

Rural Families Choose Home-Based Child Care for their Preschool-Aged Children

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The ability of mothers to make time for employment is often dependent on finding good quality child care that is reasonably priced. Child care providers play an important role in promoting child development, especially for preschoolers, whose early life experiences play a critical role in their development. Good quality child care enhances early brain development, cognitive and language development, and school readiness, setting the stage for successful early school achievement.¹ Ensuring good quality child care for rural preschoolers is critical because rural preschoolers of employed mothers spend, on average, 37 hours in child care

each week—slightly more than the 35 hours urban preschoolers of employed mothers spend in child care per week.

While most mothers of pre-school aged children (children under 5 years old) are challenged in finding and securing adequate child care, research suggests that those living in rural areas have fewer child care choices, with center-based care being the least commonly available option.² Many rural families rely on relatives to care for their preschoolers,³ which is not surprising given the lower costs associated with relative care,⁴ the greater availability of relatives at nonstandard work hours,⁵ and the existence of strong kinship ties in rural communities and the greater interdependence among kin in lower income, rural families.⁶ The child care choices rural

families make are important in light of recent research that finds rural children lagging behind urban children in letter recognition or beginning sounds recognition when entering kindergarten.⁷

Relatives Are Prominent Care Providers in Rural and Urban America.

Use of relatives and organized care facilities is similar for rural and urban preschoolers with employed mothers. Table 1 shows that preschoolers of employed mothers are cared for by relatives most often in both rural and urban areas (over one third), followed by organized care providers (about one third).⁸ Roughly one quarter of preschoolers are cared for by a parent—either their mother or father—while the mother is working, regardless of whether they live in a rural or urban community. However, the use of informal non-related care

Types of Child Care Arrangements

Employed mothers rely on a wide range of child care providers for their preschoolers. *Relatives* include grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins. *Informal nonrelative care* includes family day care providers, in-home babysitters or nannies, neighbors, friends, and other nonrelatives providing care either in the child's or provider's home. *Organized care* is provided in day care centers, nursery schools, preschools, federal Head Start programs, and kindergarten. *Home-based care* includes relatives and other informal non-related care providers.

Table 1. Child Care Arrangements for Children Under 5 Years of Employed Mothers, 2002

	TOTAL	RURAL	URBAN
Number of children (in thousands)	10,193	2,307	7,886
Percent using at all¹:			
Parent	28	27	29
Relative	36	37	35
Informal nonrelative care	21	25	20
Organized care	32	31	33
Percent using as primary arrangement²:			
Parent	21	20	22
Relative	25	26	24
Informal nonrelative care	18	21	17
Organized care	25	23	25
Other/no regular arrangement ³	11	10	12

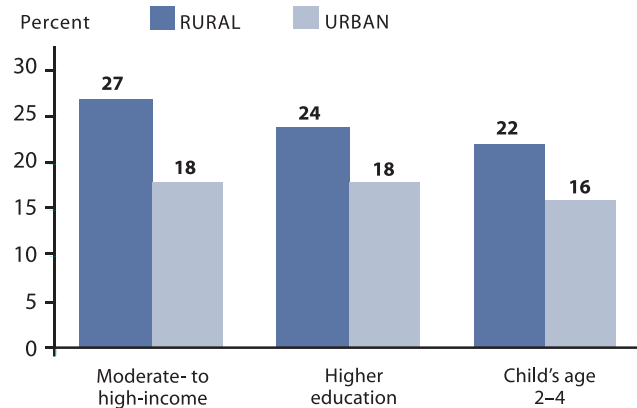
¹ Includes any care in specified arrangement types. Percentages exceed 100.0% because of multiple arrangements.

² The primary arrangement is the arrangement used for the greatest number of hours each week.

³ Other arrangements include self care and other. Not having a regular child care provider may indicate instability in child care or difficulty in identifying what types are regularly used.

Source: 2001 SIPP, Wave 4 data

Figure 1. Primary Use of Informal, Non-related Child Care Providers, by Select Characteristics by Residence, 2002



Note: Moderate- to high-income refers to families living at or above 200% of poverty; higher education refers to mothers who have at least some college education or higher.

Source: 2001 SIPP, Wave 4 data

providers is higher in rural than in urban areas (25 percent compared with 20 percent, respectively), and this higher rate is driven by the higher use among rural preschoolers of family day care providers or other nonrelative care in the provider's home.

A similar pattern exists when considering the primary child care arrangement parents choose for their preschoolers. Both rural and urban preschoolers are cared for most often by relatives and organized care providers, and rural preschoolers are more likely to be primarily cared for by informal non-related care providers than urban preschoolers.

Relative Care is Higher Among Low-Income Families and Single Mothers.

Overall, 25 percent of preschoolers are primarily cared for by relatives while their mother works. Relative care is common among low-income families, regardless of residence. Thirty-two percent of rural preschoolers living in low-income families (under 200 percent of poverty) with an employed mother are primarily cared for by relatives, while only 22 percent of rural preschoolers living in families with higher income levels are primarily in relative care. This same pattern of a higher dependence on relatives among low-income than in higher income families persists among urban families (29 percent compared with 23 percent, respectively). Relative care is also more prevalent among employed single mothers than employed married mothers regardless of rural or urban residence.

Rural Employed Mothers Rely More on Informal Non-Related Care Providers Than Urban Employed Mothers.

The use of informal non-related care providers is higher in rural communities than in urban areas, and varies by income level, education level, and child's age depending on residence (see Figure 1). For example, rural employed mothers with moderate- to high-income levels are more likely to use informal nonrelative care as a primary child care arrangement for their preschooler than urban employed mothers (27 percent compared with 18 percent). Likewise, 24 percent of rural employed mothers with high education levels primarily use informal nonrelative care, while only 18 percent of urban employed mothers do. Finally, rural employed mothers place their older preschoolers (2 to 4 years old) in informal nonrelative care to a greater extent than urban employed mothers.

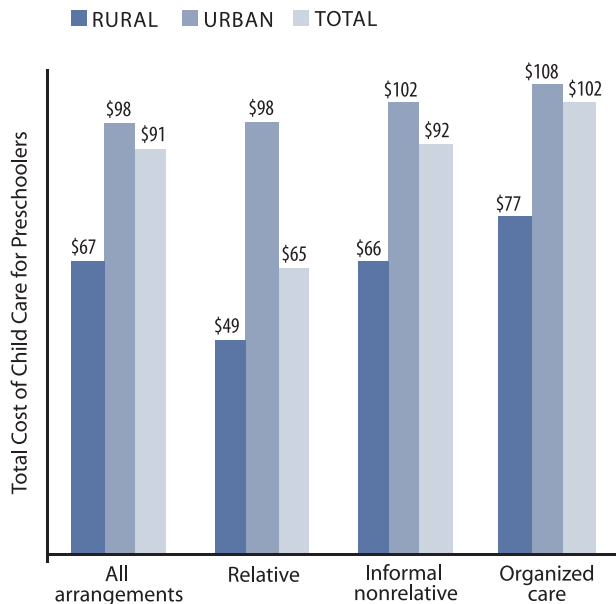
Child Care Costs Less in Rural Areas.

Roughly half of rural and urban preschoolers of employed mothers are cared for in a paid child care arrangement. Care by relatives is often unpaid, with only 21 percent of relatives who care for preschoolers receiving a payment for that care. Rural employed mothers are less likely to pay for relative care than their urban counterparts (16 percent compared with 23 percent). Informal non-related care providers and organized care providers (82 percent and 75 percent, respectively) are most likely to receive payment for child care services.⁹ Rural employed mothers pay for organized care less often than urban employed mothers, but they are equally likely to pay for care by informal non-related care providers.

Child care costs are lower in rural areas than in urban areas. Among those who pay for child care, rural employed mothers pay an average of \$67 per week for child care for their preschoolers, which is significantly less than the average of \$98 per week that urban employed mothers pay (see Figure 2). Mothers who rely on relatives as primary care providers for their preschoolers have the lowest child care costs, with rural employed mothers who rely on relative care as their primary arrangement paying the least amount per week.

Rural employed mothers have lower child care costs regardless of the primary arrangement used. For example, rural employed mothers who pay for child care and rely on relatives as their primary arrangement for their preschooler pay \$49 per week, while their urban counterparts pay \$69 per week for relative care. This same pattern of lower child care costs for rural employed mothers compared with urban employed mothers is also evident when the primary arrangement is an informal non-related care provider (\$66 compared with \$102 per week) or an organized care provider (\$77 compared with \$108 per week).

Figure 2. Total Child Care Costs for Preschoolers of Employed Mothers, by Primary Child Care Arrangement by Residence, 2002



Note: Average total expenditures per week among employed mothers making child care payments.

Source: 2001 SIPP, Wave 4 data

Conclusion

Despite the overall national trend of a declining use of relative care over the past 30 years,¹⁰ relative care remains a prominent choice for both rural and urban employed mothers, especially among single mothers and those with low incomes. However, employed rural mothers are less likely than urban mothers to pay for relative care if they use it, and pay the lowest amount for child care if their primary child care arrangement is a relative. Although less prevalent than relative care, the use of informal non-related care providers for preschoolers is more common in rural communities than in urban areas. In sum, rural families choose home-based child care in the form of relatives or informal non-related care providers to care for their preschoolers more often than organized care facilities.

This high usage rate of relatives and informal non-related care providers among rural families may reflect a preference to have family members, friends, or neighbors care for children or it may be the result of a shortage of child care options in rural communities. Research suggests that home-based care arrangements, such as relative or informal nonrelative care, often lack the stimulating learning and play materials found in centers and focus less on education.¹¹ Children's exposure to formal early care and education settings, like child care centers, preschools, and pre-kinder-

garten programs, has been found to be associated with better cognitive skills. Recent research finds that rural children in America enter kindergarten with fewer key early literacy skills, such as letter recognition or beginning sounds recognition, than urban children. Although care by family, friends, and neighbors has positive elements for children including greater continuity in relationships, research indicates that these settings are frequently unlicensed and educational components often are not organized or deliberate.

If rural families are choosing home-based child care because it is less costly or more accessible than organized care facilities, then rural communities may need more affordable and expanded access to formal early childhood programs. Increased funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant could be used to promote more center-based care in rural America. Expanding the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit and targeting child care subsidies toward rural families could reduce the cost of center-based care. However, if rural families prefer home-based settings for their preschoolers then relatives and informal non-related child care providers need tools to promote child development and increase stimulation for early learning. Providing training for these child care providers could be one step toward reaching that goal, and raising awareness among parents could facilitate participation. Assuring that rural preschooler's early learning experiences prepare them for future school success should be a strong focus of state and federal policy.

Endnotes

- ¹ Shonkoff, Jack P. and Phillips, Deborah A. 2000. eds. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Pp. 307–20.
- ² Gordon, Rachel A. and Lindsay Chase-Landsdale. 2001. Availability of child care in the United States: A description and analysis of data sources. *Demography* 38:299–316; Johansen, Anne S., Arleen Leibowitz, and Linda J. Waite. 1996. The importance of child-care characteristics to choice of care. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58:759–772.
- ³ Atkinson, Alice M. 1994. Rural and urban families' use of child care. *Family Relations* 43:16–22.
- ⁴ Smith, Kristin. 2002. "Who's Minding the Kids? Child Care Arrangements: Spring 1997." In *Current Population Reports*, 70–86. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- ⁵ Presser, Harriet B. 1989. Can we make time for children? The economy, work schedules, and child care. *Demography* 26:523–543.
- ⁶ Dill, Bonnie Thornton and Bruce B. Williams. 1992. "Race, Gender, and Poverty in the Rural South: African American Single Mothers." In *Rural Poverty in America*, edited by C. M. Duncan, 97–109. New York: Auburn House; Uttal, Lynet. 1999. Using kin for child care: Embedment in the socioeconomic networks of extended families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:845–857.

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⁷ Grace, Cathy, Elizabeth F. Shores, Martha Zaslow, Brett Brown, and Dena Aufseeser. 2006. New clues to reaching very young children and families in rural America. *Zero to Three* 26: 7–13.

⁸ See the “Data used in this report” section for a discussion of the data and the definition of rural used in this policy brief.

⁹ The inclusion of federal Head Start participants and kindergartners in the organized care category reduces the overall percent paying for organized care.

¹⁰ Hofferth, Sandra L. 1999. Child care, maternal employment, and public policy. *The Annals of the American Academy* 563:20–38.

¹¹ Brown-Lyons, Melanie, Anne Robertson, and Jean Layzer. 2001. *Kith and Kin—Informal Care: Highlights from Recent Research*. New York: Columbia University, National Center for Children in Poverty; Galinsky, Ellen, Howes, Carollee, Kontos, Susan, and Shinn, Marybeth. 1994. *The Study of Children in Family Child Care and Relative Care*. New York: Families and Work Institute.

Data used in this report

The data source for this report is the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) 2001 Panel, Wave 4 Child Care topical module collected in the winter of 2002. The SIPP is a nationally representative survey of American households. For this report, all child care estimates analyzed by the author refer to arrangements used by preschoolers (children under 5 years old) with employed mothers. Estimates may vary slightly from published Census Bureau numbers due to minor variations in the external and internal data for confidentiality reasons.

Child care arrangements are regular arrangements used at least once a week in a typical week, while the primary child care arrangement is the arrangement used for the greatest number of hours each week. Estimates of average hours spent in child care are for children using at least one regular child care arrangement and estimates of child care costs are for those who make a child care payment. Comparisons presented in the text are statistically significant at the 0.10 level.

“Rural” refers to non-metropolitan counties that had neither (a) a city of at least 50,000 residents or (b) an urbanized area of 50,000 or more and total area population of at least 100,000, and were not economically tied to counties that did have one or both of these characteristics. “Urban” counties meet one or more of the criteria listed above and include both central cities and surrounding suburbs. For more information on the SIPP, see <http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/>.

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