

Early Care and Education Choices, Quality, and Continuity for Low-Income Families

New Findings from the Maryland-Minnesota Child Care Research Partnership

The purpose of the [Maryland-Minnesota Child Care Research Partnership](#) is to collect information about low-income families' experiences with early care and education for their young children that can be used to improve state policies and practices. Child care subsidies that provide financial assistance to eligible low-income families are a focal topic of the research conducted by the Partnership and a subject of four new research briefs.

Brief 1: Stability of Subsidy Participation and Continuity of Care in the Child Care Assistance Program in Minnesota

Researchers analyzed administrative data from Minnesota to understand the dynamics of subsidy use among families. An important metric to examine is “spell” length denoting the time a child receives a child care subsidy without interruption.

- In Minnesota, as in other states, there is considerable variation in how long children continuously receive child care assistance. While half of children used subsidy continuously for at least eight months, including a quarter of children who were on subsidy for 18 months or more, other children had shorter spells, including a quarter of children with spells of four months or shorter. The median subsidy spell length of eight months in Minnesota is as long as or longer than in most other states that have reported similar results.
- In Minnesota, as in other states, certain characteristics are associated with leaving the child care subsidy program more quickly including parental participation in education and training (in contrast to employment).
- A short spell of subsidy receipt followed by an exit and a quick return, or cycling off and back on the program, raises concerns about the impact of disruptions for children. About half of children who left returned to CCAP within four years. Most who returned did so quickly, with 25% returning within three months and 33% within six months. This rate of return is similar to other states' rates.

Brief 2: Continuity of Child Care Subsidy Receipt: Why Definitions of Spells and Gaps Matter

Most of the research on subsidy dynamics has been conducted with monthly data on subsidy participation. However, some states and localities use weekly data. It is unclear whether and how these different time units impact findings related to subsidy duration and whether weekly and monthly data collected in different states are comparable. Weekly child care subsidy data in Maryland were used to address these issues. The conclusions drawn from the findings were:

- Analysis using monthly data on subsidy receipt will result in longer spell durations than those based on weekly data, particularly for shorter spells.
- Estimates of spell lengths based on weekly data are not comparable to those based on monthly data. There is no easy conversion between weeks and months, as a four-week break is not equivalent to a one-month break.

Brief 3: Implementation of 12-Month Child Care Subsidy Eligibility Redetermination: A Case Study from Maryland

Federal policy now requires the use of 12-month eligibility periods for families using child care subsidies.

- In Maryland, both six-month and 12-month eligibility periods are common, and longer eligibility periods have become more frequent since 2007. However, just 35% of child care subsidy vouchers had long (48 week+) eligibility periods in 2012. Thus, the data from Maryland shows that many families were not assigned a 12-month eligibility period.
- The substantial variation in median eligibility periods across jurisdictions in Maryland suggests practical implementation of the policy varied across locations within the state. Subsidy receipt and child care arrangements might be more stable with longer eligibility

Brief 4: Changes in Child Care Arrangements of Young Children in Maryland

In addition to the new research briefs on child care subsidies, Partnership researchers also examined the results of longitudinal family surveys (three surveys over 18 months in Maryland) to understand patterns of change in stability in early care and education arrangements. This brief found that:

- Over half of children in a sample of low-income families in Maryland experienced a change in primary provider between survey waves. From the first survey wave to the second (approximately eight months), 57% of children experienced a change in their primary provider. From the second wave to the third wave (approximately seven months), 62% of children experienced a change in their primary provider. These rates of change are comparable to those found in [Minnesota](#) for a similar sample, although the time between survey waves was slightly shorter in the Minnesota survey
- Changes were more frequent for older children than younger children. About half of children who were infants (50%) or toddlers (48%) experienced a change in primary provider between survey waves. The proportion of children who experienced a change was higher for pre-schoolers (63%) and school-aged children (80%) compared to infants or toddlers.
- Children in center care were the most likely to remain in the same type of care setting.

About the Partnership

Maryland and Minnesota are two states that have been leading innovations across early care and education (ECE) policy and simultaneously investing in research and data infrastructure to ensure that their strategies are informed by evaluation and new evidence in the field. [The Maryland-Minnesota Child Care Research Partnership](#) received a grant in 2010 from the federal Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation to examine critical issues in early care and education and use research findings to inform policy. The Partnership plans were developed in collaboration with an interdisciplinary team of researchers at [Child Trends](#), the University of Minnesota, RESI at Towson University and Wilder Research, and state partners at the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the Maryland State Department of Education.

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