

# Welfare Reform, Work, and Child Care

The Role of Informal Care in the Lives of Low-Income Women and Children

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**C**omplex child care arrangements are a common feature of working life for parents in the United States. However, parents with low-wage jobs — and especially single parents with histories of welfare receipt — make these arrangements within unusually tight time and financial constraints while facing limited child care options. Analyzing rich data from in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, Next Generation researchers documented the challenges that low-income families face as they patch together a variety of arrangements to meet their child care needs. Unregulated or minimally regulated informal care typically plays a central role in these families' patchworks of care, meeting some families' needs very well but representing inadequate or unsafe arrangements of last resort for many others.

Generally living in very poor urban neighborhoods, the families interviewed for these studies are a particularly disadvantaged subset of low-income families; but their stories raise important issues for policymakers concerned with protecting our most vulnerable children. The studies point to three policy directions that can promote the well-being of children while helping vulnerable low-income parents to sustain employment: continued investment in access to high-quality, flexible, and reliable child care; expanded initiatives to improve the quality of informal care; and the development of operational strategies in the welfare and child care subsidy systems to support the goal of promoting child well-being.

## Introduction

As policymakers debate proposals that affect families' access to child care, they are keenly aware that the system of early education and care must support both parents' employment goals and children's developmental needs. But how does the pursuit of these two goals actually play out in the lives of very low-income families in disadvantaged neighborhoods? Examining the work and child care patterns of families who participated in two recent ethnographic studies provides new perspectives on three ways in which policymakers typically view these issues.

First, policy discussions often divide the child care system into *formal care*, which in these studies encompasses care that is provided in a day care center or a licensed or certified family day care home, and *informal care*, which refers to minimally regulated care provided by relatives or neighbors, either in or out of the child's home. But the ethnographic

studies suggest that discussions organized around these distinctions may miss the complex blending of arrangements used by many low-income families. When families in these studies did use formal care, it was almost always part of a larger patchwork that included informal situations. Moreover, informal care dominated many blended arrangements and was often used exclusively. Thus, for policy to truly reflect the daily experiences of low-income children, policymakers and advocates concerned with quality of care and child development need to focus on formal care, informal care, and how these forms of care are typically combined in the daily lives of low-income children.

Second, current subsidy policy emphasizes the goal of enabling parents to choose the care arrangements that best suit their families.<sup>1</sup> In reality, the control that families in these studies had over their choices was highly circumscribed by their limited money, by the sparse

care options of their low-resource neighborhoods, and by the inflexibility of their role as employees. Parents ranked their children’s well-being as their top priority, and many said they would leave jobs if their children were ever placed at risk. Nevertheless, they rarely were seen taking this step unless their child care arrangements collapsed completely. Instead, they often resigned themselves to leaving their children in situations they knew were far from ideal.

Third, the ethnographic interviews highlight a hidden but significant cost of care for low-income single parents — the enormous logistical effort required to keep arrangements intact. This level of effort may, in fact, both conflict with the requirements of parents’ jobs and reduce the amount of attention parents can devote to their children. Moreover, it may prevent parents from applying for and utilizing child care subsidies, because, even though the cost of child care was a primary concern, seeking and maintaining subsidies often seemed to require considerable time and effort.

To further describe the realities the studies document for these families, this policy brief considers three issues in greater detail: why parents resorted to patchwork and informal care; parents’ experiences with subsidies; and the extent to which their arrangements met minimal standards of health, safety, and predictability.

## FAMILIES USE INFORMAL CARE IN RESPONSE TO LOW-WAGE WORKING CONDITIONS

The studies found two patterns of families’ child care use that can best be described as “patchworks” that often blended informal and formal arrangements:

**Changing arrangements over the course of a year.** As was the case for Alicia (whose movements in and out of the workforce are charted below changing jobs was prevalent among study parents, who often held temporary positions or were searching for better wages. While some changes in care arrangements were predictable disruptions for which parents could plan ahead, such as children’s summer vacations from school, a significant proportion of parents had to contend with unpredictable shifts in their children’s need for care over time, due to sudden loss of a job or of an informal care arrangement.

**Multiple care arrangements within each day.** Like Maria (whose complex schedule is displayed in the graphic on page 3), many of the working parents in the study held jobs with erratic work hours or schedules that took them away from home on nights or weekends. Often parents found that informal

**ALICIA**, a 31-year-old Milwaukee mother, moved from job to job and faced a spell of unemployment over the course of a year. Each change required her to re-adjust complex formal and informal care arrangements for her three children, ages 5, 10, and 12.

### PATCHWORK OF CHILD CARE YEAR-ROUND

| CHILD CARE              | ALICIA'S JOBS<br>part-time<br>JANUARY-JUNE            | Unemployed<br>JUNE-AUGUST   | Day Care Worker<br>full-time<br>AUGUST-SEPTEMBER | Babysitter and Waitress<br>temporary jobs<br>SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER | Mail Sorter<br>11pm-7am<br>NOVEMBER →                        |
|-------------------------|---|---|--|---|--|
| Mornings                | Babysitting by friends, relatives, and oldest sibling | Two younger children home with mom<br>Oldest child at summer school |  | Two older children at Boys & Girls Club                         | School   |
| Afternoons/<br>Evenings | Boys & Girls Club                                     | Boys & Girls Club   | Youngest child with grandmother in Tennessee     | Two older children at Boys & Girls Club                         | Home with mom  |
|                         | Home with mom   | Home with mom   |  | Home with mom   | Home alone, supervised by mother's boyfriend living upstairs |

Informal Child Care

Formal Child Care

care, with more flexible hours than child care centers, was the only option that accommodated these conditions.

Complex and shifting work schedules often led parents to rely upon informal care, either alone or blended with formal care. However, each form of care brought unique challenges. Informal care often turned out to be unstable, with the result that parents had to scramble to find new arrangements that would be safe, affordable, enriching, and would fit their work schedules and their children's needs. Some parents preferred supervision by friends and relatives, even when center-based care was available; others clearly appreciated how formal care could contribute to children's learning and development, and valued centers' back-up care when regular teachers were absent. But families often found center-based care beyond their reach — it could be hard to find in low-income neighborhoods, it was often too costly unless it was subsidized, and, as discussed next, the subsidy system was problematic for many in these studies.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH SHEDS NEW LIGHT ON CHILD CARE POLICY DISCUSSIONS

This policy brief draws on information from 116 parents in two ethnographic studies that were designed to enhance understanding of how welfare and employment policies affect families and children. The studies — initiated as part of the New Hope project and the Project on Devolution and Urban Change — involved in-depth interviews and observations, conducted over three-year periods between 1997 and 2001, with low-income individuals. Most were single parents who originally relied on welfare and lived in very low-resource urban neighborhoods in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia. Although these families were particularly disadvantaged and therefore do not represent low-income families in general, their stories offer insights into the problems associated with the welfare-to-work transition of families most isolated from the economic mainstream.

Decisions about child care result from parents' assessments of their families' needs, resources, and constraints, all of which are constantly changing for low-income working parents. Thus, child care arrangements reflect parents' preferences, values, incomes, work schedules, and access to subsidies and formal care, as well as the variable schedules of children and caregivers. Ethnography is particularly well-suited to describing these intersecting factors and how low-income parents ultimately decide where their children will be while they are at work. While these studies cannot pinpoint the prevalence of particular child care arrangements nationally or the impact of arrangements on children's development, they vividly show how child care arrangements unfold over time in the lives of a group of low-income parents and children. Such dynamic accounts of those parents' efforts to secure safe, stable, affordable, and good-quality care for their children can help to orient policy debates toward the fundamental needs of — and conundrums confronting — low-income working parents and their children.

**MARIA**, a 28-year-old mother from Cleveland, juggles a complex schedule of day and night jobs and alternates between formal and informal arrangements to cover the care needs of her four children, who range in age from pre-schooler to teen.

### A SURPRISING NUMBER OF FAMILIES FIND THE SUBSIDY SYSTEM UNHELPFUL

The child care subsidy system is meant to further the work efforts of low-income parents, but the studies point to two ways in which it can sometimes exacerbate

#### PATCHWORK OF CHILD CARE DAY-LONG

| MARIA       | Home          |                     | Cashier Job |   |   |    |    | Home          | Pizza Delivery Job  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |          |   |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------|-------------|---|---|----|----|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----------|---|
| Teens       | Home with mom | Grand-mother's home | School      |   |   |    |    | Home with mom | Unsupervised at home  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |          |   |
| Preschooler | Home with mom | Grand-mother's home | Head Start  |   |   |    |    | Home with mom | Rides in car with mom or stays at home supervised by older siblings |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |          |   |
| Time of day | 5 am          | 6                   | 7           | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | Noon          | 1 pm  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | Midnight | 1 |

Informal Child Care

Formal Child Care

the unpredictability and frustrations associated with juggling work and family life.

**Families cannot count on subsidies.** The availability of child care subsidies has increased dramatically in recent years, although nationally only between 10 percent and 15 percent of eligible children benefit from child care subsidies from the Child Care and Development Fund, the main source of federal funding for this help.<sup>2</sup> Families' descriptions of their experiences with the subsidy system surfaced several reasons why access remains limited. For example, even families that do have subsidies report that changes in eligibility status can cost them their subsidies and force them to take children out of care situations that were working well. Further complicating matters, the studies suggest some parents are not aware — until the subsidy suddenly disappears — that fluctuations in their work schedules or incomes will trigger ineligibility.

**Bureaucratic procedures and staff attitudes in agencies that manage subsidies often discourage parents who qualify from using this help.** The practices that made families reluctant to take advantage of subsidies included requirements that they repeatedly reapply for benefits over the course of a year to verify income eligibility and that they file applications at different agencies once they leave the cash welfare system. In the interviews, the mothers reported that their subsidized care providers faced heavy paperwork requirements and delays in receiving reimbursements, further adding problems that made subsidy use burdensome.

Some parents also spoke about caseworkers who did not have a good grasp of subsidy rules. Even when parents suspected caseworkers' judgments were wrong, they often felt intimidated about raising objections, in part because caseworkers could be insensitive. For example, when one study parent told her caseworker that she would be forced to quit her job if she did not receive

subsidies over the summer, the reported response was: "That's your problem."

Parents' difficulties with the subsidy system not only limited the availability of subsidies, but in some cases interfered with parents' work efforts as well. For example, one study parent, Eileen, said that she had no time to challenge the welfare department to reinstate a subsidy she believed had been wrongly revoked. "I'm tired of putting appeals in," she said, "and then, like by me being in there all the time, I'm always coming to work late. I'm on the borderline of getting fired." (For a fuller account of her child care experiences, see box on page 5.)

The level of difficulty many parents experienced in obtaining subsidies differed from site to site. This variation suggests that some of the obstacles to using this support may stem from operational practices and styles that could be adjusted by state and local systems that manage subsidies.

## INFORMAL CARE ARRANGEMENTS SOMETIMES MEET FAMILIES' NEEDS

**A small number of parents, most of whom could rely on spouses or other close relatives for consistent help, were fully satisfied with a patchwork that included informal care.**

Debbie, one of these parents, worked a day shift; her husband worked at night. With some help from a grandmother, the parents spelled each other in providing the care needed to cover the time the family's three children were not in school or at a child care center. Despite highly circumscribed and demanding schedules, Debbie and her husband were acting in accordance with their preferences for balancing work and care, and they believed that these arrangements met their children's needs best.

Debbie's circumstances were unusual in that most parents interviewed were single mothers like Katie, a maintenance worker at a local community college. The mother of two children, ages 5 and 7, Katie worked from 3 P.M. to 11 P.M. and relied on her broth-

er to look after her children after school through bedtime. A licensed child care provider who was eligible to receive child care subsidies, Katie's brother limited his child care work to watching only Katie's children, continuing to provide care that Katie was happy with over a two-year period until his health began to deteriorate.

### INFORMAL CARE ARRANGEMENTS FREQUENTLY FAIL FAMILIES

**Parents often expressed satisfaction with their arrangements but with undercurrents of ambivalence, suggesting that they had come to terms with situations over which they had little control.** Maria, who sometimes took her child with her when she delivered pizza until 1 A.M. (see chart on page 3), said that she felt reasonably comfortable with her care arrangements but also acknowledged her lack of options. Although the ethnographic studies did not directly measure outcomes for children, this night-time care arrangement is clearly at odds with the goal of supporting the healthy development of low-income children.

**Changes in informal child care arrangements were common — often induced by parents' dissatisfaction with the quality of care or by changes in caregivers' availability.** Parents in these studies often reported that they changed or wanted to change arrangements after discovering that their children's developmental needs were not being met. Other common reasons for shifts in arrangements were either unexpected changes in the situations of relatives and friends who served as caregivers, or the departure of caregivers who were no longer available when work shifts changed. For example, one parent, Edith, was disturbed that her caregiver relied on television to keep her children occupied, a practice that she saw as exacerbating her six-year-old son's behavior problems and preventing her preschool-aged son from developing age-appropriate language skills.

The ethnographies were designed to report on unfolding experiences, not to detect

## CHANGING PROVIDERS TO FIND AN ACCEPTABLE ENVIRONMENT

**ALICE:** A single mother, living in Cleveland. Two school-age children and one preschooler.

Alice repeatedly shifted child care arrangements during a two-year period because of problems with family child care providers. "The woman was going to sleep all morning," says Alice of her first provider, "and she used to hit the children on the arms with a ruler." Finally, when the provider began taking a day off every week, Alice sought a different arrangement but again found the supervision inadequate. After discovering her children playing alone outside, she temporarily shifted them to the care of her pregnant sister and then selected another family provider. While Alice was pleased that this caregiver organized many activities with the children, she still was dissatisfied because businesses run out of the house made the atmosphere chaotic. But with no obvious alternative child care options, Alice kept her children in this situation.

## UNSAFE INFORMAL CHILD CARE

**EILEEN:** A single mother, living in Philadelphia. Four minor and two adult children.

Eileen had a child care subsidy she used to pay her oldest son to care for his siblings, the youngest of whom was six years old. When she lost the subsidy after only a few months, her son had to find other work and therefore could no longer help. Eileen then turned to her adult daughter, who is severely developmentally impaired, and she sometimes allowed the children to stay alone. In both situations, Eileen shut off the gas stove to prevent the children from using it in her absence. Later, she relied on a cousin who was addicted to drugs and on the children's father, whom she had left because of serious domestic abuse. On one occasion, Eileen returned from her third-shift job to find smoke coming out of her apartment, while the father, who was under the influence of drugs, sat outside. Eileen succeeded in removing the children from the house with the help of neighbors, but disaster had clearly been imminent.



impacts of different caregiving arrangements on children. But research has shown that frequent changes in caregivers and understimulation threaten healthy development.<sup>3</sup>

***A number of the care situations posed outright safety risks to children.*** Eileen’s changing situation, with a son who was a satisfactory caregiver and other relatives who were not, highlights the variable quality of the kinship care used by many parents in these studies.

One source of risks to children was caregiving by siblings, as the experiences of Renée illustrate.

*I heard her whooping and hollering at my daughter and [my daughter] was sobbing so hard she couldn’t catch her breath.*

— Tonya, describing her child’s reaction to an informal care provider, which she overheard in a telephone conversation.

Renée put her 10-year-old son Marcus in charge of his two siblings, ages 6 and 1, for six to seven days a week during a summer when she worked two jobs. On one occasion observed by an interviewer for the study, the children were locked out of the house on a street with visible drug activity, while Marcus climbed through a window to get inside and unlock the door.

Besides posing danger to younger children, sibling care could place undue pressure on the child in charge. Marcus experienced severe behavioral problems, which Renée attributed to his heavy responsibilities. Strikingly, although a number of older children in study families did serve as caregivers, very few attended after-school programs.

Researchers were struck by the resourcefulness, energy, and determination in orchestrating care that they repeatedly found among this group of parents. Most parents were intensely engaged in managing the tensions between work and parenting, day in and day out. Nevertheless, the range of caregiving situations that researchers heard about and observed suggests that among a significant proportion of these families, the patchworks of child care that parents managed to piece together appeared to be insufficiently supportive of children’s health, safety, and well-being. While parents managed to patch together care that could be flexibly scheduled, their concerns about its stability and quality should be taken seriously. ■

## Policy Implications

Meeting the child care needs of very vulnerable families who live in resource-poor urban neighborhoods, such as the families interviewed for these studies, is a critical challenge for policymakers and program operators. Given parents’ long work hours and shifting schedules, informal care will almost inevitably be part of many families’ patchworks of care, even as efforts continue to expand the availability of vital formal care, including center care, Head Start, and prekindergarten programs. By showing that informal and unregulated care play a critical role — in some cases genuinely working well for both parents and children — these ethnographic studies suggest that policies supporting parental choice of care are well-founded. But the findings presented here also underscore the importance of continuing to search for policy solutions to the child care problems that confront disadvantaged families. The results point to at least three directions for future action:

- **Invest to increase the availability of low-cost, high-quality, flexible, reliable care — both formal and informal — to low-income families.**

Areas that child care policy experts have deemed important for investment include expanding the supply of high-quality care providers and the generosity of subsidies; increasing the number of families receiving subsidies; adopting user-friendly procedures for accessing subsidies; and decoupling eligibility for subsidies from employment or income levels as much as possible.<sup>4</sup>

Given current fiscal pressures on every level of government, it is clearer than ever that this agenda is competing with other uses of tax dollars. Nevertheless, these types of investments in the system of formal early education and

care, as well as informal care, have enormous potential to benefit low-income working mothers and their children.

Notwithstanding the tradeoffs that new investments would require, two more immediate changes could be implemented by the welfare and subsidized child care systems. Those systems could:

- **Act on the knowledge that informal care is an important part of families' care arrangements by doing more to bolster its quality.**

Despite the well-documented challenges of improving the quality of informal care,<sup>5</sup> innovative methods of expanding family care providers' access to training, to family care networks, and to incentives for upgrading skills could all have positive payoffs. There is also a need for creative outreach strategies that target appealing educational materials and advice on structuring good caregiving environments to relatives and others who have not been systematically encouraged to upgrade quality. Efforts in the educational system to provide youth with basic information about child development and parenting could also bring important long-run benefits for informal care.

- **Operationalize the new goal of making child well-being a central mission of the welfare system, through changes in service delivery.**

Welfare workers, whose job has gradually been broadened to include promoting employment, often advise recipients about child care; but their role could evolve further to support the goal of improving child well-being. At the same time, administrative practices of child care subsidy offices could be made more work-friendly by offering hours of operation and locations geared toward working parents and by streamlined recertification rules.

The trend to expand welfare workers' roles to include the promotion of work

would benefit from a parallel effort that integrates a new emphasis on promoting the well-being of children. Workers could be trained to help parents assess the quality of the child care arrangements they are currently using or are considering. If parents know that the welfare system views the child care search in the same light as it has come to define job search — as a process that often requires not only initial but repeated assistance — an opportunity might be created for parents and caseworkers to collaborate to find sustainable arrangements that benefit children, and working families.

Working parenthood is the norm in our society, bringing disproportionately large challenges for low-income single parent families. The results of the ethnographic studies discussed here point to the importance of helping these vulnerable parents succeed at their combined roles as parents and providers by creating social policies that support parents' right to choose the child care situations that they think are best for their children, enhance their ability to sustain employment, and contribute to safe and healthy child development. The perspectives from families outlined here and the accompanying policy recommendations are meant to stimulate ongoing discussion about promising strategies to further these important goals.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>G. Adams and M. Rohacek, "More Than a Work Support? Issues Around Integrating Child Development Goals into the Child Care Subsidy System," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17: 418-440, (2002).

<sup>2</sup>L. Giannarelli and J. Barsimantov, "Child Care Expenses of America's Families," *Assessing the New Federalism Occasional Paper No. 40* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2000).

<sup>3</sup>J. P. Shonkoff and D. A. Phillips (eds.), *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>For a comprehensive treatment of this topic, see Adams and Rohacek (2002).

<sup>5</sup>Adams and Rohacek (2002).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Virginia W. Knox**, Senior Research Associate, MDRC;  
**Andrew S. London**, Associate Professor of Sociology and Senior Research Associate at the Center for Policy Research, Syracuse University; **Ellen K. Scott**, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Oregon; with **Susan Blank**. The names of the principal authors are listed alphabetically.

## RECENT ETHNOGRAPHIC PAPERS FROM THE NEXT GENERATION

Clampet-Lundquist, S., K. Edin, A. London, E. K. Scott, and V. Hunter. 2003. "Making a Way Out of No Way: How Mothers Meet Basic Family Needs While Moving from Welfare to Work." In A. C. Crouter and A. Booth (eds.), *Work-Family Challenges for Low-Income Parents and Their Children*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lowe, E. D., T. Weisner, and S. Geis. 2003. "Instability in Child Care: Ethnographic Evidence from Working Poor Families in the New Hope Intervention." Next Generation Working Paper No. 15. New York, MDRC.

Scott, E. K., A. Hurst, and A. London. 2003. "Out of their hands: Patching together care for children when parents move from welfare to work." Next Generation Working Paper No. 16. New York, MDRC.

## ABOUT THE NEXT GENERATION

The Next Generation project examines the effect of welfare, antipoverty, and employment policies on children and families. Drawing on rich data from recent welfare reform evaluations, the project aims to inform the work of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers by identifying policy-relevant lessons that cut across evaluations.

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## RESEARCH PARTNERS

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**MDRC**  
 16 East 34th Street  
 New York, NY 10016-4326  
 Tel: 212 532 3200  
 Fax: 212 684 0832  
 www.mdrc.org

**Regional Office**  
 475 14th Street  
 Oakland, CA 94612  
 Tel: 510 663 6372  
 Fax: 510 844 0288



16 East 34th Street  
 New York, NY 10016-4326

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