



Child Care Decision-Making: An Examination of the Processes Low-Income Parents Use in Selecting Child Care Arrangements for Young Children

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Introduction

Understanding child care decision-making processes is...

...important for:

- Assessing unmet needs
- Informing quality enhancement initiatives
- Targeting QRIS marketing to parents

... challenging because:

- The process is complex and influenced by many different factors
- Parents are uninformed consumers
- When ideal choices are not available, parents adjust their expectations



Purpose of this Study

Provide information on the child care decision making processes of low-income families in order to inform early childhood policies and programs:

- Identify patterns in child care decision-making processes
- Identify characteristics of families who use different patterns in making child care decisions
- Examine differences in the child care preferences, choices, and satisfaction with care arrangements among families with different child care decision-making patterns



Child Care Decision-Making Process

Priorities

- Three main priorities: cost, convenience, quality
 - Cost and convenience as constraints in child care decision-making
 - Parents' definitions of "quality" vary:
 - Trust
 - Health and Safety
 - Provider-focused Indicators (e.g., experience, education, attitudes towards children, warmth)
 - Activities/Curricula
 - Characteristics of the Care Setting (e.g., institutional culture)

Process

- Less has been documented about families' process when making child care decisions:
 - Low-income parents consider, on average, few child care options and child care searches tend to be short
 - Parents typically start exploring child care options through informal methods

References available upon request.



Child Care Choices and Perceived Satisfaction

Choices

- Child care choices vary by child, parent, and family characteristics (e.g., child age, parental employment status, family income , family structure, cultural acculturation)
- Child care choices are dynamic and complex
 - Informed by ...
 - parent's perceptions and rational choices
 - social networks and other contexts
 - access to information

Satisfaction

- Parents tend to report being satisfied on research surveys
- Need for new ways to measure satisfaction

References available upon request.



Gaps in Knowledge/Methodological Issues in Existing Research

- Studies tend not to distinguish between child care priorities (what parents want) and choices (what parents end up choosing for their child).
- Parents' priorities and satisfaction are difficult to measure reliably
- Studies of the child care decision-making process are scant
- As most analyses are based on average associations between variables, variation across diverse families is often lost



Data Source

- Wave 1 of the MN Child Care Choices study
 - Longitudinal study of low-income parents (N=323) involving biannual phone interviews
 - Parents were included in the study if they:
 - Had applied for public assistance
 - Lived in a QRIS pilot area or comparison area
 - Had at least one child age six or younger
- Parents from the MN Child Care Choices study were included in these analyses if they used some form of non-parental child care and the focal child was not in school (N=271)



Sample Characteristics

Survey Respondents:

- 92% were female
- Average age was 25 years (range 18-55)
- 39% were white (non-Hispanic), 7% were Hispanic, and 54% were non-white, non-Hispanic
- 75% of families were living below the federal poverty level
- 28% had less than a high school diploma, 36% held a high school diploma, and 36% attended some college or held an A.A.

Focal Children:

- 49% were female
- Average age:
 - 31% were infants
 - 30% were toddlers
 - 38% were preschool-age
- 62% were the first/only child in the family
- 13% had disabilities/health issues behavior problems



Analytic Strategy

- Person-centered statistical technique, used to
 - Identify patterns in child care decision-making processes
 - Identify characteristics of families with different child care decision-making patterns
 - Examine differences in the child care priorities, choices, and satisfaction with care arrangements among families with different child care decision-making patterns



Using a Person-Centered Approach to Identify Patterns in Child Care Decision-Making Processes

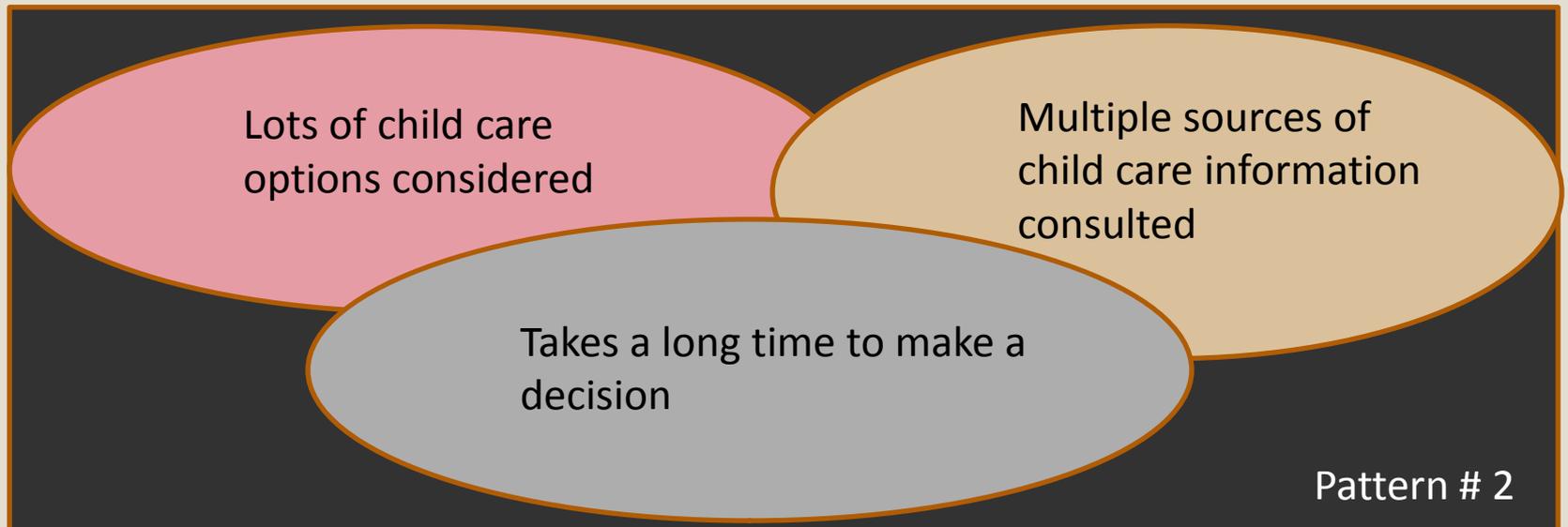
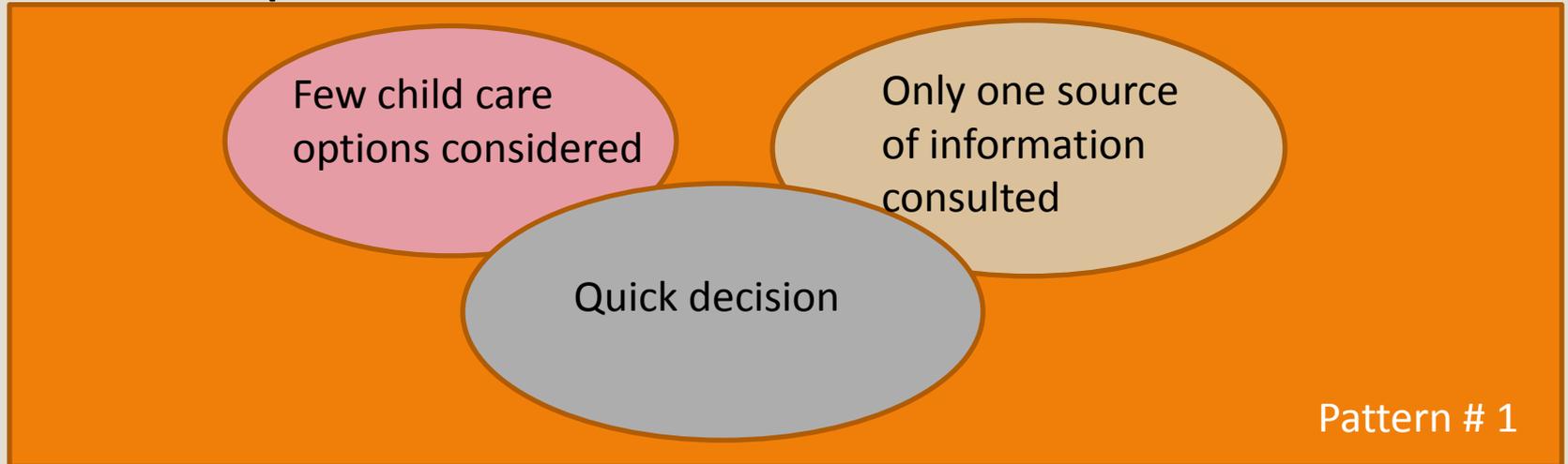
Number of child care options considered

Sources of child care information consulted

Duration of child care decision-making process

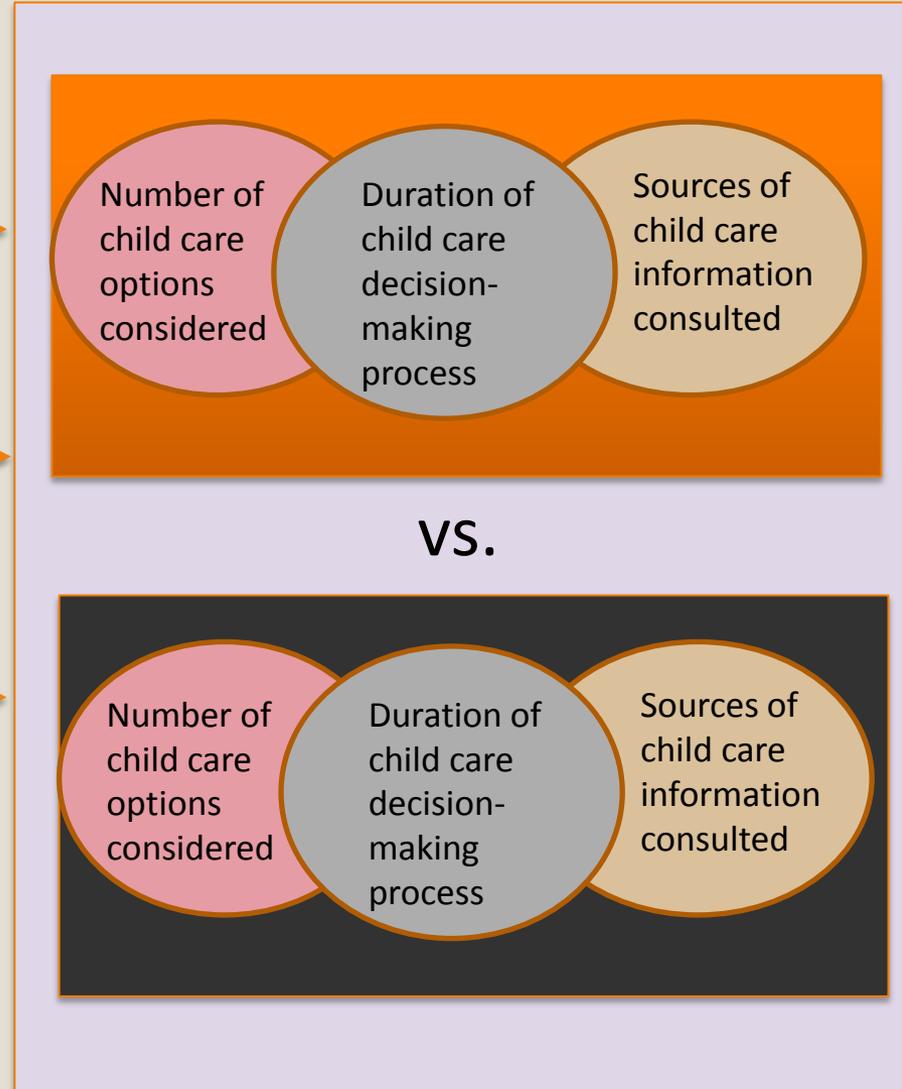
Question # 1: Do distinct patterns exist in the child care decision-making processes of low-income parents?

For example...

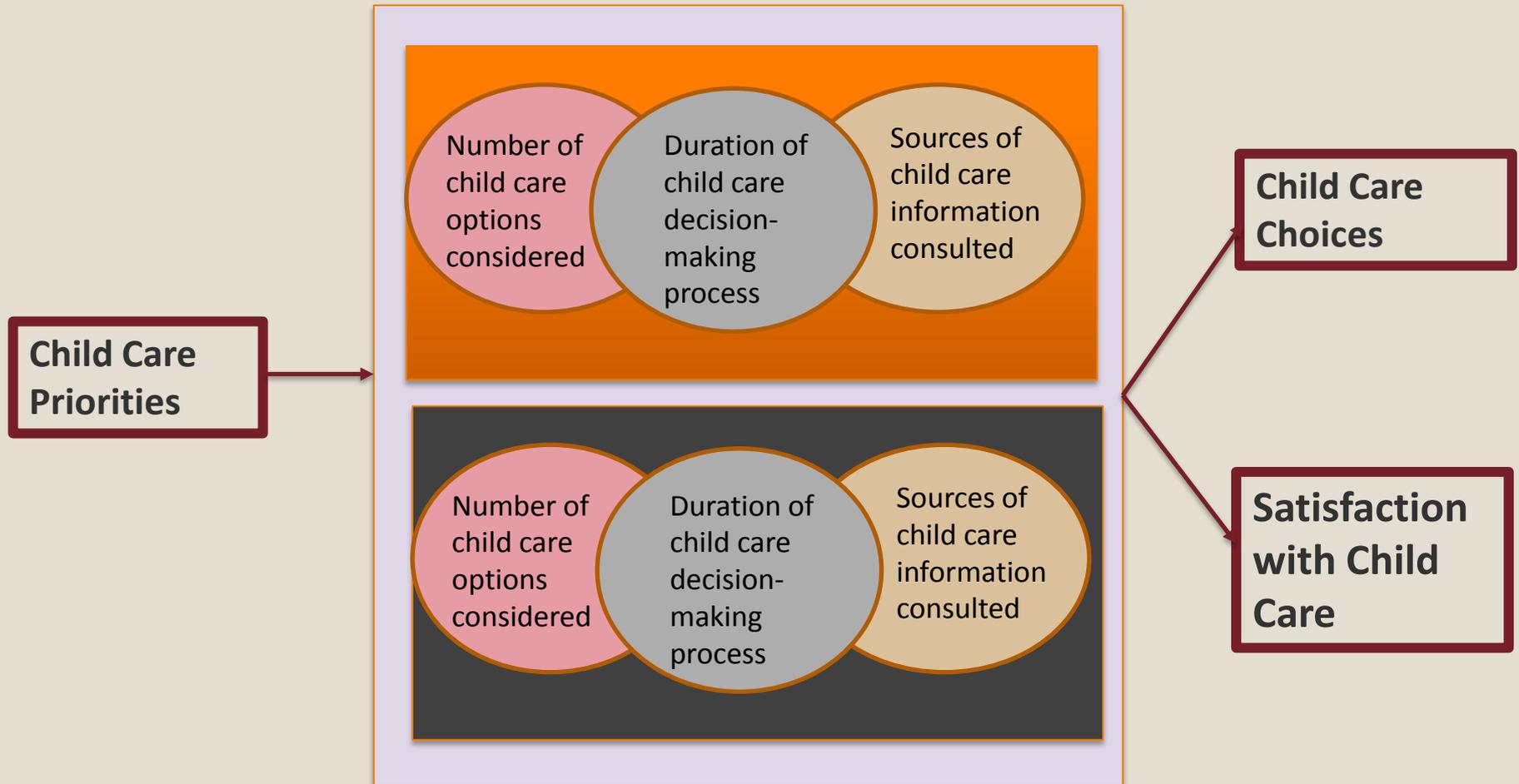


Question # 2: Are there differences in the demographic characteristics of families with different child care decision-making patterns?

- **Characteristics of the Focal Child**
 - Focal child age, gender, health
- **Characteristics of the Parents**
 - Parent age, race, education, employment status, health/mental health
- **Characteristics of the Household**
 - Household income, family structure, immigration status, number of children in the household, welfare receipt
- **Characteristics of the Community**
 - Urban vs. rural, availability of QRIS, zip-code level economic indicators (median rent, median household income)



Question # 3: Are there differences in the child care priorities, choices, and satisfaction with care arrangements among families with different child care decision-making patterns?



Parents' Child Care Decision-Making Processes, Priorities, Choices, and Satisfaction

Priorities:

- The majority of families cited quality (58%) as being most important in their choice among providers, about one-quarter cited convenience (26%) and 9% cited cost.

Choices:

- Care arrangements varied by age
 - The majority of infants (67%) and toddlers (60%) were in informal care.
 - Preschoolers tended to be in center-based care (58%)
 - Regardless of age, between 10-20% of children were in the care of a family child care provider

Satisfaction:

- Over half (66%) of parents stated that they would strongly recommend their provider



Identified Patterns of Child Care Decision-Making

	Quick Deciders 82% of sample	Time Takers 18% of sample
Number of options considered	1.3	1.8
Duration of child care decision-making process	1.7 weeks	10.7 weeks
Sources of information considered	48%- child care experts/professionals 46%- child care list 42%- friends and family	67%- child care experts/professionals 45%- child care list 55%- friends and family



Differences in Select Demographic Characteristics by Child Care Decision-Making Process

- On average, ***quick deciders*** were less educated than ***time takers***
 - 30% of ***quick deciders*** had less than a high school diploma (compared to 17% of ***time takers***)
 - 53% of ***time takers*** had some college education (compared to 33% of ***quick deciders***)
- Additionally, some age differences were found across the groups, with ***quick deciders*** being younger than ***time takers***.



Differences in the Priorities, Choices, and Satisfaction by Child Care Decision-Making Process

- ***Quick deciders*** were more likely than ***time takers*** to cite convenience as their primary concern in selecting a child care arrangement (29% vs. 13%).
- No statistically significant differences were found in the type of care chosen or satisfaction with child care arrangements among ***quick deciders*** and ***time takers***.



Conclusions

- The majority of low-income parents (82%) made a quick decision during their last search.
 - Decision was made in less than 2 weeks
 - An average of one other option was considered (M=1.3)
- A minority of families (12%) had a longer decision-making process
 - Decision took more than 2 months
 - An average of two other options were considered (M=1.8)
- Those who made quick decisions had less education and were younger than those who took longer to make decisions.
- Parents who made quick decisions placed a stronger emphasis on convenience as their primary priority for care than parents who took longer to make a decision.
- No differences in type of care selected or satisfaction with care were found between parents who made quick decisions and those who took longer to make a decision.

Questions for You

- Do the findings of this study mirror the experiences of resource and referral counselors in your state?
- What insights from your work could help shape future research on this topic?
- What innovative strategies is your state using to target information to parents who are ***quick deciders***?



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Additional resources about child care decision-making
are available on Research Connections:

<http://www.childcareresearch.org/>

