



Many Young Children Spend Long Hours in Child Care

by Jeffrey Capizzano and Regan Main

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Forty-two percent of children under age 5 with employed mothers spent at least 35 hours a week in child care in 2002.¹ The proportion is even greater (50.6 percent) among children whose mothers worked full-time. These findings reinforce the important role that child care plays in the lives of America's youngest children and the need for policymakers to pay close attention to the quality of that care.

This Snapshot uses data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) to examine the number of hours that preschool children (children under age five) with employed mothers spent in care. The NSAF collected information about the types of regular child care arrangements used and the number of hours each child spent in each type of care.² The hours that each child spent in care across all reported non-parental arrangements were then totaled, and the child was placed in one of four categories based on weekly hours in care: 35 or more (full-time), 15 to 34, 1 to 14, and no hours (for children who were not in a regular, nonparental child care arrangement).³ This Snapshot investigates how the number of hours children spent in care varied by the number of hours the child's mother worked, the child's age, and family income.

Major Findings

In 2002, a large percentage (42.0 percent) of preschool children with employed mothers were in full-time care each week (table 1). Another 19.9 percent of children were in care for 15 to 34 hours while 16.5 percent were in care for only 1 to 14 hours. The remaining 21.6 percent spent no time in a regular child care arrangement.

The same share of preschool children with employed mothers was in full-time care in 1997 and in 2002. However, the percentage in care for 15 to 34 hours a week dropped, and the percentage reporting no hours in child care rose.⁴

Not surprisingly, children whose mothers worked full-time (at least 35 hours a week) were in care longer than all children with working mothers: more than half of the children whose mothers worked full-time (50.6 percent) were in care for 35 hours or more each week, while 27.9 percent were in care for 34 hours or fewer.

Yet a sizeable proportion of children whose mothers worked full-time (21.5 percent) were not in a regular child care arrangement. In fact, this proportion is virtually the same as the share of all children with working mothers who were not in a regular child care arrangement.

Older preschool children with employed mothers spent more hours in child care than younger children. For example, 47.4 percent of 3- and 4-year olds were in full-time child care, compared with 38.0 percent of children under age 3. Combining these children with children in care 15 to 34 hours a week, we find that 70.8 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds with working mothers were in care for 15 or more

hours a week in 2002, compared with 55.3 percent of children under age 3. The percentage of children who spent no time in a regular child care arrangement differed along the same lines: more children under age 3 (27.5 percent) spent no time in care than did 3- and 4-year olds (13.7 percent).

Children from higher-income families spent more time in child care than children from low-income families. Higher-income children were in full-time care slightly more often than low-income children (43.2 percent and 39.4 percent, respectively). The percentages of higher- and low-income children receiving 15 to 34 hours of care were similar (20.5 percent and 18.7 percent, respectively). The greatest difference between the two

groups was in the percentage of children spending no hours in child care: 18.9 percent of children from higher-income families spent no time in child care, compared with 27.5 percent of children from low-income families.

Discussion

A large percentage of children under age 5 spent long hours in child care each week in 2002 while their mothers worked. Although children whose mothers work full-time, older children, and children from higher-income families spent more time in care than other children, close to 40 percent of the other groups examined here spent 35 hours a week or more in child care. Indeed, even among children under 3 years old, 38 percent were in care for at least 35 hours per week.

DATA AT A GLANCE

IN 2002, 42 PERCENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN WITH EMPLOYED MOTHERS SPENT 35 HOURS OR MORE EACH WEEK IN CHILD CARE—THE SAME SHARE AS IN 1997.

ALMOST 50 PERCENT OF 3- AND 4-YEAR OLDS WERE IN FULL-TIME CHILD CARE, COMPARED WITH 38 PERCENT OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 3.



Table 1. Time Children under Five with Employed Mothers Spend in Nonparental Care, by Mother's Work Hours, Child Age, and Income (percent)

	No Hours	1–14 Hours	15–34 Hours	35 Hours or More
All children under 5 with employed mothers	21.6	16.5	19.9	42.0
Children under 5 with mothers who work full-time	21.5	12.7	15.2	50.6
Child's age				
0–2 years	27.5	17.3	17.3	38.0
3–4 years	13.7*	15.5	23.4*	47.4*
Family income				
Low-income ^a	27.5	14.4	18.7	39.4
Higher-income ^a	18.9*	17.5*	20.5	43.2*

Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. Total sample size for children younger than five with employed mothers is 6,063.

^a Low-income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds and higher-income as 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds and above.

* Estimate is significantly different from estimate in row above at the 0.10 level.

These findings emphasize how important a role child care plays in the lives of America's families. Recent research on early childhood development has found that children's activities can profoundly affect their later academic and social outcomes. At the same time, however, various studies have indicated that the quality of child care is highly variable and that many children receive substandard care (National Research Council 2000). Given the many hours children spend in care, it is imperative that policymakers continue to work to improve the overall quality of child care.

Reference

National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. 2000. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Data on child care arrangements and hours in care were obtained by conducting interviews with the adult most knowledgeable about the child. Since for 71.9 percent of the children in the sample that person was their mother, we use the term "mother" to refer to that respondent.
- ² To be counted as a child care arrangement, the arrangement had to be used regularly, that is, at least once a week for the previous four weeks. Hours spent in non-regular child care are not included in the total.
- ³ The NSAF's questions focused on regular, nonparental arrangements, including Head Start, center-based care (nurseries, preschools, and prekindergarten), before- and after-school programs, and care in and out of the child's home by relatives and non-relatives. If the respondent did not report that the child was in an arrangement, we assumed that a parent cared for the child. Such children are grouped in the "no hours in care" category.
- ⁴ In 1997, 24.2 percent of children were in care for 15 to 34 hours, and 17.8 percent spent no hours in care. Year-to-year comparisons were made using weights based on the 2000 U.S. Census, so 1997 estimates cited here may be slightly different from those in reports published before the release of the Census 2000 data. Estimates for 1999 can be found at http://www.urban.org/pdfs/309439_HoursinCare.pdf.

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SNAPSHOTS
of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

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