

# Issue BRIEF

Mynti Hossain, Jaime Thomas, Cleo Jacobs Johnson, Nazihah Siddiqui, Amaka Osuoha, Patrick Balke

## The research questions

1. What are the primary reasons that parents choose informal child care?
2. Are informal child care providers interested in promoting their own economic advancement through providing care to young children, and how might they do so?
3. How do bartering and other nonmonetary exchanges support informal child care?
4. What types of quality do children experience in informal child care settings?
5. What types of support do parents and informal child care providers get, want, and need?

## Supporting High Quality Informal Child Care in Detroit

Since 1930, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) has strived to support children's development by reducing vulnerability caused by economic and social inequity. In November 2016, in partnership with the Kresge Foundation, WKKF launched the year-long initiative *Hope Starts Here: Detroit's Early Childhood Partnership* to develop a strategic plan to ensure that all children in Detroit have access to high quality early childhood experiences. Through community engagement, stakeholder collaboration, and research, WKKF is learning about existing caregiving and support networks in Detroit and trying to find ways to enhance them. WKKF asked Mathematica Policy Research to carry out the Informal Child Care in Detroit (ICCD) research project. Mathematica conducted the research from June 2016 to December 2017.

The preceding briefs in this series present findings on the first four research questions and discuss the experiences of parents and caregivers with informal child care and the networks they use in Detroit and Wayne County, Michigan. In this brief, we seek to answer the fifth question by discussing barriers to providing high quality informal child care in Detroit and how to overcome them.

### What is informal child care?

For the ICCD project, we defined informal child care as provided by someone other than a child's parent or guardian outside a licensed child care center or family child care home. The caregiver may be a family member, a friend, or a neighbor; the care may be regular or occasional; and it may take place in the home of the caregiver or the child. Other terms for informal child care are family, friend, and neighbor, relative, or kith-and-kin care; and unlicensed, unlisted, or license-exempt care.

### PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS FACE BARRIERS TO STATE CHILD CARE RESOURCES

The state of Michigan offers eligible informal caregivers payments through the Child and

Adult Care Food Program and child care licensing through the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, and offers eligible families a child care subsidy through the Child Development and Care program. However, parents and caregivers often reported that they were

## Study activities



1. **Twelve interviews with key informants** who were staff at nonprofit organizations, consulting and research organizations, and a state government agency in Detroit, Wayne County, or Michigan. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about existing informal child care programs and networks. WKKF recommended some key informants; others were identified via contacts with stakeholders who were working with organizations that provide family and children's programming and services. We recruited key informants by email and phone, and conducted interviews with them from November 2016 to March 2017.



2. **Eighteen site visits** to nonprofit and other organizations and public libraries in Wayne County. During these visits, the research team conducted interviews with 95 parents and informal caregivers to learn about their experiences using and providing informal care, and drew 51 ecomaps (graphic representations of social systems and supports). The study targeted adult parents and caregivers who use or provide informal child care on a regular or occasional basis for young children, with a focus on those living or providing or receiving child care in Detroit. We invited parents and caregivers to participate in the study individually or in group settings. We conducted interviews with them from January to April 2017.

unable to secure this state support. They and key informants identified several barriers to accessing Michigan's state child care resources.

### Parents and caregivers are largely unaware of the child care subsidy

Parents and caregivers frequently reported that they had not heard of the child care subsidy. Indeed, some of them expressed surprise at the existence of subsidies for informal child care. Key informants, on the other hand, varied in their opinions about whether parents and caregivers were aware of the child care subsidy. Some key informants believed that the subsidy was successfully promoted, either through the state of Michigan or by word-of-mouth in parent and caregiver communities. For example, one key informant reported that, because community trust is important for Detroit families, parents and caregivers largely rely on each other to learn about the subsidy, regardless of how much his organization promotes it. Other key informants said that relying on state and word-of-mouth promotion of the subsidy is insufficient. For example, a few key informants reported that caseworkers for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS)—who have heavy caseloads and responsibility for promoting multiple programs—do not properly

### Michigan's child care subsidy

Michigan's Child Development and Care program offers child care subsidies to eligible families—primarily low-income working families—to help parents pay for the cost of informal or formal child care.<sup>1</sup> Eligibility for the program depends on family size and monthly income. Payments are made biweekly and based on the hours of care provided, up to 90 hours every two weeks. Reimbursement varies by the type of care selected and its quality rating, as determined by the state's Great Start to Quality rating system. Payments range from \$1.35 per hour for a level-1 unlicensed provider to \$4.75 per hour for a 5-star rated child care center for children from birth to 2 1/2 years old. The subsidy is then reduced by a flat-rate deduction, which varies depending on monthly income and family size. Payments are made directly to formal caregivers. For informal caregivers, payments are made directly to the parent, who then reimburses the caregiver.<sup>2</sup>

#### on this page

<sup>1</sup> Sorenson, P., "Failure to Invest in High-Quality Child Care Hurts Children and State's Economy." Michigan League for Public Policy, 2014. Available at <http://www.mlpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Failure-to-Invest-High-Quality-Child-Care.pdf>. Accessed August 20, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Michigan Department of Education, "State of Michigan Child Development and Care (CDC) Handbook." Available at [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/CDC\\_Handbook\\_7-2013\\_428\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/CDC_Handbook_7-2013_428_7.pdf). Accessed August 20, 2017.

## Study sample characteristics

**146**  
parents and informal  
caregivers  
participated in  
the study

**40**  
was the  
average age

Over  
**90%**  
were female

About  
**50%**  
were  
African American

**20%**  
had less than a high  
school education

**29%**  
had a high school  
diploma or GED

**26%**  
attended some  
college

**16%**  
had at least a  
college degree

introduce and explain the subsidy to families. In addition, one key informant described how some parents might be isolated or disconnected from the communities from which they might learn about the subsidy—a parent who works at night, for example, may not be able to attend school meetings at which other parents with children of a similar age discuss the subsidy.

### Fear of government interference prevents some families from seeking the child care subsidy

Some of the parents and caregivers who were aware of the child care subsidy did not pursue it, reported caregivers and key informants, because they feared the government would interfere in their lives. Caregivers believed that subsidy dollars might be counted as income and put them over the income threshold for other social services they receive. Others feared that they would face legal penalties if authorities discovered that they lacked a child care license. Two key informants from the same organization related that undocumented parents were cautious about applying for government programs, explaining that they often assumed that they were ineligible for any government benefit. However, these key informants reported that eligibility for the subsidy does not take into account citizenship status of parents.

### Respondents believe that the child care subsidy's income eligibility requirement and application process discourage parents and caregivers

Parents must be below 125 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) to be eligible for the child care subsidy. One key informant noted that a parent who is even one percent above the FPL is ineligible for the subsidy, and some parents narrowly miss meeting the income eligibility requirement for that reason. Similarly, one caregiver reported that the parents for whom she provides child care have applied for the subsidy several times and been denied because the strict income requirement prevents them from qualifying. One parent said that she understands that she is ineligible for the subsidy because she makes too much money, but thinks this is unfair because she does not receive health care and other benefits through her job and has to pay for them herself. She said that the subsidy income

eligibility requirement does not take situations like hers into account.

“ The program is very limited. The income level of who can access it [the subsidy], you have to be working and be considerably poor.

*A Key Informant*

Moreover, some respondents see the child care subsidy application as “onerous” to parents and caregivers. Some caregivers in the study reported that the child care subsidy is not worth the time and effort required to apply for it—the subsidy rate is low, and there is no legal recourse if parents who receive the child care subsidy fail to turn the money over to their caregivers. A few key informants noted that families who apply for the subsidy might simultaneously apply for other social services, which means that the parents have to reveal a large amount of information about themselves, their families, and their caregivers, which they may be reluctant to do. An additional burden is that an applicant may have to spend time going back and forth with caregivers to gather the needed verifications for the application. One key informant added that the reading level of the application form is high, making it more difficult for individuals to complete. Another key informant reported that the state asks people to complete the application online rather than on paper, and some applicants (presumably those without a computer or Internet access) are not technologically savvy.

“ It's an intimidating application.... I think going through and making certain you have the application complete and all the necessary documentation that needs to go along with it for eligibility is a pretty arduous task.

*A Key Informant*

### Caregivers do not know how to become licensed or are unable to comply with licensing requirements

Although the informal caregivers in the study generally reported that they are not interested in

pursuing a career in child care, a few said that they do wish to become licensed but do not know how to go about it. Key informants confirmed that the process for obtaining a child care license is unclear to informal caregivers. Indeed, those who expressed interest in pursuing child care licensing did not report that they were taking definite steps to obtain it, indicating that they do not know specifically what is needed to obtain a license.

A few caregivers and some key informants reported that even those caregivers who are familiar with the child care licensing process do not think it is realistic for them to pursue it because they cannot comply with licensing requirements. For example, the costs associated with obtaining a license may be too high for some informal caregivers; and the cost of making certain changes required by regulations, such as upgrading to eowindows and redesigning homes to create spaces for children, may be unaffordable for caregivers.

## **PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS NEED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND SUPPORT TO PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY CARE**

Parents, caregivers, and key informants believe that informal caregivers can and, in many cases, want to improve the quality of care they provide for children. Respondents identified three areas in which parents and caregivers need and want additional resources and support.

### **1. Parents and caregivers need convenient access to programs offering resources and support**

Respondents frequently mentioned that WKKF's *Hope Starts Here* initiative, parenting classes, and other programs at churches, schools, and Head Start centers offered resources and support for children, parents, and caregivers. However, some parents and caregivers reported that they do not access these programs. Their reasons vary: some are not aware of these programs, others find it difficult get to places that offer these programs, and others cannot pay for programs that include admission fees and other costs. Key informants said the organizations in Detroit that provide early childhood services lacked a shared message, contributing to parents' and caregivers' unfamiliarity with, and confusion over, available and accessible resources and support.

In addition, some parents and caregivers expressed the need for specific resources and sources of support, including the following:

- Children's diapers
- Children's clothing, books, and toys
- Car seats and transportation vouchers or benefits
- Convenient access to indoor recreation centers
- More parent support groups
- Background checks on potential caregivers
- Training in healthy eating, safety (CPR, first aid, and home childproofing, for example), child discipline, and working with children with severe emotional disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder

Respondents also expressed the need and desire for additional funding in the form of grants, subsidies, and stipends to give parents more child care options and to provide monetary compensation to caregivers.

### **2. Parents and caregivers seek child care information and advice from their families and neighborhood communities, but want to expand their networks of trusted sources**

Although a few parents reported that they have no one to ask for information and advice on child rearing, most parents and caregivers reported that they turn to family members (most often their mothers), neighbors, and community organizations for guidance. However, caregivers and key informants frequently emphasized that parent and caregiver networks are limited to their trusted sources—family circles and neighborhood communities. Parents and caregivers noted that it is important to receive guidance from individuals and organizations they trust because, as one parent said, they want to get information from people whose children “turned out right.” One key informant added that immigrant parents and caregivers typically seek advice from people within the same culture, and presumably from organizations that display cultural competency, because these sources uphold values similar to theirs.

In addition, a lack of convenient transportation in Detroit confines families to their neighborhoods, preventing them from networking more broadly and developing trust with other individuals and organizations in the city. Thus, parents and caregivers may not have the opportunity to learn new information that could link them to additional resources and support.

### 3. Parents and caregivers recommend that outreach methods be personal

Parents, caregivers, and key informants reported that the most effective way to communicate about informal caregiving and related resources and support is (1) through in-person contact at community organizations, libraries, schools, playgrounds, and recreation centers; (2) at events such as resource fairs; and (3) through word-of-mouth referrals from trusted sources in the community. Second to in-person methods of outreach are flyers, said parents, caregivers and key informants. For example, one key informant reported that her organization has approximately 450 people on a waiting list for its programs, solely in response to advertisement through flyers.

Respondents' opinions varied on whether texting and Internet-based communication (email and social media, for example) are effective ways to connect parents and caregivers to resources and support. Some parents and caregivers use technology to communicate with each other and to find resources and support, but others either cannot or do not want to use these methods of communication because smartphones are expensive, they lack access to a computer or Internet, they may not be technologically literate, and they are skeptical of information they get from the Internet.



[Parents and caregivers] are not as high tech as others think they are.

*A Key Informant*

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMISING APPROACHES TO SUPPORT INFORMAL CAREGIVERS AND PARENTS

The Informal Child Care in Detroit research project targeted a range of stakeholders: key

informants at the state, county, and local levels; parents; and informal child care providers. Our goal was to provide a deeper understanding of the parents and caregivers who participate in informal child care in Detroit. Our findings suggest several promising approaches for supporting informal caregivers and ensuring that the children they care for are on the road to educational success.

### Acknowledge the importance of informal child care

Both parents and caregivers may be hesitant to openly acknowledge their use and provision of informal care because of the stigma associated with unlicensed care. However, parents and caregivers see community organizations as a trusted source for child care information and advice. Such community organizations have the power to promote informal child care as a valid choice for parents and caregivers and thus reduce stigma. These organizations can acknowledge the prevalence of informal child care in Detroit and connect parents and caregivers to resources and support. This support will help parents find high quality care and help caregivers improve the quality of care they provide.

### Promote organizations that work closely with undocumented and new immigrant families

New immigrant families are often unaware of available child care resources and support and undocumented parents may be hesitant to seek them, particularly support from state programs such as the Child Development and Care program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Community organizations that work closely with diverse populations can help parents and caregivers gain access to resources and support through advertising, in the process ensuring that parents and caregivers in immigrant and other vulnerable communities are not isolated.

### Collaborate to facilitate access to resources and support

Collaboration among community organizations, religious centers, schools, and other organizations in Detroit that work with parents and caregivers can facilitate convenient access to resources and support in two ways. First, these

## Study limitations

Findings from this research project have several limitations. The generalizability of the findings is limited because the project included a small convenience sample of parents and caregivers who either lived or worked in Wayne County. In addition, the distribution of languages in the sample is not random, as interviewer ability and availability to conduct interviews in languages other than English was a factor in determining the individuals we interviewed. For these reasons, findings from the research project are not representative of the city of Detroit, Wayne County, or the state of Michigan. Moreover, individuals who chose to participate in the project may be different—they may, for example, hold more positive views on informal caregiving—than individuals who declined to participate or were not asked to do so.

organizations can work together to develop and disseminate a shared message about the programs that offer resources and support. Shared messaging will help parents and caregivers learn about and better understand programs in Detroit that may be relevant to them, such as the child care subsidy and child care licensing programs. Second, organizations can work together to explore ways to facilitate convenient access to resources and support. For example, in collaboration they could explore and advocate for improved neighborhood safety and transportation benefits for parents and caregivers. More accessible transportation will not only help parents and caregivers access programs outside their own neighborhoods but also enable them to travel to new places where they might meet and develop relationships with new people, expanding their networks of trusted sources.

Furthermore, community organizations and other stakeholders should work closely with community organizers, parent or family liaisons, and well-known caregivers to disseminate information about available resources and support in an accessible way; that is, without relying solely on the Internet for outreach. Working closely with these grassroots organizations and community leaders can also help state, county, and local program staff stay attuned to the needs and difficulties of parents and caregivers in Detroit.

## Investigate ways to help parents and caregivers gain access to the child care subsidy

Community leaders and other stakeholders can talk with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), MDHHS, and other state-level program leaders about the advertisement of the program, income eligibility criteria, and subsidy reimbursement rate. Stakeholders can also work closely with MDE and MDHHS to explore ways to make it easier for parents and caregivers to apply for social services and subsidy benefits. For example, organizations and state-level leaders could work together to make the application forms shorter and more easily understood, and they could consider ways to ease the burden of those parents who struggle to complete electronic applications. At the same time, organizations serving families can offer assistance to parents who need help with their applications.

## Pursue opportunities for further research

Research on informal child care at the national level is sparse, and even less exists that is specific to informal child care in Detroit. Funders and researchers should pursue opportunities to add to stakeholders' understanding of the prevalence and quality of informal child care. A national study could help stakeholders better understand the needs of parents, children, and informal caregivers; it could also help to inform grassroots efforts and broad policy initiatives to support children, families, and caregivers across the country.

