

Child Care and Preschool Access and Utilization among WIC Participants in L.A. County

The 2005 Los Angeles County WIC Survey: The Seventh in a Series of Reports

Quality child care and preschool play a vital role in children's cognitive and socio-emotional readiness for school. Each working day, more than half of the 800,000 infants and children ages 4 and under in Los Angeles County spend most of their day in out-of-home child care and preschool. The child care and preschool landscape in L.A. County is complex and varied, with care provided in many different forms and funded by a variety of public and private entities. Low-income families often have fewer choices available due to constraints in their ability to pay for care, therefore it is particularly critical to explore how low-income families access child care and preschool, and to examine the barriers to care that low-income families face.

Data from multiple sources suggest that socio-economically disadvantaged children are less likely to utilize center-based early care and education (ECE) programs, which may have significant negative consequences for long-term school performance.¹ Data also show that high-quality child care has been linked to benefits in school performance.² In the context of the current policy landscape, child care and preschool initiatives supporting universal preschool are rapidly becoming part of the national dialogue, with many states making legislative efforts to provide free and universal preschool to all 4-year-old children. In L.A. County, First 5 LA is a founding supporter of the Los Angeles Universal Preschool organization.

The goal of this report is to describe factors associated with accessing child care and preschool among low-income families served by the WIC Program in L.A. County. Over two-thirds of all infants born in L.A. County are served by WIC, making this population of young children an important focus for identifying needs and barriers for early child care and education. With only one-third of WIC families enrolling their children in child care, it is important to explore whether families choose not to access care, or need care but are unable to find it. This brief addresses potential strategies for making child care and preschool available and accessible to low-income children, as well as the need to increase both the supply of and the demand for high-quality child care and preschool settings in low-income neighborhoods. Often, the terms "child care" and "preschool" are used interchangeably, particularly as children turn 4 and attend extended-day programs that serve the dual role of preschool and child care facility. In this



report, child care is broadly defined as any type of arrangement where someone other than the child’s primary guardian cares for the child for any amount of time on a regular basis. Preschool is defined as attendance in what caregivers identify as a preschool or nursery school. The two are separated in this brief to illustrate the patterns of care that emerge for low-income children from birth to age 5. Together, child care and preschool represent the complex and broad spectrum of care for young children in L.A. County.

The primary data used in this research brief come from the 2005 L.A. County WIC Survey data. Please visit www.lawicdata.org for a complete description of the survey, including sample demographics and methodology.

Are Low-Income Children Enrolled in Child Care?

WIC families were asked a series of questions about child care access and utilization. Of the 4,681 participants surveyed, 34% of the children from birth to age 5 are enrolled in child care in L.A. County (1,601 children). Time spent in child care ranges from one to 50 hours per week, averaging seven hours per week. Spanish-speaking Latina mothers are least likely to enroll their children in child care. Utilization of child care increases after the first year, and stays steady until it increases again at age 4. Across L.A. County Service Planning Areas (SPA), caregivers in the Antelope Valley and South SPAs use child care the least compared to West and South Bay/Harbor SPAs.

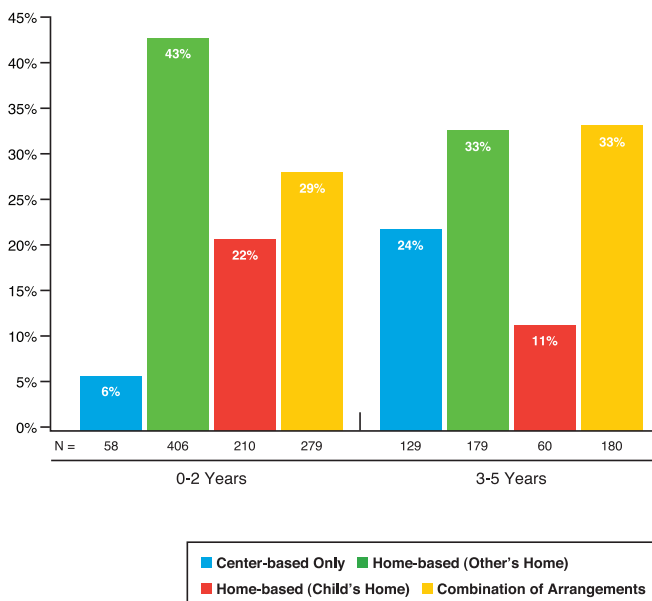
Table 1: Percent of Children in Child Care

Child’s Age	Percentage of Children in Care, by Age Group	Child’s Ethnicity*	Percentage of Children in Care, by Ethnicity	Service Planning Area**	Percentage of Children in Care, by SPA
<12 Months	28.7	Latino—English-speaking	50.4	Antelope Valley	30.9
1 Year	35.3	Latino—Spanish-speaking	24.9	San Fernando	33.7
2 Years	33.5	White	45.3	San Gabriel	35.8
3 Years	33.4	African-American	58.2	Metro	32.1
4 Years	43			West	38.2
				South	31.9
				East	36.2
				South Bay/ Harbor	38.8

*The survey takers were unable to report on Asian or other ethnicity subgroups due to small sample sizes.
 **Twenty-four participants could not be assigned to a Service Planning Area (SPA).

What Type of Child Care is Accessed?

Figure 1: Childcare Type by Age

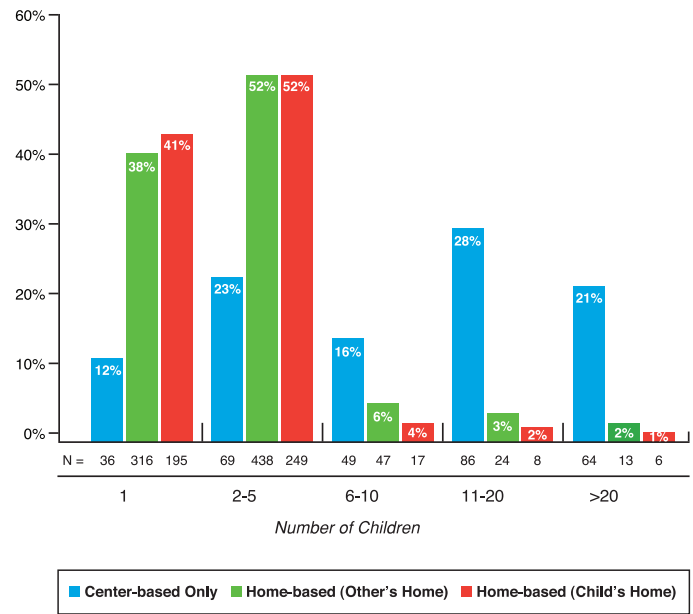


Home-based child care arrangements are most common for young children, regardless of ethnicity. Combinations of child care arrangements are also common (see Figure 1). Among center-based child care programs, caregivers report that 63% are licensed. By contrast, less than 25% of home-based providers accessed by WIC families are licensed, and over 70% of home-based child care programs report that the provider is a relative. In cases where the child care is provided in the provider’s home, 24% of the providers are licensed. Of those providing care in the child’s home, 19% are licensed.

As shown in Figure 2, a majority of home-based programs, whether provider's or child's home, are small and provide care for up to five children. Center-based programs tend to be larger, with almost half of the child care centers caring for more than 10 children daily.

A large number of WIC families (66%) are not utilizing any form of child care. When asked why they were not using child care, the top three reasons included, (1) preference to stay home (87.6%); (2) a parent is not working (61.4%); and (3) the high cost of child care (36.5%). Thus, the majority of families not using child care reported that they did not have a need for it. For those families accessing child care, 30% of caregivers reported difficulty in obtaining care. The main reasons reported included cost (74.8%), availability (50.8%) and incompatible hours and location (43.1%).

Figure 2: Number of Children by Type of Child Care



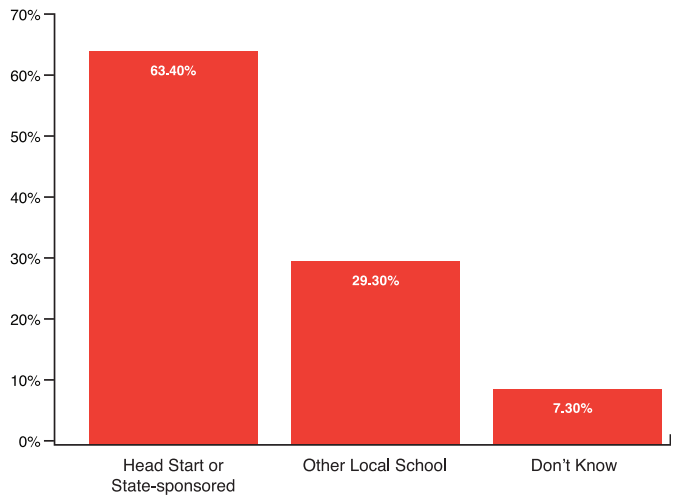
Are WIC Children Enrolled in Preschool?

WIC families indicated increased attendance in preschool as children approach school age. At age 2, fewer than 8% of children served by WIC are enrolled in preschool. By age 3, this number jumps to 31%, and at age 4, 63% of children served by WIC are enrolled in preschool. Of the families of 2- to 4-year-olds not enrolled in preschool, over 80% indicated that they had plans to enroll their child in preschool or nursery school. Families with a child enrolled in preschool, or that were planning to enroll their child, were asked about their enrollment experience. Twenty-four percent of the caregivers reported difficulty with enrollment (N=552), with the primary reasons reported as a lack of available space (65.3%) and the high cost of preschool (46.3%).

Over two-thirds (67.6%) of families served by WIC have incomes below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and all WIC families have incomes below 185% FPL.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the most commonly utilized preschools by WIC families are publicly funded. Of all the available preschool programs, Head Start programs serve the largest number of WIC families. At the time of the survey, there were 29,703 Head Start slots available to children in L.A. County. By comparison, 70,559 4-year-olds and 73,479 3-year olds were served by L.A. County WIC programs. WIC regularly refers families to Head Start, and these numbers provide dramatic evidence of the high need for more high-quality preschool programs that serve low-income families.

Figure 3: Type of Preschool Used by 2- to 4-year-olds



Conclusions

- The child care landscape is complex and multifaceted. While the majority of children from low-income families are cared for by their own mothers, the 34% in child care are mostly cared for by non-licensed providers in home-based care—usually relatives. Given that the majority of these providers are license-exempt, it is critical to assess how best to reach these providers with ECE education training and support, such that the quality of these care arrangements can be maximized.
- It is clear from the data gathered that the demand exists for high-quality child care and preschool among WIC parents, but supply and cost continue to be barriers. Co-location of preschool facilities near WIC Centers may ensure that all 4-year-olds served by WIC have easier access to preschool. Policy efforts must focus on expansion of available high-quality care, such as Head Start, that is accessible to low-income families.
- Data from this survey indicate that families that encourage and support literacy are more likely to enroll their children in preschool. Therefore, care providers should consider outreach efforts in low-income communities, including WIC Centers, that encourage parents to promote children's early learning at home from birth through age 3. These interventions hold promise for maintaining and increasing preschool demand as supply becomes available.
- Outreach to WIC families in order to provide parenting support is important. Nearly two-thirds of mothers who utilize WIC are providing the majority of care for their own children. It has been documented that WIC mothers experience higher levels of depressive symptoms than normal (see Brief 6 in this series) and may therefore benefit from parenting support and/or help with caregiving. This may be particularly true among Spanish-speaking mothers, who experience the highest levels of depression and the lowest levels of participation in child care programs.
- Given child care's diverse landscape, local and state policy directed at improving child care access and utilization among low-income households must focus on basic strategies that have applicability across settings. In addition to the creation of new child care locations in areas of high need, creative efforts can be directed at improving child care provider education and support for existing providers. Designing strategies that link child care Resource and Referral agencies with WIC, such that the agencies that have expertise in promoting and training child care have access to low-income families, is an important avenue to explore.

¹L. Chyu, A.R. Pebley, S. Lara-Cinisomo. *Patterns of Preschool Use for Children in Los Angeles County*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation (2005). Available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR116/

²E.S. Peisner-Feinberg, M.R. Burchinal, R.M. Clifford, M.L. Culkin, C. Howes, S.L. Kagan, N. Yazejian. "The Relation of Preschool Child-Care Quality to Children's Cognitive and Social Developmental Trajectories through Second Grade." *Child Development* (2003), 72(5), 1534-1553.

The Data Mining Project

The Data Mining Project is a Research Partnership between PHFE-WIC and First 5 LA. The primary goal of the Project is to provide comprehensive data about the low-income 0–5 population in Los Angeles County served by the WIC Program.

WIC is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. The 2005 L.A. County WIC Survey was conducted with a random sample of 5,015 WIC families. For more information about the survey, please visit www.lawicdata.org and click on the link "Report #1 Overview of the Survey."

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First 5 LA

First 5 LA is a unique child advocacy organization created by California voters to invest tobacco tax revenues in programs for improving the lives of children in Los Angeles County, from prenatal through age 5. First 5 LA champions health, education and safety causes concerning young children and families. For additional information about First 5 LA, our partners and projects, visit www.first5la.org.

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