

The Child Care Arrangements of Paid Child Care Workers in the United States: An Exploration using the SIPP

In recent years, many U.S. researchers have studied two distinct sets of questions related to non-parental, or “substitute,” child care. One is the paid child care workforce itself (Blau 1992; Howes et al 2012, Kontos et al 1996, Mocan and Tekin 2000, Walker 1992, Whitebook and Sakai 2003, Whitebook 1999). The other concerns the child care arrangements used by working parents to care for their children; the overarching question in this second literature is – as it is often phrased – “who’s minding the kids?” (Blau and Currie 2004, U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Remarkably, there is little scholarship that links these two areas of inquiry. As a result, we know almost nothing about who is caring for the children of paid child care workers. Using data from the Survey on Income and Program Participation (SIPP), this study begins to close that gap.

Introduction

Many scholars – mainly labor economists, sociologists, and child development scholars – have assessed the child care workforce. According to Howes et al (2012), this workforce comprises about 1 percent of all workers. These workers fall into three groups with distinctive work settings and conditions: center-based workers (about two-thirds of total), family day care workers (about one quarter) and nannies, those who work in private homes (about 10 percent).

Child care workers across these categories face multiple challenges. The child care workforce is highly feminized, and, in general, is characterized by low pay, limited benefits and few advancement opportunities (Blau 1992, Howes et al 2012, Whitebook 1999). Moreover, child care workers are significantly more likely to have children and to be single mothers than other types of workers. According to Howes et al (2012), half of all child care workers have children under 18, and 20 percent are single mothers. This is significantly higher than other interactive care workers (41 percent have children under 18, 10 percent are single mothers), low-wage workers (36 percent have children under 18, 16 percent are single mothers), and the workforce overall (37 percent have children under 18, 10 percent are single mothers).

A number of scholars have argued that low pay and limited benefits may be offset in part by “compensating differentials,” such as the enjoyment of working with children (Armenia 2009, Cameron 2002, Connelly 1992, Walker 1992) or the ability to care for one’s own children while working. However, there is evidence of variation among groups of child care workers on this point - for example, while family day care workers typically have the opportunity to care for their own children at work (Nelson 1990, Tuominen 2003, Armenia 2009), workers in child care centers (the largest share of the child care workforce) and nannies typically do not (Blau 1992, Connelly 1992). However, existing research addressing this question is largely qualitative, and none of the studies cited directly compare child care workers in different work settings – the current study explores this question in greater depth, comparing groups of child care workers, other direct care workers and comparable non-care workers directly using survey data.

From the perspective of families utilizing paid child care, many scholars have analyzed disparities among children in their care arrangements, especially with respect to their enrollment in formal – and presumably higher-quality – care (U.S. Census 2010; for a review see Meyers et

al 2004). Yet, while much is known about child care disparities associated with family demography, household income, and multiple aspects of parents' (mainly mothers') employment, there has been little research on differences associated with parents' occupation – including their employment in child care itself.¹ Clearly, if child care workers report unique patterns of child care utilization, the underlying causality is likely to be complex and multidirectional. It is precisely these complex processes which we seek to explore in this study.

Data and Methods

Using microdata from the four blended panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)² Core and Wave 5 Topical Modules,³ this Russell Sage Foundation-funded study explores a set of intertwined and diverse individual and job characteristics on the child care arrangements of paid child care workers. Expanding on our paper presented as a poster at PAA in 2012, we present both detailed descriptive findings on the child care arrangements of child care workers and comparison occupational groups, and preliminary multivariate models delving into the unique patterns of child care usage reported by child care workers.

Descriptive Findings

The first substantive contribution of this paper is to describe the child care arrangements, demographic and workforce characteristics of child care workers and comparison occupational groups, including:

- In what settings are the children of paid child care workers being cared for? Are their arrangements stable or unstable, formal or informal? To what extent do paid care workers care for their own children while also caring for others? To what extent do paid care workers rely on paid care vs. unpaid care?
- Are there significant differences in child care utilization patterns *among* child care workers – comparing center workers, family day care workers and nannies?
- Are the patterns of child care usage by child care workers different from those of other workers? In particular, are they different from those of other care workers, and/or from those in non-care jobs with similar earnings levels?
- What is the relationship between work schedules and child care arrangements for different groups of care workers? How do work schedules relate to the ability to care for one's own children at work, or not?

The table below summarizes some of the key descriptive findings of the study, with regard to both workforce characteristics and child care arrangements of child care workers, other direct care workers, and restaurant workers (a comparable group of non-care workers).

¹ Some early research found that blue-collar and service workers tend to utilize more care by relatives and less institutional care, while professional and managerial workers use more paid and non-relative care (see Floge 1985).

² Given the small sample sizes of each SIPP panel, when attempting to analyze relatively small occupational categories it is necessary to blend multiple periods of data to improve sample size. The relevant questions are relatively consistent across the 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008 SIPP panels, enabling the authors to blend these four panels to achieve adequate sample size for the analysis of the detailed occupational categories described.

³ Wave 5 topical modules include Child Care and Work Schedules, two critical components of understanding the child care processes we are exploring in this paper.

**Selected Descriptive Statistics Describing Characteristics and Child Care Arrangements of
Child Care Workers, Other Direct Care Workers, and Restaurant Workers**

| | Child Care Workers | | | | Other Direct Care Workers | Restaurant Workers |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|---------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Center- Based | Family Day Care | Nannies | All Child Care | | |
| Sample N | 1,242 | 361 | 504 | 2,488 | 3,290 | 5,258 |
| Median Age | 34 | 38 | 34 | 35 | 41 | 33 |
| Age <25 | 29% | 5% | 35% | 25% | 15% | 37% |
| Age 55+ | 11% | 11% | 17% | 14% | 16% | 9% |
| Has one or More Children <15yo | 43% | 64% | 26% | 41% | 41% | 31% |
| Median Hourly Wage | \$8.34 | \$9.47 | \$7.30 | \$8.33 | \$10.23 | \$8.55 |
| Regular Full-Time Worker | 53% | 71% | 46% | 52% | 66% | 48% |
| Regular Part-Time Worker | 38% | 27% | 42% | 38% | 29% | 43% |
| Mixed/Varying Work Schedule | 8% | 2% | 13% | 10% | 6% | 9% |
| Child Care Indicators (Workers with Children <15yo Only) | | | | | | |
| Sample N | 489 | 221 | 103 | 935 | 1,160 | 936 |
| Youngest Child 6-14 Ever in Self-Care | 12% | 8% | 7% | 10% | 14% | 17% |
| No Regular Arrangement Reported | 9% | 24% | 17% | 13% | 5% | 7% |
| Child care arrangements disrupted at least once this month | 3% | 0% | 0% | 2% | 3% | 3% |
| Not "Very Satisfied" with child care | 17% | 5% | 12% | 13% | 15% | 18% |
| Use One or More Formal/Institutional Care Settings | 19% | 26% | 5% | 18% | 14% | 9% |
| Pay for Child Care Services | 21% | 11% | 14% | 18% | 19% | 14% |
| Median % of Family Income Spent on CC Services | 5% | 1% | 6% | 4% | 7% | 10% |
| Median Weekly Cost of CC Services (among those paying for care) | \$47 | \$20 | \$36 | \$40 | \$50 | \$50 |

NOTE: For comparative purposes, data for all occupational categories reflects only female workers, since child care workers are overwhelmingly female (95.4%).

NOTE: All child care workers includes an additional number of child care workers in other work settings (N=191)

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2008 SIPP Panels, Core and Wave 5 Topical Modules

As the above table illustrates, there are substantial differences both among subgroups of child care workers and between child care workers, other direct care workers, and restaurant workers (a non-care occupational group with comparable wages). These differences are explored more thoroughly in the multivariate analysis which follows.

Multivariate Models

Second, we move from description to analysis, developing multivariate models to delve into the unique patterns of child care usage reported by child care workers. The goal of this analysis is to use the data available to identify and understand the factors that shape the link between holding a child care job and placing one's children in specific care arrangements. These factors are certainly quite varied, and operate in diverse and intertwined ways. While this analysis is ongoing as of the date of submission of this abstract, the table below provides a rough schematic

of possible links between worker and job characteristics and child care arrangements, some of which are not causal (but are due to selection) as well as those that may have a causal component. Note that only Cell IV assumes that one’s child care job “causes” the pattern of child care usage.

- **Cell I** contains factors *not* specific to child care that could shape selection into child care work as well as decisions about one’s own child care arrangements. Some individual characteristics such as education and family structure might influence workers’ choice of child care occupations, as well as decisions about where to place their children.
- **Cell II** contains factors that *are* specific to child care that could shape selection into child care work as well as decisions about one’s own child care arrangements. It might be that persons’ (prior) understanding of child care, or their preferences/beliefs about child care, could both motivate them to choose child care work and also shape the decisions that they make about their own children’s care.
- **Cell III** contains factors that capture characteristics of child care *jobs* that may influence workers’ own child care decisions, but which are not specific to child care. These include, e.g., the job’s work hours or schedule, the level of pay, or the work site location.
- **Cell IV** contains factors that capture job characteristics that *are* directly related to the child care aspect of the job. Some child care workers’ jobs offer the option to enroll one’s own child. It also may be that some child care workers, because of their jobs, have access to information and/or referrals that they would not otherwise have. These kinds of resources are likely to influence the child care arrangements that they make for their own children.

**Schematic of Factors that May Underlie Associations
between Holding a Child Care Job and One’s Child Care Arrangements**

| | Characteristics of the parent/worker | Characteristics of the child care job |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Not specific to child care | I. ● Education * ● Family structure * ● Household income * | III. ● Work schedules * ● Wages / earnings * ● Proximity to home |
| Specific to child care | II. ● Prior knowledge about child care / child care arrangements ● Prior preferences / beliefs about child care arrangements | IV. ● Option to enroll a child in the child care arrangement where the parent works * ● Knowledge gained at work shapes child care workers’ preferences/beliefs about child care arrangements (tenure in occupation) ** ● Access to information about child care arrangements and/or funding options, social networks (tenure in occupation) ** |

* Variable(s) directly available in the SIPP data (Core or Wave 5 Topical Modules)

** Related variable(s) available in the SIPP data (Core or Wave 5 Topical Modules)

Discussion and Conclusions

As described above, this study is the first to systematically describe the child care arrangements of paid child care workers. Further, we describe and explore a wide range of factors to better understand the diverse and intertwined relationships between paid child care and care for one’s own children. As such, we hope to contribute to prevailing understandings about paid child care workers and their families, and to the literature on child care, work and family more broadly.

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