

Access to Early Care and Education for Low-Income Hispanic Children and Families: A Research Synthesis

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INTRODUCTION

Public investments in early care and education (ECE)^a aim to provide low-income families with resources to help offset the challenges of living in poverty and increase the likelihood of economic mobility and self-sufficiency.¹ Affordable care arrangements allow low-income parents to more reasonably pursue employment or education and training opportunities. In addition, children from low-income families who experience high-quality ECE, especially in center-based settings, fare better in terms of developmental and academic outcomes than those who do not.²

Hispanic^b households—home to roughly 1 in 4 U.S. children³—may especially benefit from public ECE investments because they have high rates of parental employment and experience significant poverty.⁴⁻⁶ Yet Hispanic populations have historically underutilized government assistance programs aimed at serving low-income families, including those related to the care of young children.⁷⁻¹⁰ Although recent data suggest that ECE utilization is generally increasing among Hispanics, especially for preschool-aged children, there is also evidence of inequities and barriers that limit access for some groups of families.^{11,12}

This review synthesizes the latest research on ECE access for Hispanic families, with an emphasis on low-income Hispanic populations, to highlight factors that facilitate or impede access for this large and diverse U.S. population. A more comprehensive understanding of these factors can inform policy and practice efforts to ensure equitable access and fully achieve public ECE investment goals. We focus the review on three broad questions:

1. What is known about the child, family, and household factors (e.g., child age, parental needs and preferences, and ECE search processes) that shape ECE access for low-income Hispanic families with young children from birth to age 5?
2. How do community contexts, such as the supply of available ECE providers or the presence and strength of social networks, impact Hispanic households' use of ECE?
3. How do local, state, and federal policy contexts serve to potentially constrain or facilitate Hispanic families' ECE access?

^a Prior literature has at times treated child care arrangements made because parents are working or otherwise unavailable as distinct from early education programs more specifically designed to support child development (e.g., Head Start and prekindergarten [pre-K]). In this synthesis we use the term “early care and education” (ECE) broadly to refer to the full range of nonparental arrangements that provide basic care and early learning opportunities for young children. When describing study results, we specify which types of settings or providers were examined.

^b We use “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably in this paper. Consistent with the U.S. Census definition, this includes individuals having origins in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, as well as other “Hispanic, Latino or Spanish” origins.

Key Findings

The Hispanic population in the United States has grown in size and diversity over the last decades. This review is intended to provide a more accurate reflection of today's ECE landscape serving Hispanic families and bring up to date our understanding of what we know about Hispanic families' access to ECE. Key findings of this review include the following:

The ECE utilization patterns seen among low-income Hispanics are changing. Prior gaps in ECE use between low-income Hispanics and their low-income white peers may be closing, especially for preschool-aged children. Some subgroups of low-income Hispanic children and families are still less likely to access ECE.¹²

- Recent studies indicate that ECE access is higher today for low-income Hispanics than in the past.^{11,12} Access estimates that account for all types of ECE arrangements—including a recent study finding high ECE participation in the city of Chicago or those estimates that use national data, such as the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)—find usage rates ranging from 50 percent to over 80 percent for Hispanic populations from low-income backgrounds.^{11,12} These are higher than prior estimates, suggesting that ECE programs are generally experiencing more success with engaging hard-to-reach groups.^{11,12}
- Research also confirms that subgroups of Hispanics are likely encountering barriers and/or lack of opportunities to ECE access, including Latino families with nonstandard work schedules,¹³ Spanish-speaking families with English language barriers,¹⁴ children who are dual language learners (DLLs),¹⁵ or those families without access to social networks that offer robust information about the availability of child care options within their community.^{16,17}
- Improvements in ECE access for Hispanics are likely accompanied by ongoing challenges to access. On the supply side, challenges include a lack of available providers with schedules that meet families' needs,¹⁸ and differences in eligibility and documentation requirements for receiving ECE subsidies across states.¹⁹ On the household or demand side, data on how and why low-income Hispanic families search for ECE arrangements show fewer searches and a lower likelihood of changing arrangements following a search, relative to low-income white and black families.²⁰

Stress associated with social and economic challenges can also further negatively impact families' well-being and their interactions with ECE programs. ECE providers seeking to enroll children in ECE programs also face challenges in developing relationships with families and their children.^{13,57} These factors can have an impact on ECE access for low-

income Hispanic families.

Why research on low-income Hispanic children and families matters

Hispanic or Latino children currently make up roughly 1 in 4 of all children in the United States,^a and are projected to make up 1 in 3 by 2050, similar to the number of white children.^b Given this increase, how Hispanic children fare will have a profound impact on the social and economic well-being of the country as a whole.

Notably, though, 4.9 million Hispanic children, or 27 percent of all Hispanic children in the United States, are in poverty, more than in any other racial/ethnic group.^c Nearly two-thirds of Hispanic children live in low-income families, defined as those with incomes less than two times the federal poverty level.^d Despite their high levels of economic need, Hispanics—particularly those in immigrant families—have lower rates of participation in many government support programs when compared with other racial/ethnic minority groups.^{e,f,g} High-quality, research-based information on the characteristics, experiences, and diversity of Hispanic children and families is needed to inform programs and policies supporting the sizable population of low-income Hispanic families and children.

a Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2017). America's children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2017, Table POP3. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>.

b Ibid.

c DeNavas-Walt, C., & Proctor, B.D. (2017). Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016, Table B-2. Current Population Reports, 60-252. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/P60-259.pdf>

d Lopez, M. H. & Velasco, G. (2011). Childhood poverty among Hispanics sets record, leads nation. Washington, DC: Pew Research Hispanic Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/09/28/childhood-poverty-among-hispanics-sets-record-leads-nation/>.

e Williams, S. (2013). Public assistance participation among U.S. children in poverty, 2010. Bowling Green, Ohio: National Center for Family & Marriage Research. Retrieved from <http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-andsciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/FP-13-02.pdf>

f Lichter, D., Sanders, S., & Johnson, K. (2015). Behind at the starting line: Poverty among Hispanic infants. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Carsey School of Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1250&context=carsey>

g Child Trends Databank. (2014). Health care coverage. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=health-care-coverage>

- For example, families with nonstandard work hours are likely to have multiple arrangements in place, which requires effort and coordination of ECE across providers.¹³ This level of coordination can place a further strain on families, providers, and children. However, when parents and ECE providers are working effectively together, coordinated care allows for a stable and/or flexible set of arrangements with benefits for children and their parents' need to work.
- Access to ECE for low-income Hispanic families may also depend on the extent to which they feel supported and integrated versus isolated within their community.²¹ Research shows that some families feel less welcome and less safe in the current social and political climate, which appears to be an increasing access barrier in some communities.²¹
- With information and training, ECE providers can be a critical source of support for low-income Hispanic family members and/or children experiencing stress or trauma, but many providers need additional resources to effectively serve in this role.²¹ Some encouraging research on ECE quality and services finds that ECE programs serving higher proportions of low-income Hispanic children are more likely than other programs to have specialists on staff (e.g., language specialists), and to provide developmental screenings for children and social support services for parents.²²

Recommendations

- Although Hispanic participation in several publicly supported ECE programs is high^{11,12}—especially in certain communities and for programs focused on preschool-aged children—many low-income Hispanic families do not utilize services for which they are eligible.⁷⁻¹⁰ Research on programs that are effective in recruiting and partnering with Hispanic families could inform strategies for reducing barriers, along with new research as to why the self-perceived need for federal assistance is low among Latinos.²³ This research could produce more compelling outreach materials for advising Hispanic families regarding obtaining assistance for ECE, including Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies.
- Researchers and ECE programs must continue to consider how single- and dual-parent households differ (or are similar) in how they balance ECE and work—in particular, how ECE arrangements reflect flexibility, or lack thereof, in their employment options or schedules.
- Further study of ECE programs and providers who serve high proportions of Hispanic children will underscore the features of ECE programs that meet their needs. This is critically important for sub-populations of Hispanic children who are at risk for lower access to ECE, such as DLLs or children of immigrant parents.
- New research on the community and policy contexts that serve as key drivers of ECE access must intentionally consider factors that likely constrain or facilitate ECE access within Hispanic communities. Researchers can better incorporate into future studies important data elements that help unpack the heterogeneity and diversity of the U.S. Hispanic population, such as nativity status, language(s) spoken, or country of origin (see Appendix).²⁴
 - Constraints to ECE access include a lack of eligibility for CCDF subsidies for enrollment in English language classes or job training in some states,¹⁹ a mismatch between work schedules and ECE schedules, “child care deserts” and other geographical differences in supply, and variances in how programs are regulated and how quality is defined for Hispanic families (including DLLs).
 - Facilitators to access could be more deeply considered in future research, including social ties among members of Hispanic communities that contribute to shared knowledge about ECE resources, as well as community members who offer child care for family and neighborhood children. Policies and practices that facilitate community and social networks,²⁵ especially among recently arriving immigrants, would facilitate employment and knowledge of ECE options, and potentially increase utilization as trust is built and information about providers is shared.



- Pressing issues such as those identified in this review can and should be addressed in future research studies using quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Also, using the best publicly available national data sets with key data elements for studying Hispanics and ECE will provide a starting point for designing new studies.²⁶ Gaps to be addressed in future research include the reasons that Hispanic parents give for considering ECE options and their timelines for consideration; and how heterogeneous, low-income Hispanic households are balancing employment and caregiving while maximizing developmental and educational opportunities for their children.¹³

Background and Scope of the Review

We begin our review with a demographic portrait of low-income Hispanic households with young children, highlighting dimensions of within-group diversity that are critical for understanding Latino families. Next, we offer an overview of how rates of ECE utilization for low-income Hispanic children are changing, especially among low-income preschool-aged children. In the following section, we describe the conceptual framework guiding this review, which weaves together an accommodation model of child care decision making²⁷; a family-focused, multidimensional framework of ECE access²⁸; and sociocultural perspectives on Hispanic child development.²⁹ We use this framework in the next section to organize our review of empirical research on dimensions of ECE access and decision making for the diverse population of Hispanic families in the United States. We conclude with a consideration of how state and federal policy contexts serve as important factors shaping ECE access.

Methodology and Key Considerations

We conducted a literature review guided by conceptual models of understanding Hispanic access to ECE from a variety of dimensions (see pages 8-10). We reviewed studies published from 2000 to present with either Hispanic children as a focal sample, or a subsample of Hispanic children within the overall study that was examined. To locate relevant empirical literature, we used a variety of search terms, including *low-income, Hispanic, Latino, immigrant, early care and education, child care, subsidies, Head Start, Pre-K, and preschool*. We also reviewed published work from notable scholars on the topics of ECE access and/or the needs of Hispanic children and families. Lastly, we identified and included a number of technical reports and white papers from key federal agencies and policy organizations. A table summarizing the articles, including the sample characteristics and study design, can be found [here](#).

Several important reviews and conceptual papers on ECE access and utilization for low-income families have been published in the last few years^{1,27,30,31}; however, this work has not been critiqued using a focus specifically on Hispanic ECE access. Also, newly available public data from the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) and recent studies conducted with low-income Hispanics support the need for a contemporary portrait of ECE access for Hispanic families.

Comparison of findings across studies with different sampling approaches and/or the inclusion of different subgroups of Hispanic children and families can be difficult.

A key consideration for this review and the literature in general is how subgroups of Hispanic families have been sampled or selected in research. Some studies use an “immigrant lens” to make comparisons with U.S.-born populations, or to consider within-group variation in the immigrant experience. Hispanics often compose a large proportion of these immigrant samples, reflecting national demographics. The same is true for studies of children who are identified as DLLs—many, but not all, of whom are Hispanic and/or in immigrant households (see Figure 1). Other studies, however, particularly those involving secondary analysis of large-scale data sets, identify a Hispanic subsample on such factors as self-identified race/ethnicity, country of origin, and home language use. Thus, comparison of findings across

studies with different sampling approaches and/or the inclusion of different subgroups of Hispanic children and families can be difficult. This review attends carefully to the samples used in prior research and attempts to highlight differences in findings that could be due to variation in sampling procedures, the characteristics of children and families across studies, or unmeasured variation associated with children or households.

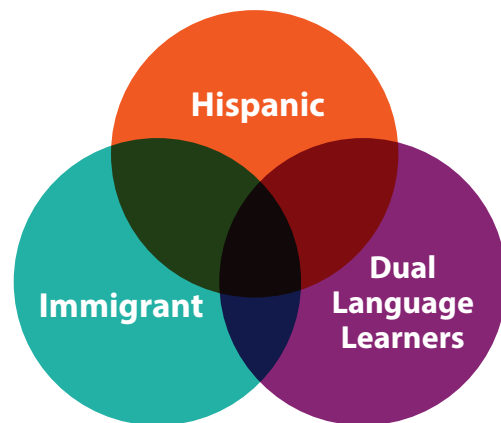
Portrait of Low-Income Hispanic Households with Young Children

Hispanic children currently make up about 1 in 4 U.S. children; by 2050, this share is projected to be 1 in 3, similar to the number of non-Hispanic white children.³² Despite high rates of stable two-parent households and parental employment, many Hispanic children experience economic disadvantage.^{4,33} About 5.7 million Hispanic children, or one third of all Hispanic children in the United States, live in poverty—a greater number than in any other racial/ethnic group—and an additional one third live in low-income households with incomes from 100 to 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold.³⁴ As noted above, this means that Hispanic children and their families are a key target population for federal and state early childhood investments as a way to mitigate the harmful effects of poverty, reduce income-based disparities in educational opportunities, and support the learning and development of all children.

Ethnicity, language, and nativity status. As noted in the methodology box and illustrated in Figure 1, the study of young Hispanic children is informed by three overlapping lenses (and corresponding literatures) that capture the experiences of intersecting subpopulations based on nativity status and language use. While the majority of young, Hispanic children are U.S. citizens, significant numbers have a least one foreign-born parent,^{4,35} and about 25 percent reside with a parent who is an unauthorized immigrant.³⁶ Children who are U.S. citizens, but have family members without authorization to reside permanently in the country, often experience stress as a result of the uncertainty and vulnerability their family members experience.³⁷⁻³⁹ This uncertainty can serve as an access barrier if parents are less willing to seek out or utilize some ECE options due to fear of outsiders.¹⁷

Child language exposure and family language preferences are characteristics that vary within the Hispanic population and can play an important role in families' search for, and selection of, ECE arrangements. Over one quarter of all children served in Head Start or Early Head Start come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken,¹⁴ and about 73 percent of all school-age English Language Learners are Spanish-speaking.^{40,41} While some DLL children are exposed to two or more languages from birth, for many, ECE settings serve as their first substantive exposure to English.⁴²

Figure 1. Overlapping and Intersecting Factors that Guide Research on Young Hispanic Children



Note. Hispanic children can be influenced by many other factors in their families and environments. However, within the literature on this population, these three overlapping and intersecting factors are important to consider in understanding experiences through a Hispanic lens.



Three aspects of language that likely impact ECE use and decision making for DLLs include (a) family language preferences, (b) the match or mismatch between the family home language(s) and that of the ECE provider, and (c) the specific language(s) of instruction utilized in the ECE setting. Although an in-depth review of the literature on DLLs and ECE participation is beyond the scope of this synthesis, evidence shows that when DLL students receive culturally relevant, high-quality instruction in English and Spanish—and appropriate assessment of their emerging language abilities in both languages—learning outcomes are optimized and children can reap the benefits of being bilingual.⁴³⁻⁴⁶

Hispanic diversity. The U.S. Hispanic population is extremely diverse, in ways that go beyond native or foreign-born status, or the language(s) spoken within a household. Even within these broad categories, some heterogeneity likely influences parents' ECE access, search, and decision

making. Characteristics such as country of origin, time in the United States, citizenship, and English language fluency have been highlighted as high priority data elements for research on Hispanic populations (see Appendix).²⁴ These features of diversity may directly or indirectly impact a Hispanic parent's approach to securing and selecting ECE, the barriers Hispanic families face, and the options available to them.

Community contexts. Another source of variation in the experiences of young Hispanic children relates to the communities in which they reside. Hispanic communities differ in terms of density and recency of Hispanic immigrants. Emerging communities are those in which Hispanics are fairly new arrivals to the region, whereas established communities are areas that have been home to Hispanic populations for generations.⁴⁷ While Hispanics are dense in gateway cities for immigrants (such as Los Angeles, Miami, Houston, Chicago, or New York),⁴⁷ some of the most rapid growth in recent decades has occurred in the Southeastern region of the United States, in states such as Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina.⁵ When Hispanic populations are newer arrivals, their receiving communities may lack the infrastructure to connect them to employment, child care, and other resources.⁴⁷ Employment opportunities also may be more limited within emerging communities for family members who are primarily Spanish-speaking and/or those perceived to lack documentation.^{48,49} Lastly, given that about 67 percent of Hispanic adults obtain a high school degree, a lower rate than other racial and ethnic groups, low-income Hispanic parents may need educational opportunities to secure their families' economic well-being and mobility.⁵⁰

In sum, individual, household, and community factors are important considerations for understanding children's access to early care and education. These include children's DLL status, household members' nativity status and language use, and the limited educational or work opportunities for adults in Hispanic communities. ECE constraints and opportunities also likely vary across emerging and established communities of Hispanics.

Early Care and Education Utilization Patterns of Low-Income Hispanic Households

To set the stage for our review of the factors that shape ECE access for low-income Hispanic families, we provide a historical and contemporary picture of ECE utilization patterns for this population. Estimates of ECE utilization by Hispanic households vary considerably by such characteristics as child age, nativity, and home language; parent employment and income; and type of ECE setting considered. For example, while some studies report on ECE utilization for all children ages 5 and under, many have focused exclusively on preschool-aged children. Also, because of their policy relevance, samples are often limited to children with working parents and/or those in poor or low-income households. Finally, some studies focus on publicly funded ECE programs (e.g., Head Start and prekindergarten [pre-K]), while others consider the full range of ECE arrangements. These variations create challenges for comparing estimates over time and across contexts; however, several broad patterns emerge from the literature.



Previously reported gaps between Hispanic and non-Hispanic children in the use of nonparental care—and the type of arrangement used—appear to be narrowing, particularly among low-income preschool-aged children versus those younger than age 3.⁵¹ Whereas studies a decade ago found that less than 40 percent of Hispanic children ages 3 to 5 were in any type of nonparental care arrangement,^{51,52} more recent estimates from the 2012 NSECE show that this figure is now approximately 60 percent.¹² This means that Hispanic children from low-income families are as likely as their white peers to enroll in ECE, although they remain somewhat less likely to participate than their black peers, whose participation rate is above 75 percent.¹²

The majority of Hispanic preschool-aged children (3 in 5) from low-income immigrant and nonimmigrant households who are enrolled in ECE have center-based arrangements, similar to their white and black peers.¹² Head Start is one type of center-based program especially likely to serve Hispanic preschool-aged children.⁵³⁻⁵⁵ Presently, Latino children make up more than one-third (37%) of all children enrolled in Head Start in 2016.⁵⁶ The use of a dual-generation approach

within Head Start, which simultaneously provides services for children and their families, could be one reason that Head Start has had strong enrollment by low-income Hispanic families.⁵⁷ In addition, Head Start is relatively unique among ECE programs in that multicultural principles and a family focus have long been cornerstones of the program.⁵⁸

Infants and toddlers are generally less likely to be in nonparental care than children ages 3 and older, a trend that is more pronounced for Hispanics than their non-Hispanic peers. According to a recent analysis, one third of low-income Hispanic infants and toddlers are enrolled in ECE settings, compared to one half of their low-income white peers and nearly two thirds of their low-income black peers.¹² These same national data show that the predominant type of nonparental arrangement used for this age group by low-income Hispanic, white, and black parents is home-based; roughly two thirds of infants and toddlers in ECE are in home care settings.¹²

National data on the ECE search process for low-income families with young children (birth to age 5) indicate that Hispanic parents are less likely to search for care than their low-income white and black peers.²⁰ While 35 percent of low-income Hispanic parents reported searching for ECE in the past 24 months, black families and white families searched at higher rates (49 percent and 41 percent, respectively). This same study finds that low-income Hispanic parents were less likely than their white counterparts to consider more than one provider in their search, and to change care arrangements as a result of a search. Characteristics of Hispanic parents' ECE searches also vary by child age. For infants and toddlers, Hispanic parents were less likely than white and black parents to consider center-based care in their search, although they were as likely as non-Hispanic parents to do so for children ages 3 to 5.²⁰

Whereas studies a decade ago found that less than 40 percent of Hispanic children ages 3 to 5 were in any type of nonparental care arrangement,^{50,51} more recent estimates from the 2012 NSECE show that this figure is now approximately 60 percent.¹²

While these findings may suggest more limited ECE searches and/or options for low-income Hispanic families, the results on their own, like those for utilization patterns, do not provide direct information about ECE access. Instead, they can be considered outcomes of a multidimensional process described in more detail below. The next sections describe our theoretical and conceptual framework for thinking about the multiple factors that shape ECE access for Hispanic families and review the literature on various aspects of this process.



Conceptual Framework for Understanding Early Care and Education Access for Hispanics

Conceptualizations of ECE access and parental decision making have advanced significantly over the last decade. Earlier work on this topic often used ECE utilization data to infer parent preferences, assuming that families' current care arrangements reflect what they need, want, and are willing to use. For Hispanics in particular, and immigrants in general, this meant that lower rates of center-based care were often taken as evidence that these groups prefer more informal family, friend, and neighbor care, without much investigation of the potential barriers these families experience.⁵⁹ Recent research challenges this outdated assumption that utilization simply reflects preferences, and reveals a range of individual, family, community, state, and national-level factors that interact to shape ECE access, use, and decision making.^{18,31}

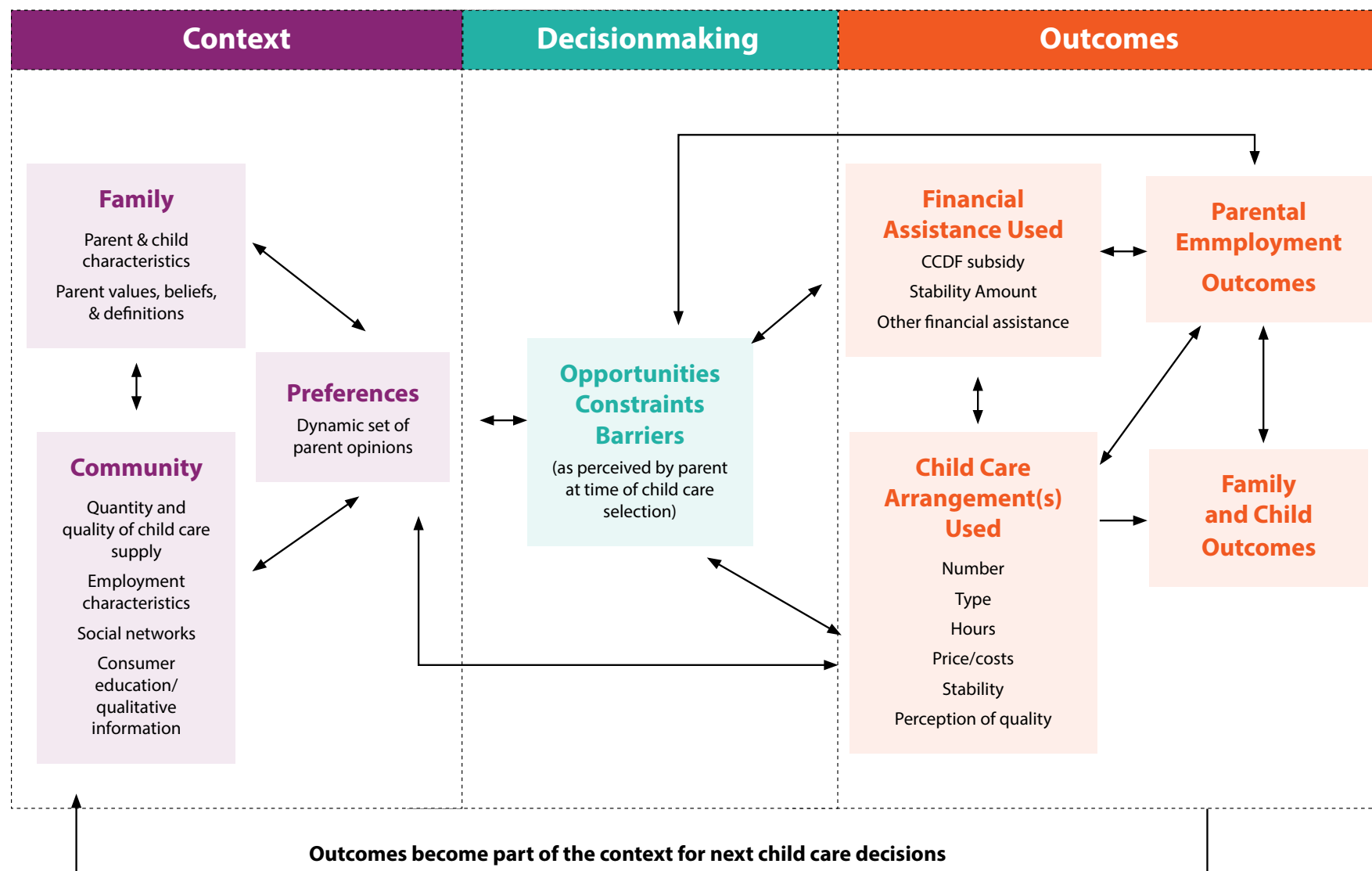


An ecological transactional framework showing how individual factors transact within specific contexts illustrates how parents are faced with constraints on their ECE choices, along with opportunities for ECE access.⁶⁰ These constraints and/or opportunities include household or contextual factors related to preferences, as well as factors at the local and/or state policy level that may disproportionately impact Hispanic households and may influence their ECE access and parental search and decision making.¹⁹

Accommodation model of child care decision making. The accommodation model provides an integrative framework for investigating and understanding the processes by which families search for and select ECE arrangements.^{27,61,62} It draws on complementary perspectives from economic theory (with its focus on consumer choice), ecological theory (with its emphasis on the contextualized nature of behavior), and life course theory (with its recognition of families and households as units of action and the importance of considering life stage) to highlight the trade-offs or “accommodations” that families make when choosing care given the dynamic circumstances and contexts of their daily lives. It recognizes that parents seek to optimize a set of outcomes, not only for themselves as individuals and workers, but also for their children, their household, and possibly their broader social networks. In other words, they are balancing caregiving, employment, and family well-being.

Figure 2 illustrates how a range of factors intersect over time to impact parents' decisions about the selection and use of ECE.²⁷ Factors at the individual level include child age, developmental stage, or need; family beliefs and preferences for ECE; and parents' agency and resources to search (i.e., navigational capital).⁶³ At the family level, key factors include employment characteristics (e.g., schedule and location), income resources, number and ages of children, and the availability of household members, extended family, or friends to provide care. For Hispanic families, additional factors may be salient, including immigration status, languages spoken in the home, and the English proficiency of household members. At the community level, factors that may play a role include employment opportunities, ECE supply (number, type, and quality of available slots), transportation options, social networks for sharing information about ECE, racial/ethnic composition of a community, and recency and pace of growth of immigrants within communities.²⁰

Figure 2. Factors that Play a Role in the Enrollment of Children in ECE²⁶



Note. Graphic originally published in: Weber, R. (2011). *Understanding Parents' Child Care Decision-Making: A Foundation for Policy Making*. OPRE Research-to-Policy, Research-to-Practice Brief, OPRE 2011-12. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This accommodation model does not explicitly depict policy context²⁷; however, accommodation and decision making must account for local, state, and national policy contexts as key influencing factors that shape Hispanic households' access and utilization of ECE. For example, significant public investments in recent years to expand ECE access for low-income families through expansions in CCDF, Head Start, state pre-K programs, and federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grants (linked to state quality rating and improvement systems) and Federal Preschool Expansion grants are changing the landscape of opportunities for Hispanic families. While existing research with low-income families has validated the accommodation model, more research is needed to document unique features of access and decision making for Hispanic families.^{15,27}

Socioecological context of minority child development. Families' decisions about child care and the use of government assistance are situated within a broader historical and contemporary socioecological context. Being of Latino and (even perceived) immigrant origin in today's climate of heightened attention and divisive public discourse around immigration policy creates a context that impacts child development, families, and communities. In Garcia Coll and colleagues' seminal framework for understanding minority child development, social stratification within society impacts the environments in which children and families live, attend school, and work.²⁹ Further, this model suggests that such environments can be promoting or inhibiting for children's development, and will eventually influence how families socialize and share their cultural beliefs and practices to contribute to child outcomes.²⁹ In promotive community environments, ECE programs can provide secure and enriching settings for Latino children, as well as support parent's need for work and provide a social support network.⁵⁷ In contrast, neighborhoods and communities that feel unsafe or discriminatory may lead families to keep children at home,^{21,64} to mistrust government services,⁶⁵ and to limit their engagement in employment and enrichment opportunities and social networks.^{16,38}

The negative and far-reaching impacts of the current climate around immigration policy for children and families, particularly those facing traumatic experiences, are being documented.^{66,67} ECE providers are reporting negative impacts on enrollment and attendance as immigrant and Hispanic families report being less willing to separate from their children.²¹ At the same time, many ECE providers report feeling ill-equipped to meet the needs of immigrant families and struggle to connect them to community resources.²¹ For these reasons, Yoshikawa and colleagues suggest that community-based organizations can play a critical role in helping immigrants locate resources and build social networks within their community.¹⁷ The impact of current policy efforts, their impact on Hispanic populations and their social communities, and ECE access will be important to monitor in future research.

Defining and measuring access to early care and education. To more precisely understand ECE access, we use a family-focused, multidimensional definition recently proposed by Friese and colleagues (2017)²⁸:

Access to early care and education means that parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports the child's development and meets the parents' needs.

This multidimensional conceptualization aligns with the accommodation model and identifies specific areas to consider in a review of the literature. This definition explicitly acknowledges that the care options facing any particular family are not simply the full range of programs or providers operating within their community. Instead, a family's level of access to ECE will depend upon their resources and preferences, whether available options meet their needs, and whether they are adequately informed about such options.

In sum, perspectives such as the accommodation model of child care decision making,²⁷ theories of minority child development,²⁹ and an expanded definition of ECE access all contribute to a multidimensional understanding of ECE access for low-income Hispanic children and families.²⁸

Research on Early Care and Education Access for Low-Income Hispanic Families

In this section, we review contemporary research on four dimensions of ECE access for low-income Hispanic families, beginning with an analysis of features of ECE arrangements that meet parents' needs, followed by affordability and how ECE quality is measured and viewed by parents, and concluding with reasonable effort. We focus on these dimensions individually as a way to organize the literature, but note that these intersect in the daily lives of families. Many empirical studies and papers recognize this reality and examine more than one dimension simultaneously.

We also acknowledge that these dimensions are part of a dynamic process (see Figure 2), rather than a static set of factors. In theory, most parents presumably begin an ECE search with preferences or priorities in mind for their child and household, but then must engage in an iterative cycle of gathering information, evaluating options, and revisiting preferences or priorities as they learn more, or as family needs and resources change.



Early Care And Education Arrangements To Meet Parents' Needs

As a parent or parent(s) search for ECE options for their child, the accommodation model suggests that a range of factors intersect to impact how they will prioritize and enroll in arrangements that partially or fully meet their families' needs. Two of the most salient needs that have been studied in relation to ECE are parents' need to coordinate care with employment, and to find care settings that meet the individual and developmental needs of their children.

Low-income Hispanic parents, like other parents, tend to identify employment as the primary reason for conducting an ECE search (followed by wanting enrichment opportunities for their children).²⁰ Maternal employment is a positive predictor of child care use for Latino children (as well as for other groups), and when studies control for maternal employment, Latino households use ECE at rates equivalent to their white and black peers.⁶⁸ Beyond employment status, when and where parents work—and the predictability and flexibility of their work schedules—can impact the types of ECE arrangements they search for and the options that are available to them.^{13,26}

Parents employed in the low-wage labor market are particularly likely to encounter job characteristics that make it difficult to secure and maintain high-quality ECE arrangements—these obstacles include nonstandard work hours (outside of the traditional 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekday hours) and irregular work schedules, especially if they have little input.⁶⁹⁻⁷¹ A majority of Hispanic parents work in low-wage jobs, often in such sectors as construction, hospitality, agriculture, and factory work, and thus are likely to face irregular and/or nonstandard work hours.⁵ According to national data from the 2012 NSECE, more than 3 in 4 Hispanic children with low-income working parents had at least one parent who worked during nonstandard times, often in the early morning, evening, and/or on the weekend.^{c,13} This same study found that roughly half of low-income Hispanic working parents receive short advance notice of work hours (i.e., 1 week or less), with higher rates reported by immigrant households. This type of scheduling may make it difficult to plan for and maintain care arrangements, especially with providers that offer less flexible care and payment options. Indeed, two studies of ECE decision making among low-income families suggest that providers' schedule of availability is the most significant factor weighed by parents amidst their many identified ECE preferences and priorities.^{1,72}

Evidence further suggests that nonstandard and irregular hours may act as barriers to receiving and maintaining child care subsidies. Numerous states require that children be enrolled in a minimum or consistent number of hours per week

^c Standard work activity hours are those that occur between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. Nonstandard work activity hours are those that occur beyond 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. They include early morning hours (5 a.m.–8 a.m., Monday–Friday), evening hours (6 p.m.–12 a.m., Monday–Friday), overnight hours (12 a.m.–5 a.m., Monday–Friday), and weekend hours (Saturday–Sunday).

to be eligible for subsidies.^{71,73} Recognizing this challenge, the 2014 reauthorization of CCDF includes several provisions intended to lessen administrative burdens for parents with fluctuating income and work schedules, and to encourage states to increase the supply and quality of ECE arrangements available to children during nonstandard times.⁷⁴

Types of care arrangements that fit Hispanic parents' employment needs. The next section of the review on ECE availability considers the extent to which ECE supply aligns with the employment needs of Hispanic families; however, reported associations between parents' employment and children's ECE participation suggest that parents with nonstandard different work conditions face different care options and trade-offs. For example, national data from the 2012 NSECE show that low-income Hispanic children who experience ECE during nonstandard hours (versus those who are in care during standard hours only) are more likely to be in home-based settings, less likely to be in center-based care, more likely to have multiple arrangements, and more likely to be in longer hours of care.⁷⁵ These results echo the broader literature which shows that, across family income levels, nonstandard work schedules are associated with the use of multiple ECE arrangements,⁷⁶ and that low-income parents particularly rely on precarious "patchworks" of care arrangements to try to maintain employment.⁷⁷

Given the realities of low-income parents' work lives, families might try to meet their employment and child care needs by having other adults, especially relatives, coordinate their work opportunities or schedules. Research with a multi-ethnic sample showed that parental care was more likely in two-parent homes than in single-parent homes, and that the likelihood of relative care (versus other types of ECE or parental care) increased with each additional adult member of the household.⁵³ In this same study, the likelihood of center- or home-based care (versus parental care) decreased as the number of children in the home increased. Other work specific to Hispanics indicates that Latina immigrant mothers and their partners often coordinate work schedules and work opposite shifts to limit their child care expenses.¹⁶



Although the causal direction is not clear, the use of parent and relative care is positively associated with nonstandard work schedules for low-income families, including Hispanics.^{68,69} Parents with nonstandard schedules may prefer that children stay with family members during evenings, nights, and weekends, but this may be the most readily available type of care during these hours (discussed further in the availability section). Family members who trade off care, as mentioned above, may also rely on nonstandard hours to make this arrangement work. Broader research on the link between parent priorities and utilization patterns reinforces the notion that more informal arrangements may help meet parents' practical concerns and needs.^{69,75} Studies suggest that parents who identify accessibility, proximity to home, cost, and availability of sick child care as priorities are more likely to use home-based care, while those who prioritize quality, provider training, and English fluency are more likely to use center-based care.⁵¹

Even though informal care arrangements with family, friends, and neighbors may help meet parents' needs for flexible, convenient, and low-cost care, recent data suggest that Hispanic parents are no more likely than white and black parents to choose this type of care.¹² Also, data drawn from the 2012 NSECE indicates that low-income Hispanic families are less likely to live near relatives who can provide child care than their white and black counterparts.¹⁸ Moreover, the presence of relatives nearby is not associated with greater use of informal care amongst Hispanic families. This set of findings is a departure from prior literature suggesting a cultural preference by immigrants and Latinos for in-home care by relatives.⁵⁹

The potential for ECE to meet a broader set of family needs. Beyond offering a critical work support to low-income parents and a developmental context for their children, research suggests that ECE providers may also help meet a wider range of family needs. For example, researchers working in New York City have shown that child care centers often serve as a hub for organizing access to other community resources and as a place for parents to expand their social networks.²⁵ Research has shown the importance of social networks for immigrant mothers in terms of sharing information and resources that benefit both the child and family.¹⁶ By providing information directly and facilitating connections among parents, providers can help low-income and immigrant families build social, financial, and navigational capital.⁶⁵ Two-generation early childhood programs like Head Start are also designed to help address a range of parent and child needs, including those related to adult education, English language skills, and family health.⁵⁷ Notably, Hispanic children make up more than one third of Head Start enrollment.⁵⁶

Additional topics related to how well Hispanic parents' ECE needs are being met. One potential indicator of how well parents' needs are met is their satisfaction with available care options and/or their current care arrangements. One review indicated that most parents would recommend their child care provider to other parents,⁷⁸ suggesting a relatively high level of satisfaction. However, it is possible that once parents place their child into ECE, they are highly motivated to appraise that setting positively, both to avert the need for a new search and to feel secure about the choice they made for their child (especially if few or no other options are available). Better measures of satisfaction, including evaluations of the components of care that are important to parents for specific children, would enhance our knowledge in this area. These data would be especially insightful to collect for low-income parents of all ethnic backgrounds because of the multiple constraints they face on their ECE choices, relative to parents from higher-income backgrounds.

Another area of research that is relatively underdeveloped for low-income Hispanic families is the extent to which places of employment are supportive and responsive to employees' roles as parents; and how parents manage child care and work disruptions, such as those created by child or provider illness. The work-family balance literature has tended to focus on higher-income parents in higher-status occupations. Qualitative studies of low-income Hispanic and immigrant workers reveal a significant amount of workplace discrimination,⁷⁹ which might further complicate parents' efforts to coordinate employment and child care.

Finally, elsewhere in this review, we describe results related to Hispanic parent preferences and evaluations about the quality of care provided to children in different settings. Parents might try to meet specific needs in selecting ECE arrangements, including developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate care (as perceived by the parent), and potentially arrangements that fit their individual child's temperament, interests, skills, etc. Additional research on the full range of child needs that Hispanic parents consider in ECE decisions, including child disability and chronic health problems, would provide a more complete understanding of access for this population. The general literature suggests that parents of children with special needs face significant challenges finding appropriate care arrangements and may, as a result, delay entry into nonparental care and rely more heavily on informal arrangements with relatives.¹



In sum, parents' employment needs are a driving force for the selection of care for all families. Research shows that low-income Hispanic parents are very likely to work nonstandard hours and to have fluctuating schedules. These types of work hours can complicate a parent's search for care that meets the needs of their child and family. Nonstandard work schedules are also associated with the use of multiple ECE arrangements. Low-income parents may turn to relative care or other informal arrangements because of the flexibility they offer and the limited range of alternative options available during nonstandard hours. However, Hispanic parents do not appear more likely to do this than their non-Hispanic peers, and may actually have less access to relatives as a nonparental care option.

Early Care And Education Availability

Although models of ECE decision making have expanded to include multiple dimensions, ECE supply remains a critical driver of the opportunities or constraints that families face in arranging care for their children. Family and household decision making about ECE utilization cannot be fully understood without considering the supply of ECE options available to families living in a particular area (neighborhood situated within a particular city/town, county, state, region, etc.). ECE supply has been traditionally measured as the number of slots relative to the number of age-eligible children within a community. There is growing interest, however, in knowing more about several aspects of those slots, given the policy goal of increasing families' access to high-quality ECE opportunities. Additional features of supply that are consequential for families include the type, quantity, and quality of ECE providers per child age; cost; location; and the capacity to meet families' needs and preferences in terms of hours, schedule flexibility, and other features of care (e.g., cultural and linguistic responsiveness, ability to accommodate a child with disabilities).

The 2012 NSECE is the most up-to-date data source about national ECE supply, and includes some relatively unique information, such as the distance between families' homes and ECE arrangements.⁸⁰ A recent analysis of providers serving high (25 percent or higher Hispanic enrollment) and low proportions of Hispanic children (<25 percent Hispanic enrollment) provides insight into how well ECE supply aligns with working parents' needs.⁸¹ First, regardless of Hispanic density, centers are less likely to offer full-time hours and flexible schedules than home-based providers, and few providers of any kind provide care during nonstandard hours. Among centers, those serving a high percentage of Hispanics are less likely to offer full-time hours and flexible hours, but less likely to charge late fees than those serving a low percentage of Hispanics. Among listed home-based providers, those who are high-Hispanic-serving are more likely than those who are low-Hispanic-serving to offer weekend and evening hours. Finally, this analysis shows that a majority of center-based and listed home providers, regardless of Hispanic enrollment, have turned families away because they have no available slots; however, high-Hispanic-serving centers are less likely than their low-Hispanic-serving counterparts to have dismissed a child from the program because of their behavioral problems.

Regardless of Hispanic density, centers are less likely to offer full-time hours and flexible schedules than home-based providers, and few providers of any kind provide care during nonstandard hours.

Findings on U.S. regional differences in ECE utilization indicate that children from the West are more likely to be in parental care (rather than nonparental care), relative to children living in all other regions.⁸² Children from the South are more likely to be in nonrelative care over relative care compared to children living in all other regions, and more likely to be in center-based care compared to children from the Northeast and West.⁸² A number of studies have examined geographic differences in ECE supply, considering how available options vary by particular community characteristics. For a sample of immigrant families drawn from the 2012 NSECE, living in a community with a higher percentage of Latino

families, living in suburban/urban versus rural communities, and car ownership are all factors that have been found to be associated with higher use of nonparental care.⁸³

Location and related transportation issues play a role in the accessibility of ECE. A study found that the presence of a Head Start center in a census tract increases Head Start enrollment by 50 percent, even after accounting for a range of community-level variables that might be associated with Head Start services and enrollment.⁸⁴ Moreover, the impact of availability of Head Start in a local community on enrollment was found to be larger for more recent immigrants and for those with less access to public transportation. This set of findings suggests that proximity of a center to families can facilitate access. Another study of a subsample of Mexican-origin families in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort (2001) found that child care centers were less likely to be in counties with higher concentrations of Latino families.⁸⁵ At the same time, Mexican families in this study were most likely to enroll in center-based programs in communities with higher child care supply and those with higher Latino density; this was especially true for families who were more acculturated to the United States.

Notably, geographic and rural/urban differences in ECE supply can create mismatches between the availability of care and families' needs. In the extreme, some communities effectively represent "child care deserts," where there is very limited or no access to high-quality care arrangements.

Finally, the intersection of ECE supply and employment supply in communities is an important consideration for understanding access to ECE. The types of jobs of available to low-income Hispanic parents will influence the number of employed parents, the number and type of work hours they have, the wages they earn, and the (in)stability and (in) flexibility they experience balancing work and family demands—all of which have implications for the types of ECE arrangements they will seek and be able to use.

Early Care And Education Affordability

Affordability is a critical component of ECE access. Even when communities have an adequate supply of high-quality providers that meet children's and parents' needs, and are known to families, arrangements will remain inaccessible if out-of-pocket costs exceed household budgets. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sets the standard for child care affordability at 7 percent (or below) of household income,⁸⁶ yet the market cost of center and regulated family-based child care exceeds the affordability standard in every state.⁸⁷ Households with infants, more than one child, or single parents—and those with low incomes—face the highest cost burdens for care, often equating to more than 30 percent of household income.⁸⁷

Low-income Hispanic parents, like their non-Hispanic peers, consistently cite affordability as a significant factor in considering and selecting ECE arrangements.^{1,72} Moreover, concerns about cost appear to lead families to use different types of ECE arrangements. In the absence of subsidies, many families are likely priced out of more formal, legally operating care arrangements, which tend to be higher quality and more stable than informal arrangements.⁸⁷

Both national data and smaller, localized studies with Hispanics included as part of broader samples show that families who place a higher priority on cost are more likely to use home-based arrangements, and less likely to use center-based care.^{53,78} The literature generally suggests that parents with less education tend to place more emphasis on affordability (relative to other features like quality) in their child care decision making, relative to those with more education.³¹ This may, in part, reflect the more constrained financial resources that tend to accompany low parent education levels.

Hispanics may be especially likely to perceive cost differences between different ECE options. Survey data from the 2012 NSECE indicate that Latino parents are less likely than white parents to perceive center-based child care as affordable.¹⁸ This may reflect actual differences in the cost of available ECE options across communities, or perceived differences based on different levels of access to information. It may also, however, reflect the fact that low-income Hispanic families are less likely than their white and black counterparts to access child care assistance.⁸⁸

Despite high rates of participation in some forms of publicly funded ECE programs (such as Head Start and state pre-K),^{11,53,55} Hispanics are underrepresented among income-eligible children who receive subsidies through CCDF. In 2014, 37 percent of U.S. children from low-income working families were Hispanic, yet only 21 percent of children served by CCDF were Hispanic.⁸⁹ Another analysis of national data shows that Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)-funded assistance serves a small fraction of eligible children, and Latino children are less likely to receive assistance than their non-Latino peers. While 13 percent of all eligible children (birth to age 13) and 21 percent of eligible black children received CCDBG subsidies, only 8 percent of eligible Latino children received assistance.⁸⁻¹⁰ These findings are consistent with a larger body of literature showing lower rates of participation for Hispanics compared to other racial/ethnic groups in several public assistance programs.^{7,8,90}

According to national data, the most commonly cited reasons that low-income Hispanic parents give for not receiving public assistance are a perceived lack of need, lack of awareness of programs, and perceived immigration-related ineligibility.²³ In the next section of this review, which considers state and federal policy contexts, we describe research examining how CCDF policies and their implementation may differentially affect Hispanics and subgroups of Hispanic families.

In sum, the literature generally documents the challenges of affordability in accessing ECE. There remains a significant gap in charting Hispanic families' specific perspectives regarding the relative importance of ECE affordability relative to other factors about arrangements, such as quality, that might be associated with a higher cost. Additional work on out-of-pocket costs for ECE, relative to other household costs and income, would enhance our understanding of these perceptions and potential barriers to ECE access.



Early Care And Education Quality As A Component Of Access

Meaningful and equitable ECE access is increasingly understood to include considerations of quality. That is, to meet child and family needs and achieve policy goals of mitigating the effects of poverty, ECE arrangements must not only be available and affordable, but also of good quality. A growing number of studies provide information about the quality of ECE arrangements that Hispanic families can access and use, as well as their perceptions and definitions of quality.

Quality of ECE settings serving low-income Hispanic families. The most readily available, large-scale information about the quality of ECE options in a community relates to type of care (formal versus informal) and structural aspects of ECE

settings (e.g., teacher education level or child-to-adult ratios), rather than indicators of process quality (e.g., interaction and instructional quality).²² The latter, which is more predictive of child outcomes,²² tends to be collected in smaller-scale studies. The literature offers some of both types of information about the ECE arrangements used by low-income families generally and Hispanic families in particular.

Some studies of structural and process quality suggest concerning disparities in the quality of ECE options available to low-income families of color. For example, one study found that higher proportions of Hispanic families in a community are associated with lower levels of teacher education, lower teacher wages, and fewer child care providers per child (i.e., lower availability).⁹¹ And, an examination of community-level variation in teacher-child interactions (as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System [CLASS]) within Georgia's universal public pre-K program reveals lower levels of process quality in low-income communities and communities of color.⁹²

At the same time, an analysis of national data from the 2012 NSECE suggests that centers serving a high percentage of Hispanics (25 percent or higher) compare favorably to those serving fewer Hispanics on several characteristics associated with quality.²² Specifically, this study shows that high-Hispanic-serving centers are more likely than low-Hispanic-serving centers to provide coaching or mentoring opportunities to staff and to offer staff such benefits as release time and tuition assistance for education and training. They are also more likely to provide access to screenings and support services

for both children and families, and to have staff with specialized training (e.g., working with children with language learning needs or children with disabilities). Finally, compared to low-Hispanic-serving centers, high-Hispanic-serving centers have lower staff turnover but higher child-to-adult ratios.



Although not a focus of the analysis, results suggest that differences between high- and low-Hispanic-serving centers on these predictors of quality may be linked to differences in funding sources. Two thirds of centers serving a large percentage of Hispanic children received public funding, compared to only one third of low-Hispanic-serving centers.²² Additional evidence that Hispanic children in center-based programs tend to experience relatively good quality of care comes from recent findings that roughly equivalent percentages of Hispanic (43 percent) and white (48 percent) children in Head Start are in programs rated as high-quality. This is significantly higher than the proportion rated as high-quality for black children (26 percent).⁷¹

Hispanic parents' views of ECE quality. How parents define quality and which quality features they consider important when selecting arrangements for their children may depart from standard measures of quality used by researchers and professionals in the ECE field. Several recent studies provide insights about what low-income parents in general, and low-income Hispanic parents in particular, seek in terms of ECE experiences for their children. The broader literature on parents' ECE decision making suggests that parents think along several dimensions when considering ECE setting quality, including provider education, provider experience and training, low child-to-adult ratio, provider warmth, activities to support children's development, open communication within the family-provider relationship, health and safety, and parents' trust of the provider.³¹ A qualitative study of low-income parents' ECE decision making (with a sample that is more than half Hispanic) finds that, although parents mention the importance of the availability, accessibility, and affordability of the provider, they also emphasize the value of opportunities for their children to learn and socialize with peers, and the importance of a sensitive and trustworthy provider who could reinforce their family's culture and language.⁷²

When parents are asked to rank their priorities when searching for ECE, higher-income families tend to prioritize quality over more practical features like affordability, schedule, and convenience, which are often highly prioritized by lower-income families.⁷⁸ In a nationally representative study using data from the NSECE (2012), compared to black families, Hispanic families perceived center-based ECE as less nurturing; compared to white parents, Hispanic parents viewed relative care as less nurturing, flexible, or affordable.¹⁸ Other studies with more focused samples have shown within-group variation in considerations of quality and how they relate to enrollment. Immigrant parents with greater concerns about quality were more likely to use center-based care than other care arrangements, while those who rated accessibility and culturally consistent care as important were more likely to use relative care and less likely to use center-based care.⁸²

Research with Spanish-speaking parents in two data sets comprising Head Start families (Head Start Impact Study, and Family and Child Experiences Survey [FACES] 2009) found that two factors were predictive of enrollment in a Spanish-speaking instructional environment.¹⁵ Children with Spanish as their exclusive first language were significantly more likely to be enrolled in an ECE arrangement with Spanish instruction over an arrangement that did not use Spanish. Second, parents were more likely to enroll DLL children in settings with Spanish instruction when the proportion of other DLL children previously in the setting was higher.¹⁵ This research could indicate that language environments for children may be important features of quality for Hispanic parents, especially when the child speaks Spanish exclusively.

Child age could also play a role in how parents view quality of ECE and which settings they believe will provide children with high-quality experiences. In a study with the 2012 NSECE data,²⁰ researchers found that low-income Hispanic parents of preschool-aged children (ages 3–5) are more likely than low-income black parents to identify child enrichment as the main reason they searched for ECE arrangements. For younger children (birth to age 2), low-income Hispanic, white, and black parents were equally likely to identify support for parental employment as the primary reason they had recently searched for care. Additional research on parental views of quality across developmental periods, and the extent to which they believe different ECE settings can provide these experiences for children, could be informative, especially given evidence that gaps in ECE participation between Hispanic and non-Hispanic families are larger for infants and toddlers than older children.¹²

In sum, findings reviewed here suggest that some aspects of ECE quality, like safety and trust in the provider, are more universally endorsed preference factors across low-income parents from different racial/ethnic groups. However, for low-income Hispanic families, indicators of quality may also involve the perceived quality and type of language experiences, including a provider who is Spanish-speaking. Programs that offer services for both children and their families may be attracting Hispanic families who perceive these programs to be supportive of families and of higher quality. Yet much more research is needed to unpack why and how Hispanic children are enrolled in certain types of ECE arrangements and not others, and how these patterns vary across different communities.

Reasonable Effort

Studies report that efforts by low-income Hispanic parents to locate and secure ECE may be challenging, often in ways that are different from low-income parents from other racial/ethnic groups. Miller notes that parents of DLLs may be constrained during the search process due to limited English speaking and reading abilities.¹⁵ Chaudry and colleagues described ECE choices among predominantly Latino low-income families from Providence, Rhode Island and Seattle, Washington with children from birth to age 4, finding that families used several resources to find child care but generally preferred to receive information through friends, relatives, and coworkers.¹ Forry and colleagues reported that most low-income parents learn about ECE providers from friends, relatives, and neighbors.³¹ Friends and relatives sometimes share information to recommend child care providers, whereas other information is about knowledge of child care government assistance.⁷⁸

Work by Vesely and colleagues examined a sample of low-income, first-generation immigrant mothers who mostly were from Latin America, and found that mothers who lived closer to family members acquired more knowledge about government assistance than those who did not.¹⁶ Additionally, this study also showed that Latin American mothers who were undocumented and living in an “ethnic enclave” had better experiences accessing government assistance than mothers with documentation who were living in the suburbs. This suggests that friends, relatives, and neighbors could be useful in sharing information about government-sponsored child care and possibly assisting with navigating the system.

Empirical research has been conducted generally on some factors that predict ability to access ECE. Families’ receipt of other forms of public assistance may connect them to ECE opportunities. For example, parent receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits increased their likelihood of using center-based care compared to parental and home-based care.⁵³

In terms of the difficulty of searching for ECE, the sample of predominantly Latino, low-income families interviewed by Chaudry and colleagues described mixed feelings about their experiences using local human services agencies for their ECE search.¹ More specifically, some families found child care resources from these services to be valuable, such as information on subsidized care and inclusive or special needs care, while others found them to be outdated, unreliable,

or time-consuming.¹ Similarly, immigrant parents interviewed by Vesely and colleagues described multiple barriers to receiving assistance, including application processes that were inconvenient to work schedules (number and timing of appointments) and government workers perceived as being rude to immigrants.¹⁶ Participants in this study also noted multiple obstacles in locating and accessing government programs (i.e., child care subsidies and SNAP). Many mothers did not know about such programs, had incorrect information, or were fearful about accessing government assistance programs.¹⁶

Latino families report barriers to access that include a lack of knowledge of ECE options or of how to navigate the system.¹ Forry and colleagues' review of child care decision making suggested that parents, especially immigrant or refugee parents, may have limited awareness of their eligibility for free or subsidized ECE.³⁰ Additionally, parents noted that they would be interested in learning about quality rating information systems to aid their search for child care, but they lacked knowledge of such systems. In a review of access barriers for families of color, which included Hispanic families, several state-level constraints were identified regarding eligibility documentation, waitlists, and family co-pays.⁷¹

Forry and colleagues' child care subsidy literature review also concluded that subsidy usage is low among subsidy-eligible families because of several common factors across low-income populations, including lack of knowledge and application burden, but also unique factors to Hispanic families such as stigma associated with using subsidies.³⁰ In terms of information about child care, Forry and colleagues also reported that most low-income parents see themselves as having limited ECE options, which influences their consideration of few child care options.³¹ However, the field currently lacks specific data regarding what influences low-income families' perceptions of available ECE options, as this is likely associated with a range of factors including availability and affordability.



A challenge in reasonable effort is that families report making time-sensitive decisions about ECE arrangements. For example, in research by Forry and colleagues with a sample of low-income Minnesotan families using nonparental care for children ages birth to 5 (7 percent Hispanic), a majority of parents (82 percent) decided on a child care arrangement in 2 weeks or less and usually considered one other option.⁷⁸ The remaining 18 percent of the sample took longer to decide on a child care arrangement (11 weeks on average) and usually considered two other options. This research suggests that family accommodation is a fairly quick process, and so ECE options must be readily available and known quickly to families who search.

Moreover, as discussed above, Mendez and Crosby found that low-income Hispanic families are more likely to only consider one ECE provider, relative to their low-income black and white peers.²⁰ Low-income Hispanic families also reported significantly lower rates of searches than their low-income black and white peers. This study suggests that more research must be conducted to determine whether low-income parents who use ECE have more stable arrangements, or if they are less likely to search for multiple providers who meet their needs and leave the search without securing an ECE arrangement.

In sum, the evidence reviewed here indicates that stigma, application burden, and lack of knowledge of available ECE options are among the barriers that low-income Hispanic families face in locating ECE arrangements. Hispanic families also report a lack of need and fear of government assistance. There is some indication that Hispanic families prefer information from friends and relatives within their social networks. Reasonable effort for immigrant and Hispanic families may be hampered by language barriers and other obstacles associated with the ECE application process. Finally, Hispanic parents may perceive limited choices and select ECE providers rather quickly if the arrangement meets some of their needs, without exploring a range of options that can accommodate their preferences more fully.

State and Federal Context for Early Care and Education Access for Hispanic Families

The roles of state and federal policies must be incorporated when conceptualizing and studying ECE access for low-income Hispanic families. Such policies likely establish constraints and facilitators that impact families' decisions on choosing how, when, and how much ECE to utilize (Figure 2, page 9). ECE supply has been the target of significant local, state, and federal investment over the past 2 decades, especially in terms of increasing the quantity and quality of options available to low-income families.^{11,93}

An analysis of U.S. Census microdata from 2000 indicates that the number and types of ECE providers vary widely across communities (i.e., Census tracts) according to residents' socio-demographic characteristics. High-income communities have greater ECE availability (both publicly funded and private ECE providers), more formal ECE slots, and higher-quality options than those with the lowest incomes. However, the latter fares slightly better on these indicators than moderate-income communities, who are often just beyond the target population of state- and federally funded ECE opportunities. This same analysis indicates that ECE availability (especially for center-based arrangements) is particularly low in predominantly Hispanic communities. The authors suggest this might partially result from a tradition of locating anti-poverty interventions in predominantly black communities. Similarly, a study of Georgia's universal pre-K program shows that communities with high concentrations of Hispanic families have fewer pre-K slots per child than communities with high concentrations of black families.⁹¹

We highlight three recent projects as examples of state and federal policy contexts that may serve as facilitators or barriers to access. These include a cohort-based, longitudinal analysis of low-income children in the city of Chicago¹¹; a longitudinal and retrospective analysis of children previously enrolled in either subsidized child care or public pre-K in Miami, Florida⁹³; and an analysis of elements of CCDF eligibility, documentation requirements, and user experience in the 13 U.S. states in which about 80 percent of all Hispanic children reside.¹⁹

In a study of children from low-income families enrolled in Chicago Public Schools kindergarten programs in 2013–2014, the vast majority (more than 80 percent) of low-income Hispanic children had participated in publicly funded center- or home-based ECE programs in the two years prior to kindergarten entry.¹¹ When factors other than Hispanic ethnicity were examined, the ECE participation rates for Hispanics were generally higher than those of non-Hispanics. Controlling for family demographics, prior use of other public assistance services, and neighborhood characteristics, the authors found that Hispanic children had a 2 percentage-point higher probability of participation in publicly funded ECE in general, compared with non-Hispanic children.¹¹ This higher participation was primarily in two types of center arrangements: Head Start and a newer offering in Chicago called Preschool for All (PFA). Finally, among low-income Hispanic children, the rate of participation in publicly funded ECE programs varied by family characteristics. Participation was higher for low-income Hispanic children from households in which Spanish was spoken than for those from non-Spanish-speaking households. Moreover, it was higher for children with one or more parent(s) born outside of the United States.¹¹

In a second study of a cohort of Miami children attending preschool and receiving follow-up testing at kindergarten entry and at the end of third grade, children receiving center-based pre-K programs performed slightly better on third grade testing than children who participated in subsidized care options.⁹³ While children enrolled in Head Start were not included in this study, the findings demonstrated that, in Miami, access to public pre-K and subsidized care were both associated with low-income Hispanic children's increased success on a third-grade standardized test of academic achievement.⁹³

Finally, a 13-state analysis of CCDF policies was conducted in high-density Hispanic states to illustrate how the state-level child care policy context may differentially shape Hispanic families' ECE utilization and further contribute to disparities in access for Hispanic families.¹⁹ Variation in eligibility requirements, documentation, and the availability of information in Spanish was documented. Researchers concluded that this variation likely creates constraints on Hispanic populations who seek access to child care subsidies in the different states.¹⁹ A recent analysis of national CCDBG data confirms significant cross-state variation in Latino access to subsidies.¹⁰ This work finds that access for Hispanics is lowest in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Maine, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, and Tennessee.⁹ Policy studies such as these can inform efforts to expand access for low-income Hispanic families, especially in communities that may be experiencing child care deserts.

Summary

Overall, this review has offered a critical synthesis of the field's current knowledge base on ECE access for low-income Hispanic families. Research in recent years has confirmed significant improvements in rates of utilization by low-income Hispanic families, relative to earlier decades. We also highlighted a range of barriers and facilitators for ECE access. Addressing inequity in access to ECE will require new efforts that build on prior work.

- Future studies must incorporate the unique factors impacting low-income Hispanic communities within the research design and execution of new studies to inform programmatic and policy efforts.
- Future studies of state and community variation in ECE supply, and outreach efforts within communities where low-income Hispanic families live and work, will be critical next steps in advancing ECE access.
- Moreover, consideration of the sociocultural ecology impacting low-income Hispanic families, their economic circumstances, and their family and cultural strengths can also be further considered as ECE access efforts unfold.
- Finally, future research should prioritize work with providers who serve low-income Hispanic children to identify professional development needs and supports that can improve the quality of ECE and more effectively deliver it to the children and families who use it.

Appendix. Highest-Priority Data Elements to Unpack Diversity of Hispanic Populations

Experts have identified several important attributes for better describing and understanding heterogeneity within the Hispanic population.²³ These variables (or data elements) include Hispanic ancestry/heritage subgroup, country of birth, parental countries of birth, U.S. citizenship status, time in the United States, language spoken at home, English speaking proficiency, literacy, highest educational level attained outside of the United States, country of origin, and legal residency status.

Data Element	Underlying Construct
Hispanic ancestry/heritage subgroup	Cultural background, demographics
Country of birth (of respondent, focal child, and parents of focal child, if not respondent)	Demographics, cultural, contextual
Parental countries of birth (of respondent or of parents of focal child, if not respondent)	Cultural background, institutional access
U.S. citizenship status	Social position, resources, institutional access
Time in U.S. (for individuals born outside of the U.S.)	Acculturation, institutional access, proxy for legal residency status
Language(s) spoken at home	Language proficiency, acculturation, institutional access
English speaking proficiency	Acculturation, institutional access
Literacy (reading/writing) in any language (of languages spoken)	Acculturation, social position
Highest educational level attained outside of the U.S. (for individuals born outside of the U.S.)	Demographics, cultural, contextual
Legal residency status (for individuals who previously responded “No, not a U.S. citizen”)	Institutional access, social position, household stability

Note. Table originally published in: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014). *Survey data elements to unpack diversity of Hispanic populations* (OPRE Report #2014-30). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is a hub of research to help programs and policy better serve low-income Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and economic self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to Child Trends, in partnership with Abt Associates and New York University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of Maryland, College Park. The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is supported by grant #90PH0025 from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The contents are solely the responsibility of the National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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