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Authors

Valles, Dario
Shadduck-Hernandez, Janna
Garcia, Natalia

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Labor as the Bridge: Bringing Together Low-Wage Workers and Family Child Care Providers to Meet Care Needs

Dario Valles, Janna Shadduck-Hernandez, Natalia Garcia | Institute for Research on Labor and Employment

Why child care, why now?

Today's child care system is a patchwork of various public and private local, state and federally-funded programs – one that ultimately leaves low-wage parents and their children with the illusion of choice. California's more than 33,000 family child care providers have been essential to helping low-wage parents navigate the child care system – and more recently, have come together with these families under the banner of Raising California Together to wake policymakers and the public to the need for new solutions to this crisis of care.[1] Bridging the experiences of low-wage parents with those of family child care providers that offer round-the-clock care to working families, often for below minimum wages, we can better understand the role child care and labor policy plays in closing the educational and economic achievement gaps plaguing California's current and future workforce.

A recent survey conducted by the UCLA Labor Center, the Garment Worker Center and Research Action Design, and with the support of the Ms. Foundation, uncovers the challenges mostly migrant low-wage working mothers in Los Angeles face in accessing child care. Among the most startling revelations is that garment workers, some of the lowest paid workers in the region, spend as much as one-third of their weekly income on child care.[2] These rates parallel experiences across the U.S.: a national survey indicates that child care for toddlers amounts to 44 percent of a single working mother's income.[3] Further challenges for garment workers are exacerbated by regional conditions and workplace inequalities, including rampant wage theft, high costs of living, a lack of affordable housing and barriers related to immigration policy.

[1] California Child Care Resources and Referral Network. *2013 Child Care Portfolio.* San Francisco: CCRRN. 2013.

[2] Garcia, Natalia, Shadduck-Hernández, Janna, and Valles, Dario. *Hanging by a Thread! Los Angeles Garment Workers' Struggle to Access Quality Care for their Children.* Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, the Garment Worker Center and Research Action Design. 2015.

[3] National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NAACRRA). *Parents and the high cost of child care.* Arlington, VA: NAACRRA, 2014.

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IRLE Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, Los Angeles

10945 Le Conte Ave. Ste. 2107
Los Angeles CA 90095
Tel: (310) 794-5957
Fax: (310) 794-6403

www.irle.ucla.edu

The garment worker survey raises key questions about the ever-growing need for child care among low-wage parents. Quality child care both supports parental labor and benefits child development.[4] The inaccessibility of regular child care plays a critical role in perpetuating the multi-generational effects of poverty and exacerbates the gaps in academic and economic success among racialized and low-income communities and their white and wealthier counterparts.[5] Yet public policy is only recently beginning to catch up to the increasing demand for quality care and the lack of supply thereof. For impoverished immigrant communities, family child care providers have been critical to filling the gaps in public and private child care by offering low cost, flexible early education programing for working families.[6]

Family child care providers offer home-based care in formal and informal arrangements and serve low-income workers through government subsidies. For the purpose of this report we utilize the Urban Institute's definition that family child care refers to any care setting (licensed or unlicensed) in which providers offer child care in their homes, serve multiple children from different families, and provide these services as an intended ongoing business.[7] Providers often offer quality, multi-lingual early education programming in underserved communities.

Like garment workers, family child providers face their own challenges in the workplace. Family child care providers' experiences and advocacy provide an important window into what *can* work to close the child care gap – and where new policy interventions are needed. In this brief, we bridge the realities of child care access in California for low-wage workers with the experiences of family child care providers, and offer recommendations from practitioners' perspectives to resolve the growing crisis of care. Affordable child care is essential to improving the lives of working families in California, and child care providers are a key component to raising the prospects for California's next generations.

What do workers say about child care access?

Two of the major findings of the collaboratively produced garment worker child care access survey were 1) that child care was unaffordable and inaccessible for garment workers, and 2) that garment workers are not utilizing public subsidy programs. Finding child care for infants and toddlers is especially difficult, largely due to higher costs of care for this age range and the numerous requirements and waitlists for larger day care centers. Weekends, holidays and nights are particularly challenging to find care. Garment sector employment schedules often overlap with

Garment workers, who are among the lowest paid workers in Los Angeles and experience some of the highest levels of wage theft, spend as much as one-third of their weekly income on child care. (Photo courtesy of the UCLA Labor Center, 2014.)

[4] Winer, Abby C. and Thompson, Ross. "How Poverty and Depression Impact a Child's Social and Emotional Competence." Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Poverty Research. n.d.

[5] Early Education for All. "Early Childhood Education: A Strategy for Closing the Achievement Gap." Boston: Strategies for Children. 2007.

[6] This policy brief is informed by over two years of ethnographic field research by Dario Valles, Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University and co-author of this report. Valles has also conducted over 20 in-depth, "life history" interviews with family child care providers on their experiences. His research has been generously supported by Northwestern University, the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

[7] Chaudry, A. et al. *Childcare Choices of Low-wage Working Families*. Urban Institute. 2011.

school breaks or holidays; as such, children at times accompany their mothers to work due to a lack of child care options.

The *Hanging By a Thread!* study also found that a mere 4 percent of garment workers are accessing publicly funded child care programs. Approximately 18 percent of garment workers surveyed cited their immigration status as a barrier to accessing government child care programs, with many assuming to be ineligible, even if their children are citizens. Aside from the lack of information on government-supported care, the burden placed on the applicant to navigate the eligibility system is enough to deter many overworked parents. Garment workers noted the time and significant paperwork required to receive child care subsidies or aid. As one worker explained, "Even if I know where to go to apply for assistance, I need help to complete all the paperwork."

In order to receive child care benefits, workers must continually respond to "means-testing verifications," i.e. income assessments by government-subcontracted agencies, and must update agencies of their constantly changing work schedules. In an industry where managers often force workers to labor under the table and off the clock, garment workers have trouble securing basic signatures and requesting advance schedules from their supervisors.

Given these roadblocks, low-wage workers rely on family, friends, and neighbors to care for children; more broadly, they turn to family child care providers. The burdens of child care are clearly shared by the underpaid child care providers who care for low-wage workers' children, which we discuss further below. But how did family child care providers become such an essential part of care for low-income and working families?

How did we get here?

The various pieces that make up the jigsaw puzzle of the contemporary child care system in California took shape throughout the second half of the 20th Century. When women entered war-related industries during World War II, the emergency situation prompted the Lanham Act of 1940, which authorized the first and only federally-funded child care program for working mothers regardless of income serving approximately 600,000 children at 3,100 centers across the country at its height.[8] While the Lanham Act was not reauthorized after the war, activist working mothers and center workers came together and pushed to convert war-time centers into a permanent program in California lasting into the 1960s. However, this new state-based program was more restrictive, with income requirements and increased parent fees. The post-war child care programs introduced "means testing," preventing middle class women from accessing these services and stigmatizing public child care programs by associating them with poor or single women.[9]

The Lyndon Johnson Great Society and War on Poverty provided a major boost to child care with the federal "Head Start" program. As researcher Abby Cohen notes, Head Start was "premised on the notion that early childhood education could have a substantial impact on poor children's later success" and provided a "comprehensive child development program" that linked learning, health, social service and

[8] Fousekis, Natalie M. *Demanding Child Care: Women's Activism and the Politics of Welfare, 1940-1971*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 2011.
[9] Stoltzfus, Emilie. *Citizen, mother, worker: Debating public responsibility for child care after the second world war.* Durham: UNC Press Books. 2003.

parent involvement.[10] The Head Start program's emphasis on child development has led to its success, but the program is limited in scope, only serving families below the federal poverty level.

In 1971, U.S. Senator Walter Mondale proposed a multi-million dollar federally-funded daycare system through the bipartisan Comprehensive Child Care Act. The Act was meant to unify these diverse programs and make it easier for single parents to work -- but it was vetoed by President Richard Nixon, whose allies utilized culture war rhetoric contrasting the "dangers" of communal child rearing to a "family-centered" approach.[11] A decade later, President Ronald Reagan accelerated the dismantling of social programs, privatizing the public sector and deploying race-based rhetoric, such as the image of the Welfare Queen, to further stigmatize welfare and social service recipients.

By 1988 more than half of all mothers with children under the age of six were in the workforce.[12] But even with this growing need for care, in the increasing anti-welfare state atmosphere in the U.S., child care began to be seen only as a means to press more poor mothers into the workforce and off welfare. The federal Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 crystallized the turn to "workfare." The FSA amended direct welfare payments through Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) by introducing new time limits and requirements for women to take low-wage work to receive benefits. Child care was only guaranteed for the hours mothers participated in jobs training programs.[13] The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA), which replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), expanded "welfare-to-work" programs through the Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. The legislation authorized those participating in new federal and state "workfare" programs, such as Cal-Works in California, to receive subsidized child care.

PRWORA was also followed by the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, which increased restrictions on the types of federal aid immigrants could receive, while instituting more restrictive immigration policies. Throughout the 2000s, increasingly anti-immigrant legislation complicated the ability of all immigrants, regardless of status, to access basic services. As garment workers' experiences indicate, punitive approaches have created fear among immigrant communities – even among those eligible for services – of utilizing any government-funded services.

By 2000, women's work force participation had reached its historical peak in the U.S. at more than 60 percent. The 2008 recession put more men out of work, especially in construction jobs, while industries where women prevail like the health and service sectors have only grown. Currently in California there are about 300,000 families on a waiting list to receive child care subsidies, and legislators have cut more than a billion dollars in early educational programs since 2008.[14] New cuts in services, as demand is increasing, have only widened the gap in child care access in California.

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[10] Cohen, Abby J. "A brief history of federal financing for child care in the United States." *Future of Children* 6(2), 26-40. 1996.
[11] Fousekis, 2011.
[12] Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Women in the Labor force: Databook." Washington DC: BLS, December 2014
[13] Cohen, 1996.
[14] California Senate Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review. "Perspectives on California's Child Care and Development System: An Oversight Hearing on Child Poverty and California's Child Care and Development System." Sacramento: California State Senate. March 2015.

Recently, new federal programs have sought an answer to early education access, given the plethora of research showing its importance to later academic and economic achievement. President Barack Obama's Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a federally-funded pilot program to reach low-income and English learners with quality preschool for children ages 3 to 5, awarded California $75 million from January 2012 to December 2015.[15] This plan is focused on quality care and child development as well as kindergarten readiness and closing educational achievement gaps. But while the RTT-ELC should be applauded, as we discuss above, it remains out of reach for many immigrant and low-wage workers, and its funding is only temporary. How then can the patchwork of care be unified – and how can we answer to the ever-growing need for child care? The answer requires looking at the experiences of workers who have become essential to the child care infrastructure in California and nationwide: family child care providers.

Why is family child care so important to workers?

A family child care provider holds an infant at her care center in Long Beach, California. (Photo courtesy of Raising California Together, 2014.)

Family child care encompasses any care setting, licensed or unlicensed, in which providers offer child care in their homes, serve multiple children from different families, and provide these services as an intended ongoing business. [16] Unlike center-based, Head Start and preschool programs, family child care homes provide year-round and flexible care that can meet the needs of working families. Researchers have clearly documented that low-wage working mothers are more likely to work non-standard shifts, including weekends, holidays and evenings, and to bear stiff penalties for missing work, making the use of traditional childcare services almost impossible for this labor force.[17] A national study found that most family child care services for children are nearly year-round and can last up to 13 hours a day, with more than half of providers surveyed willing to care for children when they are sick.[18] Low-wage workers also select family child care because these providers will serve infants and toddlers, offer subsidized care (often making pay arrangements to support families), provide meals, accommodate early and late pick-up and even provide transportation.

Similar to the national patterns in this industry, family child care providers in Los Angeles have anywhere from seven to twenty years of experience in the field. Ethnographic research among family child care

[15] LA Universal Preschool. "Los Angeles Universal Preschool's Implementation of Race to the Top –Early Learning Challenge (RTT-EL)." Los Angeles: LAUP. 2013.
[16] Chaudry et al, 2011.
[17] Sheely, Amanda. "Work Characteristics and Family Routines in Low-wage Families." Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 23(3). 2010.
[18] Layzer, Jean & Goodson, Barbara. "Care in the home: A description of family child care and the experiences of the families and children that use it." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - Administration for Children and Families. 2006.

providers in Los Angeles reveals a racially and ethnically diverse workforce representative of the region; across the U.S., providers are predominantly immigrant women who offer care in multi-lingual settings that can meet a variety of social, linguistic and cultural needs.[19]

What is the current state of family child care in California?

Family child care is critical to the provision of affordable and flexible care for low-wage workers and to keeping particularly women active in the workforce. Yet child care providers earn on average 4.98 dollars an hour with no health insurance, fomenting high turnover in the industry.[20] The low pay in the industry is due largely to the Regional Market Rates (RMR) funding formula developed during the late 1980s privatization and welfare reform, as the federal and state government turned to subcontracted agencies to provide care. The RMR determines caps on the rate child care providers can be paid through public subsidies. Family child care advocates argue that this model relies largely on outdated regional surveys of pay – maintaining wages artificially low for those willing to care for low-income children. In California the most recent RMR is currently set at the 85th percentile of the RMR survey conducted in 2009, *minus* 10.11%; in other words, it is substantially lower than current average regional pay for such care.

Even with the low pay, most family child care providers are willing to work with federal, state and local agencies to offer care for low-income children. But many are simply squeezed out from participating in subsidy programs. Family child care providers interviewed were largely excluded from the new Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge funding because most care for infants and toddlers outside the 3 to 5 age range. Even those family child care providers with the education credentials to qualify for funding could not meet new substantial paperwork and time commitments. In general, family child care workers already contend with numerous regulations required to maintain licensing and participate in subsidy programs, including site inspections and zoning laws.

[19] Park, Makie et al. *Immigrant and Refugee Workers in the Early Education Field: A Closer Look.* Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute. 2015.
[20] Layzer and Goodson, 2006.

Raising California Together

In Spring 2014, hundreds of family child care providers, low-wage parents, children, labor unions, education advocates, clergy and elected leaders took a bus across the state under the banner of Raising California Together. Holding press conferences, protests and street theater performances in city after city, the coalition had one goal in mind: to bust the economic and academic achievement gaps that plague the state. The #Gapbusters bus tour generated a social media buzz and widespread press coverage from outlets such as *La Opinion, San Diego Tribune, Telemundo* and others on the working conditions faced by family child care providers and their role in addressing the needs of minority and low income children through their provision of high-quality, multi-lingual early education. The campaign featured a nine-year old #Kidgovernor, who openly challenged Governor Brown in campaign-like bus stop tours to "build a California where all kids, regardless of age, the size of their parent's paycheck or zip code, have the opportunity to be kindergarten-ready so that they can succeed in school and in life."

Since its' founding in 2010, the Raising California Together (RCT) campaign has been dedicated to increasing the opportunities for all of California's children to enroll in programs that lead to kindergarten readiness and K-12 success. One of the coalition's major goals has been to secure collective bargaining rights for child care providers, which would allow providers to better advocate for children and families with the state government. Beginning with child care, RCT members envision a broader platform: "We advance women rights, fight income inequality, increase economic opportunities for communities of color, and ensure California's businesses provide good, family-sustaining middle class jobs."

For more on Raising California Together, see http://raisingcaliforniatogether.org/. RCT is also

Family child care providers have come together in order to transform these substandard wages and institutional challenges, unionizing in more than a dozen states, including Oregon and Washington state. In California, family child care providers have worked with unions and labor organizations, as well as early childhood education advocates, to support improving child care delivery through multiple strategies.

To improve working conditions and provide a stronger voice for the child care needs of working families, providers in the child care subsidy system have thus worked to establish legislation that would allow them to bargain with the state government on issues of rates, benefits, fair and consistent licensing standards, and training. In 2007, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed AB 1164, the Family Child Care Collective Bargaining Rights bill. Legislators continue to reintroduce the bill annually in successive legislative sessions – and the bill continues to be vetoed by successive governors. In 2015, the collective bargaining bill is currently pending as SB 548, the Raising Child Care Quality and Accessibility Act (RCCQA). The bill would also substantially increase the number of available child care subsidy slots statewide.

Beyond organizing to improve working conditions in the industry, child care providers have been active in early education advocacy. Recent victories include:

- Helping to restore Cal Works Stage 3 funding – for parents no longer on cash assistance but still requiring child care subsidies – from budget cuts in 2011;

- Setting up quarterly provider input meeting with the state's Department of Education to discuss improving child care subsidy procedures and policies;
- Helping to close a resource and referral agency in Los Angeles' South Bay found to have been mismanaging public funds in 2012;
- Organizing a multi-city, statewide bus tour in February 2015 culminating in Sacramento to raise awareness of the role of early childhood education in addressing the economic and academic achievement gap. (See *Raising California* text box and photo).

Even as family child care providers await official recognition from the state in the form of collective bargaining rights, these early educators continue to be an important voice for child care reform alongside low-wage parents and community partners. And their services remain essential to meeting the needs of working families across the state.

In February 2014, Raising California Together's (RCT) #Gapbusters tour stopped at Ramona's Family Daycare in Long Beach, with California's State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, #Kidgovernor, family child care providers, children in family child care, and Spanish-language media. (Photo courtesy of RCT, 2014.)

What can we do about child care?

California is at a crossroads in terms of closing the deep economic and social chasms that have defined the last several decades. California has now had budget surpluses since 2013, and the state's GDP is expected to surpass both Brazil and Italy.[21] But in order for this prosperity to be shared among those who work so hard to raise California, and for the state's growth to last far into the future, there is no wiser investment than early education. Child care is a critical component to women, workers of color and young workers' economic mobility, as well as to ensuring a capable 21st Century workforce. We conclude with key opportunities on the horizon that will impact both California's current and future prosperity:

- **Increase resources and protections for family child care.** Support child care collective bargaining rights through the passage of SB 548, the Raising Child Care Quality and Accessibility Act (RCCQA). This legislation will allow family child care providers greater input with the state on issues of rates,

[21] Marois, Michael and Shin Pei. "Brown's California Overtakes Brazil With Companies Leading World." *Bloomberg Business*. 15 January 2015.

benefits, fair and consistent licensing standards, and training, as well as substantially increase the availability of subsidized care slots.

- **Increase training opportunities for child care providers**. Child care unions are currently partnering with child development programs to create an apprenticeship program, modeled after other trade unions, for those entering the early education field.

- **Streamline the child care application process.** Reduce the complexity and paperwork burden of applying for subsidized care for parents and simplify immunization, employment, "means-testing" and residential verification requirements and procedures.

- **Streamline different funding sources.** Bring together federal, state, and local funding streams under a unified umbrella, and increase federal and state funding for care.

- **Increase access to public subsidies**. In particular, open subsidy access to immigrant and low-wage working parents beyond the "welfare-to-work" system. Improve education and outreach to help inform underserved communities on available services.

- **Improve networks of parents, providers and agencies**. Bring to the table different businesses and industries with high need (i.e. garment industry), as well as labor and community-based organizations in these industries, to promote existing child care options.