as likely as girls to receive full-time child care.

Child Care Costs and Child-Adult Ratios. Our results show that child care can be a substantial portion of families' budgets. For example, families with an annual income of \$13,000 or less who used full-time non-parental child care paid an average of \$155 per month in child care costs. The comparable average monthly cost was \$118 for families with incomes of \$13,000 to \$23,999; \$241 for families with incomes of \$24,000 to \$46,999; and \$396 for families with incomes of \$47,000 and higher. These average costs would have been considerably higher, except that a substantial proportion of families, particularly in the lower-income groups, received child care at no cost.

Relative care was by far the least expensive type of child care. More than half of relative-provided child care was provided at no cost, but when parents paid relatives to care for their children, they paid an average of \$2.54 per hour compared with \$4.10 and \$4.62 per hour for non-relative and center-based care.

Our multivariate results show that families were significantly more likely to pay for child care (as opposed to receiving it at no cost) if the mother had education beyond college, was employed, and was using care providers other than relatives. Moreover, families were significantly more likely to have to pay for part-time than for full-time child care. For families who did pay for child care, the multivariate results show that those who used full-time child care paid significantly less per hour than those who used part-time care. Both the greater need to pay for part-time care and its higher hourly cost suggest that finding and paying for part-time care was more difficult for families that needed part-time care providers.

We assessed child care quality using child-to-adult caretaker ratios for child care arrangements. These ratios have considerable limitations as indicators of child care quality. However, our analysis of these ratios produced several interesting results. On average, child-adult ratios were substantially higher for center-based care than for relative care. Non-relative care ratios were also higher than those for relative arrangements, but considerably below ratios for centers. An examination of the ratios by type of care and family income (see Figure 10) illustrated the diversity in the care environments within each type of care category. For example, for non-relative care, children from the poorest families were in arrangements with an average of 5.4 children per adult caretaker, whereas children from families earning more than \$47,000 per year were in arrangements with ratios of 2.1. We speculate that the difference may have been due in part to the fact that non-relative arrangements used by poor families may have been more likely to be neighbors or other adults who take care of multiple children in their home while non-relative arrangements for higher-income families may have been more likely to be

nannies or baby-sitters responsible only for one or two children. On the other hand, child care centers used by the highest-income group had higher child-adult ratios than those used by the lowest-income group.

Our multivariate results show that children in poor (rather than very poor) neighborhoods, younger children, and those in higher-income families were more likely to have low child-adult ratios. Holding other factors constant, we found that child-adult ratios were highest for center care and lowest for non-relative care. The cost of child care was significantly related to child-adult ratios, but the association was not as strong or consistent as might have been expected.

Poor Families and Child Care. We also examined child care use by the poorest families in the L.A.FANS sample: those with annual incomes of less than \$24,000. One important difference between lower- and higher-income families was that mothers in poor families were considerably less likely to work. While approximately three-quarters of mothers in the poorest families were not employed, the comparable percentage for families with incomes above \$47,000 was 34 percent. Those who did use non-parental child care rely heavily on relatives who provided care at no or low cost. Low-income families also were more likely to have free or subsidized care for their children. However, more than half of the poorest families who used child care reported paying for care and not receiving any subsidy.

Discussion. The results in this report show that child care use patterns in 2000–2001 varied considerably for preschoolers of different ages. Maternal education and work status played a major role in determining the type of care children received in their first five years of life. There were substantial variations across regions in the proportion receiving non-parental child care. Non-parental child care costs were high relative to family income, particularly for poor families.