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Understanding Appetites for Addressing the Early Child Care Access Problem: Results from a Stakeholder Survey in New England

Marija Bingulac, Sarah Savage, and Julia Wilson



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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston or the Federal Reserve System.

Authors' Note

This report was written before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The intention was to capture the perceptions and experiences of a mix of stakeholders in New England on early child care in the region. Our survey was motivated by a pattern of inaction on fixing the child care access problem that, in the job market at the time, created challenging consequences for working parents and parents who want to be working in our region. Our hope was that by better understanding stakeholder perceptions on the access problem and its implications for the economy, we might be better positioned to inform needed change.

It is important to acknowledge that the labor market has gone from being tight to experiencing a historical downturn, with 22 million people filing for unemployment as of April 2020. When we wrote this report, job vacancies were a challenge for many employers, while today there are mass layoffs as businesses struggle to stay afloat amidst social-distancing requirements. However, in both contexts access to child care is critically important. Before the pandemic, for some families access to child care could affect whether and how parents worked, with implications for families' financial well-being and productivity levels in the economy more generally. In the pandemic, access to child care can mean the difference between essential parent workers doing their critically important work on the front lines of this crisis, whether they are grocery-store workers, doctors, or first responders, for instance.

We will continue to need a well-functioning system of child care in the recovery period. Our hope is that what we learned from our survey of stakeholders, though it was in a different economic context, will help inform how we leverage this unprecedented opportunity to restore and strengthen what was a vulnerable child care sector into a robust system of child care that is well aligned with the needs of working parents.

Abstract

Early child care plays a critical role for parental employment.¹ Yet formal care is largely unaffordable and inflexible to parents' needs, with variable—and at times concerning—quality.² In a mostly private market, it is extremely difficult for providers of early child care to offer care that is at the same time affordable, high quality, and available for parents' diverse needs.³ As a result, parents may struggle just to access care that they need to work, perhaps paying more than they can afford and/or not obtaining care that is of high quality; trade-offs like these may carry negative implications for their children, employment, and income.⁴

To better understand whether and how the “need for change” is perceived among child care stakeholders in New England, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston conducted an online exploratory survey between December 2018 and March 2019 with 664 individuals in New England, targeting those who identified as child care stakeholders: parents, child care providers, nonprofits, funders, employers, child care resource and referral agencies, licensors, government agencies, legislators, and subsidy administrators. This exploratory survey found that a large share of parent respondents who pay for care privately, and the vast majority of parents who pay with subsidies, felt uncomfortable leaving their children in the care they could afford. Across respondent groups, we found strong recognition that early child care workers tend to be underqualified and underpaid. While there was nearly unanimous support that change was needed, opinions on how the change should be implemented and who should be responsible for financing it varied.

Introduction

The foci of this issue brief are (1) to explore the extent to which the economic implications of inaccessible early child care for working parents—defined by affordability, availability, and quality of care—are salient with relevant stakeholders across New England, and (2) to assess the extent to which this salience helps explain system inaction in the field. Research demonstrates that working parents' inability to secure child care that meets their needs has financial consequences in terms of lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. Indeed, a recent study analyzing the cost of child care problems among parents of children under three years of age estimated that child care problems cost the U.S. economy \$57 billion annually, while the cost to employers alone from workers facing child care challenges is estimated at \$12.7 billion annually.⁵

News headlines highlight the high cost of formal care,⁶ but less common in public discourse are discussions of quality and limitations on accessibility.⁷ This may create a narrative that issues in early child care are only related to its high cost and are therefore only burdensome for lower-income families; however, that narrative is incomplete, if not inaccurate. In reality, the problems associated with early child care in the United States are multidimensional, surpass matters of cost alone to include issues in quality and availability, and present a major barrier to employment for a broad swath of parents, across income and family composition.⁸ However, there is a dearth of research that

examines the consequences to parents of having to accept questionable care arrangements in order to work.

Current policy interventions tend to focus on providing more access by increasing the number of open slots. Absent a multidimensional lens for how access is defined—as a function of quality, affordability, and availability (i.e., for whom and when parents need early care)—interventions yield only marginal changes. Indeed, the current subsidy system faces a major coverage gap: it serves only 15% of the eligible population annually, resulting in long wait lists in some states or extremely low eligibility thresholds in other states.⁹ In contrast, the narrative around quality deficiencies is much less known, with the exception of egregious and tragic incidents.¹⁰

To help gain a deeper understanding of the child care-related trade-offs parents make in order to work, we conducted a survey across New England of 664 stakeholders to better understand how those with an interest in child care, whether as users, providers, or other parts of the child care system, (1) perceive various problems and consequences associated with obtaining child care to work; (2) think about the viability of pathways for change; and (3) assess the division of responsibility for change implementation. The findings that follow are not statistically generalizable to the larger population. They are the product of emic field research—a research approach that centers findings on reflecting views from within a particular group of people (and focusing on uncovering ways in which they make meaning of their experiences); this research was centered on a self-selected group of care stakeholders.¹¹ They are, however, illustrative of the reasoning processes and proposed policy solutions that stakeholders in New England have regarding early child care. Given this emic approach, these findings should be read as the reasoning processes and views uncovered from engaging with stakeholders whose perceptions were the main focus of this exploratory research. (For full methodological details, please see the appendix.) This issue brief will inform both future research and policy/program agendas because of the insights on early child care challenges.

Three overarching research questions guided this survey: (1) How do different stakeholders perceive and/or experience the early child care system? (2) What, if anything, do different stakeholders believe are the employment and economic impacts of the early child care system? (3) What, if anything, do stakeholders envision could/should be changed in the early care system?

Findings

This section is organized in four parts. Part 1 presents respondent characteristics. Part 2 discusses perceptions of experiences in the early child care system. Part 3 offers perceptions of the economic and employment impacts of early child care. Finally, part 4 presents what respondents offered as their visions to better align child care with the needs of working parents.

Part 1: Respondent Characteristics

The largest majority of respondents lived/worked¹² in Connecticut (n=142), Massachusetts (n= 124), and Maine (n=82), followed by respondents from Vermont (n=60), New Hampshire (n=58), and Rhode Island (n=56).

Parents made up the largest proportion of respondents (40%), followed by providers (26%) and all other stakeholders (34%, of which 28% were nonprofit representatives).¹³ Among the providers, the majority represented child care centers (63%), while a smaller portion included family child care (30%).¹⁴ It is important to note that there is a modest overrepresentation of white female respondents in the data across all stakeholder groups. Among respondents, 86% self-identified as female and 77% identified as white, with 8% identifying as Hispanic/Latino and 5% as black/African American. In contrast, 52% of adults in New England identify as female, and 74% identify as white of non-Hispanic origin, 11% as Hispanic/Latino, and 6% as black/African American.¹⁵ Among the parents, there is also overrepresentation in education and employment demographics, as a large majority of parents in the sample were employed full time (81%), had a bachelor's degree or higher (86%), and paid privately for early child care (87%).

It is important to acknowledge that the overrepresentation of certain stakeholders means that there are important perspectives and experiences that are excluded; therefore, it cannot be assumed that the findings highlighted here are an accurate representation of the general population. The stakeholder voices reflected in this brief disproportionately leave out people who have historically lived realities of disproportionate burdens. Indeed, what is known from national research suggests that the findings highlighted in this report are likely significantly more perilous for low-income families and women of color. For example, albeit made up of mostly women, the early-education sector is the most diverse sector of the teaching workforce, with 40% of it made up of people of color.¹⁶ In contrast, of the people in our sample who identified their race/ethnicity, 10% of providers, 13% of parents, and 15% of all other respondents were people of color.¹⁷

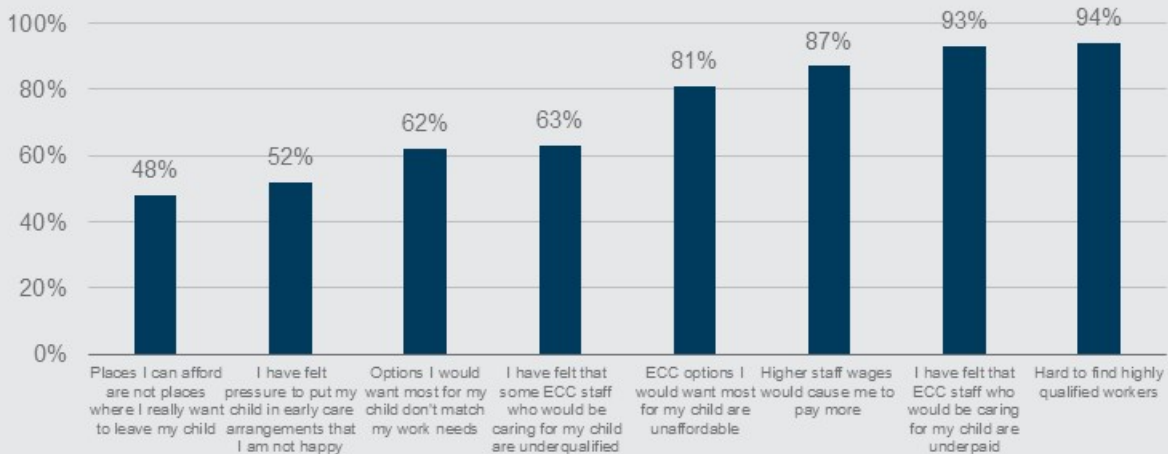
Based on many other well-documented racial/ethnic economic differences elsewhere, we infer that difficulties around finding truly accessible child care are likely more profound for low-income working parents of color, with deeper economic ramifications. It is likely the same that providers of color, as business owners or teaching staff, likely experience the most acute economic difficulties. It is also likely that, while the barriers to accessing early child care to work may be common across New England, how the problem plays out and the responsiveness of each state are unique. Given the important ways in which this exploratory study likely misses the accurate holistic assessment, we supplemented the study with two parallel efforts aimed at increasing reliability of information. First, we formed a Family Council of 13 socioeconomically diverse parents from the Greater Boston region. The members of the Family Council served as our “critical friends,” adding important group-specific anecdotes to add more context to our findings. Second, we presented these preliminary data findings across New England to understand how child care shows up as an economic/employment issue

in states and to lift up examples of promising practices. Insights of the Family Council and over 265 child care stakeholders who joined us in data presentations are reflected throughout the rest of this brief for additional anecdotal context.

Part 2: Perceptions of Experiences and Related Concerns

Parents are aware of the tension between the need for quality workers and what that quality would cost. Issues around quality of early care were particularly salient for parents. As seen in Figure 1, high percentages of parents agreed¹⁸ with statements related to the lack of quality workforce to care for their children (94%), the low wages that child care workers earn (93%), and the costs that might be passed on to parents if quality were increased (87%). Perhaps the most striking insight is that many parents, regardless of the ways in which they pay for child care, did not feel good about utilizing the child care options that were available to them. A majority of parents (62%) agreed that the child care option they wanted for their child did not match their work needs. Further, 52% of parents indicated feeling pressure to put their child in subpar care, and 48% agreed that the places they can afford are not those where they really want to leave their children.

Figure 1 | Parents' Perception of What is Happening



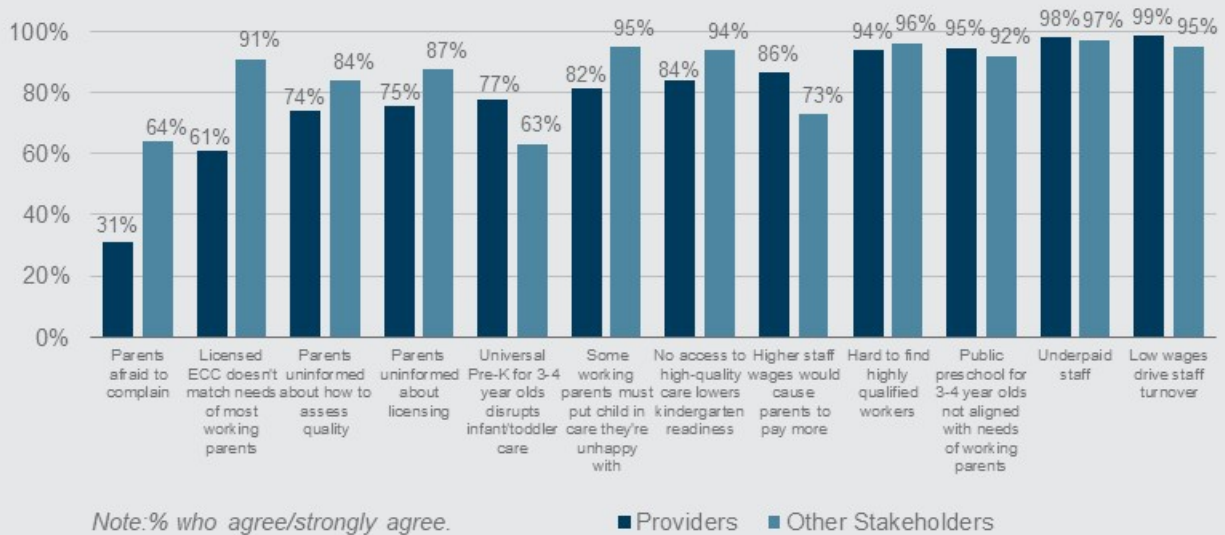
Note: % who agree/strongly agree.

Consider the following as an emblematic illustration of how quality, affordability, and availability are key features of truly accessible early child care: seven out of 10 children under age six in Vermont have all available parents in the labor force and are likely to need some type of child care,¹⁹ and of those infants who are likely to need care, only 22% have access to high-quality programs.²⁰ None of the care is considered affordable.²¹

An important inductively derived²² finding is that parents frequently have to sacrifice quality of care for affordability in order to be able to go to work and that even with these trade-offs, the cost of child care remains a significant burden to families. It is important to remember that our stakeholder survey over represents people who pay privately for early care. Given that so many people paying privately had significant experiences around having to put their children in subpar care in order to work, it is likely that low-income families, including families who receive public assistance, might have even more precarious experiences that might not have been adequately captured in this survey.

Similar to parents, as Figure 2 shows, worries among providers and other stakeholders about the early child care workforce were highly salient. In particular, the highest percentage of agreement among both providers (99%) and other stakeholders (95%) was that low wages drive staff turnover, followed by an agreement that staff is underpaid (98% providers; 97% all other stakeholders). Like the parents surveyed, 86% of providers and 73% of all other stakeholders shared concern that higher wages for teachers would be passed on to parents.

Figure 2 | Providers and Other Stakeholders' Perceptions of Problems with Early Child Care (ECC)



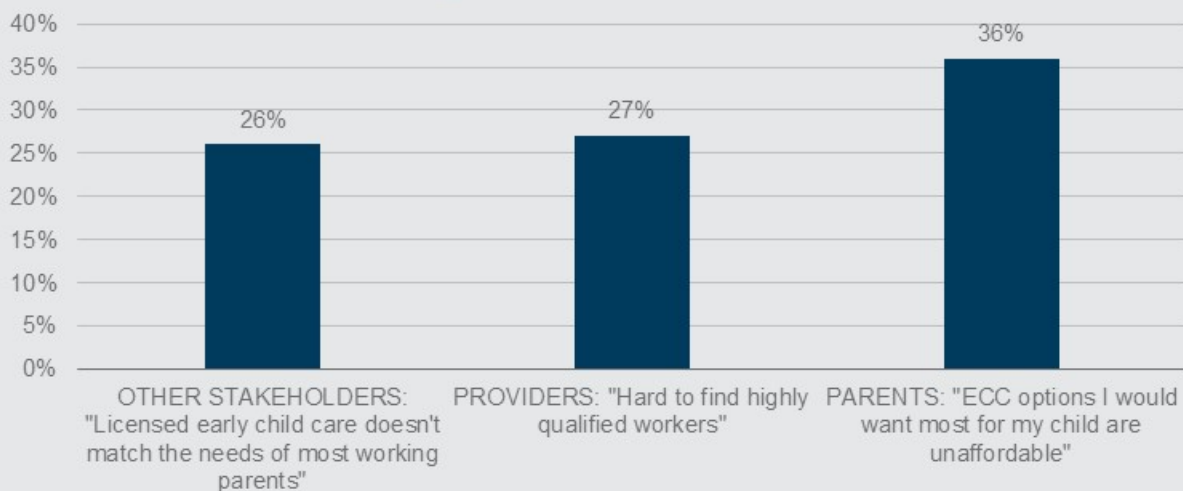
The state-specific anecdotes added important context to the early child care workforce issue. In Maine, for example, there has been a significant drop among all family child care providers—almost 40% between 2009 and 2019.²³ This decline held even among the family providers who receive Child Care and Development Fund support. In 2006, there were 1,850 family care providers participating in the family system; in 2018, the number decreased to 413 providers.²⁴ Adding more early-care slots,

however, does not address the issue: in Maine, there are currently open slots but no teachers to fill classrooms. Part of the explanation for the closure of family centers is that people opening those centers usually do so while their own children are in need of care; with their kids aging out, the business model is not sustainable, and many decide to close their doors.²⁵

The research uncovered a perception mismatch relating to the early-care experiences and needs of working parents. Although the vast majority of providers and other stakeholders (95% and 92%, respectively) agree that public preschool for three- and four-year-olds is not aligned with the needs of working parents, possibly because of the limited days or hours commonly associated with preschool, 61% of the providers and 91% of all other stakeholders agreed that licensed early child care does not meet the needs of working parents. Further, only a small share of providers (31%), compared with other nonparent stakeholders (64%), agreed that parents are too afraid to complain about the quality of care that their child is receiving.

Anticipating the likelihood that many statements might get high rates of agreement, we asked participants to rank the set of statements by priority of concern. As seen in Figure 3, this analysis uncovered divergence among the areas of highest concern to each subgroup.

Figure 3 | Issues of Biggest Concern Expressed by Stakeholder Groups



Despite a majority of parents experiencing issues related to lack of quality—indicated, for example, by 94% agreeing that highly qualified teachers are hard to find and 52% feeling pressured to leave children in care they were not happy with (Fig. 1)—the top concern for parents was that the options they would want most for their children are unaffordable. The parents demonstrated a strong recognition of the constraints that

child care providers have, including difficulties finding and keeping qualified, appropriately compensated workers. The top concern for providers related to difficulty finding and retaining a qualified workforce. On the other hand, the top concern for nonparent stakeholders was that licensed care did not match the needs of most working parents. While 84% of providers and 94% of other stakeholders agreed that without high-quality early child care, children are less ready for kindergarten (Fig. 2), the issue was somewhat lower on the ranked list of top concerning issues.²⁶

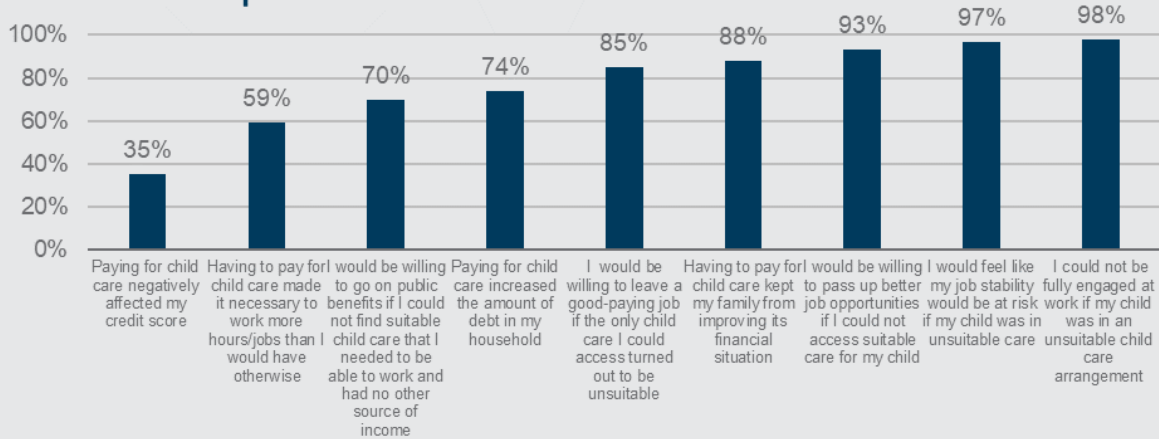
Our approach to centering stakeholders’ own perceptions and experiences in this research and the convenience sample lift up a potentially important tension relevant for policymakers across New England: tension between the early child care needs of working parents and trade-offs that they and providers make in today’s system. For the parents, part of the trade-off happens when they have to accept lower-cost but lower-quality care in order to work. For the providers, part of the trade-off is closing classrooms because they cannot find workers, yet not being able to attract workers by offering higher wages without transferring the cost burden to the parents. This tension merits further research with representative survey data in order to understand its depth and ramifications. It also calls for research around the economic effects and financial stability and effects on children.

The next part of the brief examines perceptions of consequences related to the issues surfaced here.

Part 3: Perceptions of Consequences and Related Concerns

As seen in Figure 4, parents responding to the survey demonstrated high levels of agreement when assessing the possible consequences of not having child care arrangements that meet their work needs.

Figure 4 | Parents’ Perceptions of Possible Consequences



Note: % who agree/strongly agree.

The highest percentage of parental agreement (98%) was around the statement that they could not be fully engaged at work if their child was in a subpar child care arrangement, and 97% of parents agreed that their job stability would be at risk if their child was in such an arrangement. In other words, unsuitable early child care arrangements negatively affect how, not just whether, parents work. To that, 93% of all parents said they would be willing to forego better job opportunities and 85% would be willing to leave a well-paying job if they could not find suitable child care arrangements; we did not ask how many might have made such a choice. In addition, the majority of parents (59%), said that they had to work more or take on an additional job because of the high cost of early child care. This was attenuated among subsidy recipients. Seventy percent of parents also indicated that they were willing to access public benefits if they could not find suitable care. Nearly all parents agreed that inadequate child care would prevent them from being fully engaged at work, having job stability, and accessing career advancements.

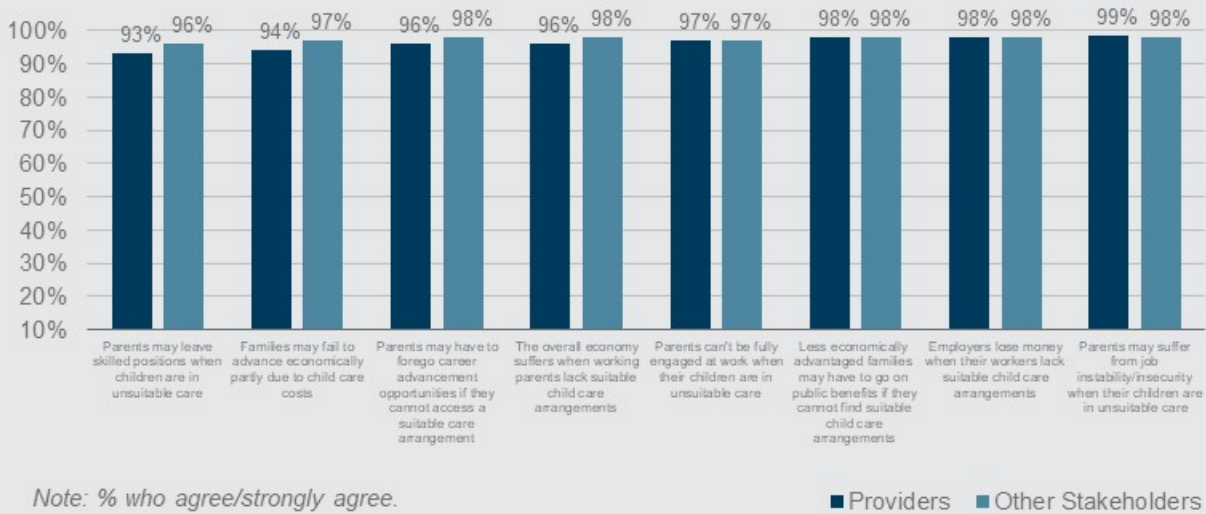
Lastly, a third of all parents in the sample agreed that paying for child care negatively affected their credit score. This was an important trend that merited further investigation though conversations with our Family Council and the state-specific events because, as already noted, our sample was skewed toward private-paying parents, which could signal that lower-income people faced particular financial burdens that were not accurately captured. Additionally, because other research reveals large racial disparities in credit score and debt,²⁷ we wanted to triangulate our findings around this issue to understand how it might play out in terms of having to pay for child care.

When we presented these findings to the members of our Family Council for comments, we got resounding feedback that racking up credit debt in order to pay for child care was an enormous problem that seemed underemphasized in the findings. Indeed, one of our members, a married mother of two children who holds two jobs in order to pay for child care expenses, said that her family's credit-card debt is excessive and that child care was the largest share of the debt. As she shared her experience, other members nodded, noting that debt is a necessary mechanism for meeting early child care needs and that, for many, worrying about a negative credit score is a luxury rather than a priority.

What we are starting to see are indications that the economic ramifications to parents not being able to secure early child care needs in order to work are potentially huge—shown in the short term through credit-card debt or patterns of work, and in the long term through foregoing employment opportunities, negative credit scores, and impeded economic mobility.

Unlike providers' and other stakeholders' perceptions of the problem, where there were some larger deviations in agreement, when these participants were asked about potential consequences, every statement received similar percentages of agreement (93% or higher), as seen in Figure 5.

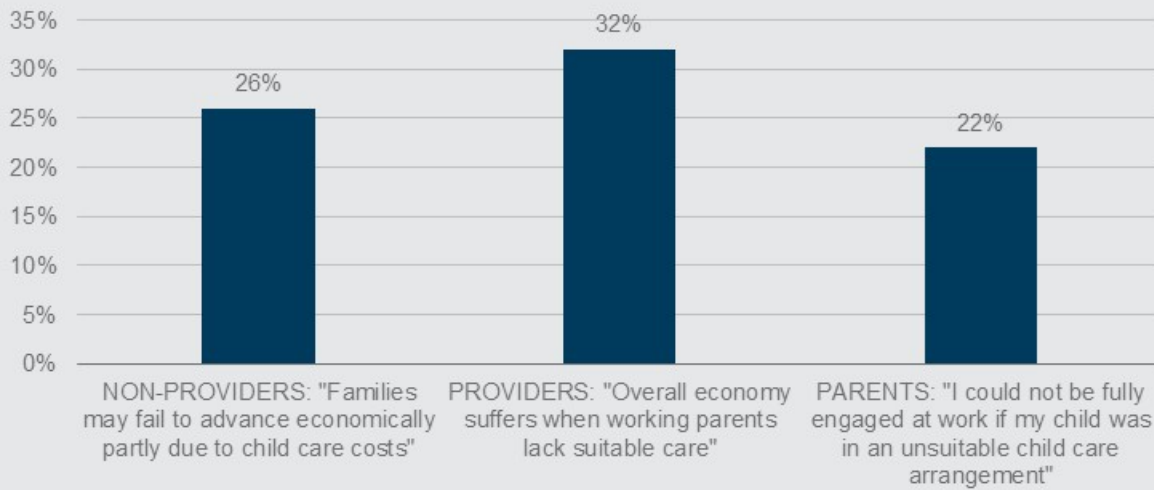
Figure 5 | Providers and Other Stakeholder Perceptions of Possible Consequences



The highest agreement (99% of all providers and 98% of other stakeholders) was seen in the statement related to the consequence of parents suffering from job instability when their children are in unsuitable care. It is worth noting that this precise concern was the second-highest agreed on among the parent sample, with 97% agreeing. With nearly the same percentage of agreement was the concern that working parents' child care issues show up as economic issues, with 98% of both providers and other stakeholders agreeing that employers lose money when their workers lack suitable child care.

Figure 6 shows that, when asked to rank issues of most concern, the largest portion of respondents in each group were most concerned about issues related to the economic ramifications for parents of unsuitable early child care. The inability to fully engage at work because of unsuitable child care was the highest-ranked statement among parents; among providers, it was the negative impact on the economy when parents lack suitable care; and among other stakeholders, it was the negative impact of high child care costs on the economic advancement of families.

Figure 6 | Consequence of Biggest Concern Expressed by Stakeholder Groups



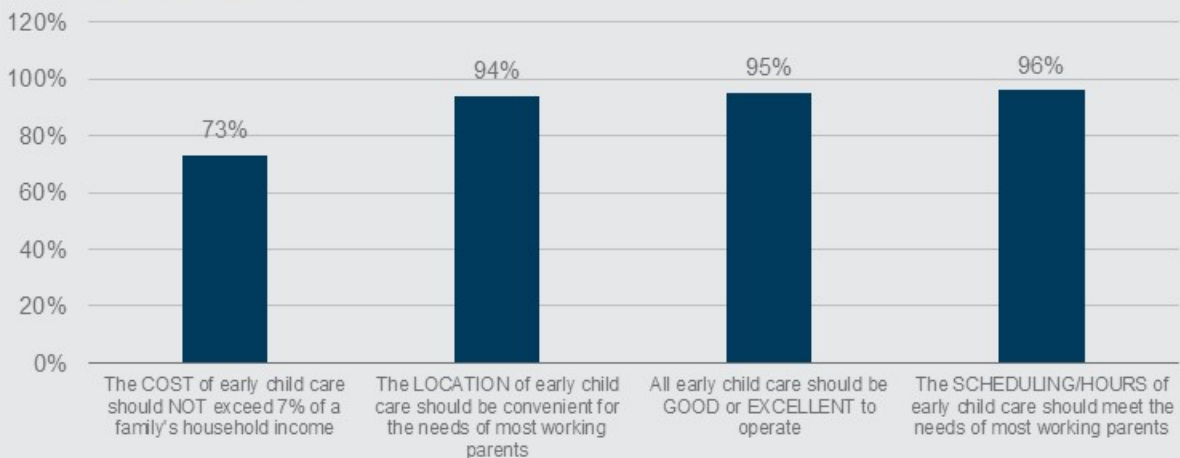
For further nuance of how child care shows up as an economic issue, consider these observations, from our conversations in New Hampshire: “New Hampshire and New England are both facing the tightest labor market in decades. It’s difficult to identify and hire the kind of talented employees that businesses need to function and grow. And for too many businesses, it’s also becoming difficult to retain good employees when certain basic human needs aren’t addressed by the company. One of those needs is child care—the need on the part of employees, where both husband and wife work, to find quality and affordable child care. This is especially true for low- and middle-income families where one-third of their income often goes to child care.”²⁸

Indeed, according to research, one in five parents in New Hampshire reported quitting a job, school, or training in the past year because of issues with child care.²⁹ Barbara Couch, president of Hypertherm’s HOPE Foundation, who participated in the New Hampshire conversation, shared an emblematic story from an employer’s perspective of the child care “pain” she sees felt by her employees. Her “rising star” employee on the manufacturing floor with a promising path for advancement suddenly had her child’s center close because of lack of funding. She had no other options and saw that everything changed for her overnight. The company was losing a very valuable employee and tried its best to help her make other arrangements. While Barbara said this was a story with a happy ending, she noted that she frequently hears similar stories told by other employers with unhappy endings.³⁰

Part 4: Possible Solutions and Pathways for Support

Most of the stakeholders from the survey indicated broad and strong support for changing the system along the availability and quality dimensions, as shown in Figure 7. Most (96%) agreed that the scheduling and hours of early child care should meet the needs of most working parents. Further, 95% agreed that all early child care should be good or excellent in order to operate. Finally, 94% agreed that the location of early child care should be convenient for the needs of the working parents.

Figure 7 | Views of All Stakeholders on Quality, Affordability, and Availability Standards for Early Child Care



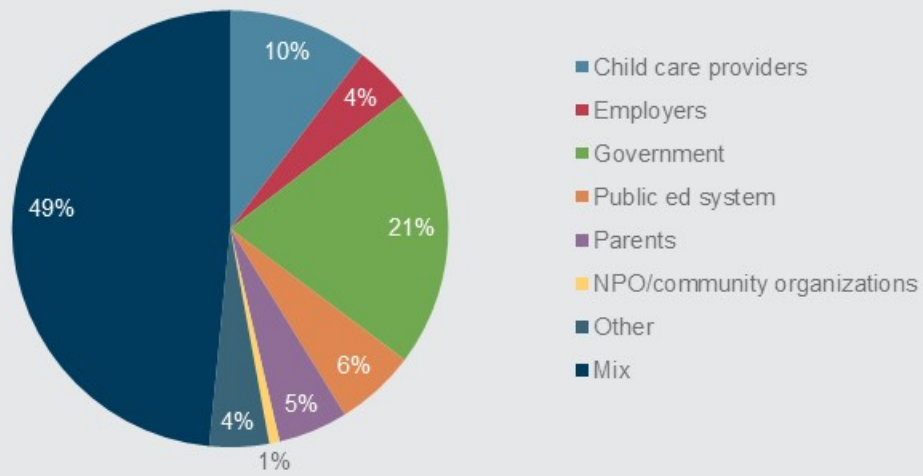
Note: % who agree/strongly agree.

Stakeholders who were a part of this exploratory survey seem to agree that there is a real need for systemic improvement to the early child care system. However, the survey surfaced a diversity of opinions related to the affordability dimension and the responsibility for implementing changes. Indeed, 73% of all respondents agreed that the cost of child care should not exceed 7% of a family's household income—the affordability threshold currently espoused by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services³¹—while nearly 20% indicated that they did not know. Whether this is because an affordability threshold does not resonate well or is difficult to interpret, or if respondents simply were not sure, is unclear.

Unlike the affordability cap, there were more consistent opinions on the main mechanism for providing change. In two different parts of the survey—a quantitative question and an open-ended question—the respondents had a chance to reflect on who they thought should bear primary responsibility for providing quality, affordable, and available child care. Responses to the quantitative question, seen in Figure 8, shows that the near majority of the sample (49%) indicated that responsibility should lie with a mix³²

of public and private partnerships and 21% indicated that government should bear the sole responsibility.

Figure 8 | Perception of Who Should Be Responsible for Providing Quality, Affordable, and Available Early Child Care



Analysis of the open-ended question, worded as “Please describe your vision for paying for child care,” allowed us to more deeply explore respondents’ positions on the need for change. Two small methodological notes to keep in mind: (1) the question assumes in its wording that change is needed, though the respondents were at liberty to write in whatever their opinions might have been (including the possibility that no change is needed), and the analysis includes them all; (2) the coding of the open response allowed for multiple themes, so the same respondent could fall into more than one category.

The most frequent theme among the responses (n=219) related to why change to the early child care system was needed. In particular, the respondents discussed how increases in the quality of early child care would yield health and safety benefits and long-term positive effects on child development. The most dominant explanation for the need for change involved long-term benefits to society, including facilitating economic mobility of families who rely on child care in order to be able to work. Lauren,³³ a parent in Massachusetts/New Hampshire with a bachelor’s degree, who is employed full time and pays for care privately, said:

Employers should contribute to child care in some form of flexibility or subsidy (preferably flexibility so that I can have time with my kids and work after they go to sleep). I am a more organized and dedicated employee knowing that my family depends on my job for healthcare and income. I am fortunate that my supervisor

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is also a mother and values this, but I cannot change jobs to a close location to home because I have found no other employer with this same understanding.

The second most frequent theme we identified (n=197) related to provider-based interventions/supports. The vast majority of respondents who discussed this theme mentioned increases in teacher pay, providing professional-development opportunities, respecting the profession in more meaningful ways in general, and increasing benefits to staff. Sam, a provider in Maine, said:

This is a field that helps form who a person is and will become. It is crucial that we start recognizing the importance of early, quality care, and that those providing this care are paid accordingly. It is the most important job as far as I am concerned. We are shaping the future.

The third most frequent theme (n=126) related to the visions of specific policy and program changes that could be made in order to facilitate an increase in the quality, availability, and affordability of early child care. Interventions vis-à-vis levying taxes was mentioned by nearly half of the stakeholders who discussed such specifics. Specific tax ideas mentioned through the responses included property tax, the millionaire's tax, corporate tax, the penny tax, a tax break to deduct child care expenses, and a marijuana tax. There, interesting insight surfaced related to universal pre-K in that those who discussed it were split in terms of its potential benefits. The second largest subtheme of the specific policies related to universal pre-K. Specifically, as described by Alex, a provider in Maine:

Public pre-K is not the solution. It has a place, but many seem to forget public pre-K is not 10 hours a day, five days a week, and year-round. There needs to be care available outside the school hours.

And Patricia, an “other stakeholder” in Connecticut, said:

States should consider funding ECC similar to how some are funding paid family leave. Those that focus on public pre-K are destabilizing the infant/toddler market.

Additional policy ideas included offering more direct ways of giving subsidies/vouchers to families, reducing government salaries, suspended accounts with cost and income caps, 30-year bonds, expansions to paid medical leave, and a more general social insurance model akin to Medicaid.

The fourth most frequent theme (n=91) related to the impact of early child care changes on parents—in particular, envisioning an income-based affordability system that has a sliding scale. Interestingly, in contrast to the responses that seemed to acknowledge the enormity of the child care cost on many parents, many respondents to this question noted that parents should be primarily responsible for weathering the costs, while mentioning the importance of a work ethic to overcome obstacles. In addition, responses included an activity-based expansion of parents' eligibility for receiving assistance with child care, including those in recovery. Clarisse, an “other stakeholder” from Maine, said:

Depending on income level, parents should be responsible. However, low-income families should have access to a sliding scale/co-pay system based upon where they fall compared to an average income. Government programs should cover cost of care for women or men in college, job training, or recovery.

The fifth most frequent theme (n=100), related to provider-based intervention, was a slightly more general theme focused on improvements to the early child care system. A large majority of the respondents who shared ideas for general improvements articulated preferences for a more agile system better able to meet the unique needs of families. In particular, respondents mentioned expanding centers' hours of operation, providing a mix of care options to meet families' needs, and providing a tailored, culturally sensitive curriculum. Additionally, respondents wrote about issues related to increasing availability by helping to build infrastructure and increasing the number of centers. Kim, a parent in Massachusetts with a graduate/professional degree who is employed full time and pays privately for care, said:

Employees would be more motivated if they did not have to worry about the quality and expense of child care. The system is antiquated and based on a mother staying home and taking care of a child. Most families, they have both parents [and] consist of both parents working, and some working multiple jobs. But what about the single parents that the system doesn't even consider?

The least frequent theme (n=79) related to articulating employers' role in fixing early child care. Of those, most wrote about ways to tie employment to affordable and available care. The specific ideas mentioned included employer contributions to affordable care and reduction in work hours to accommodate parents who need child care. A much smaller portion of the responses discussed experiences of a business that provides early care—in particular, voicing concern for the \$15 minimum-wage increases and the general constraints of the early child care business model. Kim, a parent in Massachusetts with a graduate/professional degree who is employed full time and pays privately for care, said:

Child care should be set up similar to insurance or retirement, and companies should contribute. We must have health insurance because it's mandatory, yet we do not have the same mandate for child care. If you're employed, the employer should provide subsidized child care in order to make it affordable, especially if there is no child care facility on the premises. Employees who have children could enroll in child care benefits and pay a premium (regardless of the number of days that the daycare will be used). If all parents are paying a premium, we could keep child care prices lower because everyone would be paying their share. It's a great business model. If everyone contributes, we would accomplish more in the end because everyone is paying into the system. Everyone would be defined as the employer, the state (if you work for a state agency), and the employee. The percentage that the employer adds could be based on a formula that ties in the employee's salary, number of children, and possibly the years of service.

And a provider in Connecticut said:

I have to pay above minimum wage. I also have families enrolled that pay over \$25,000 for two children in my center. I would not be able to pay that cost on my salary working here ... I do not believe in having a minimum-wage increase to \$15 per hour for child care workers unless the state or [federal government] will assist in paying child care workers' salary. Paying that amount would shut us down because the cost to parents would be too great. I do agree child care workers deserve more than minimum wage, especially those with ECE credits or degrees, or several years' experience.

Discussion

One of the main theses of our child care work is that true access to child care is a function of affordability, quality, and availability of care from a working parents' perspective. The goal of this exploratory study was to try to assess the extent to which this narrative might be salient with child care stakeholders across New England as a way to explain the lack of systemic action toward improving early child care. The study provided insight into the perceptions and experiences of a cross-section of parents and professionals identified as child care stakeholders regarding early child care and the possible consequences of unsuitable care. It also provided a deeper examination of how a subset of this cross-section of stakeholders think change should occur. Our desire to better understand how stakeholders perceive and, in the case of parents, experience child care and child care problems as well as any resultant consequences was based on a set of assumptions, which we discuss in the context of the findings.

Going into this study, we assumed that the lack of systemic action in early child care improvements could be explained, in important part, by a one-dimensional definition of the problem. For example, we expected that we might see a tendency for early child care to be defined through the lens of childhood outcomes only and without consideration for economic ramifications resulting from parents' inability to work to the best of their ability due to child care constraints. We also expected that stakeholders viewed accessible child care only in terms of affordability, without considerations of quality and availability (i.e., for whom and when parents need it).

Contrary to our assumptions, our findings suggest that the economic consequences to working parents are salient among the stakeholders who participated in our survey, as are the concerning consequences for labor-force attachment and employment. Most of the parent respondents from the survey paid for child care privately, had high levels of education, and had full-time jobs. Yet even they reporting being forced to make trade-offs between making it to work and the potential well-being of their children because of the care arrangements they had to accept. Perhaps because of our sampling technique, this study skewed toward higher-educated parents who paid privately for child care, which could be part of the reason why the high cost of care was as poignant as it was among parents. Thus, this brief may not represent broader views among the much more diverse population of New England parents. It could, however, also be the case that the findings from this study are indicative of a larger problem: prevailing inability to secure

the type of child care arrangements that are constraining many from participating in the labor market to the full extent to which they are able and willing to participate. Even with a sample that could be thought of as more economically stable, this survey revealed problematic experiences with the parents' ability to find the type of care that meets their affordability, availability, and quality standards. The survey responses also seem to indicate that a parent-centered approach to evaluating child care needs resonates with respondents. However, analysis of responses to an open-ended question about what should be done to fix the child care system suggests that more work needs to be done on strengthening the narrative to make sure that policies and programs evaluate and, at the very least, consider their potential impact on parents' ability to work. In addition, most likely because there were only three employers who took this survey, the downstream effects on employers was not assessed; however, barriers to employment resonated throughout the survey through issues like concern for the economy, inability to hire qualified workers, and preference for suitable care over opportunities for economic advancement if forced to choose.

The variety of visions for affordability standards that respondents put forward seem to indicate that the issue of child care may be influenced by values around what the responsibility of a parent ought to be in a society—for example, the opinion that parents alone should be responsible for paying for early child care for their children. While there seems to be general support for improving early care—especially for parents to work—what remains unclear is what the appropriate appetite for a particular policy change might be. The insights generated through this survey nonetheless provided important insight to help us understand positions and challenges for ensuring that child care becomes a key part of workforce infrastructure.

In this report, we sought to identify issues and policy solutions that stakeholders themselves name and of which they understand the extent. Admittedly, the survey overrepresented parents and providers and really cannot assess the extent to which this problem definition is salient with policymakers and businesses—two key stakeholders in the early child care space. Nonetheless, the widespread acknowledgement of the problem and possible employment consequences for parents, as well as the underlying causes of these challenges, made us confront the fact that there is no easy explanation for the pattern of inaction and that information alone might be insufficient to motivate needed change. Future research that focuses on the lived experiences of working parents could provide a more nuanced understanding of the degree to which parents compromise on aspects of early child care in order to work. This survey helped us better understand and engage in state-level conversations about this problem. Any future research will be much enhanced by the inductively derived findings presented in this issue brief.

Appendix: Methodology

This exploratory study used quantitative methods to capture perceptions and opinions from a cross-section of stakeholders in New England at a single point in time.

Sample

Using a snowball sampling technique, the Boston Fed disseminated the online survey to stakeholders across New England, yielding a total of 664 responses. Of this total, 512 respondents fully completed the survey; the rest provided partial responses that we chose to retain in our analysis. To reach stakeholders with a possible interest in early child care, we leveraged our network of community-development practitioners, administrators, and researchers as well as our institution’s Family Council, comprised of 13 parents from the Greater Boston area who engage with us on child care topics. We made several requests of recipients of the survey for distribution: (1) complete the survey, if appropriate; (2) share with a colleague, client, or another parent; (3) help expand our sample by sharing the survey with an extended network as appropriate; and, upon monitoring responses, (4) help us increase responses from a subset of intended stakeholders—members of the business community. To help with recruitment, we created versions of the survey for parents and nonparents and made it available in English and Spanish.

The survey was deployed for approximately four months, until a minimum of 50 responses per state was reached, so that the initial patterns and responses could allow for baseline state comparison. Additionally, 70 percent of the 512 respondents who fully completed the survey offered detailed responses to an open-ended question asking about their vision of how to pay for child care that they think would best support working parents.

We sought to have even representation across the following key categories of respondents in the sampling frame from each state: parents, child care providers, and “other” stakeholders (businesses, policymakers, and nonprofit representatives). The stakeholders who had opinions and perspectives regarding licensed early child care as a support for working parents with children under the age of five (non-school age) were asked to proceed with taking the survey. We also sought a racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample. However, the nature of our sampling strategy resulted in our survey being skewed toward over representing white, higher-educated individuals, most of whom are employed and pay out of pocket for early child care—reflecting the nature of the bias likely introduced by the sampling.

While the survey cannot be generalized to the larger population because it was not representative, it centers on exploring perceptions and experiences around three dimensions of child care—affordability, availability, and quality—amid a public discourse that has typically been dominated by a focus on affordability only. In doing so, it re-centers the research agenda on the topic. Further, we think that this research is an important first step in truly examining this three-dimensional issue from the point of view of stakeholders who can redefine the problem of early child care systems by helping to make the case that early child care is an economic and employment issue—one that impacts not just *if* but *how* families work, and one that affects most working parents, not just those on the lower part of the income distribution.

Instrument Design

We created an original survey instrument using an iterative process and relying on outside experts to be critical advisors in the survey design. The research team conducted an extensive literature review to find if there were any field-tested survey instruments that could be adjusted and replicated in our study, but none of them matched the needs of the survey (which was to uncover problems that stakeholders from New England defined, allowing for exploration of affordability, availability, and quality aspects of early child care).

The iterative design of this research was an advantage because it allowed for ongoing customization to leverage insights from New England stakeholders. As we pilot tested the instrument in the field, we revised it to reflect the feedback we received. We convened representatives with professional expertise in the child care field (researchers, advocates, and licensors) for a three-hour design session in June 2018, during which the experts offered feedback on question wording and flow as well as analytical techniques. We also workshopped the survey with our 13-member Family Council to make sure the survey captured both the breadth and depth of experiences in order to help increase validity parameters. After the two in-depth design meetings, the survey was revised and piloted, which led to the design of the final survey instrument.

There were two survey versions—one for parents only and another for all other respondents. These two groups had different sets of problem and consequence questions because parents could speak to their experiences with early child care while nonparents could be asked about their perceptions from a professional standpoint. Anticipating that there might be a respondent who was both a parent and another category of stakeholder, we were careful in our recruitment to ask people to select their primary role and to provide them the appropriate survey. In subsequent recruitment efforts, we were also intentional in asking our partners to encourage specific groups to take the survey. (For example, we told our Family Council that we sought to include parent representation, which led to them sharing the parent questionnaire to their individual networks). Demographics and place of residence and work were captured for all respondents. The residence/work question allowed people to check all that applied, enabling respondents to indicate that they lived and worked in different places. Seventeen of the 504 people who answered the place of residence/work question listed two locations; in the breakdown that lists respondents by state, those people are captured in each of the listed states and are thus not mutually exclusive. Experience with child care, how they paid for care, employment status, and education obtained were only asked of parents.

Analysis

This survey centered on stakeholder voices and was informed by participatory review sessions that we had with experts in the field and our Family Council. One set of questions asked respondents to state their level of agreement/disagreement with a set of statements relating to the perceived/experienced problems and their consequences. Then, informed by the instrument review session that we had, the second set of

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questions asked the respondents to rank the issues. The final question asked everyone an open-ended question: “Please describe your vision for paying for child care.” It yielded 357 lengthy responses, which were analyzed using qualitative techniques.

This issue brief also contains supplementary information obtained from the state-specific child care conversation we organized and from the members of our Family Council. Permission was granted from everyone whose insight we include throughout.

Most of findings were examined using descriptive statistics, measures of frequency using STATA. Most responses were analyzed by three main groups of respondents: parents, providers, and other nonprovider stakeholders. (See findings section for sample characteristics.) The last question, which yielded 357 text responses, was analyzed utilizing a code sheet that was iteratively created from the themes that emerged by two coders who worked independently and then compared their draft analysis instruments in order to finalize the code sheet. A single coder conducted the analysis using that code sheet, so there is no intercoder reliability rate available. On occasions when the primary coder had uncertainties about how to code something (approximately 5% of all cases), they sought advice from the other researchers involved with the project, resulting in clear agreement on how to code in each of those instances.³⁴

Limitations

This was an exploratory study and the results, especially in terms of percentage breakdowns, cannot be generalizable to the greater population. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that most of the findings here reflect stakeholders’ stated preferences, and we do not have a way to assess their revealed preferences. However, while we cannot say if statistical patterns hold, we feel confident about the importance of indicatively uncovered patterns/issues/solutions that actual early child care stakeholders identified as vital. Further, especially with the addition of the open-code questions, we think that the findings here at least represent solutions that must be included in consideration if one was to fully understand how issues of early child care play out in New England.

Finally, although we did not uncover an issue during or after the iterative design sessions, we wish to recognize that we did not word agreement items in neutral terms and that, at times, we asked statements that were worded in negative ways, which leaves the possibility that some of the questions might have sounded leading. Our thought in deciding wording was that more neutrally worded questions would not have lent themselves to the follow-up ranking approach, and we wanted to test statements in the colloquial way in which we (and likely all others) were used to hearing them. Nonetheless, it merits recognizing that there is a chance that the responses could have been overly concerning because of a lack of diverse ways of asking agreement. However, the supplemental accounts that we gleaned from our state-specific conversations and discussions with our Family Council make us feel confident that the effect of such wording was insignificant, if it occurred at all.

Importance/Contribution of this Work

The emic approach employed in this research is the main contribution of this work to the field. In centering this work directly on stakeholder respondents across all six New England states, we produced an important baseline for policy solutions and responsibilities that stakeholders desire. A representative population is ideal, yet this work is a valuable improvement to uncover the importance of previously underdiscussed issues (e.g., interaction of quality, availability, and affordability of early care and how child care shows up as an economic/employment issue for working parents). As such, it serves to position any future research to be more robust as we effectively identify vital categories and issues that are underrepresented currently in the main discourse on early child care, which is dominated by affordability, without a clear focus on the child care needs that working parents have in order to work.

About the Authors



Marija Bingulac

Marija is a senior community development analyst in the Regional & Community Outreach Department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston working on efforts to create conditions to increase household economic security and equity, including reducing the racial wealth divide and ensuring early child care is an accessible part of the work infrastructure for every parent who needs it to work. For the decade before she joined the Bank in 2017, Marija worked at the nexus of applied research and community engagement on issues of poverty alleviation, housing stability and homelessness, economic mobility, and discrimination, with a focus on low/moderate-income and historically marginalized communities—both domestically and internationally. She earned her PhD from the McCormack Graduate School of Global and Policy Studies at UMass Boston, where her dissertation focused on labor market discrimination of Roma people in Serbia.

marija.bingulac@bos.frb.org



Sarah Savage

Sarah Savage is a senior policy analyst & advisor in the Regional & Community Outreach Department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. She is an applied researcher on topics that impact low- and moderate-income residents of New England. Savage holds a PhD in

sociology from the University of New Hampshire and a BS in marketing from Babson College.

sarah.savage@bos.frb.org



Julia Wilson

Julia is currently a graduate student at the University of Chicago School of Social Work and Social Welfare. As a graduate student, she worked at the School of Public Policy's Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab as a research assistant for two projects, both focused on studying the science of parent decision-making. She also completed two clinical field placements, one working with women experiencing homelessness, and the other with survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence. Before starting her second year of her master's program, Julia interned at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston as part of the Early Child Care for Working Parents team. Prior to enrollment in graduate school, Julia received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Connecticut.

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- ¹¹ Maxwell, J.A. (2010). Using numbers in qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(6): 475-482.
- ¹² Total of 504 unique respondents, 18 of whom indicated living/working in more than one location.
- ¹³ Other stakeholder respondents included advocates, community groups, educators in the public-education sector, employers, funders, government agencies, and legislators.
- ¹⁴ Seven percent of those who self-identified as child care providers did not specify the type of provider.
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³¹ For more on affordability recommendation, see <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-09-30/pdf/2016-22986.pdf>.

³² If respondents listed more than one specific type of partnership, they were coded as “mix.”

³³ Names attached to quotes from the stakeholder analysis have been changed to protect respondent’s privacy and confidentiality.

³⁴ For more on qualitative analysis techniques and processes that the authors followed, see Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., Huberman, M. A., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*.