

The Wait List as Redistributive Policy: Access and Burdens in the Subsidized Childcare System



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This article theorizes the wait list as an underexamined vehicle of administrative burden. Wait lists are now common within the U.S. social safety net, yet little research has considered their administration. Drawing on a surprising case of Massachusetts' declining wait list for subsidized childcare, I find that administrative burdens were introduced to the list following state questioning of agency competence. The burdens have resulted in the ongoing deactivation of thousands of caseloads from the list per month and a 75 percent reduction in the total number of waiting families in just five years. My findings suggest wait lists as understudied but consequential sites of opaque policymaking that shape access to critical social services and the legibility of unmet need.

Keywords: childcare, wait lists, inequality, social welfare

Stephanie learned that she was pregnant during her last year of college.¹ She moved home to Boston, had her baby, got a job, and planned to start a life for herself and her child. Stephanie's job, though, paid just \$2,100 a month—enough to keep her out of poverty but not enough for rent, food, or diapers and certainly not enough for childcare. Stephanie applied for the state subsidized childcare program, a criti-

cal social welfare program that provides care to low- and moderate-income working families for free or at a reduced price. Despite her eligibility, Stephanie was unable to obtain assistance. Limited funding had restricted the number of available vouchers. Instead, she was placed on the state's wait list, a process that according to Stephanie went as follows: "Do your application, we'll put it in the system,

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1. All participants' identities have been anonymized.

you'll get a confirmation letter when we send out updates, and wait."

Stephanie's experience is not uncommon. Increasingly, this is how many social welfare programs work: apply and wait. Like publicly subsidized childcare, many means-tested benefits are now managed from a place of scarcity. Amid the broader shift of the twentieth-century American welfare state from entitlement to eligibility (Allard 2009; Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012), gaps in funding have been increasingly filled with wait lists to catalog the families eligible for but without access to multiple forms of social assistance, including subsidized childcare but also housing assistance, substance abuse treatment, elder care, and even emergency homeless shelters, among others. Wait lists are now foundational to and ubiquitous within our social safety net.

Even so, their significance has been only peripherally considered. Existing work notes lengthy and problematic wait lists (DeLuca, Garboden, and Rosenblatt 2013; Desmond 2016; Moynihan, Gerzina, and Herd 2021) and more broadly lengthy and problematic wait times (Auyero 2011; Cohen 2018), but we know less about how wait lists are managed and why, the scope of administrative burdens attached to them, and the implications for citizens' access to public resources. These questions are important for two reasons. First, wait lists function not only as precursors to obtaining assistance for those in need, but also as public performance measures for those in charge, making them co-constitutional social statistics relevant to both beneficiary and elected leader. Second, wait lists operate in spaces with little public oversight or opportunities for public scrutiny, meaning that they may also create opportunities for discretionary decision-making that could lead to exacerbating systems of inequality. Uncovering the rules and practices—the administrative burdens—through which wait lists are governed is therefore critical to understanding issues of access in the contemporary social safety net.

To examine the role of administrative burdens in wait lists, I draw on the surprising case of Massachusetts' recently declining wait list for subsidized childcare. Between 2013 and 2018 it dropped by 75 percent, from nearly sixty

thousand cases to fifteen thousand, where it remains today. Given the historical and widespread scarcity that has characterized the subsidized childcare program, the decline in wait list numbers is at first perplexing. Current estimates suggest that just 8 percent of the nearly thirteen million eligible children nationwide receive subsidized services (Ullrich, Schmidt, and Cosse 2019). Other families, like Stephanie's, often wait for years. Thus—and especially given the consistency of program eligibility requirements, the absence of change in program capacity, the historical underfunding, and the rise in employment rates in the state over this same period—one might have instead predicted a growing wait list.

To explain, I redirect attention to the administration of the wait list and its significance as a discretely managed public performance measure. In my review of archival documents, I find that immediately before the rapid plunge in wait list numbers, state officials, wary of the growing length of the list, had ordered an audit of the state's Early Education and Care (EEC) Department with the primary goal of reviewing the agency's wait list. The audit found evidence of possible inflation, which state leaders attributed to agency mismanagement. In response, the list was "cleaned" and additional administrative requirements for clients to remain on the list were introduced, resulting in the sudden drop in wait list numbers as caseloads were terminated for failure to adhere to the new and newly enforced burdens, even as evidence of ineligibility remained ambiguous.

In the second half of this article, after this historical context, I explore the downstream burdens created for families and organizations. I find that, first, terminations have continued so that thousands of cases are currently deactivated from the wait list every month, despite demographic estimates suggesting persistently higher levels of unmet need, and second, that wait list numbers have especially declined within majority Black, Hispanic, and immigrant communities. Meanwhile, the newly introduced administrative practices also placed an additional level of burden onto contracted providers, contributing to a parallel and material, and ongoing, reduction in subsidized childcare at the level of the organizational field.

Ultimately, I argue that because the wait list came to symbolize agency competence, the performance of the list itself became the problem to resolve rather than the possible unmet need it represented. This analytical delineation is important because it shifts attention away from wait lists as objective indicators of need to instead emphasize them as understudied but consequential sites of opaque policymaking that can shape both access to critical social services and the legibility of unmet need.

BACKGROUND

The subsidized childcare program is a critical antipoverty and child well-being program designed to support intergenerational mobility through maternal employment and child development. Federally funded by the Child Care and Development Block Grant, states are allotted grants through which to support the establishment of public-private childcare markets for low- and moderate-income families. Much like under the Housing Choice Voucher program, beneficiaries are typically given time-limited vouchers with which to “purchase” childcare from private providers contracting with the state. Although friends and family members can be designated as caregivers, contracted providers are typically childcare centers or in-home family childcare providers, which are licensed facilities operated out of the provider’s home.

Access to the program, however, is increasingly limited because voucher availability and the number of subsidized providers have both declined nationwide over the 2010s (Mohan 2017; Ullrich, Schmidt, and Cosse 2019). Consequently, many states now revert eligible families to wait lists. As of 2016, eighteen states had wait lists for subsidized childcare with the reported length of the lists ranging from twenty-four in Colorado to more than twenty-four thousand in Massachusetts.² Longer lists have been more recently reported, such as in Texas when approximately seventy-five thousand children statewide were waiting for subsidized care in 2018 (Waller 2018). Although data are scarce on how long parents typically spend on these

wait lists, the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) finds that parents could wait anywhere from under six months to a year or more (Schulman and Blank 2016).

Subsidized childcare, however, is far from an isolated case. Wait lists now appear to be commonplace in the process of securing a range of social services. The waiting list for Medicaid waiver services in New Jersey, for example, is 8,500 people with a wait time of three to six months. This is short relative to other states, such as Texas, where one mother was told that the wait for disability services for her children showing signs of severe autism would be ten years (Stuckey 2022). Demand for housing assistance also is so severe in some areas, such as Denver or Houston or New York City, that wait lists are no longer open for enrollment. Instead, lotteries are held for the possibility of getting onto the list. Despite their rationing, the national average wait time for housing assistance is two years (Fischer and Sard 2017). Even when services appear critical to the health and survival of an individual, a wait list is still likely. In Maine, for instance, 925 elderly residents were wait-listed for home health care as recently as 2021. One resident, eighty-year-old Louise Shackett, refused to understand: “I should be getting the help I need *and that I am eligible for*” (Galewitz 2021, emphasis added).

In the contemporary United States, however, eligibility for services can mean little. Despite some expansions of the social welfare state over the past several decades, state agencies still find themselves underresourced and ill equipped to grapple with growing demand (Edin and Shaefer 2015). The origins of this disenfranchisement were formalized in the 1996 welfare reforms, which restructured the way public assistance is delivered. With the intention of promoting a work-first welfare state, direct cash payments were largely replaced with in-kind services (Allard 2009). These services, however, were introduced under an eligibility rather than entitlement model, meaning services are rendered only when budgets allow. Childcare offers an insightful case.

2. The National Women’s Law Center, which collects this data, stopped reporting on waitlists after 2016. States’ reporting on lists is highly variable because of a lack of federal standards in waitlist administration.

Given the work-first approach of the reforms combined with the fact that most welfare recipients were mothers (Moffitt 2015), policymakers recognized childcare as indispensable to any path forward. Between 1996 and 2003, total federal spending on childcare for low-income families tripled from \$4 billion to more than \$12 billion. Spending increases, though, in parallel to other assistance programs, slowed in the 2000s and remained stagnant for nearly two decades. It was not until 2018 that any meaningful reinvestments were made in the childcare program and even then, total spending remained below 2003 levels. COVID-19 relief has sent more money into childcare with 2022 budget projections around \$33 billion, but spending is anticipated to return to pre-pandemic budgets by 2024 (Hahn et al. 2021).

With too few resources and unable to serve all eligible, policymakers and bureaucrats instead resorted to rationing and triaging strategies, including the implementation of wait lists. Predictably, then, as spending on subsidized childcare slowed, state wait lists for the program grew. Estimates from the NWLC suggest that by 2016 more than 450,000 children nationwide were on state wait lists for subsidized childcare, excluding those in California and New York where records are maintained at the local district level and aggregate statewide data are not available (Schulman and Blank 2016).

To be sure, childcare wait lists are not isolated to the public program. Even for those able and willing to pay privately, accessing a slot may take years. Although no systematic data collection on the length of individual childcare provider wait lists is in place, popular reporting suggests that wait lists for non-subsidized infant care in a licensed and out-of-home childcare setting (that is, not a nanny or an au pair or kith and kin) can easily be more than a year long and in some markets up to three years (LegUp 2022; Nguyen 2021). But while the scarcity of childcare in the private market can be rationed through price, a practice that exacerbates inequalities elsewhere, the state must resort to alternative methods. One such alternative method is the management of wait lists.

BURDENS AND THE POLITICAL SALIENCE OF THE WAIT LIST

Scholars have highlighted how bureaucratic complexity can be intentionally invoked to covertly triage scarce resources (Gustafson 2011; Hacker 2004; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Lipsky 1984), a process Michael Lipsky called “bureaucratic disentanglement” (1984, 9). Although wait lists do not necessarily have to be spaces of complexity, they often are. Research on rental assistance wait lists, for example, has found that beneficiaries experience the process as “opaque and complex,” and one that typically involves considerable labor and requires significant knowledge to successfully navigate (Keene et al. 2021, 1). Learning about the existence of and how to navigate a wait list, for instance, can be read as forms of what Donald Moynihan and colleagues (2015) call “learning costs.” Who does one call to be placed on the list? What are the policies to get and stay on the list? How does one move up or down on the list? And how might one check their status? Managing these requirements after learning about them, represent forms of “compliance cost,” (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Gathering paperwork, submitting changes of address, and responding to annual interest letters, among other requirements, all exact the burden of compliance from beneficiaries.

Beyond list logistics, the experience of waiting and the accompanying uncertainty can become a deliberate and specific form of disentanglement (Heinrich et al. 2022). Stephanie Pierce and Stephanie Moulton, in their discussion of mortgage relief (2023, this issue), describe how long wait times for services can amount to what they classify as passive compliance costs, in which an individual is tasked with waiting on the state to act. These passive costs can affect who receives services, and who does not, because not all applicants will be able to persist. Given that many waiting on services may also be in a state of crisis, the act of waiting itself could be elevated to a third type of cost: psychological (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Those waiting may often have only a vague timeline for when services can be expected, if ever, and are often waiting for resources critical to their well-being. Waiting in

this sense is a visceral experience of power (Bourdieu 2000).

Significant here, however, is that these burdens are not inevitable. They are the result of choices made by state and local administrators. The costs exacted therefore can and do vary based on these choices, which is why it is important to remember that wait lists are not just relevant to those doing the waiting. Wait lists can also be public performance measures, making them additionally relevant to the politicians and nonelected state actors who manage and are evaluated by the lists.

Like other social statistics, wait lists operate on a dual plane. On the one hand, they can be resourceful for the fair and transparent dissemination of public services, incentivizing public actors' accountability (Heinrich and Marschke 2010; Porter 1995). Wait lists can, for example, demonstrate how effectively a program's resources are being distributed or help officials weigh the magnitude of unmet need. On the other hand, though, social statistics are prone to manipulation precisely because they are also evaluative measures reflecting the successes or failures of administrative actors (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Heinrich and Marschke 2010; Moynihan 2008). For example, using the case of standardized testing in public schools, Brian Jacob and Steven Levitt (2003) demonstrate how the intensification of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations in the Chicago public school system significantly increased not student achievement, but teacher cheating. Teacher cheating was also more likely to occur in high-stakes circumstances, such as low-achieving classrooms, and less so when the benefits of cheating were lower and the costs higher (Jacob and Levitt 2003, 847). We could similarly consider the 2014 scandal at the Veterans Health Administration (VA). To incentivize responsive services for veterans, VA administrators' pay structure rewarded short turnaround times. But because the VA lacked the resources to meet these deadlines, executives instead encouraged staff to falsify information (Lopez 2015; Moynihan 2014). In each example, the performance measures came to reflect the appearance of progress rather than progress itself.

These cases tell us four things about perfor-

mance measures as social statistics. First, they are intended for transparency and fair governance and therefore are taken seriously as evaluative measures for individuals and organizations (Heinrich and Marschke 2010; Porter 1995). Consequently, and second, performance as behavior can become disassociated from performance as information (Moynihan 2008, 5), resulting in the strategic "gaming" of important performance indicators (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Third, an actor's propensity for gaming performance measures is typically relative to how much weight is placed on the performance measure itself and the actor's ability (resources) for achieving the measure (Heinrich and Marschke 2010). Fourth, their manipulation can have material consequences, especially for vulnerable populations.

Wait lists, therefore, can be tools for both resource management *and* impression management. In fact, they are ideal sites for the latter because they are typically maintained almost entirely under the supervision of nonelected bureaucrats, including local authorities (Keene et al. 2021; Leopold 2012), and with little public oversight. Given these qualities, I theorize the wait list as a discrete site of "subterranean" policymaking (Hacker 2004), the methods of which are accomplished or capable of being accomplished by the introduction, repeal, or modification of administrative burdens. To demonstrate, I draw on in-depth interviews and analysis of administrative and archival data to first describe how the Massachusetts state wait list for subsidized childcare became a significant social statistic, and one that was emblematic of agency dysfunction, and how administrative burdens were invoked to restore its integrity. Second, I explore the downstream effects of these administrative burdens at the individual and organizational levels.

POLICY SETTING

Childcare represents more than an insightful case. Extensive research has demonstrated the robust relationship between childcare availability and mothers' labor-force participation (Aaronson and Alba 2021; Blau and Robins 1989; Landivar et al. 2020; Presser and Baldwin 1980). Early childhood contexts also have implications for children's cognitive and emo-

tional development, the effects of which can reach long into adulthood (Heckman 2006). Even so, childcare remains unaffordable and broadly inaccessible. Childcare costs typically rival and sometimes surpass housing costs in most states (DeParle 2021). According to recent data collected and analyzed by the Economic Policy Institute, for example, infant care in Massachusetts is 31 percent more than the average rent. Similar patterns are found across the country: in Connecticut infant care is 11 percent higher than the average rent, in Indiana it is 24 percent higher. In Wyoming, a minimum wage worker would need to work full time for thirty-seven weeks to pay for childcare for just one infant.

Yet the majority of mothers still work. As of 2020, 67 percent of mothers with children younger than six years old were in the formal labor force (Women's Bureau 2020). This means that every day, mothers without safe or reliable childcare must make difficult and sometimes dangerous decisions about their employment and their children's care (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Levine 2013). This context is what makes subsidized childcare so critical. In an attempt to more strategically deliver services, states have adopted a triage schema, prioritizing vouchers for teen parents, homeless families, and those currently or recently receiving cash assistance or welfare, among a few other select groups. Families involved with child protective services through the Department of Children and Families (DCF) are also typically prioritized and, in Massachusetts, placed directly into services. Their prioritization means that families in "target" groups are less likely to be placed onto the wait list, but, as Frank Edwards and his colleagues (2023, this issue) document, are likely to endure other versions of administrative burdens.

For all other eligible families, the wait list is now the first step to receiving services in Massachusetts, as in many other states. Getting onto the list is straightforward. You need two things: your personal information and contact with a wait list administrator. This administrator can be any employee of a subsidized childcare center, a Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) caseworker, or those working the 211-hotline. At first pass, this administrator will

input your name, your contact information, your stated income, and the number of children in your home, among other data, into a centralized platform called KinderWait, a system used by several other states and owned by Controltec, a company that specializes in what it calls childcare subsidy management solutions and that was recently bought out by the private equity firm Firmament—a business model built around the proliferation of wait lists to support my earlier point. Immediately, the software will compute your eligibility. If deemed eligible, your file will be registered on the list until funding becomes available, a wait that can take from months to up to two or three years. Once you receive an offer, you can officially apply to the program, a process that takes from days to several weeks. As detailed in the sections that follow, however, *staying* on the wait list can require consistent and considerable labor.

From a demographic standpoint, most families likely to be on the wait list would be most accurately categorized as *near poor*, that is, earning too much to be considered highly vulnerable but not enough to afford childcare in the private market. Income eligibility parameters for subsidized childcare are generous relative to other assistance programs. In Massachusetts, eligibility is 50 percent of the median state income, which as of 2016 equated to a maximum annual income of just over \$55,000 for a family of four. At the other end, though, are families who likely have very few resources, including any classification from the state. For example, all homeless families are now prioritized on the wait list according to the McKinney-Vento definition. However, at the time of this study, a family was only deemed homeless by the EEC if living within a state-sanctioned Department of Housing and Community Development shelter, *de facto* excluding those living in hotels or cars or other precarious and possibly unhoused arrangements. For this article, then, unhoused and otherwise vulnerable families absent of a state classification were possibly also on the wait list.

It is also mothers, and especially poor and near-poor mothers of color, who are likely to be on the wait list. Black mothers in particular have significantly higher rates of subsidized

childcare program participation than White or Hispanic mothers (Radey and Brewster 2007). Recent administrative data also suggest that a substantial portion of those on Massachusetts’ wait list are not native English speakers, nearly 16 percent of children on the list indicating Spanish as their first language, followed by smaller percentages indicating Portuguese or Haitian Creole as their primary language.³ Barriers to accessing childcare, including administrative burdens buried in the wait list, therefore contribute to the gendered and racialized reproduction of inequality, what Whitney Laster Pirtle and Tashelle Wright term “structural gendered racism” (2021) and reflect intersectional disadvantages similar to those documented within and reverberating across many other institutional contexts (Sackett and Lar-eau 2023).

DATA AND METHODS

The data used in this article originate from two primary sources: in-depth interviews and administrative records. In total, I interviewed forty individuals working within or around the field of subsidized childcare in Boston, Massachusetts (table 1). Because my interests lay in the relationship between the state and families’ access to childcare, I intentionally reached out to those working in the subsidized system. Among them, seventeen were directors of centers, including executive directors overseeing multiple sites and directors of specific elements of the programs such as enrollment. These seventeen individuals represented eight organizations. I also interviewed two individuals currently or formerly employed by the EEC and two from the CCRR agency, which are non-profits regionally subcontracted by the EEC to manage the distribution of vouchers and placement of families into subsidized slots. It was during one of the latter interviews that I was introduced to the original wait list conflict and cleaning that resulted in many of the burdens introduced and discussed below.

I recruited participants through multiple outlets. First, I strategically cold-called and emailed local advocates and providers whom I had heard speak at public board meetings. I

Table 1. Interview Participants by Occupation

	N
Childcare providers	
Subsidized center directors	17
Private center directors	2
Teachers	4
Bureaucrats	
CCRR	2
EEC licenser	1
Former EEC commissioner	1
Policy Advocates	
Local	4
National	5
Related	
Community college counselor	1
Subsidized housing	1
Social worker	2
Total	40

Source: Author’s tabulation.

then relied on snowball sampling and interviewee referrals. Interviews took place in person and over the telephone. All but two were recorded and later transcribed. Of the two interviews not recorded—one because of technical failure and the other by request—I took detailed notes immediately following. Interviews were frequently prefaced and followed up with ongoing email conversations.

It was from these individuals that I began piecing together a broader understanding of how the wait list functioned and how it did not, as well as the wider institutional history of the list. In most interviews, the wait list emerged unprompted when I asked about the mechanics of serving subsidized families. For some, the wait list was more problematic than for others. It was from enrollment directors that I learned about the technical logistics of the wait list and in particular the monthly deactivation of children from the wait list.

To corroborate these deactivations and the longer wait list history, I submitted a public records request for administrative data from the EEC on the number of children actively on the wait list, number terminated from the wait list

3. EEC administrator, email correspondence, November 23, 2022.

in total, by zip code, and by reason, in addition to the number reinstated to the wait list following a termination by month for November 2013 to December 2019. The numbers aligned with what participants had described to me, but still missing was an explanation for the terminations. As Javier Auyero (2021) argues in his advocacy for political ethnography, “numbers provide a baseline but not the complete truth.”

To better understand the context and possible reasons for the wait list decline and ongoing terminations, I first reviewed annual EEC legislative reports from 2012 to 2017, EEC management bulletins, and third-party research reports, including two Urban Institute reports commissioned by the EEC. I then returned to my fieldnotes taken while attending the EEC monthly board meetings beginning in November 2016. In all, over a three-year period, I had attended or viewed online eighteen of these meetings, which begin with an open public commentary period followed by organized discussion of ongoing agency business. To validate the notes I had taken, I requested minutes of public board meetings and other relevant public committee meetings from January 2013 through December 2017. I analyzed these documents, in total 427 pages, for mentions of the wait list as well as voucher funding and slot use updates, which helped me piece together a timeline of the wait list’s recent history and political shaping. These minutes led me to the 2014 state audit of the EEC, the investigation that became the instigation for the original wait list cleaning and which I was able to locate online. This audit, in addition to local reporting and the archival materials discussed above, became central to my understanding of the wait list as presented here.

RESULTS

Between 2013 and 2018 the number of cases on the Massachusetts wait list for subsidized childcare dropped by 75 percent. The drop was sudden and should have been unexpected given the program’s historical underfunding combined with limited changes to eligibility requirements and no meaningful changes in program capacity statewide. In other words, the list was not going down because people were getting in. In addition, demographic estimates

would have similarly supported more demand: the state’s child population remained relatively stable, unemployment rates fell from 6.7 to 3.7 even as economic inequality worsened. It was unlikely, then, that the list was shrinking because of population-level changes. This article theorizes instead a third source of change: political administrative.

In Massachusetts in 2014, a state audit of the EEC led to the intensification and renewed enforcement of multiple forms of administrative burdens for families navigating the program’s wait list. The audit came following a meteoric rise in the number of caseloads on the wait list, a number that was at once shocking but also predictable because by 2011, the EEC had imposed a voucher freeze due to the “unstable economy” and a fear of overspending the budget. The freeze would last two and a half years and result in the exponential growth of the wait list. Former Commissioner Killins explained to a reporter in early 2013, “We have seen a surge of about 2,000 people per month go on to our waiting lists and we have not been able to respond to that need” (Johnson 2013). By 2013, the state’s childcare wait list reached nearly sixty thousand, quadrupling since 2005 and becoming one of the longest in the country.

Still, the wait list was not a problem until it was declared one. As Moynihan (2008) points out, the meaning of performance measures is highly subjective. The context of the wait list as problematic only shifted when rising caseloads collided with calls for universal childcare from then Governor Deval Patrick. Patrick had run on a platform of education, including early education and care. In 2008 his administration had published their education agenda, “The New Promise of Public Education.” Among promises of expanded community college and teacher retention was universal early education: “a coordinated plan to provide high-quality early education and care for *all children beginning at birth*” (The Patrick Administration Education Action Agenda 2008; emphasis added).

Patrick tried to make good on his promises, repeatedly calling for increased investments into public education, including expanded access to early education. In his January 2013 State of the State address, Patrick specifically touched on the EEC wait list and universalizing

childcare: “Toddlers, infants, other preschoolers, 300,000 [*sic*] of them are on the wait list for early education opportunities. Let’s ensure that every child in Massachusetts has access to high quality early education” (Patrick 2013). Soon after, the governor requested an additional \$131 million intended to eliminate the EEC’s wait list and expand early education access over the next four years, in addition to other investments like teacher salaries. State senate leaders responded by publicly questioning the agency’s competence and would later approve only \$15 million.

At a time when state resources were still limited from the effects of the Great Recession, repeated calls for increased spending appeared to cause tension between the Governor and House Speaker Robert DeLeo. A 2013 news article from the *Boston Herald*, published only weeks after the governor’s address, reads, “A fed-up House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo—already in a showdown with Gov. Deval Patrick over taxes—vowed yesterday to clean up two scandal-ravaged agencies in the Patrick Administration, telling the *Herald* the abuses in the welfare and early education departments must stop” (Cassidy 2013). In fact, the cleaning up had already begun.

Questioning whether the agency was “managing its money and caseload efficiently” (Levenson 2013), and specifically suspicious of the recent wait list growth, DeLeo had ordered an investigation into the EEC from the newly minted state auditor’s office: “Before we make any further investments, we want to make sure their house is in order.” The audit would span two years, from 2011 to 2013, and not be published until November 2014. It would find evidence of agency wait list mismanagement, revealing more than 21,500 “possibly ineligible” children on the wait list.

While under investigation by the state auditor, however, the EEC leadership defended the validity of their wait list data. After the audit was well under way but not yet published, board members strategized about how to communicate the authenticity of their data: “Board Member Childs reported that the active wait list for childcare subsidies has grown to more

than fifty thousand children. Board Member Scott-Chandler opined that although the data demonstrates that the wait list is increasing, stakeholders do not trust the data, so the Department needs to get the message out that *this data is not inflated and reflects real children.*”⁴

Given the voucher freeze, an increasing wait list was not unexpected. After all, newly added cases were still being screened by caseworkers and systems such as KinderWait before they were ever placed onto the list. As described to me by Claudia, who worked at a subsidized childcare program that operates three centers and whose entire job consisted of managing those centers’ enrollment, “it’s all in the computer.” When she mentioned her guilt when parents came in and earned \$100 or so over eligibility, I asked her if she was ever tempted to manipulate the results. She explained, “It won’t let us. It just says, ‘exceeds the income.’ . . . It’s sad because you wish you could help them but there’s just no way because it’s just all in the computer, it calculates it itself.”

The possible overestimation was problematic for the state for two reasons. At the time, in addition to recording waiting families, the state claimed to use the wait list as a funding barometer. Consequently, the auditor’s office argued that “inaccurate data may adversely affect the Legislature’s ability to assess the need for childcare services and establish appropriate funding.” Overestimating need could presumably result in overbudgeting. Even so, the legislature had already begun cutting the agency’s budget. Between 2010 and 2012, the years of the greatest wait list growth, the EEC’s budget dropped by more than \$30 million, including funding for expanding access to income eligible families, suggesting that numbers alone were not dictating this process.

The second problem was more political. As an executive at the National Women’s Law Center explained by email, state actors must be concerned about not only the accuracy of the list but also “the negative political consequences of having a long waiting list, and how it would look to the public and/or advocates.” DeLeo, too, had positioned himself as a friend

4. Board meeting minutes, January 8, 2013 (emphasis added).

to the early education and childcare sector and an advocate for early childhood education (Children's Trust 2016; MADCA 2017). An ever-growing wait list was in neither Patrick's favor nor his own. Still, as House speaker, DeLeo was also responsible for helping manage the state budget, which at the time was strained from the lingering effects of the Recession. Even had the list reflected only "real children," existing funding for them all was hardly enough. By redirecting attention to the agency's performance, the debate pivoted to focus on the agency's inability to manage the list rather than the legislature's inability to fund it.

When the audit was released, one of the problems the investigation revealed was duplicates. Because of the many wait list administrators, some families were being placed on the wait list more than once. Even so, duplicates were only a minor problem, accounting for fewer than seven hundred of the 21,561 estimated overage. The others, according to the auditor's report, were records of children that had not been updated in twelve months or more, an existence that technically violated EEC policy and that the state wanted fixed.

In practice, the agency was balancing type 1 false-positive errors over type 2 false-negative errors by intentionally keeping families on the list who may have no longer been active only because of a recent glitch. Relevant case file information, including families' dates of application, had been lost when the wait list had been transitioned over to KinderWait in 2011. Rather than terminate families inaccurately, the agency disabled the platform's automatic archive system to allow families to remain on the list under the new platform for at least a year, meaning that families who were no longer eligible or active were possibly still on the list. Following the audit, however, the feature—which automatically archives families inactive in the system for twelve months and two weeks or more—was reinstated and more than twenty thousand children's entries were immediately deactivated. Although now impossible to say with confidence, this pivot likely flipped the risk-reward ratio to instead prioritize the integrity of the list but at the expense of potentially

eligible families. A redirection to preference type 2 over type 1 errors.

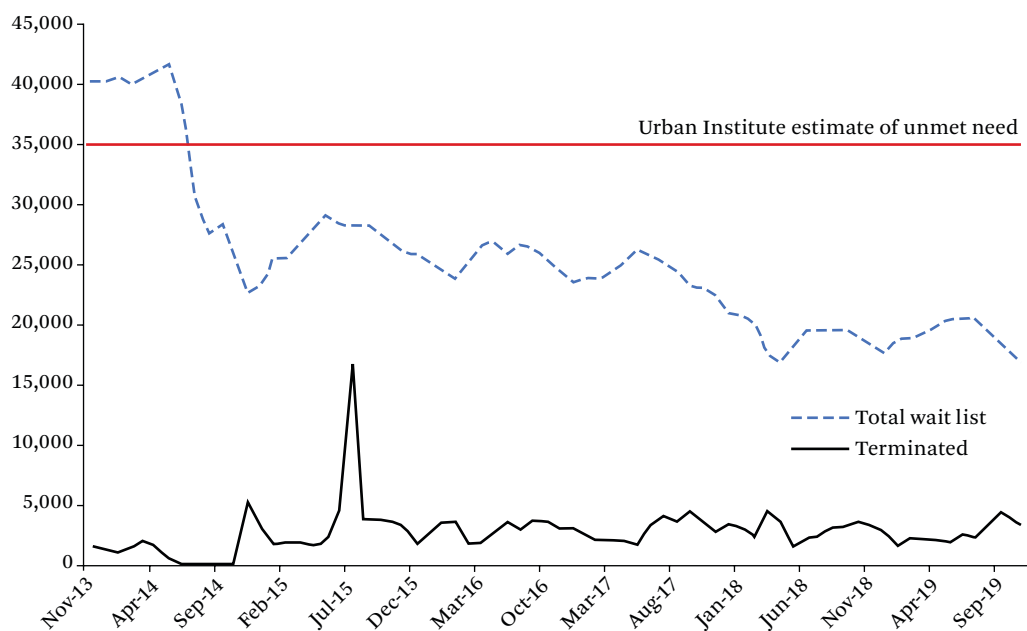
In 2014, with the list about forty thousand cases deep, the early education narrative in state politics also flipped. The following fiscal year, Patrick asked for a reduced \$15 million for childcare access expansion, his goal dropping from universal to 1,700 children (Simpson 2014). Although the EEC had historically leveraged its long and growing wait list as a reason for increased funding, the list itself, rather than the possible unmet need it represented, appeared to remain the problem. Soon after taking over agency leadership in late 2013, then Commissioner Weber acknowledged the wait list as "one of the most politically salient and known aspects of [the] EEC."⁵ Within months, the former commissioner had assembled an internal task force to review the wait list procedures. The recommended "enhancements" included expediting the removal of families from the list, shortening the duration for reinstatement, and "establish[ing] a consistent process for 'blocking access' to families terminated for cause" (board meeting presentation, April 8, 2014). The cause, however, is often an inability to pay even the subsidized fee. In short, despite agency protests over the validity of the data a year earlier, the list came to symbolize the agency's incompetence rather than valid need.

That summer, the EEC undertook, "the additional initiative to perform a Waitlist Cleanup project," which the agency internally described as "aggressive" (board meeting minutes, September 11, 2014) and which would involve "purging the list of families who are no longer interested in care," (Isaacs et al. 2015, 52). To accomplish this, CCRR employees were tasked with contacting all families remaining on the list. First, a confirmation letter was sent. Two telephone calls followed, one mandated to be during nonbusiness hours. If families did not respond to the letter or the calls within thirty days, they were dropped from the wait list. Between April 2014 to August 2014 alone, the number of children on the wait list dropped further—from 41,028 to 27,593 (Isaacs et al. 2015, 103).

By 2018, with a cleaning ritual firmly em-

5. Board meeting minutes, April 8, 2014.

Figure 1. Children Active and Terminated Monthly from State Wait List for Subsidized Childcare, Massachusetts



Source: Author's tabulation based on EEC administrative data.

bedded in agency practice, the wait list had dropped to approximately fifteen thousand children (figure 1), the same as it had been in 2005 and where it more or less remains, oscillating monthly between fifteen and twenty thousand since. The cleanup is preserved as a bullet-point accomplishment on the state auditor's landing page and the wait list has mostly dropped from agency discussion. Whereas access expansion and specifically wait list numbers had been a recurring theme in board meetings between 2012 and 2015, mentions declined precipitously in 2016. By 2017, the term was mentioned only three times, twice from members of the public who continued to express frustration over the time families were on the list and waiting for subsidized care, a figure that to my knowledge has not changed.⁶ The state appears to have already made a hard pivot away from access expansion as a goal: "Board Member Wasser Gish noted that the [House Budget update]

presentation assumes that since voucher access is closed, there will be an attrition of the number of vouchers. Deputy Commissioner Concannon responded that the House did not fund wait list remediation, and the intention is not to increase access."⁷

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCESSIBILITY

Social statistics introduced as a form of performance management, like the wait list, can on the one hand offer opportunities for a more efficient public sector. Cleaning the wait list could theoretically make it a more useful administrative tool for effectively distributing public resources. On the other hand, when performance measures become more important than the behavior itself, unintended consequences can follow (Moynihan 2009). Whatever the motivation behind the wait list purge, of greater concern here are the consequences. In the following two sections, I describe how the introduction of incremental wait list bur-

6. Board meeting minutes, October 10, 2017.

7. Board meeting minutes, May 10, 2016.

dens now shape families' access to subsidized childcare at the individual and organizational levels.

Many Points of Termination

Since the purge, the agency's wait list cleaning practices have proliferated. Families now must respond to the agency's annual confirmation letters—telephone calls are no longer made—and letters of childcare offers from the CCRRs and the subsidized providers to remain on the wait list. When the latter will be sent, how many a family might receive, or where the letters will originate cannot be determined. Generally, two pathways lead to termination.

First, families may be offered a voucher from the CCRR. To receive the voucher, they must respond to the offer within fifteen days of the date of the letter to make an appointment with a caseworker. If they are successful, they must secure care on their own but do so within thirty days, after which funding is not guaranteed and they may be placed back on the wait list (Weber 2019). If they fail to respond, they will be dropped. If dropped, they can appeal and be placed back on the list if they contact the EEC within thirty days of removal.

The second way families can be removed from the list is through offer letters for contract slots, which are subsidized slots contracted to specific childcare centers or home-based providers. These offer letters are sent directly from the provider with the open contract slot to families and again families must respond within fifteen days of the letter's being processed. The key here, however, is the number of letters sent. For every slot that the provider has open, five letters must be sent per EEC rules. The first family to respond will get the slot, but the other four families must still acknowledge receipt of the letter. If they do not, they are considered inactive and removed from the list. Hannah, an enrollment manager of a large system of subsidized providers, explained: "I'm gonna go into the wait list. I'm gonna put in that I have twenty openings. The system sends out five times as many letters as you have openings. . . . [If] nobody responds—it could be that it was a wrong address, it could be any reason—they don't respond, the system terminates in thirty days. They don't go back

to the bottom of the list. They're terminated. They're not anywhere at this point." Consequently, parents could be required to respond to multiple letters a year all without ever actually securing a subsidized childcare slot.

When a parent fails to respond to one of these letters within the agency's required time frame, whether they want the placement or not (families are permitted to turn down contract slots up to three times before being deactivated), they are deemed no longer interested in services and removed from the wait list. One of the central problems with this type of wait list cleaning, of course, is in the interpretation of families' interest, which misaligns with both current scholarship on the daily tumultuousness of poverty and administrators' own understanding of their clients. As Hannah described, the risk of wait list expulsion is highly correlated with stress and vulnerability:

Families that are applying for the subsidies have a lot going on in their lives. I always say like, I don't have kids. I'm not living paycheck to paycheck and I can tell you that when I come home at night and I grab my mail, I often don't go through it for a while. And now you think about a family who is a single parent, trying to manage two jobs, a lot of stress, a lot of trauma. . . . I don't really expect that they're going through their mail at night.

In this case, not going through one's mail at night could translate into termination from a years-long wait list. Rosa, a CCRR employee, agreed. She said that, in fact, the letters often never reach their intended families. Sometimes they are returned to sender. Other times clients claim that their mail has been tampered with. In some cases, the letters may never have been sent at all. The same state audit investigating the integrity of the list also found that, at the time, up to 15 percent of confirmation letters were not mailed in the first place due to a KinderWait technical glitch.

The past decade of social welfare scholarship substantiates Hannah's and Rosa's reading of the field. Given the residential transiency of vulnerable American households (Desmond 2016), lost letters are not at all implausible. Studies of welfare bureaucracy consistently

document communication as problematic to beneficiary access (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Gustafson 2011). Telephone calls may be unsuccessful. Among the mothers I met in the course of this wider project, many used temporary or disposable phones that are more economical. Victimized women, who are also more likely to experience poverty and need institutional support, may make intentional changes in their daily routines and contact information to avoid current and past abusers (Bjerregaard 2000; Vest et al. 2002). When families are not reachable, it is as likely a sign of incremental vulnerability as one of disinterest.

Consequently, providers suspected that the agency's newly adopted wait list integrity practices were inadvertently terminating eligible families for subsidized childcare and resulting in a wait list that severely underestimated unmet need. Again, Hannah, the enrollment manager for a large group of subsidized programs explained it this way:

You hear about like how the wait list is twenty-five to thirty thousand. And I think that it really has significantly gone down but I also think that it's not necessarily because we're serving more kids. I think there's a lot. . . . so, I mentioned to you about the 20 percent, right? The five times as many letters. We don't fill twenty subsidies when we send a hundred letters. And I think that's across the board. There's some that are falling off the waitlist 'cause they never contacted, which in my opinion is the majority of them. I think most don't call. And I think that there's reasons. . . . I think people are busy. I think people have challenging lives and this is a very vulnerable population. Those families need their hands held a little more.

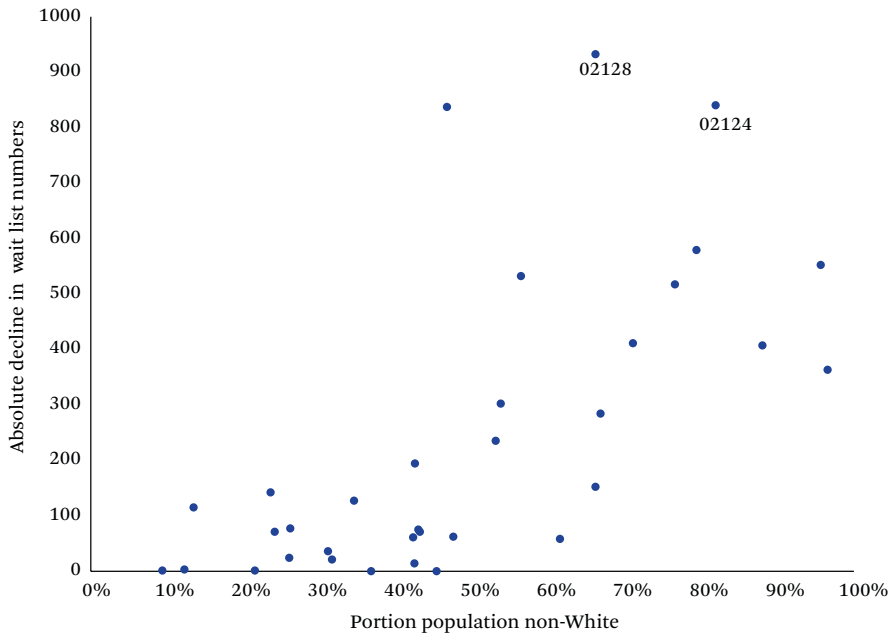
Hannah's opinion is also fact. Administrative data from the EEC show that the majority of wait list terminations—on average two thousand a month and in total nearly 140,000 between July 2014 and December 2019—were a consequence of families not responding to funding offer letters from providers.

Perhaps most consequentially though, EEC data suggest that these risks have not been equally distributed. As expected, the need for

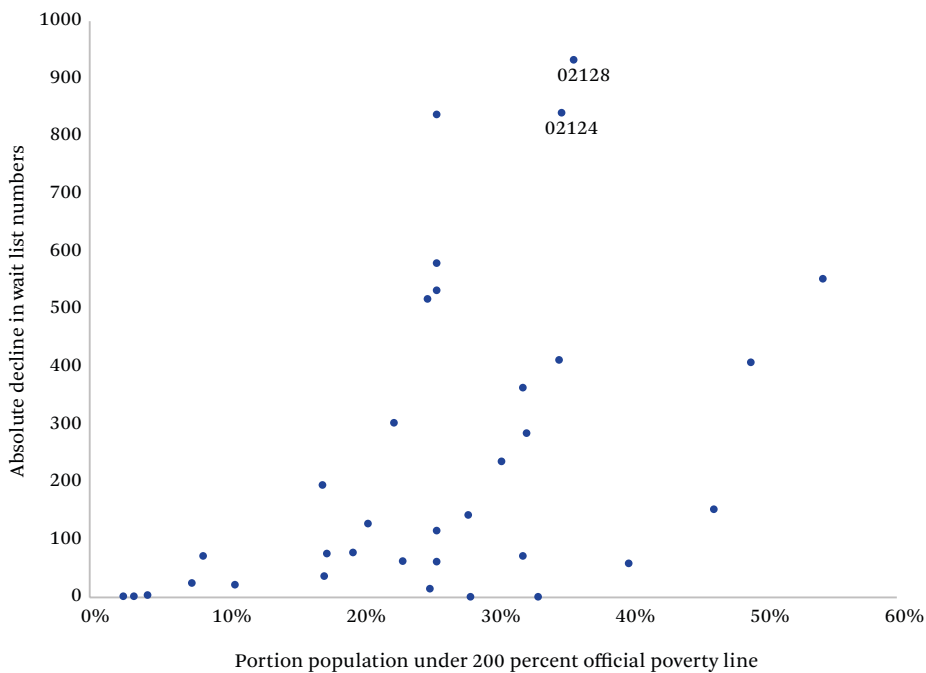
subsidized childcare in Boston is greatest in lower-income, predominantly non-White communities (Campbell and Patil 2019), where wait lists also tend to be longest. Analysis of year-over-year wait list changes among a sample of thirty-four zip codes that make up Boston proper showed that some zip codes have experienced higher rates of decline than others and that absolute declines in wait list numbers tend to increase as the portion of non-White residents (figure 2) and population living under 200 percent of the official federal poverty level increases (figure 3). Models demonstrating a robust correlation are beyond the scope of this article, but the scatter plots clearly visualize the unequal and intersectional impact of the wait list and its burdens.

Analysis of absolute wait list declines at the zip code level reveal similar patterns (figure 4). The zip code with the greatest absolute decline, 02128, covers East Boston, a well-known and longtime Mexican and Central and South American immigrant enclave with 36 percent of the population earning below 200 percent of the official federal poverty line. From 2013 to 2018, the number of cases on East Boston's wait list fell from more than one thousand, one of the city's longest lists, to just 146—an 87 percent drop that placed the zip code nearer to the median list length. It is possible that a language barrier contributed. Funding offer letters for contract slots can now be sent out in five languages, including Spanish and Portuguese, but prior to 2016 funding letters were only in English. East Boston experienced almost the entirety of its decline in waiting cases between 2013 and 2016, after the purge and before the language choice policy.

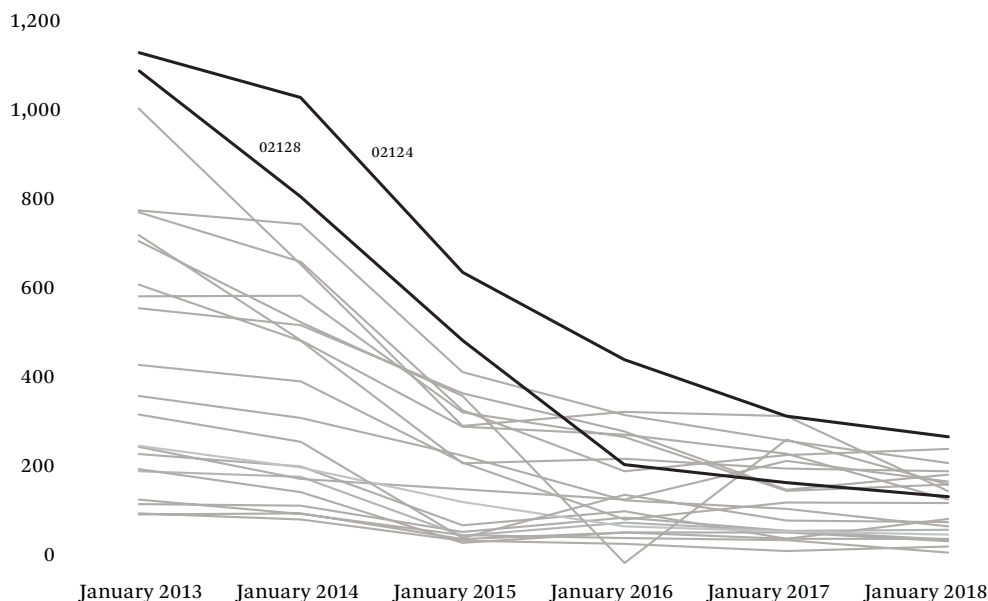
The zip code with the second highest absolute decline in the city, 02124, covers Dorchester, a community that is 82 percent non-White, 53 percent of residents identifying as non-Hispanic Black, and one of the most segregated communities in Boston. The most recent American Community Survey data report 8 percent of the zip code's population in deep poverty. Between 2013 and 2018, the zip code's wait list fell from more than 1,100 to just 277 cases, remaining the city's longest but by a much smaller margin. Combined, these two zip codes make up 22 percent of the city's total decline in

Figure 2. Decline in Wait List by Portion Non-White Among Boston Zip Codes, 2013–2018

Source: Author's tabulation based on EEC administrative data and American Community Survey data accessed via NHGIS (Manson et al. 2022).

Figure 3. Decline in Wait List by Poverty Among Boston Zip Codes, 2013–2018

Source: Author's calculations based on EEC administrative data and American Community Survey data accessed via NHGIS (Manson et al. 2022).

Figure 4. Wait List Cases by Zip Code, Boston

Source: Author's tabulation based on EEC administrative data.

wait list numbers. Although more research is needed, my findings suggest that for poor and racialized families living within poor and racialized communities, the wait list may amount to a double jeopardy: most likely in need of care, these same families may need to wait the longest and face the greatest risk of termination; a disturbing finding considering the racialized history of welfare reform.

In December 2019, the wait list hit a new low. State-commissioned research suggests that this number—fifteen thousand—falls far below the true unmet need for subsidized childcare (figure 1). Per the auditor's report that prompted the original purge, wait list numbers at the time were overstated by 36 percent, suggesting a more accurate wait list figure of thirty-seven thousand to thirty-eight thousand children. A third-party policy report commissioned by the EEC found similar results. In 2015 the Urban Institute published the "Child Care Needs of Eligible Families in Massachusetts" (Isaacs et al. 2015). Their estimate of unmet need using demographic rather than wait list data was approximately thirty-five thousand children. If the wait list was bloated in 2013, these reports suggest that it is now anemic. Meanwhile, the

total number of caseloads served—53,405 in December 2011—has remained virtually unchanged: 55,607 caseloads served as of December 2019. Like Hannah said, the wait list has "significantly gone down but . . . it's not because we're serving more kids."

Overburdened, Underutilized Providers

"We don't touch the wait list." "You don't?" "No. We just work with the shelter. A family enters shelter, their caseworker knows to put them on our wait list if they're seeking care." Nancy, the director of a small group of entirely subsidized centers, had been working in childcare for decades. Before she was a director, she had been a teacher. She knew how to operate a center and according to her it was not by filling her slots through the wait list.

To run an entirely or even a partially subsidized childcare center is to run an efficient organization, akin to what Josh Seim (2017) calls a "lean fleet"—a subsidized social service entity nudged into market efficiencies through fiscal austerity. Subsidized providers are only paid a portion of the market rate, typically less than 75 percent, and only for the slots they fill. Consequently, their financial model depends

on capacity. Whereas families with vouchers have to secure care on their own, Nancy explained that “the contracted spaces, that’s up to us [the providers] to fill those.”

To fill their contracted slots, providers are supposed to mail funding offer letters to families on the wait list, as reviewed in the previous section. Ironically, though, this same mechanism resulting in the majority of family terminations—the funding offer letter—is also problematizing providers’ slim financial margins in ways that make operations difficult. For Nancy, it was unsustainable:

I think the real fact of the matter is, when they went to the statewide wait list, everything is done by snail mail. You pull a name off of this statewide wait list. You have to mail them a letter saying “I have a spot for you.” It can turn into a six-week process. Meanwhile, the spot is sitting empty. You’re not getting any funding for that spot. But your expenses don’t change whatsoever. . . . We couldn’t afford to work like that. Half of our building would be empty all the time.

The only way to operate her center, she told me, was to maintain 90 percent capacity, and the only way to do that she said was to bypass the state wait list altogether.

From this perspective, the wait list cleaning makes sense. Keeping the wait list screened and cleaned could streamline the process of filling slots. The more families on the list who are eligible and active, in theory, the higher the success rate of placing a family should be and the less likely the need to churn through the list. Providers had been struggling with underutilization for years. Enrollment directors at large subsidized programs as of 2016 and 2017 were reporting a roughly 75 percent use rate across the field, meaning that approximately 3,750 contract slots across the state were sitting empty at any one time. Having a reliable pool of families from which to pull should help curtail placement times and reduce the number of open slots. But again, use rates had declined since 2013–14, when they were closer to 90 per-

cent, suggesting that the wait list cleanse, if done for this reason, was not working.

Eligibility alone was not the only thing slowing parents’ placement into slots. For some providers, like Allen, another director of subsidized centers, the absence of flexibility in *how* he filled his slots was taking a toll: “I don’t have any control of who I can put in [my centers], so now I’m losing all my childcare slots. . . . The state decides who gets the slots basically, not me . . . and the fee-paying parents don’t want to put their kids in public housing projects. So those slots often go unfilled. We have to wait, it takes weeks. We send somebody up and they go, “I like the center, but I don’t like the neighborhood.””⁸

Although the wait list had been introduced to distribute subsidized care more fairly, not all providers were perceived equally. In prior decades, Allen had served almost exclusively families from the surrounding public housing units. Now he had to work through all the families uninterested in but assigned to his space via the wait list before finding someone to take the slot. Even so, families do not commonly refuse slots. The problem seemed primarily in the drawn-out processing and mailing and waiting for responses from the offer letters.

To manage these burdens, providers I spoke with were sometimes adopting alternative and extra-institutional strategies. Some skirted the wait list or ignored it, such as Nancy, instead pulling families directly into their centers. Others, like those surveyed by the EEC during the 2013–14 fiscal year, substituted voucher-holding families who have more market agency and can enroll more quickly and even private paying families for those on the wait list: “Some [providers] said they can’t afford to keep a [contract] slot open when they have a waitlist of private payers. Others said that when a family with a voucher comes, they don’t want to turn down the income. At the same time, they can only afford to have a certain number of subsidized spots so the voucher family goes into what would otherwise be an open contracted slot.”

When providers place voucher-holding families into contract slots, the voucher is forfeited

8. Subsidized childcare operates on a sliding scale according to household income with a maximum weekly payment of \$283 for a family of four and minimum of \$0.

and, providers suspected, not always put back into circulation. What should have been two subsidized slots becomes one. When providers fill a contract slot with a private paying family, the subsidy is gone altogether. Although providers recognized the harm in these practices, they often felt they had no other choice, as was the case with Leann, the executive director of a group of subsidized centers. I asked, “if you don’t fill all [your contract slots], can you fill those slots with private pay [families]?” “Yeah, we don’t like to, but we would.”

Combined, these reports point toward a field closing in on itself. Administrative data suggest the same. Between 2012 and 2017, the state lost 289 subsidized programs (Bouek 2022). Many simply closed. Others appear to just be transitioning out of the subsidized system: “Sharon jumps in to offer that the last program she worked for didn’t renew their DCF or subsidized slot contracts. They were operating on a \$70,000 per year gap. It was a financial decision.”⁹ For subsidy-reliant families, though, the effects are the same: one fewer provider for them and their children.

Last, the underuse of contract slots for providers meant a dearth of funds. For the state, though, it meant a surplus. Hannah explained: “Every quarter let’s say we have three million dollars’ worth of [funding for contract slots] and we’ve only been using like two and a half million because, well they’re [the slots are] not all being used. We only bill the state for what we use. The state, every quarter, says okay we’re taking back three million dollars. Not really taking money back ‘cause we never had it but they’re re-allocating it. They re-allocate the money.”

In fiscal year 2014, more than \$3 million of the agency funds budgeted for income eligible access remained unspent (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2012). In 2015, the figure reached nearly \$11 million, complicating the narrative of austerity. At the time, the excess funds were reverted to the state general fund, a practice that was eliminated in 2017. Now, earmarked unspent income eligible funds can be rolled into access expansion for prioritized groups and unspent agency funds are redirected to

providers in the form of workforce salaries and quality grant funding.

Still, no one I spoke with knew exactly how the surplus funds had been reallocated before the policy change. As Hannah contended, maybe this was beside the point, because the point was that the funds were not being used for families in need: “The reality is there’s this money pool that has been allocated for our programs for families, right, which is the ultimate goal, that isn’t being used. . . . My point in saying this though, is there are open contracts out there. We have a ton of open contract slots. We have so many more children we could help serve but it’s really, the waitlist system can be very challenging.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Tressie Cottom (2020) writes about the contemporary workforce as a hustle economy. One might easily apply the same descriptor to the social welfare state in which “failure to obtain needed services is no longer the fault of the state but rather the failure of the individual to transact effectively in the market” (Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012, 307). Still, the mechanics and the politics behind the hustle—in this case the wait lists—are less well understood. Because wait lists exist within a space of limited to no public oversight, they are ideal sites for the “opaque” or “subterranean” policymaking that underlies the hustle (Hacker 2004; Herd and Moynihan 2018). Understanding how and why wait lists are managed within this relatively hidden realm is therefore fundamental to understanding issues of access.

This article makes one such contribution. Drawing on the recent case of Massachusetts’ declining subsidized childcare wait list, I explore the idea of the wait list as an overlooked but consequential venue of administrative burden. Within the context of fiscal austerity and in the realm of a “new politics of care” (Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012), wait lists have emerged across the country and for a multitude of social services. I identify them, rather than or in addition to wait lists serving as official documentation of waiting families, as important sites of discretionary decision-making by un-

9. EEC advisory council meeting fieldnotes, March 24, 2017.

derlining their dual significance as performance measures. In the present case, because the wait list itself became symbolic of agency competence, leaders' attention shifted toward managing the list rather than the problems the list represented. The list's integrity was ultimately restored and questions of agency competence seemingly cleared, but all at the ongoing expense of vulnerable families and well-intentioned providers and without ever actually expanding access, the original intention behind the budget request that triggered the audit.

More broadly, the research here contributes to a conversation on the political efficacy of wait lists as social statistics. Wait lists can support fair and transparent governance. They can also be invoked, however, as symbolic references to effective governance, particularly in situations when political pressure is high but resources low (Jacob and Levitt 2003). Administrative burdens in this context can operate like a hidden valve, quietly speeding or slowing the appearance of demand and unmet need. In Massachusetts, the purging and cleaning of the subsidized childcare wait list over the last nine years has taken place almost entirely outside public scrutiny. The only place these terminations have been documented are in the appendix of the EEC's annual legislative reports, a practice that ended in 2017. Now they are nowhere. We might, then, begin to understand wait lists as a distinct form of statecraft that can be employed to actively manage the optics of need by "disappearing social crisis," altogether (Lara-Millán 2021). As Hannah, the enrollment manager, explained, when clients are deactivated from the list they become "not anywhere." In some ways then, Hannah's point might suggest Massachusetts as a least-worst approach. Other states have no wait lists, not because there is no unmet need, but because maintaining a list is overly burdensome for the state. What does it say about the social value of a need when there is no attempt to measure it?

No matter the motivation for the burdens, most consequential are their effects. Here I find that the introduction and intensification of burdens had an outsized impact on majority Black, Hispanic, and immigrant communities, and most likely mothers, emphasizing the in-

tersectional significance of burdens. My findings also highlight the importance of tracing burdens into the organizational sphere. As work in this double issue demonstrates, third parties can function to remediate or intensify burdens for clients. But, as Lilly Yu (2023) illustrates with her case of immigration attorneys, third parties can also be *recipients* of burdens. Within a social safety net that depends on private contractors for service distribution, these burdens can have real and material implications for citizen access, suggesting the field itself as a third and possibly variable layer of inequality between bureaucrats and their divergent policy contexts (Michener 2018).

My results here are limited in that they can only speak to one wait list operating in one state for one program during one political-historical moment. In fact, in some states, over the same period, subsidized childcare wait lists grew, remained stagnant, or were eliminated altogether. Do these cases represent success or failed public policy? One of the most politically valuable aspects of the wait list is in its transmutability: that it can be whatever the state and its actors need it to be. Future work might well consider case studies of wait lists or the absence of wait lists in other states and municipalities as well as those operated by public rather than private entities. Beyond wait lists, the idea of purging eligible populations is present in other consequential contexts, such as voter rolls and state health-care coverage for children (Kelman and Reicher 2019). The conditions under which these purges take or do not take place and how can be informative as to their utility as venues of policymaking.

Also missing in this article are the narratives of parents navigating the wait list. Preliminary data from my ongoing interviews with mothers of young children suggest that their experiences are just as opaque as the rules governing the list. Several were uncertain about their eligibility, whether they were on the wait list, and how to confirm their status. Their uncertainty should lead us to question the gendered and racialized distribution of the burdens outlined here. For mothers who are simultaneously navigating life with small children, poverty or economic marginalization, school or employment or both, and many doing so without reliable

access to transportation, the ambiguous administration of a wait list coupled with a high risk of termination for a social service critical to intergenerational mobility suggests a moral failing of the state.

From a policy perspective, opportunities are available. As providers suggested, brief open enrollment periods during which families could bypass the wait list and go directly to the provider of their choice are one. This would not only work to address the issue of underutilized contract slots, but also of the geographical restrictions that most families were unaware were being imposed on them. Allowing families to rank preferences outside open enrollment could also help alleviate providers' efforts to fill slots and possibly reduce the onerous 5:1 letter to slot ratio. Last, and if nothing else changes, the EEC should consider increasing funding to the CCRRs as an immediate way of expanding access and creating a more inclusive process. CCRR employees cite receiving "100 voicemails per day" and that they are unable to respond in a "timely and efficient manner."¹⁰ For those unable or ill equipped to navigate the wait list platform on their own, calling the agency or CCRRs may be a natural next step. Ensuring that families can access the list without technical expertise is imperative to the program's inclusivity. In any case, we should remember that administrative burdens are a choice, with some programs having significantly fewer than others (Herd and Moynihan 2018). The EEC made a choice nearly ten years ago to implement additional and more restrictive burdens. Similar choices could be made now to repeal or reduce them.

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