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Access to Child Care: Does it Vary by Neighborhood Type?

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Issue

Finding safe and high-quality child care is critical for working parents, especially single mothers and low-wage workers of color. Despite rising demand for such care, research suggests that formal child care in the United States is in dangerously short supply — a situation that worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While past studies have shown that the supply of formal care across neighborhoods varies by race/ethnicity and income, they often overlook the importance of geography and neighborhood type. In this study, we use California data to test whether — all else equal — child care access (i.e., child care capacity relative to the number of children under 5 in an area) is lower in outlying suburban neighborhoods with newer and less developed social infrastructure than urban neighborhoods.

Notably, while the need for child care has increased in suburbs across California, funding and support from local governments has not. This study seeks to better understand and quantify geographic gaps in service, providing key recommendations for future funding allocations and government actions.

Key Research Findings

As predicted, **child care access is lower in newly developed suburban areas compared to most other**

neighborhood types (Figure 1). Child care access varies across neighborhood types, even when controlling for socioeconomic and employment characteristics. Such findings suggest potential spatial barriers to child care provision and use.

In California, child care access is higher in higher-income neighborhoods than lower-income neighborhoods. Child care access also tends to be positively associated with working from home and percent non-Hispanic white.

Similar to prior research, **the percent Latinx of a neighborhood is associated with lower child care access.** In contrast, neighborhoods with a high percent of Asian residents tend to have greater access to child care.

Neighborhoods in employment clusters are associated with greater child care access than those outside of employment centers. Child care supply in these neighborhoods appears to benefit from the demand of both residents and workers.

One-time federal and state allocations for child care fall short of need. Currently, the Child Care & Development Fund (CCDF) is the primary source of federal funding for subsidized child care. During the pandemic, several bills allocated additional funding for child care, but funding streams still are not enough to meet rising demand.

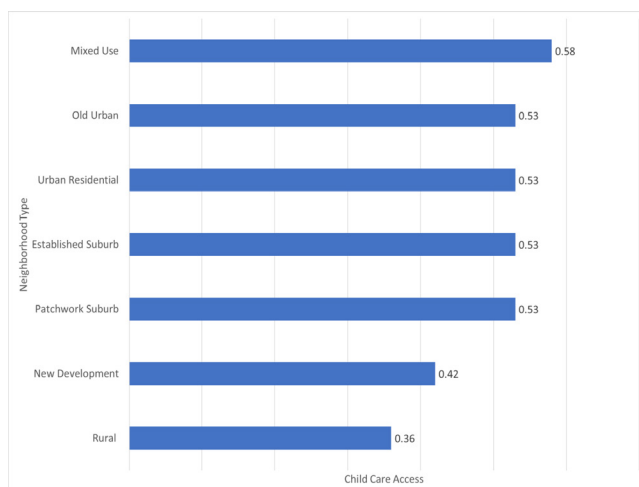


Table 1: Child care access by neighborhood type in California

Recommendations

The supply- and demand-side issues associated with access to child care suggest the importance of targeting policies to support child care centers and low-income families, particularly in outlying neighborhoods.

Governments must actively work to incentivize the expansion of child care facilities in new suburbs, neighborhoods that currently house a quarter of all young children in California.

To address geographic variation in the costs of providing care, states should allocate child care subsidies based on the true costs of providing care. Research suggests that the cost of providing care in small family centers located in outlying neighborhoods is likely higher than that of larger urban centers. This is mainly due to the significant fixed costs of running a center, the inability to benefit from economies of scale, and the need to provide transportation services.

Local and state governments need to provide additional funding as well as technical support for certain types of child care centers. Family child care centers, which are

particularly prevalent in outlying areas of the state, are small businesses that could benefit from enhanced assistance. This may include help with licensing requirements, professional development, and other forms of business support.

Transportation needs to be considered and expanded alongside access to child care, particularly in outlying neighborhoods. Findings underscore the importance of enhancing transportation in these communities through interventions such as subsidized auto ownership and car-sharing programs, the redeployment of vehicles across existing programs, and the expansion of new technology-based services

Conclusion

Access to dependable and quality child care is critical. Increased funding and targeted programs to support both providers and families located outside of dense urban areas can significantly improve access to such care in the neighborhoods that need it most. Further, these interventions can boost the economy and help address a major barrier to labor force participation and earnings growth.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from an academic publication: Blumenberg, E., Zhiyuan, Y., & Wander, M. (2023). Variation in child care access across neighborhood types: A two-step floating catchment area (2SFCA) approach. *Applied Geography*, 158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2023.103054>. For more information about the findings in this brief, contact Evelyn Blumenberg at ebumenb@ucla.edu.

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