Making Sense of Childcare Instability Among Families with Low Incomes: (Un)desired and (Un)planned Reasons for Changing Childcare Arrangements

ALEJANDRA ROS PILARZ, HEATHER SANDSTROM, AND JULIA R. HENLY

Childcare instability can negatively affect family well-being. Yet not all childcare changes are bad for families. This qualitative study (N = 85) examines work, family, provider, and subsidy-related factors contributing to childcare changes among families with low incomes. We focus on the desirability—the extent to which parents wanted to leave their provider—and the planned nature of childcare changes—the extent to which parents anticipated the change and had time to plan. We find that although nearly all desired changes were planned, undesired changes were both planned and unplanned. Planning was important but not enough for finding care that aligned with family needs, and undesired changes, especially sudden changes, were often driven by the loss of a childcare subsidy, sometimes accompanied by a job loss. We discuss how these findings can help researchers and policymakers understand the implications of complex childcare trajectories for family well-being and early care and education policy.

Keywords: childcare, early care and education, instability, childcare subsidies, low-income families

Alejandra Ros Pilarz is an assistant professor at the Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, United States. **Heather Sandstrom** is a senior fellow in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., United States. **Julia R. Henly** is a professor at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, United States.

© 2022 Russell Sage Foundation. Pilarz, Alejandra Ros, Heather Sandstrom, and Julia R. Henly. "Making Sense of Childcare Instability Among Families with Low Incomes: (Un)desired and (Un)planned Reasons for Changing Childcare Arrangements." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(5): 120–42. DOI: 10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.06. The authors gratefully acknowledge funding provided by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Grant 90YE0133. The contents of this article are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not represent the official views or endorsement of the funding agency. We especially thank study participants for contributing their valuable time to this project. We are grateful to Carolyn Barnes, Sarah Bendix, Daysi Diaz-Strong, Jaimie Grazi, Olivia Healy, Jonathan Holmes, Sandra Huerta, and Jaeseung Kim for research assistance; and to our Illinois and New York State and regional partners for project collaboration, especially Linda Saterfield, Janice Molnar, Maria Whelan, David Alexander, Marcia Stoll, Kimberly Hunt, SuzAnne Kollmann, Melinda Denham, Justine Hanif, and Iris Rivera. Direct correspondence to: Alejandra Ros Pilarz, at pilarz@wisc.edu, Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1350 University Ave., Madison, WI 53706, United States.

Open Access Policy: *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* is an open access journal. This article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Finding and maintaining high-quality and affordable childcare in the United States is a key challenge for working parents. Childcare has become an even more critical issue in the context of changing family and employment trends that characterize the twenty-first century and that are the subject of the current volume (see Carlson, Wimer, and Haskins 2022). Single parents and those with low incomes face particular difficulties given constrained socioeconomic resources, limited government funding to assist with childcare, and an increasingly precarious employment environment (Howell and Kalleberg 2019) where nonstandard forms of employment proliferate, job turnover is high, and work hours are frequently unstable and unpredictable (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022; Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019; Henly, Sandstrom, and Pilarz 2017). In such an environment of declining job quality, holding onto a childcare arrangement amid earnings instability and intermittent eligibility and benefits receipt is particularly difficult. Family living arrangements shape childcare needs and likely affect childcare instability as well. On the one hand, the rise in extended household living arrangements among families with children, which are more prevalent among families of color (Cross 2018; Michelmore and Pilkauskas 2022, this issue; Pilkauskas and Cross 2018), can increase the availability of informal caregivers and could mitigate the negative effects of childcare instability. On the other hand, in complex and dynamic family structures, in which the number of adults available to support caregiving often changes, childcare challenges can be heightened and precipitate changes to care arrangements (Crosnoe et al. 2014) as well as affect eligibility for childcare subsidies.

Although any family can experience childcare instability, children of color and those in families with low incomes are more vulnerable to care disruptions because of unstable parental employment, household income, and childcare subsidy use (Chaudry 2004; Weber 2005). A study of families with predominantly low incomes from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study showed that children changed care arrangements 1.2 times on average between birth and age three, and more than 30 percent of children had two or more changes (Pilarz and Hill 2014), meaning they essentially experienced a different care arrangement each year. Although some changes in childcare arrangements during the early childhood years are expected as children's and families' needs change, instability that threatens the well-being of children and families raises concerns. Stable caregiving relationships are important for healthy early childhood development and frequent transitions to new arrangements can be stressful for children and their parents (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013). Stable childcare is also a critical work support to help parents remain stably employed, as the COVID-19 pandemic clearly indicated to the nation (Schochet 2019).

Although the early care and education field has viewed childcare changes as potentially problematic and framed continuity of care as the goal, a closer examination reveals that some change in providers is expected across the first five years of life and that not all changes represent a negative form of instability (Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015). Parents' reasons for changing providers are often driven by changing family needs and contexts—changes in employment, housing, and financial resources as well as children's developmental needs—and the underlying motivation for the change—whether the change was planned and intentional versus sudden and undesired—may have implications for whether the change is detrimental to or supportive of family well-being (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Scott, London, and Hurst 2005; Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015). For example, a change from a childcare center to an unlicensed neighborhood caregiver because of an unexpected childcare subsidy loss is more likely to be detrimental to the family than a planned and desired change from grandparent care to a preschool program.

Understanding parents' reasons for leaving a care provider, how those reasons may differ depending on family characteristics such as race and ethnicity, and whether childcare changes lead to more or less desirable care is essential for furthering knowledge on how and under what conditions childcare changes mat-

ter for children. This study offers insight into low-income parents' reasons for leaving a childcare provider and how they assess the desirability of a provider change and the extent to which the change was planned. We address two key research questions: What are parents' perceptions of the desirability and planned nature of their childcare changes? Do parents' expressed reasons for changing providers differ by the desirability and planned nature of childcare changes? To examine these questions, we use in-depth, qualitative interview data from the Illinois and New York Child Care Research Partnership Study, a study of childcare subsidy clients from four regions in New York and Illinois (for a full description, see Henly et al. 2015). Because these four regions represent diverse policy, demographic, and geographic contexts, we examine differences in parents' perceptions of childcare changes across study sites. Although we examine work, family, and childcare provider-related factors contributing to such changes, we pay particular attention to the role of the childcare subsidy program in contributing to or curtailing childcare instability. This examination offers particularly useful information that addresses policymakers' concern that families receiving subsidies may have greater difficulty accessing and retaining high-quality care.

We also apply a racial equity lens to our analysis. Racial disparities in access to childcare, particularly a supply of affordable, high-quality childcare options, stem from a long history of structural racism. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, children in predominantly Latino neighborhoods were more likely to live in a childcare desert, that is, have few care options (Malik et al. 2018), and African American children experienced more childcare changes, on average, than other children (Bratsch-Hines et al. 2015). Discrimination in the labor and housing markets that contributes to lower job quality and job and housing instability among families of color could also precipitate more childcare changes (Quillian et al. 2017; Pager and Shepherd 2008). Given this evidence, we consider how the experiences of childcare changes, whether desired and planned, may differ systematically by the race and ethnicity of our study participants.

WHY CHILDCARE CONTINUITY MATTERS

Stability is keenly important to children's development because they thrive with predictable schedules and routines and familiar settings and people with whom they feel secure (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013). Some changes in early care and education arrangements are normative and supportive of child well-being, such as moving from a home-based childcare setting to a prekindergarten (pre–K) program as a child ages. Yet frequent childcare changes can disrupt children's relationships and attachments to their caregivers, which are foundational to their early learning and social competence (Howes and Hamilton 1993; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Childcare changes also disrupt families' and children's routines, which may increase child and parent stress and lead to poorer child self-regulation and behavioral functioning (Fiese et al. 2002; McLoyd 1998; Pilarz and Hill 2017; Yeung, Linver, and Brooks-Gunn 2002). Indeed, research consistently finds that experiencing multiple childcare changes is associated with adverse child socioemotional outcomes in early childhood, including more child behavior problems (NICHD 1998; Pilarz and Hill 2014) and poorer social competence (Bratsch-Hines et al. 2015, 2020).

Childcare instability can also cause problems for parental employment and vice versa. The COVID-19 pandemic made this point dramatically clear to the nation; when childcare issues such as sudden childcare closures and restricted hours arise, parents, predominantly mothers, are often forced to cut hours, change jobs, or leave the workforce (Heggeness 2020; Kochhar 2020). These challenges have been particularly detrimental to Black and Latino parents, who are less likely to have control over their work hours and be able to work from home (Smith and Reeves 2021). Research that has attempted to tease apart the influence of job instability on childcare instability and vice versa suggests the relationship is quite nuanced. Childcare disruptions can be detrimental to job stability, but more frequently job changes precipitate childcare changes (Miller 2006; Scott and Abelson 2016). Also, parents with precarious work schedules are more likely to have difficulty arranging childcare and to

miss work because of lack of care, potentially threatening their employment (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue).

Researchers have begun to unpack the conditions under which continuity of caregivers and settings are most important for children's learning and development and when changes may be more or less disruptive to families. Qualitative research from Katherine Speirs, Colleen Vesely, and Kevin Roy (2015) demonstrates that although some changes are planned and families can prepare for the transition, other changes are forced and likely more disruptive. Drawing on interviews with African American, Latino, and White families with low incomes, they find that when transitions were planned, families moved to a preferred arrangement that supported family well-being. Forced transitions, on the other hand, occurred when mothers were satisfied with their care provider but had to quickly make a change and usually transition into a less preferred or temporary arrangement, often because of unexpected changes in employment or school schedules or the provider's ending the arrangement. Such forced transitions, and the associated stress from the experience, characterize instability that Speirs and her colleagues argue can be harmful for children. Although the study included a racially and ethnically diverse sample, the authors did not explore differences in families' experiences of childcare transitions by race and ethnicity.

Follow-up research from Kaitlin Moran (2021) with a sample of African American families applies the framework of planned versus forced transitions and finds that key reasons for planned changes were a desire for a more educational environment and concerns over socialization opportunities, children often moving from home-based to center-based care between ages two and three years. Forced transitions occurred when families could no longer pay a provider or a provider closed or relocated. Moran (2021) identifies a third transition type, abrupt changes, the result of unexpected events reflecting poor care quality and untrustworthy providers. Abrupt transitions were especially disruptive because families had to go without care while searching for alternative arrangements. Yet parents were ultimately relieved knowing their children were out of an unsafe or poor-quality setting. The extent to which care changes adversely impact children's developmental outcomes likely depends on the quality of care before and after the transition and the extremity of the disruption itself. For example, a change to a higher-quality setting may be temporarily disruptive but benefit children in the long term, whereas stability in an arrangement that is poor quality may be detrimental to child well-being (Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015).

Bringing together these notions of planned, forced, and abrupt changes (Moran 2021; Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015), we suggest two unique dimensions of changes related to the *desirability* (desired or undesired) and *planned nature* (planned or unplanned) of the care transition. Studies have confounded these two dimensions by assuming that planned childcare changes are desirable and that forced childcare changes are sudden and unplanned (Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015). We hypothesize that this is not necessarily the case. On the one hand, a change may happen suddenly and unexpectedly (unplanned) but ultimately be desired because the change places a child in a safer or healthier situation. Other changes could be unplanned and undesirable, as in an unexpected subsidy loss resulting in a move from a high-quality early care and education program to unlicensed, informal care. On the other hand, changes may be planned but not desired, such as unwillingly changing providers after an anticipated residential move that places the family too far away. Or changes can be planned and desired, such as a long-awaited move from in-home care to a preschool setting when a child turns three years old. This study explores the value of such a framework that decouples the desirability and planned nature of changes as a means of classifying childcare changes and also explores differences in families' experiences of (un)desired and (un)planned childcare changes by parents' race and ethnicity and geographic site. We describe parents' experiences of childcare changes as they remember them—some changes driven by factors outside parents' control and others within. We aim to characterize the nature of the changes themselves rather than the parents' behavior as being more

planful or better prepared, though in some cases parents did have greater awareness and resources to plan ahead.

REASONS FOR CHILDCARE CHANGES

Available evidence points to several factors that contribute to childcare changes, including parental employment reasons; parents' ability to pay for care; child developmental reasons; and childcare provider-related reasons, such as the caregiver ending the arrangement, logistical concerns, and dissatisfaction with the arrangement (Adams and Rohacek 2010). Because childcare is critical for parents with low incomes in their ability to work, changes in parental employment are key in driving childcare decisions and parents' search for new care arrangements (NSECE 2014; Sandstrom and Chaudry 2012). Work reasons for childcare instability can take multiple forms. For example, a job change can require a childcare accommodation, especially when accompanied by a new work schedule, and a job loss can make it difficult to afford care at all, leading parents to end an arrangement (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Lowe, Weisner, and Geis 2003; Scott and Abelson 2016). Among parents in the service sector, just-in-time scheduling and lack of schedule control make it difficult for parents to arrange childcare and force many parents into a childcare scramble that results in care disruptions (Carrillo et al. 2017; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022; Henly and Lyons, 2000; Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue). Because parents of color and immigrant parents are disproportionately likely to work in low-wage and low-quality jobs (see Joshi et al. 2022, this issue) and workers of color in the service sector are more likely to experience precarious work schedules (Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020), we would expect them to be at particular risk for work-driven childcare changes.

Regarding affordability, the loss of a childcare subsidy can also trigger child care changes. Parents who work jobs with precarious schedules—jobs that are disproportionately held by workers of color and those with low incomes (Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019)—might have a more difficult time accessing or maintaining a subsidy because temporary fluctuations in work hours could push their income above the eligibility threshold (Henly, Sandstrom, and Pilarz 2017). Among families using the subsidy program, parental job loss and precarious work conditions (such as lack of input into work schedule) are associated with a higher risk of exiting the program (Henly et al. 2017). High rates of exit from the subsidy program during families' last month of eligibility suggest that administrative hassles during the eligibility redetermination process also contribute to subsidy exits, and that families in states with shorter eligibly periods experience shorter subsidy spells (Davis, Krafft, and Forry 2017; Henly et al. 2015). Following a subsidy loss, families with low incomes often move to less formal (and more affordable) care arrangements (Henly et al. 2015; Krafft, Davis, and Tout 2017), and when families experience multiple subsidy spells, children experience more changes in subsidized providers (Ha, Magnuson, and Ybarra 2012; Pilarz, Claessens, and Gelatt 2016).

Child developmental reasons and provider-related reasons also motivate childcare changes, as evidenced by the normative practice of transitioning children to a center-based setting around age two or three years to promote early learning and socialization (Moran 2021). Other parents report wanting to wait until their child can talk and alert them as to whether they are being mistreated by the provider to make this transition (Pacheco-Applegate et al. 2020). Yet concerns with care quality can also prompt abrupt transitions at any age (Moran 2021). Childcare changes related to dissatisfaction with the current arrangement are particularly concerning and may be more common in communities with a limited supply of licensed and high-quality care providers. In one qualitative study, parents cited problems with their childcare provider as the primary reason for changing arrangements (Scott and Ableson 2016).

Our goal in this study is to advance understanding of the diversity of reasons why families change childcare arrangements. Building from recent qualitative literature, we use a framework that allows for transitions between childcare arrangements to represent negative instability or positive change for families by systematically analyzing changes in terms of the dimensions of desirability (desired versus

undesired) and planned nature (planned versus unplanned). We focus on a sample of subsidized families from four diverse study sites and hone in on subsidy-related factors, as well as employment, residential, and provider-related factors, that can fuel childcare changes. Because families' experiences of employment, childcare, and subsidy programs are shaped by their race and ethnicity, we examine differences in parents' experiences of childcare changes by parents' race and ethnicity. Due to key policy, geographic, and demographic differences across study sites, we also examine differences in findings across sites.

METHOD

This study is based on qualitative interview data collected from a sample of eighty-five parents with low incomes, primarily mothers, who at the time of recruitment had recently received a childcare subsidy for a young child not yet in school. The qualitative interview data are part of a multimethod project "Determinants of Subsidy Stability and Continuity of Child Care" that included an analysis of administrative program data, a telephone survey of a random sample of 612 subsidy participants drawn from the administrative data, and a qualitative study of eighty-five survey respondents who participated in the in-depth interviews (for a full description, see Henly et al. 2015). The study took place in four regions: two in the state of Illinois—Cook County, a dense metropolitan area that includes the city of Chicago, and one region in the southwest of the state that includes both a small city and several more rural counties—and two suburban counties outside New York City—Westchester and Nassau. In addition to population density, the four sites differ in subsidy program policies and administration. Illinois's subsidy program is state administered via local childcare resource and referral agencies and had a six-month eligibility period, whereas New York's program is county administered via local social services departments and had a twelve-month eligibility period (for more, see Henly et al. 2015).

To draw the purposive qualitative sample, study staff reached out to 172 of the 612 survey respondents. Of those, 111 were successfully reached and 85 completed interviews. Although not drawn to be a representative sample, no significant differences were found between the interview participants and the full survey sample in terms of race-ethnicity, primary home language, country of origin, education level, marital status, and residence with a partner or other adults. The only observed difference was the age of the youngest subsidized child in the family; qualitative interview participants had slightly younger children on average (3.1 versus 3.5 years). The purposive sample was drawn to reflect diversity in race-ethnicity and immigrant status, employment circumstances (such as work schedules and jobs since entry into the subsidy program), and number of subsidized children in the family, and to obtain diverse participant trajectories on the subsidy program (that is, stable subsidy use since program entry, a subsidy exit but quick return, and a subsidy exit but no return). The qualitative interviews took place between March and November 2013—before the 2014 Reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)—and from fourteen to thirty-seven months (an average of twenty-two months) after participants entered the childcare subsidy program. The interviews averaged approximately ninety minutes. Each participant was offered a gift of $40 cash and a children's book at the end of the interview. Table 1 presents the characteristics of families who participated.

A team of two researchers conducted the interviews in participants' homes or other convenient locations the participant preferred, often a fast-food restaurant or library. Sixteen of the eighty-five interviews (nine in New York and seven in Illinois) were conducted in Spanish by a native fluent speaker. Interviews explored themes related to families' experiences with the childcare subsidy program as well as details on all childcare arrangements used and jobs held during those months from initial subsidy receipt to the present. Interviewers also probed on the childcare search process and reasons for changing childcare arrangements. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Only one participant in Illinois declined being recorded. In that case, the interviewers took detailed handwritten notes and subsequently wrote a memo, which was used in the analysis, containing a full account of the interview.

Table 1. Participant Descriptive Characteristics

	N	Percent or Mean (SD)
Female	81	95.3
Race and ethnicity		
White	18	21.2
Black	40	47.1
Latino	24	28.2
Asian or multiracial	3	3.5
Highest level of education		
High school diploma or less	28	32.9
Some college or associate's degree	41	48.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	16	18.8
Household structure		
Living with partner	18	21.2
Single, living with other adults	19	22.4
Single, living with no adults	48	56.5
Immigrant	23	27.1
Interviewed in Spanish	16	18.8
Age of focal child at subsidy program entry	85	1.8 (1.3)
Multiple children receiving subsidy at program entry	34	40.0
Worked two or more jobs since subsidy program entry	51	60.0
Worked nonstandard hours at any job	56	65.9
TANF receipt	15	17.6
Type of subsidized provider used at program entry[a]		
Center-based care	44	51.8
Family childcare	29	34.1
License-exempt relative care	13	15.3
License-exempt nonrelative care	6	7.1
Residential move since subsidy program entry	31	36.5
Geographic study site		
Cook County, Illinois	35	41.2
Southwestern Illinois	11	12.9
Nassau County, New York	18	21.2
Westchester County, New York	21	24.7

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: N=85; SD=standard deviation.

[a]Six respondents reported using multiple subsidized providers at program entry. Total N of subsidized providers is ninety-two.

The research team developed a coding scheme based on the key research questions and coded and analyzed a priori themes as well as emergent themes across interviews using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The analytic approach included line-by-line document reading, coding of text "chunks" according to interview topics (determined a priori) and themes that were identified *in vivo* through the coding process and clarified through discussion in research team meetings (Miles and Huberman 1994; Ryan and Bernard 2000). Analysts completed intensive training on the coding scheme. Reliability checks were conducted on

the first two interviews coded, and every fifth interview was double-coded and reliability again assessed to prevent drifting over time. Reliability among coders was high, generally above 90 percent agreement. All discrepancies were resolved through team meetings.

The analytic process included the construction of a matrix in Microsoft Excel that identified every childcare change recorded for every participant and extracted coded text from NVivo that provided information about each change. The authors analyzed the matrix content to identify key themes, such as reasons for leaving a care provider, whether changes were planned or desired, effects of the change on families, and characteristics of the arrangements before and after the transition. Patterns that emerged from matrices were compared with exemplar interviews and interviewer memos to guard against misattribution of the meaning of text chunks and to further elaborate understanding of the themes.

RESULTS

We first describe the type and frequency of childcare changes reported by study participants. We then describe the desirability and planned nature of changes and factors that contributed to different types of changes. Lastly, we examine differences in parents' experiences of childcare changes by their race and ethnicity and across geographic sites.

Types of Childcare Changes

In examining parents' perceptions of childcare changes, we focused on two dimensions, desirability and planned nature. *Desirability* refers to the extent to which a parent describes wanting to leave their current childcare provider. Although in some cases parents expressed a desire to change to a different provider (*desired change*), in other cases they would have preferred to stay with their current provider when the circumstances no longer permitted it (*undesired change*). Because we focused on the extent to which the parent wanted to leave the provider, an undesired change in childcare arrangements could be the result of either negative or positive changes in a family's circumstance, such as no longer being able to afford a provider or relocating to a better neighborhood, respectively. *Planned nature* refers to the extent to which parents anticipated and expected the change (that is, a sense of awareness or warning) and had time to prepare and plan for it. We relied on information about how much time the parent had to make new arrangements as well as their subjective experience of anticipating the change or having little warning and feeling rushed to find a new provider. We coded changes as *planned* when parents anticipated the change and had time to plan for new arrangements, at least one to two weeks (though usually longer), and we coded them as *unplanned* when parents described the change as unexpected and hurried.

Frequency of Changes

We identified 132 total childcare changes across eighty-five children and families in our study. We examined changes at the target child level, meaning that we focused on changes that the youngest child in the family experienced; families with multiple children may have made additional changes for older children in care. The vast majority of children experienced at least one childcare change (sixty-four of eighty-five children, or 75 percent), 28 percent experienced one, 27 percent experienced two, and 20 percent experienced three or more between the time they entered the subsidy program and the day of the interview, again twenty-two months on average.

Because we lacked information about the case, we were unable to classify fifteen of the childcare changes (11 percent) based on either desirability or planned nature. Cases that were unclear on the desirability dimension (n = 6) were typically those in which the child left an informal or family childcare (FCC) provider because of a job loss or school program ending and transitioned into parental care only, but we did not have information as to whether the parent wanted to continue with the arrangement. Five of these were planned and one unplanned. Cases that were unclear on the planned dimension ($n = 9$) were typically unanticipated changes, but we did not have information about how much notice the parent had or whether they felt rushed; two of these were desired and seven were undesired.

Childcare changes varied across the dimen-

sions of desirability and planned nature (see table 2). Desired changes were most often planned (94 percent, n = 73), with a few exceptions (n = 5). This is consistent with the expectation that parents need time to plan to make a change in arrangements they perceive as desirable. Undesired changes were more evenly divided between planned (n = 22) and unplanned (n = 17). This suggests that awareness and time to plan is important but insufficient for making a desired change in arrangements. Even parents who anticipated needing to make a change in arrangements sometimes left a childcare provider that they would have preferred to stay with. We describe each type of change in figure 1. We examined differences in parents' experiences of childcare changes by race and ethnicity and by geographic site by analyzing variation in the types of changes and reasons for changing care arrangements across groups.

Desired Changes

Most of the childcare changes that parents described were desired, meaning parents wanted to leave their current provider. These typically led to a provider perceived to be a better fit for the family and supportive of overall family well-being. These types of changes were driven by parents seeking a different type of care or higher-quality care, a problem with their current provider, or transitions in employment, school, or housing that opened up the possibility of changing arrangements.

Desired and Planned Changes

Desired childcare changes were coded as planned when parents anticipated the change and had time to plan for new arrangements, usually at least a few weeks. Most represented moves into center-based care, which is consistent with parents needing time to search for and enroll in a center or even waiting for a spot to open. Fifty-five percent of all childcare changes were desired and planned; 60 percent of children experienced at least one such change.

Margarita, a Latina immigrant mother in Westchester County, used the subsidy program to pay a FCC provider to care for her three-year-old son. She soon became concerned about the quality of care, however: "I saw that she had lots of little kids, and he learned a little but not much. But he almost like didn't want to stay, didn't adapt. So he always stayed there crying. . . . A few times I found that it was very hot at the day care. They didn't have air conditioning, so like, I didn't like that very much. So, I said, 'I'm going to move him.'" In addition, the provider would call her at 4:30 p.m. to come pick up her son when she was supposed to be open until 5 p.m. Because of these problems, she sought out a new provider. She visited a childcare center in her neighborhood and reported that she liked it because it "had more space, more teachers," and was open until 6 p.m. She decided to move her son to the center, and when we spoke with her, she believed that her son was now thriving.

As Margarita's experience illustrates, many desired-planned changes were driven by parents seeking a new provider because of a problem with the current provider. These problems ranged from payment issues, unreliability of care, bad parent-provider relationships, logistical problems (such as commute time), and

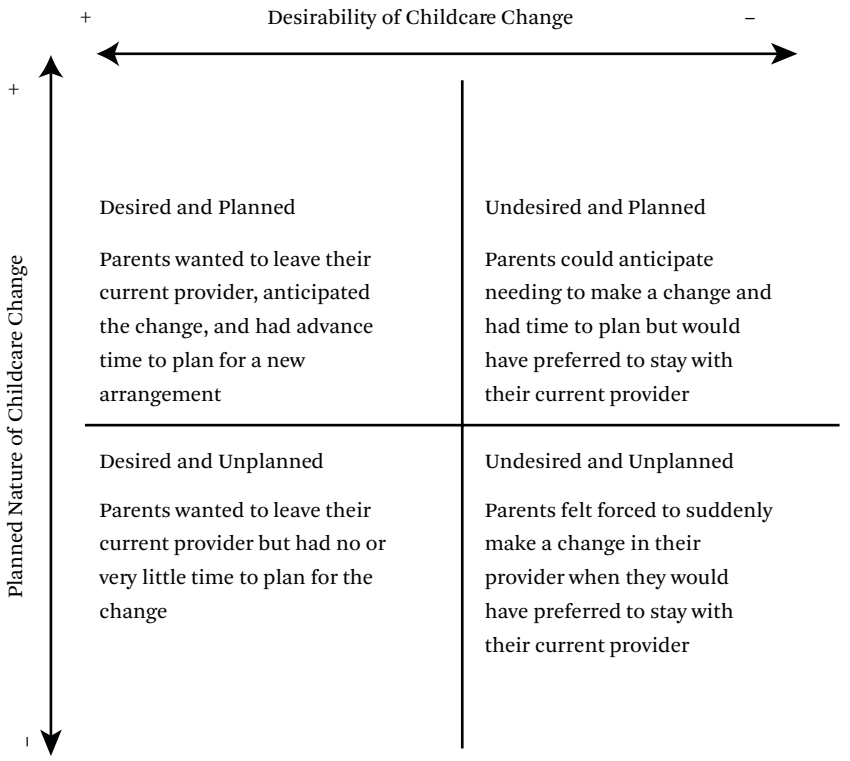
Table 2. Childcare Changes

	Planned	Unplanned	Unclear	Row Total
Desired	73	5	2	80
Undesired	22	17	7	46
Unclear	5	1	0	6
Column total	100	23	9	132

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Each cell represents the number of childcare changes coded on each dimension of desirability and planned nature of the change (for example, seventy-three childcare changes were coded as desired and planned).

Figure 1. Types of Childcare Changes



Source: Authors' compilation.

both minor and serious concerns about the quality of the care and their child's safety. Parents in all types of care—center-based, FCC, and informal—reported problems with their providers and sometimes moved to a different or similar type of care. When parents made desired-planned changes, they like Margarita were typically able to find a provider that better fit their needs.

For parents with few alternative childcare options, however, desired-planned changes did not always lead to a better family-provider fit even though they were leaving an arrangement that was not working. Gina, a White mother living in southwestern Illinois, was working part time and attending college. She used the subsidy to pay her friend to watch her infant son while she worked. Her friend had initially misunderstood the payment rates—thinking she would get $7 per hour instead of $7 per day for part-time care—and was displeased. According to Gina, the friend would make her feel guilty about the low subsidy payment rates and then became unreliable, showing up late. Gina says, "I felt bad because she had misunderstood what she was getting paid. And she kind of held that over my head, where I couldn't afford to pay her out of my pocket." Gina ultimately quit her job and ended the arrangement because of her discomfort with the situation. Although she wanted to enroll her daughter in a childcare center, she was unable to find one that would take her daughter part time, yet the subsidy would not pay for full-time care. The only alternative she saw was to quit her job and go without regular care—with the help of her partner and occasionally her mother—while she completed her degree.

In some cases of desired-planned changes, parents were satisfied with their provider but wanted a different type of care or an otherwise more satisfactory arrangement. In these cases, parents sought higher-quality care or a provider that was a better fit with their child's or

their families' needs. Most of these changes were into a childcare center, often from no primary care provider, from relative care, or from one center to another. Parents often described wanting to move into a school setting as their child approached kindergarten. When asked why she moved her preschool-age son from informal care provided by her mother to a childcare center, Tyra, a Black mother in Cook County, says, "I didn't want him to be behind, and I needed him to have like social skills." In some of these cases, parents added part-time center-based care to an informal care arrangement, combining center and relative care to better meet their child's developmental needs while covering their work hours. Head Start and public pre–K programs, both of which are government funded but not by the childcare subsidy program, played a particularly important role for parents who were not working and thus no longer subsidy-eligible but wanted their child in a school-like environment they could afford.

Transitions in employment, school, or housing also sometimes led parents to make a desired-planned change when these transitions were themselves planned and when they opened up the possibility of a new childcare arrangement that was preferable to the parent (including, in some cases, keeping a child home with the parent). Transitions out of employment included parents who were laid off, quit their job (often due to job problems), or were temporarily not working during the summer and wanted to keep their child home with them. Parents who were transitioning back to work after a period of not working could make a desired-planned change back to nonparental care, often center-based or FCC. School transitions led to similar childcare changes when parents no longer needed care or started or resumed their education.

Finally, desired-planned changes were driven by the subsidy program when parents were able to reinstate their subsidy after a gap in subsidy receipt caused by unemployment or administrative problems. Because parents could often not afford to pay for childcare without the subsidy, they stopped using their provider—typically center or FCC—after exiting the subsidy program. The transition back to work or school allowed them to reinstate their subsidy and access a preferred care arrangement.

In several cases, desired-planned changes were driven by parents who were leaving what they described as temporary care arrangements. The temporary arrangement was often secured in haste when leaving an earlier arrangement without sufficient time to plan for the next one. For example, Melissa, a Black mother living in Cook County, applied for the subsidy program when her partner and current childcare provider became abusive; she needed to quickly make new arrangements for her five children, ages two through eleven years (an *unplanned* change). She had a difficult time finding a provider who could care for all of her children (since during the summer her school-age children needed care) and who would begin to provide care while she awaited childcare subsidy approval, and viewed the FCC provider she secured as temporary. When she no longer needed care for her three oldest children at the beginning of the school year, she moved her two youngest into a childcare center that was both more convenient and, she felt, a better fit, having the racially diverse learning environment she wanted for her children as well as free transportation. When we spoke with her, she was still using and satisfied with the center.

Like Melissa, other parents who had limited time or options to find a provider during their childcare search chose temporary arrangements. Meanwhile, they continued searching for a provider who could better meet their needs. In some cases, they needed to wait for a change in jobs, subsidy status, or housing that would open up the opportunity. In describing her childcare search while first applying for the subsidy program in Cook County, Tamara, a Black mother, said, "I mean, it was getting down to the wire and I had to pick a baby—a daycare. And they were close to my house, so I just picked that one. And it was going to be a temporary thing, because I was planning on moving anyway." She later says that her son didn't like the center, which made her feel that it was not a "safe or stable environment for him," though it was "as good as it's going to get" until she was able to move to a new home near a center she had attended when she was a

child and that she "loved." She was still using this center when we spoke with her, despite a temporary break due to a subsidy loss.

Desired and Unplanned Changes

The handful of desired-unplanned changes occurred when parents willingly left their provider but had no or very little time to plan for the change. Because current arrangements were problematic, parents felt the change was better for the family, especially when they were concerned about their child's safety. Even so, the suddenness of the change could be destabilizing because it typically left families without any care. These types of changes were quite rare, only 4 percent fitting this pattern; 6 percent of children experienced a desired-unplanned change.

Desired-unplanned changes were driven by parents' job loss, problems with the childcare provider or subsidy program, or a combination of these factors. Parents reported experiencing problems with their provider or having concerns about the care for some time prior to leaving, but the decision to leave was pursued with little to no planning. A White mother living in southwestern Illinois who was fired from her job called it a "blessing in disguise" because she had several concerns about the FCC provider she had been using for her two-year-old daughter, including that the provider would ask parents to misreport the hours of care they received to the subsidy program.

Mandy, a Black mother living in Nassau County, was using the subsidy program to pay for a FCC provider for her infant twins. She explained that when she was searching for care she had limited options and was in a hurry and chose that provider because it was a new provider close to her home and on the list of approved providers from the childcare resource and referral agency. However, she later became concerned about the quality of care and found out through the state childcare licensing website that the FCC provider had received multiple health and safety violations while her children were in her care, yet no one had informed her about it. She called her caseworker at the Department of Social Services (DSS) to complain and request a provider change, but soon after made a sudden decision to stop using the FCC home after an argument with the provider about the provider's not changing her son's dirty diapers: "I called my worker that day, I said, 'I will not be bringing the children back to her after today. Whatever you have to do, I refuse to bring my kids back to her.' I called her, the [director of DSS], and I told the director. . . . 'This is what this woman did. I'm not taking them back there. And don't pay her after today.'"

Mandy did not experience a gap in providers because she "caused such a stink" with DSS that they helped her find a new one—another FCC home—and immediately processed the paperwork needed to make the change. Mandy was very satisfied with the new FCC home and continued with that arrangement until the provider closed its doors. In all other desired and unplanned changes, the parent stopped using nonparental care altogether for some time after leaving the provider.

Undesired Changes

Undesired childcare changes occurred when parents were happy with their current provider and did not want to leave. Often, a change in their circumstances—including job change or loss, subsidy loss, and residential moves—made their current provider untenable, and they felt forced to make a change. Undesired changes typically led to a provider that was a worse fit or at least not a better fit for the family. Because of this, some parents viewed their new arrangement as temporary and continued to search for childcare after an undesired change (leading to a subsequent planned, desired change); this was particularly true when parents did not initially have time to plan their childcare transition.

Undesired and Planned Changes

In undesired and planned changes, parents could anticipate needing to make a change in providers and had time to plan but would have preferred to stay with their current provider. These changes were typically out of center care into informal care or exclusively parental care. Undesired-planned changes made up 17 percent of childcare changes; 25 percent of children experienced this type of change.

Undesired and planned changes occurred

when parents had notice that their job or subsidy was ending and that they would not be able to afford to stay with their childcare provider. In some cases, after the parent left their job, they were able to continue using the subsidy until it was time to redetermine their eligibility or the provider was willing to provide care for a period of time after the subsidy ended, which allowed parents time to plan. Many of these changes were from center-based care into exclusive parental care when the parent would have preferred to keep their child in the center but was unable to afford it because of the subsidy loss. For example, in one case, Lorena, a Latina immigrant mother living in Cook County, had to redetermine her eligibility for the subsidy program while she was on maternity leave from her job. She knew she would lose the subsidy at redetermination because she did not have current paystubs to submit and continued to send her four-year-old son to the center until she received the letter from the subsidy program office that her benefits were canceled. When asked how the transition out of the center was for her family, she explained that it was difficult for her and her son: "For me, it was, I wasn't very happy, you know, to have to take him out. He was used to the center, and he would ask me, 'Mommy, when are you going to take me? I want to see my friends.' So, it was a little bit frustrating, like how do I do this, you know what I mean?" When Lorena returned to work, she reenrolled her son in the same center, where he stayed until he started kindergarten and she no longer needed childcare.

In other cases, changes in families' circumstances, including a residential move, a job change, or a work schedule change, made their current provider untenable, and the parent felt forced to leave their provider but had sufficient time to do so. Unlike those precipitated by a sudden job or subsidy loss, the parent was able to find another provider that was able to accommodate—to varying degrees—their current circumstances. When Stephanie, a Black mother living in southwestern Illinois, started using the subsidy program, she and her sister did an extensive search for childcare centers and found one near her work and her sister's house that she liked. When Stephanie changed jobs, however, the center was too far away. She explained, "And I hated that I had to switch, but it was just, I couldn't afford gas-wise to go back and forth." She found another center close to her home with which she was satisfied but continued to feel that "if I could go back, I would."

Some parents who made an undesired-planned change described conflict between competing family needs that required them to leave a provider that was not working out. For example, Jessica, a White mother living in Cook County, started using the subsidy program to pay her aunt to care for her infant son because she did not want him in a center-based setting until he was older. However, after a few months, her aunt became unreliable, causing problems in Jessica's job. Although Jessica preferred to have her son cared for by a trusted relative, she moved him to the same childcare center that her preschool-aged daughter was attending. The change caused her significant distress: "And then the daycare, I hated it, honestly, at first. Because they were good to him, it's just, like, I would cry when I would drop him off. And [my daughter] was older, so it was okay. But I would just bawl my eyes out for like probably four months." As her son grew older, Jessica became more and more comfortable with the center, and when we spoke with her, her son was still attending and she was very happy with the care.

Other parents reported preferring center-based arrangements for their children, either for practical reasons (such as proximity) or because they perceived that it would provide academic or social skills, but reluctantly stopped using a center because a child did not adapt well enough even though the parents were happy with the quality of the program. In all of these cases, parents had been using relative care and went back to that same arrangement. We refer to these as undesired-planned changes because the parent had time to make new arrangements but would have preferred a different outcome.

Undesired and Unplanned Changes

Undesired and unplanned changes occurred when parents felt forced to suddenly make a change in their provider. These are similar to undesired-planned changes because the parent

did not want to leave the provider, but more disruptive because the change was not anticipated. Thirteen percent of childcare changes were described as undesired and unplanned; 15 percent of children experienced this type of change.

Michael, a White father living in Cook County, had been using the subsidy program for his two-year-old daughter for about a year when his childcare center informed him that his benefits had been canceled. He later learned that he missed the eligibility redetermination period because he moved and did not receive the redetermination letter. It took him about two months to reinstate his benefits and return to the center. During this time, because he could not afford the $83 per day that the center charged, he pieced together care from relatives and took time off work: "I'm using up my parents . . . Actually my mom, because my dad lives in [another state], but I was using her as much as I could. And then I counted on [my daughter's] mom to show up and watch her for a couple days and that kind of fell through. So then I was calling into work, and then work was like, 'Well, you know, you need to show up. You need to be here if you want to have a job.'"

As Michael's example illustrates, undesired and unplanned changes were most often driven by an unexpected subsidy loss, subsidy application denial (child started attending provider before approval and subsidy was denied), or provider payment problems, leading parents to scramble to find childcare so they could keep their job or to quit their job. Like Michael, other parents also unexpectedly lost their subsidy because of a missed redetermination notice due to a residential move and others due to a small wage increase or moving in with their partner. Other parents reported that their provider was not getting paid for unknown reasons and either willingly or unwillingly left the provider out of concern that they would be unable to pay for the care. In these cases, parents were still working when they lost the subsidy but could not afford their current provider without it and therefore sometimes used temporary arrangements while working to reinstate the subsidy or continuing to look for other care. In a few cases, parents were able to bring children with them to work or quickly enroll in a childcare center that had openings. Most of the time, however, parents relied on relatives, friends, or took time off work. Thus the majority of these changes were from center care or FCC to informal care or exclusive parental care.

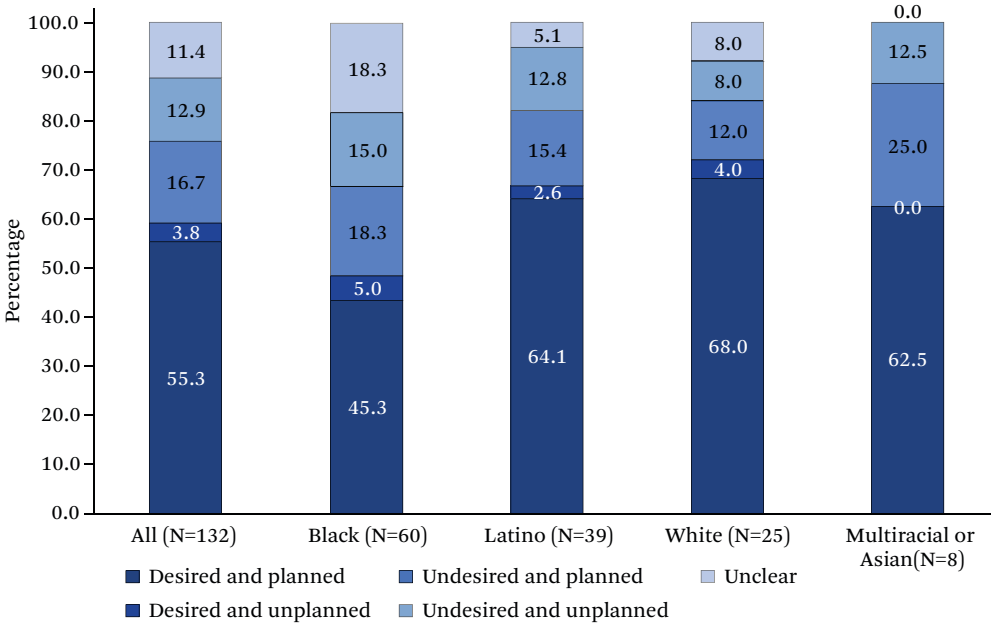
The subsidy program also contributed to undesired-unplanned changes in two cases when a parent's childcare provider—a relative or friend—quit because payment rates were too low and gave the parent little notice. Sasha, a Black mother living in Westchester County, described why her cousin and childcare provider for her two-year-old son found another job: "And, she was like, 'It's not helping me pay my bills, and stuff like that. I don't want to get put out my home, whatever. It's not enough for me to be paying.' They want her to pay more rent than what she get. You know? She could deal with it at first, but then it was just getting too hard." After ending the arrangement with her cousin, Sasha's sister began caring for her son, and Sasha and her sister submitted paperwork to the subsidy program office to transfer the subsidy payments. Despite calling the subsidy office repeatedly and submitting paperwork multiple times, after several months, Sasha's sister was still not receiving payments. This led Sasha to quit her job as a home health aide rather than continue asking her sister to provide care without pay.

Undesired-unplanned changes not driven by the subsidy program were driven by children's health problems, but were rare. For example, Crystal, a Black mother living in Cook County, had a son with a disability who had to be hospitalized for two months, leading him to lose his spot in the center he attended. Crystal's mother helped with childcare after his release until he recovered and enrolled in a new center. We coded this and similar changes as undesired because the parents described that they would have preferred to stay with the provider and the change was disruptive to the family.

DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENCES BY PARENTS' RACE AND ETHNICITY

The types of changes that families experienced differed by parents' race and ethnicity. As shown in figure 2, Black parents reported fewer desired-planned changes than Latino and

Figure 2. Types of Childcare Changes by Parents' Race and Ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: N=132 childcare changes.

White families, and reported more undesired changes, both planned and unplanned. Latino parents also reported slightly more undesired (planned and unplanned) changes than White parents. These findings are similar if we consider the number of children with each type of change. We focus on differences between Black, Latino, and White parents because only three parents in our sample identified as a different race or ethnicity, two as multiracial and one as Asian.

These racial and ethnic differences are driven in part by differences in parents' reasons for changing childcare arrangements. Black parents were more likely to report changing arrangements because of a job or subsidy loss or problems with the subsidy program, which contributed to more undesired changes, both planned and unplanned. In particular, Black parents reported problems getting their subsidy approved for their job or school program or for their unlicensed relative or friend provider. In these cases, the parent began using the subsidized provider while awaiting subsidy approval and had to leave the arrangement when their application was denied. In a similar situation, one Latina mother from Nassau County lost her FCC provider when the provider found out that the mother had switched jobs and started working as a housekeeper paid under the table. The provider worried the mother's job did not fulfill subsidy program requirements and the provider might not get paid.

Although Black, Latino, and White parents all reported that changes in their employment led to changes in care arrangements, the types of childcare changes differed by race and ethnicity. For White and Latino parents, changes in employment nearly always led to a desired-planned change. For Black parents, job changes most often led to an undesired-planned change because their new job was too far away or because their new work schedule no longer worked with their provider, which also contributed to Black parents reporting more undesired changes. Latino parents reported more provider problems that led to undesired changes; these were similar to those Black and White parents reported but more common among Latino parents. Moreover, provider problems, particularly concerns about the

quality of care (often FCC homes), were a more prevalent driver of desired-planned changes among Latino parents than among Black and White parents, who were more likely to report reasons like seeking a better provider fit or transitions in jobs, school, or housing.

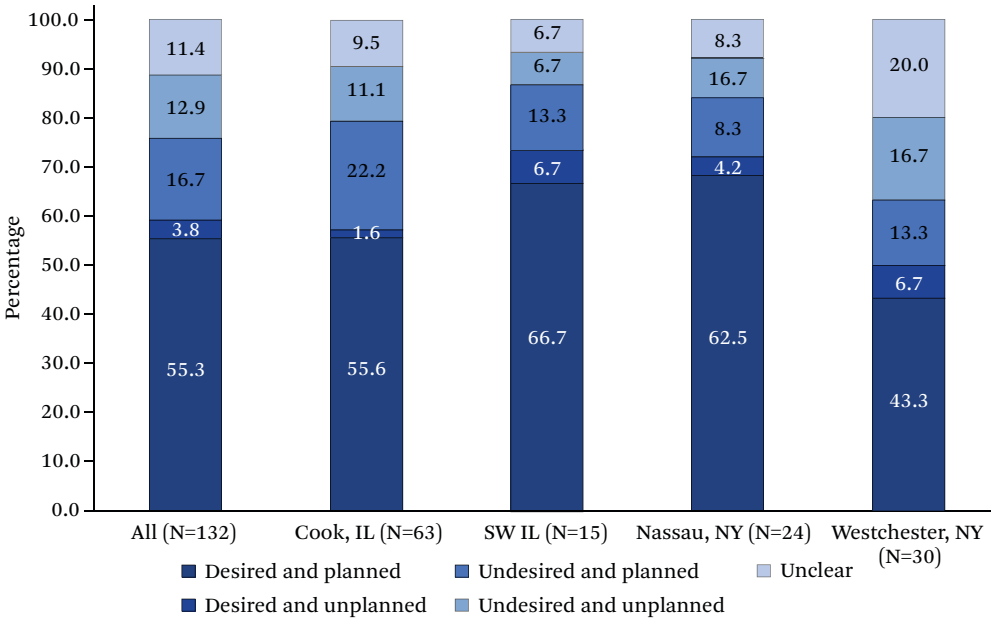
Parents rarely explicitly mentioned race or ethnicity when describing their reasons for changing childcare arrangements, but some Black and Latino parents said they sought out centers that were racially and ethnically diverse. Language was an important consideration for Latino immigrant parents. For example, one father in Cook County made a desired-planned change from one FCC to another that spoke Spanish and that he could better communicate with. Other Latino parents also reported that being able to communicate with a provider in Spanish was an important factor. Another Latina immigrant mother enrolled her daughter in a public pre–K program (a desired-planned change) so that her daughter would learn English before starting kindergarten because the family spoke Spanish at home and her daughter was being cared for by her Spanish-speaking grandmother.

Differences in Experiences by Geographic Site

Patterns in the types of childcare changes differed by geographic site. Families in southwestern Illinois and Nassau County experienced more desired-planned changes than their counterparts in Cook and Westchester Counties (see figure 3). Families in southwestern Illinois experienced fewer undesired changes (planned or unplanned) than those in the other sites, and families in both Illinois sites experienced fewer undesired-unplanned changes than their New York counterparts. These findings are similar if we consider types of changes at the child level, save that children in Cook County are as likely to experience at least one desired-planned change as those in southwestern Illinois and Nassau County.

What might account for these patterns? One explanation is that families in southwestern Illinois were less likely to report that subsidy problems contributed to a change. Moreover, although a substantial number of families in Cook County either lost their subsidy or encountered subsidy problems that led to an undesired change, they often had notice that the

Figure 3. Types of Childcare Changes by Geographic Site



Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: N=132 childcare changes.

subsidy was ending, making them more likely to experience undesired and planned changes than their New York counterparts. Some parents in Cook County, for example, reported that they continued using the subsidy after a job exit until it was time to redetermine their eligibility or that their childcare center allowed them to continue using the center for a few months after the subsidy ended. Parents in Cook County also reported more undesired and planned changes driven by provider-related reasons, such as problems with provider reliability.

Families in Westchester County seem to have experienced fewer desired-planned changes because they were less likely to report childcare changes driven by seeking a better provider fit, higher-quality care, or a different type of care. Across sites, desired-planned changes driven by seeking a better provider fit were often into public pre–K or Head Start programs or from informal to more formal care (for example, relative care to FCC or FCC to center). Indeed, the one child who experienced this type of change in Westchester County transitioned into a public pre–K program from exclusive parental care. This geographic pattern could reflect differences in the supply of licensed childcare across sites. In Cook County, although some desired-planned changes related to seeking a better provider fit were into Head Start and public pre–K programs, many were into community-based centers (typically subsidized), suggesting that parents in Cook County may have more center-based care options. In addition, across all types of changes, those in Cook County were more likely to involve transitions into center-based care, whereas those in Westchester County were the least likely.

DISCUSSION

Many families with low incomes experience childcare instability that has negative implications for both parental employment and children's development. However, not all childcare changes involve harmful instability. In fact, many reflect parental efforts to move children into more beneficial settings. Understanding the conditions that bring unwanted instability and those that support child or family well-being is imperative to identifying policy levers that can help parents prevent harmful changes and encourage more positive ones. This is especially important during an era of dynamic family trends and renewed initiatives to design policies that better meet the needs of working families. We argue that understanding the extent to which parents desire to leave their provider (desirability) and have time to plan for new arrangements (planned nature) can help distinguish between transitions that are problematic or beneficial. We apply this framework to data from qualitative interviews with a racially diverse sample of parents with low incomes.

Although nearly all desired childcare changes were planned, undesired changes were both planned and unplanned. When desired changes were planned—driven by parents' seeking a better provider fit or different type of care, problems with their current provider, or changes in employment, schooling, or housing—parents had time to search for a new provider. Most of these changes were into programs parents felt were an improvement in quality or fit, and thus were described as supportive of family well-being. In the few instances when desired changes were unplanned, they could be disruptive because they were so sudden and typically left parents without any childcare. Nevertheless, because these changes were driven at least in part by parents' concerns about their provider, parents also expressed relief at removing their child from an undesirable and sometimes unsafe care arrangement. Parents experienced undesired childcare changes when they felt forced to leave a provider with whom they were satisfied. Undesired and unplanned changes were the most disruptive and often led parents to scramble to find new care arrangements or quit their jobs. Undesired and planned changes were less disruptive but did not typically result in a better provider fit. A subsidy loss (sometimes in combination with a job loss) and problems with the subsidy program (including payment problems and low payment rates) often precipitated an undesired change, especially unplanned changes. When changes in families' circumstances, such as a residential move or job change, made a provider untenable, parents also felt forced to

make an undesired change but typically had time to plan.

Both desirability and the planned nature of changes are important dimensions for understanding parents' experiences with childcare changes. Desired-planned changes are similar to the "planned transitions" of Katherine Speirs, Colleen Vesely, and Kevin Roy (2015), which represent changes in care both wished for and planned. Similarly, undesired-unplanned changes are similar to their concept of "forced transitions," which occur when parents are satisfied with their care arrangement but need to leave without time to plan for or anticipate the change. However, planned changes are not always desirable or supportive of family well-being. When parents feel forced to leave a provider that is a good fit, they may still view the transition as undesirable, even with sufficient planning. Moreover, although most desired-planned changes did result in securing a more preferred care arrangement, many desired-planned changes were driven by problems with parents' current provider that could have been prevented if parents had more time and better information during their childcare search. The availability and quality of childcare options in parents' neighborhoods—and their knowledge of those options—mattered for their ability to find a provider that was a good fit. Finding affordable childcare with "reasonable effort" is a key dimension of access (Friese et al. 2017), and parents shared many stories of stressful and unsatisfactory searches that required more than reasonable effort. Like Moran (2021), we find that some changes are desired and unplanned when parents who were having provider problems decided to suddenly end the arrangement, for example, out of concern for their child's safety.

Not enough time to plan was particularly salient in parents' use of temporary arrangements. Those who did not have enough time in their childcare search frequently identified a temporary arrangement while continuing their search or waiting to reinstate subsidy eligibility or for a spot to open at another provider. Temporary arrangements was a strategy parents who wanted to conduct a higher-quality search used, but it contributed to children's experiencing a greater number of settings. Our findings suggest that policy reforms should work to minimize parents' need for temporary arrangements. For example, subsidy rules could (and sometimes do) allow parents to begin using care while searching for a job and hold onto care when subsidy-related problems cause delays to eligibility redetermination.

Almost half the target children in our sample (all of whom were under six years old) experienced multiple childcare changes; indeed, one in five experienced three or more. Had we collected information on additional children in the household, the number of changes would likely have been even higher. Moreover, had we collected data from a wider swath of low- and moderate-income families who do not benefit from subsidized care but nevertheless report economic challenges finding and maintaining affordable care, we might have observed even more changes. Future research would benefit from examining the implications of changes for families at different levels of economic need.

Our findings suggest that future childcare instability research might benefit from taking into account the valence of childcare changes, and identify ways to model them both individually and over time to gain a better understanding of the positive and negative implications of complex childcare trajectories for children's and families' well-being. Survey researchers could develop items that tap into the reasons for changing providers (especially job loss or job changes, subsidy loss, provider problems, children's needs), whether the change was desired, and the extent of time that was available for planning. With such data, the patterns in this study could be linked to critical outcomes related to child development, parental employment, and family well-being.

Our small and nonrepresentative sample precludes drawing definitive conclusions about subpopulation differences. Nevertheless, it is concerning that, relative to White and Latino parents, the childcare changes Black parents describe appear to more frequently reflect negative instability rather than a positive change to a new setting. For example, the childcare changes of Black parents were more likely than those of White and Latino parents to be reported as undesired (Latino parents showing

more undesirable changes compared to White parents) in part because Black parents reported more job changes that necessitated leaving a preferred provider, subsidy loss, and complications getting a subsidy approved. The data also suggest that Latino parents may be having more difficulty than either their White or Black counterparts finding providers that meet their family's expectations regarding quality and linguistic inclusion. This finding underscores the importance of including linguistic and cultural competence in provider training efforts. Overall, these findings are consistent with research indicating that the subsidy approval and redetermination process can be especially challenging for families of color, who are more likely to have precarious employment circumstances and use license-exempt family, friend, and neighbor providers, triggering in some cases unexpected and undesired care exits (Henly, Sandstrom, and Pilarz 2017).

The local supply of formal childcare options may partially account for differences in the desirability and planned nature of changes that we observed across the geographic sites. Rural areas have few center-based care options (Anderson and Mikesell 2019), and families with low incomes in suburban areas may have particular challenges finding affordable care even with their subsidies. Supply differences in formal care may explain why it was more common for Cook County parents to seek a better fit from among a broad range of community-based formal programs, whereas in other communities, seeking a better fit was more narrowly in reference to Head Start and public pre–K. Relative to New York parents, Illinois parents experienced more planned changes (desired or not), perhaps because of more notice of or more flexibility from their providers after a subsidy loss. In Cook County, a greater opportunity to plan did not coincide with more desired moves because parents reported more changes precipitated by subsidy problems than those in southwestern Illinois did. This finding suggests that differences in local implementation of subsidy programs are more likely to explain this pattern than state-level policies, such as eligibility period lengths. Our data, however, do not allow us to pinpoint the underlying causes of these different patterns by geography. We therefore interpret these findings with caution.

Our data were collected before the 2014 Reauthorization of the CCDBG, which made several changes to the childcare subsidy program to improve access for families with low incomes to high-quality care and continuity of care. Depending on the success of these goals, our 2013 data may overestimate the frequency of childcare changes today. Our findings suggest that the CCDBG policy reforms designed to increase continuity of subsidy receipt by lengthening eligibility periods to twelve months and mandating a ninety-day grace period after a job loss should help prevent undesired changes. Additionally, new federal regulations require states and territories to implement strategies to improve consumer education and childcare access in underserved communities. Improvements in consumer education strategies can help parents in their search and selection efforts so they can make informed choices and have an easier time finding high-quality care and good provider-family fit from the start. Further, increased requirements for monitoring childcare quality and safety in the CCDBG reauthorization may also minimize desired changes that are driven by provider problems, although these requirements may discourage some providers from participating in the subsidy program altogether (Henly and Adams 2018). Our findings also suggest that reforms resulting in higher payment rates to subsidized providers might reduce the frequency of childcare changes caused by providers who discontinue their involvement in the subsidy program because of the below-market rates the state pays.

Not all changes are disruptive to families and not all could be prevented by altering subsidy program rules. Given the centrality of parental employment for childcare stability, especially for Black families in our study, policies that increase earnings and improve stability in parents' work hours and schedules are also needed. As Elizabeth Ananat, Anna Gassman-Pines, and John Fitz-Henley (2022, this issue) demonstrate, fair scheduling laws have the potential to stabilize parents' work hours and schedules. More stable schedules facilitate parents' ability to find stable care and, in turn, more stable care can minimize childcare-

related work disruptions (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue).

Recent policy developments hold promise for addressing broader and long-standing issues in the U.S. childcare landscape—a shortage of supply to meet families' needs and preferences, minimal levels of quality, and unaffordable out-of-pocket costs—that complicate finding and maintaining high-quality and stable care. For example, the American Rescue Plan Act passed in March 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier pandemic relief funds infused nearly $50 billion into the childcare system aimed at stabilizing and strengthening childcare providers and supporting families with low incomes impacted by lost jobs and income. These funds have helped protect and boost the childcare market in the short term. The Biden administration's Build Back Better Framework (White House 2021) would further alleviate childcare costs. The Build Back Better plan includes a proposal to extend the expanded Child Tax Credit in the American Rescue Plan, provide free, high-quality, and universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds, and expand the availability of subsidies to ensure that families earning up to 250 percent of state median income spend no more than 7 percent of their income on childcare. These investments could significantly improve low-income families' access to high-quality and stable childcare by expanding program eligibility and reducing out-of-pocket costs while providing supplemental income via tax credits that could help families weather gaps in subsidy coverage or to afford fees not covered by a subsidy. A guarantee of two years of high-quality preschool education could also ease childcare search efforts—especially for parents working regular, daytime, and weekday hours when preschool programs are in session—thereby reducing the chance of undesired, unplanned changes because of a bad match. Our findings caution a naïve assessment of childcare changes as necessarily negative and suggest that the implementation of new policies should not encourage stability above all else. Instead, policies should support families' efforts to seek new, higher-quality providers to address changing family contexts and children's changing developmental needs while helping stabilize high-quality arrangements that are a good fit for the family.

REFERENCES

Adams, Gina, and Monica Rohacek. 2010. "Child Care Instability: Definitions, Context, and Policy Implications." Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

Ananat, Elizabeth O., Anna Gassman-Pines, and John A. Fitz-Henley II. 2022. "The Effects of the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on the Daily Lives of Low-Wage Workers and Their Families." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(5): 45–66. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.03.

Anderson, Sara, and Megan Mikesell. 2019. "Child Care Type, Access, and Quality in Rural Areas of the United States: A Review." *Early Child Development and Care* 189(11): 1812–26.

Bratsch-Hines, Mary E., Robert Carr, Eleni Zgourou, Lynne Vernon-Feagans, and Michael Willoughby. 2020. "Infant and Toddler Child-Care Quality and Stability in Relation to Proximal and Distal Academic and Social Outcomes." *Child Development* 91(6): 1854–64.

Bratsch-Hines, Mary E., Irina Mokrova, and Lynne Vernon-Feagans and the Family Life Project Key Investigators. 2015. "Child Care Instability from 6 to 36 Months and the Social Adjustment of Children in Prekindergarten." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 30, Part A (1): 106–16.

Carlson, Marcia J., Christopher Wimer, and Ron Haskins. 2022. "Changing Work, Changing Families, and Public Policies Toward Low-Income Families." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(5): 1–22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.01.

Carrillo, Dani, Kristen Harknett, Allison Logan, Sigrid Luhr, and Daniel Schneider. 2017. "Instability of Work and Care: How Work Schedules Shape Child-Care Arrangements for Parents Working in the Service Sector." *Social Service Review* 91(3): 422–55.

Chaudry, Ajay. 2004. *Putting Children First: How Low-Wage Working Mothers Manage Child Care*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Crosnoe, Robert, Kate Chambers Prickett, Chelsea Smith, and Shannon Cavanagh. 2014. "Changes in Young Children's Family Structures and Child Care Arrangements." *Demography* 51(2): 459–83.

Cross, Christina J. 2018. "Extended Family Households Among Children in the United States: Dif-

ferences by Race/Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Status." *Population Studies* 72(2): 235–51.

Davis, Elizabeth E., Caroline Krafft, and Nicole D. Forry. 2017. "The Role of Policy and Practice in Short Spells of Child Care Subsidy Participation." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 27(1): 1–19.

Fiese, Barbara H., Thomas J. Tomcho, Michael Douglas, Kimberly Josephs, Scott Poltrock, and Tim Baker. 2002. "A Review of 50 Years of Research on Naturally Occurring Family Routines and Rituals: Cause for Celebration?" *Journal of Family Psychology* 16(4): 381–90.

Friese, Sarah, Van-Kim Lin, Nicole Forry, and Kathryn Tout. 2017. "Defining and Measuring Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers." *OPRE* research brief no. 2017-08. Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Accessed March 23, 2022. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/cceepra_access_guidebook_final_213_b508.pdf.

Ha, Yoonsook, Katherine Magnuson, and Marci Ybarra. 2012. "Patterns of Child Care Subsidy Receipt and the Stability of Child Care." *Children and Youth Services Review* 34(9): 1834–44.

Harknett, Kristen, Daniel Schneider, and Sigrid Luhr. 2022. "Who Cares If Parents Have Unpredictable Work Schedules?: Just-in-Time Work Schedules and Child Care Arrangements." *Social Problems* 69(1): 164–83. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa020.

Heggeness, Misty L. 2020. "Why Is Mommy So Stressed? Estimating the Immediate Impact of the COVID-19 Shock on Parental Attachment to the Labor Market and the Double-Bind of Mothers." *Opportunity and Inclusive Growth Institute* working paper no. 33. Minneapolis, Minn.: Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

Henly, Julia R., and Gina Adams. 2018. *Increasing Access to Quality Child Care for Four Priority Populations: Challenges and Opportunities with CCDBG Reauthorization*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99150/increasing_access_to_quality_child_care_for_four_priority_populations_report_3.pdf.

Henly, Julia R., Jaeseung Kim, Heather Sandstrom, Alejandra Ros Pilarz, and Amy Claessens. 2017. "What Explains Short Spells on Child Care Subsidies?" *Social Service Review* 91(3): 488–533.

Henly, Julia R., and Sandra Lyons. 2000. "The Negotiation of Child Care and Employment Demands Among Low-Income Parents." *Journal of Social Issues* 56(4): 683–706.

Henly, Julia R., Heather Sandstrom, Amy Claessens, Alejandra Ros Pilarz, Julia Gelatt, Jaeseung Kim, and Olivia Healy. 2015. *Determinants of Subsidy Stability and Child Care Continuity: Final report for the Illinois-New York Child Care Research Partnership.* Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.

Henly, Julia R., Heather Sandstrom, and Alejandra Ros Pilarz. 2017. "Child Care Assistance as Work-Family Support: Meeting the Economic and Caregiving Needs of Low-Income Working Families in the U.S." In *Work-Family Balance in Light of Globalization and Technology*, edited by Mireia las Heras, Nuria Chinchilla, and Marc Grau. Newcastle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Howell, David R., and Arne L. Kalleberg. 2019. "Declining Job Quality in the United States: Explanations and Evidence." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 5(4): 1–53. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2019.5.4.01.

Howes, Carollee, and Claire E. Hamilton. 1993. "The Changing Experience of Child Care: Changes in Teachers and in Teacher-Child Relationships and Children's Social Competence with Peers." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 8(1): 15–32.

Joshi, Pamela, Abigail N. Walters, Clemens Noelke, and Dolores Acevedo-Garcia. 2022. "Families' Job Characteristics and Economic Self-Sufficiency: Differences by Income, Race-Ethnicity, and Nativity." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(5): 67–95. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.04.

Kochhar, Rakesh. 2020. "Fewer Mothers and Fathers in U.S. Are Working Due to COVID-19 Downturn; Those at Work Have Cut Hours." Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. Last modified October 22, 2020. Accessed February 11, 2020. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/22/fewer-mothers-and-fathers-in-u-s-are-working-due-to-covid-19-downturn-those-at-work-have-cut-hours.

Krafft, Caroline, Elizabeth E. Davis, and Kathryn Tout. 2017. "Child Care Subsidies and the Stability and Quality of Child Care Arrangements." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 39(2): 14–34.

Lambert, Susan J., Julia R. Henly, and Jaeseung Kim.

2019. "Precarious Work Schedules as a Source of Economic Insecurity and Institutional Distrust." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 5(4): 218–57. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2019.5.4.08.

Lowe, Edward D., and Thomas S. Weisner. 2004. "'You Have to Push It—Who's Gonna Raise Your Kids?': Situating Child Care and Child Care Subsidy Use in the Daily Routines of Lower Income Families." *Children and Youth Services Review* 26(2): 143–71.

Lowe, Edward D., Thomas S. Weisner, and Sonya Geis. 2003. "Instability in Child Care: Ethnographic Evidence from Working Poor Families in New Hope Intervention." *The Next Generation Project* working paper no. 15. New York: MDRC.

Luhr, Sigrid, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett. 2022. "Parenting Without Predictability: Precarious Schedules, Parental Strain, and Work-Life Conflict." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(5): 24–44. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.02.

Malik, Rasheed, Katie Hamm, Leila Schochet, Cristina Novoa, Simon Workman and Steven Jessen-Howard. 2018. "America's Child Care Deserts in 2018." Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress. Accessed November 12, 2021. https://americanprogress.org/article/americas-child-care-deserts-2018.

McLoyd, Vonnie C. 1998. "Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Child Development." *American Psychologist* 53(2): 185–204.

Michelmore, Katherine M., and Natasha V. Pilkauskas. 2022. "The Earned Income Tax Credit, Family Complexity, and Children's Living Arrangements." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(5): 143–65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.07.

Miles, Matthew, and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Miller, Cynthia. 2006. "Stability and Change in Childcare and Employment: Evidence from the United States." *National Institute Economic Review* 195(1): 118–32.

Moran, Kaitlin K. 2021. "Examining Childcare Instability and Transition Patterns in Low-Income, Urban Neighborhoods in the United States: A Qualitative Study." *Child Care in Practice* 27(1): 35–53.

National Survey or Early Care and Education Project Team (NSECE). 2014. "Household Search for and Perceptions of Early Care and Education: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)." *OPRE* report no. 2014–55a. Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/brief_hh_search_and_perceptions_to_opre_10022014.pdf.

NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD). 1998. "Early Child Care and Self-Control, Compliance, and Problem Behavior at Twenty-Four and Thirty-Six Months." *Child Development* 69(4): 1145–70.

Pacheco-Applegate, Aida, Erin Devorah Carreon, Emily Ellis, Whitney Clarke Thomas, Julia R. Henly, Julie Spielberger, and Marci Ybarra. 2020. *Finding Child Care in Two Chicago Communities: The Voices of Latina Mothers*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration.

Pager, Devah, and Hana Shepherd. 2008. "The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34(1): 181–209.

Pilarz, Alejandra Ros, Amy Claessens, and Julia Gelatt. 2016. "Patterns of Child Care Subsidy Use and Stability of Subsidized Care Arrangements: Evidence from Illinois and New York." *Children and Youth Services Review* 65(June): 231–43.

Pilarz, Alejandra Ros, and Heather D. Hill. 2014. "Unstable and Multiple Child Care Arrangements and Young Children's Behavior." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 24(4): 471–83.

———. 2017. "Child-Care Instability and Behavior Problems: Does Parenting Stress Mediate The Relationship?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 79(5): 1353–68.

Pilkauskas, Natasha V., and Christina Cross. 2018. "Beyond the Nuclear Family: Trends in Children Living in Shared Households." *Demography* 55(6): 2283–97.

Quillian, Lincoln, Devah Pager, Ole Hexel, and Arnfinn H. Midtbøen. 2017. "Meta-Analysis of Field Experiments Shows No Change in Racial Discrimination in Hiring Over Time." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114(41): 10870–10875.

Ryan, Gery W., and H. Russell Bernard. 2000. "Techniques to Identify Themes in Qualitative Data."

Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Sandstrom, Heather, and Ajay Chaudry. 2012. "'You Have to Choose Your Child Care to Fit Your Work': Childcare Decision-Making Among Low-Income Working Families. *Journal of Children and Poverty* 18(2): 89–199.

Sandstrom, Heather, and Sandra Huerta. 2013. "The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis." *Low-Income Working Families* discussion paper no. 3. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

Schochet, Leila. 2019. "The Child Care Crisis Is Keeping Women Out of the Workforce." Center for American Progress. Last modified March 28, 2019. Accessed February 11, 2020. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2019/03/28/467488/child-care-crisis-keeping-women-workforce.

Scott, Ellen K., and Miriam J. Abelson. 2016. "Understanding the Relationship Between Instability in Child Care and Instability in Employment for Families with Subsidized Care." *Journal of Family Issues* 37(3): 344–68.

Scott, Ellen K., Andrew S. London, and Allison Hurst. 2005. "Instability in Patchworks of Child Care When Moving from Welfare to Work." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67(2): 370–86.

Shonkoff, Jack P., and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. 2000. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.

Smith, Ember, and Richard V. Reeves. 2021. "Black Moms Facing the Toughest Childcare Crunch: How Policy Can Help." Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute. Last modified February 24, 2021. Accessed June 21, 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/02/24/black-moms-facing-the-toughest-childcare-crunch-how-policy-can-help.

Speirs, Katherine, Colleen Vesely, and Kevin Roy 2015. "Is Stability Always a Good Thing? Low-Income Mothers' Experiences with Child Care Transitions." *Children and Youth Services Review* 53: 147–56.

Storer, Adam, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett. 2020. "What Explains Racial/Ethnic Inequality in Job Quality in the Service Sector?" *American Sociological Review* 85(4): 537–72.

Weber, Roberta B. 2005. "Measurement of Child Care Arrangement Stability: A Review and Case Study Using Oregon Child Care Subsidy Data." Ph.D. diss., Oregon State University.

White House. 2021. "President Biden Announces the Build Back Better Framework." Press release, October 28, 2021. Accessed November 12, 2021. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/28/president-biden-announces-the-build-back-better-framework.

Yeung, W. Jean, Miriam R. Linver, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2002. "How Money Matters for Young Children's Development: Parental Investment and Family Processes." *Child Development* 73(6): 1861–79.