



TECHNICAL REPORT

Lessons Learned from Developing a Plan to Evaluate Child Care Subsidy Policies

District of Columbia's Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Policies and Initiatives Evaluation Plan

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Executive Summary

Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) lead agencies are striving to design and implement policies to meet families' child care needs and address gaps identified by the community. The Urban Institute (Urban) and the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)¹ engaged in several activities supported through a planning grant to assess the implementation and outcomes of OSSE's innovative child care subsidy rate and payment policies to enhance access to quality child care. The research team, led by a team of researchers at Urban and a co-principal investigator from OSSE, examined whether these policies are being implemented as intended and are associated with increases in quality child care access. During the planning period, the team piloted approaches to evaluating child care subsidy policy implementation and outcomes in the District of Columbia. These policies were designed to enhance equitable access to affordable quality child care for families who need financial support to be able to work or attend school.

We learned about designing and conducting research on changes to subsidy rates, co-payments, and how to best assess their effects on parents, providers, agency staff in DC, and broader system components. The report describes the promising approaches we employed to develop a plan to evaluate the District of Columbia's innovative subsidy system. We share these lessons to offer insights to guide other researchers designing evaluations on this topic.

Promising Approaches

From our planning activities, we identified several promising research approaches through activities we completed to develop the child care subsidy evaluation plan. We believe the following 10 approaches strengthened the long-term evaluation plan.

- **Partnered with the agency responsible for implementing the CCDF program.**² Our ongoing collaboration with OSSE was marked by regular meetings and input from policy leaders. We engaged a policy leader within OSSE as a co-principal investigator (PI) and met with her biweekly to discuss planned and implemented activities, methods and measures, and changes in child care subsidy policies and practices. Moreover, the co-PI worked with the team to develop and strengthen a research design to measure implementation and outcomes of policy-relevant questions.

- **Incorporated community-engaged methods³ through engagement and collaboration to shape the design, qualitative protocols, survey instruments, and secondary analysis approach.** We took steps to hear the perspectives of those implementing and affected by the subsidy system: families, child care providers, agencies, administrators, community leaders, and policymakers. In turn, these groups informed the evaluation design, protocols, instruments, and the approach to our analysis of administrative data. We plan to continue to work with community members at regular meetings, during which we will share findings through data walks and ask for input to inform our analysis of administrative data.
- **Applied a racial and economic equity lens to shape the evaluation design.** Policies and practices shaped by structural racism and classism have limited the educational and employment opportunities for families who are Black and Latinx and those with lower incomes (Adams and Pratt 2021). We deliberately focused on structural racism and considered how race shapes personal interactions. As such, we engaged people who identify as members of these groups to hear their perspectives to inform the evaluation design, ensuring their voices reach policymakers. DC's neighborhoods are segregated because of historical and ongoing discriminatory policies and practices. As such, we conducted focused outreach in specific wards (defined divisions within DC) that are disproportionately comprised of families who identify as Black/African American and Hispanic, as well as those that are economically disadvantaged, to ensure a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse range of perspectives were captured. Additionally, we incorporated an intersectional lens to the study design to document how race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other key social identities influence individual experiences and viewpoints within the subsidy system. Intersectional "means that people belong to more than one group and, consequently, may experience overlapping health and social inequities and have overlapping strengths and assets related to their group identities or membership" (Mbah et al. 2022). We emphasized recruiting a diverse sample, encompassing various racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, including representation from DC's priority populations.
- **Analyzed CCDF administrative data to determine how to best describe changes in supply of quality care for families participating in the subsidy system.** We worked closely with our partner to access child care licensing and other administrative data (OSSE 2023). We carefully developed a legal agreement that outlined how our team would protect the confidentiality and privacy of child care subsidy data. After securely accessing the data, we evaluated the scope and quality of the datasets to identify what questions could be answered through secondary analysis to determine what impact questions could be answered and to prioritize the types of data we would need to collect through interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

- **Took steps to be flexible to capture unanticipated changes in subsidy policies and practices.**

We developed a plan that accounted for the need to accommodate possible future policy and practice changes, recognizing that they change over time. Our plan captured past policies and practices but included sufficient flexibility to capture additional changes. Throughout the two years, we learned about new and planned changes in policies and practices. For example, the District of Columbia planned new payment policies and expanded child care subsidy eligibility in October 2023. We also learned that the District of Columbia is developing a new family portal so families can apply for a voucher directly through the portal, which will then be reviewed and approved by the Department of Human Services., rather than completing the process in person. The District of Columbia planned this new portal to provide families with easier access to subsidies and allow for parent choice. Typically, systems are updated once a year; therefore, we plan to update our approach to capture this information.

- **Exchanged ideas with other researchers to enhance the evaluation design.**⁴ We gained insights about approaches other researchers were taking to evaluate child care subsidy policies and practices. We identified similar constructs and theories of change. We also shared ideas about methods and specific instruments to capture implementation and outcomes of child care subsidy innovations.

The steps we took to plan the rigorous evaluation have given us the chance to incorporate the voices of those responsible for and affected by child care subsidy policies and practices. We hope that the resulting evaluation will result in data that inform child care subsidy policies and practices so quality child care is more accessible to children and families in the District of Columbia.

Notes

- ¹ “DC Child Care and Development Fund,” District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), accessed August 30, 2023, <https://osse.dc.gov/publication/dc-child-care-and-development-fund>.
- ² “What Is the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)?” US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Child Care, last updated December 14, 2016, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/archive/occ/faq/what-child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf>.
- ³ “Community Engagement Resource Center,” Urban Institute, accessed September 24, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/research-methods/community-engagement-resource-center>.
- ⁴ “DC Child Care Policy Research Partnership,” Urban Institute, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/projects/dc-child-care-policy-research-partnership>.

Glossary

Capital Quality: The District of Columbia's quality rating and improvement system.

Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF): "A federal and state partnership program authorized under the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) and administered by states, territories, and tribes to provide child care services to eligible families."⁵

District of Columbia Child Care Connections: The state-funded child care resource and referral program in DC.

District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE): The state education agency in the District of Columbia that serves as the lead CCDF agency.⁶

Department of Human Services (DHS): The agency in the District of Columbia that oversees a range of human services programs including services for youth, community services, and homeless services, along with a range of benefits including administration of child care subsidies in collaboration with OSSE.⁷

District of Columbia Shared Services Business Alliance (DC SSBA): Funded by OSSE, this is an alliance of child development homes, expanded child development homes and child development centers in the District of Columbia that provides administrative and business support functions to participating facilities.⁸

Facilities: Licensed child care centers (including Head Start centers) and licensed child care homes.

Level 1 facilities: Child care providers who are approved to accept vouchers issued by DHS to families in the District of Columbia.⁹

Level 2 facilities: Child care providers who have been authorized by OSSE to determine eligibility and co-pays for families seeking child care subsidies to attend their facility.¹⁰

Quality Improvement Network (QIN): Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership program implemented through OSSE and supported by federal and local dollars.

Sources

- ⁵ “What Is the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)?” US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care, last updated December 14, 2016, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/archive/occ/faq/what-child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf>.
- ⁶ “Office of the State Superintendent of Education,” District of Columbia, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://osse.dc.gov/>.
- ⁷ “Child Care Services,” District of Columbia Department of Human Services, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://dhs.dc.gov/service/child-care-services>.
- ⁸ “Shared Services Business Alliance for Child Development Homes, Expanded Child Development Homes and Child Development Centers Licensed in the District of Columbia,” District of Columbia, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://osse.dc.gov/sharedservices>.
- ⁹ “Child Care Subsidy/Voucher Program,” OSSE, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://osse.dc.gov/service/child-care-subsidyvoucher-program>.
- ¹⁰ “Child Care Subsidy/Voucher Program,” <https://osse.dc.gov/service/child-care-subsidyvoucher-program>.

Lessons Learned from Developing a Plan to Evaluate Child Care Subsidy Policies

This report describes lessons learned in the development of a plan to conduct a rigorous, multiyear, mixed-methods evaluation of the District of Columbia's innovative subsidy system. Researchers from the Urban Institute and the District of Columbia's Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) partnered to develop an evaluation plan to capture perspectives from people developing, implementing, and affected by child care subsidy policies and practices. The Urban Institute is a nonprofit research and evaluation organization based in the District of Columbia. OSSE is the lead Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) agency in the District of Columbia. The Urban Institute and OSSE developed the plan with funds from a planning grant from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF).¹

We engaged in several activities to develop an evaluation plan that would document the implementation and outcomes of the following innovative features of DC's subsidy system: (1) the cost-of-quality care estimation tool guiding subsidy payment rates and copayments (OSSE 2021); (2) a temporary waiver of co-payments and attendance requirements post-COVID-19 onset; and (3) the use of the District of Columbia's Shared Services Business Alliance (DC SSBA), which offers business and operational supports to participating child care centers and homes.² This report describes the lessons we learned developing this plan.

BOX 1

About DC's Subsidy System

The DC subsidy system is regulated and monitored by OSSE and eligibility is determined through DHS and community-based organizations that have subsidy agreements with OSSE. The two state agencies work together to provide funds to child care providers so quality child care is more accessible and affordable for families with low incomes with parents who are working or attending school and those who are categorically eligible for child care subsidies. OSSE provides financial support and business support services directly to child care facilities and through community-based organizations. The aim of the supports is to increase the supply of quality child care available in the District, and in particular to families seeking employment, attending school, or participating in job training.

Recent policy innovations have aimed to expand child care subsidy access equitably. Research has documented an insufficient supply of quality child care for DC families that disproportionately affects priority groups (OSSE 2021). DC prioritizes families who have been affected by ongoing and historical structural barriers to opportunities including families with lower incomes, families experiencing homelessness, and teen parents, who also disproportionately need subsidy assistance (OSSE 2019). These innovations are somewhat similar to innovations other CCDF lead agencies are pursuing (Rosenberg et al. 2023). Therefore, the rigorous evaluation plan that the team designed could inform next steps in producing evidence regarding these innovations for DC but also could be useful to other research teams considering how to best address questions about implementation and outcomes of child care subsidy innovations.

Methods Employed to Plan the Child Care Subsidy Evaluation

To develop a plan that was informed by people who design, implement, and are affected by child care subsidy policies and practices, the research team engaged in several activities to address the following questions:

- What administrative analyses can describe changes subsidy payment rates and co-payment policies and practices and possible associations with changes in parents' access to child care in the District of Columbia?
 - » What data sources and analyses are available to answer questions about whether rate policies and practices are associated with changes in care that is affordable, meets parents' needs, requires reasonable effort, and supports children's development?

- » What analytic approaches can be used to describe impacts of subsidy policies and practices?
- » What variables need to be considered to address structural racism and equitable access to quality child care?
- What valid and reliable methods are most appropriate and feasible in the District of Columbia to
 - » document whether payment rate policies and practices are associated with perceived changes in access to care for families with low-income who are eligible for subsidies?
 - » evaluate how and whether co-payment policies are associated with access to care for particular priority populations and different types of care (center-based, family child care, etc.)?
 - » assess differential effects of payment rate and co-payment policies for key populations of interest including families with different characteristics and needs, children of different ages, and children with special needs?
 - » ethically evaluate the impact of changes in policies and practices on families' access to quality child care?

Key Constructs

We identified five key dimensions of child care access as priority constructs of interest: (a) meets the parents' needs, (b) supports children's development, (c) is affordable, (d) can be accessed with reasonable effort, and (e) is equitable (Thomson et al. 2020).

Next, we identified constructs associated with child care subsidy policy and practice inputs, activities, and desired outcomes. We developed a preliminary logic model and theory of change that illustrated these key constructs. A logic model is a graphic illustration of the relationship between inputs (such as funding), activities (such as changes in rate policies and practices), outputs (results of activities such as number of providers participating in the subsidy system), and outcomes (such as changes in child care access) (W.K. Kellogg 2004). A theory of change describes the assumptions underlying the relationships in the logic model (Gienapp and Hostetter 2022). See appendix A for the constructs we identified in our formative protocols.

We also spoke with child care subsidy researchers at monthly meetings sponsored by ACF/OPRE to further refine the logic model, theory of change, and associated constructs. During these meetings, we

learned how others were operationalizing key constructs associated with the implementation and outcomes of child care subsidy policies. We shared measures and ideas for new instruments. We refined our original logic model to align with those drafted by researchers concurrently planning to evaluate subsidy policies and systems in other locations. Through this collaboration, we aimed to increase the likelihood that our evaluation approach would produce findings comparable with those in other locations.

Key Data Sources and Study Populations

We worked closely with OSSE to identify administrative data sources and variables that we could access to address key study questions and to inform primary data collection plans. We then developed and pilot-tested sampling and recruitment strategies to determine anticipated response rates, and strategies to sampling and recruitment to include in the evaluation plan. Below we describe the sources of administrative data and the approach to sampling and identifying study populations.

ACCESSING CHILD CARE ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

The Urban Institute research team worked closely with OSSE to develop legal agreements to securely access child care administrative data. Urban and OSSE staff developed a data sharing agreement that describes the specific data sources and variables of interest. The legal agreement also included details about how Urban would secure the data, how each member of the team would protect the confidentiality of data, and how the team would follow disclosure reviews before publishing any findings based on administrative analyses.

After finalizing the agreement, the Urban team accessed OSSE's administrative data to determine what questions could be answered through secondary analyses. The child care subsidy records the team accessed included data about (1) children and families receiving child care subsidies, (2) providers who participate in the child care subsidy program, and (3) providers receiving subsidies. Licensing data included details about of providers enrolling children of families receiving subsidies and the geographic location of facilities that participate in the subsidy system.

By accessing these data early, the team explored what questions could be answered and what analytic models could be created to isolate the impact of changes in policies and practices. Analysis of the data also helped us to identify gaps in the administrative data that informed priorities for primary data collection.

IDENTIFYING THE SAMPLING APPROACH

Our sample represents key groups who design, implement, and are affected by child care subsidy policies and practices in the District of Columbia, including the following:

- **Agency administrators and staff:** In the District of Columbia, personnel in OSSE regulates and oversees child care subsidy eligibility, rates, and co-payments, and the Child Care Subsidy Program (OSSE 2019). DHS uses the eligibility criteria defined by OSSE to determine the eligibility and co-payment of families who use Level 1 facilities including child development homes, expanded homes, and child care centers not authorized by OSSE for subsidy eligibility determination directly. We decided to sample the key decisionmakers in OSSE who oversee the child care subsidy system, leaders in DHS, and staff who support child care subsidy administration.
- **Community members and leaders:** In DC, DC Child Care Connections supports the subsidy system by providing resources to child care facilities and families seeking care. DC Child Care Connections engages in community events related to child care provision. The Capital Quality implementation grantee supports child care facilities directly through coaching and is also the grantee implementing the DC SSBA. We decided to sample the three leaders of these organizations and eight coaches and staff who provide these direct supports to child care facilities.
- **Child care providers:** DC child care providers vary in type and roles in the subsidy system and broader child care administration. Level 1 providers and facilities care for children whose families receive a DHS voucher or subsidy, encompassing child care homes and centers. Level 2 providers, authorized by OSSE, assess family eligibility and co-payment rates to attend their facility directly. Our study includes the perspectives of centers and home-based child care providers, Level 1 and Level 2 providers and facilities, and those not accepting families using subsidies or vouchers.

DC's child care facilities serve families of various races and ethnicities, languages spoken at home, and income levels. Our design includes facilities across the District's eight wards, caring for children in priority family groups like teen parents, families experiencing homelessness, and families accessing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

As we planned our sampling approach, we identified facilities by using the My Child Care DC search engine through OSSE, sharing information about the study in communities of practice, and asking other child care providers for referrals. We also attended local community

events designed for facilities participating in the subsidy system and collected data using a short survey instrument focusing on the five access dimensions. Through consultation with an expert on statistical sampling, we determined that our approach would include both nonrandom and random sampling. The nonrandom sampling focuses on reaching priority populations by going to the wards, neighborhoods, and community events with high portions of child care subsidy priority populations. The random sampling includes a representative sample of facilities, stratified by provider type and ward.

- **Families:** We identified families who are currently receiving or are eligible to receive child care subsidies, focused on priority populations, deciding to use a nonrandom, purposive sampling approach. Priority populations include families with low incomes, those experiencing homelessness, and those with teen parents. Families and children who identify as Black or African American or Latinx and those living in specific wards in the District are also more likely to be eligible to receive child care subsidies and therefore are priority populations.

We identified families by asking facilities to share information with the families of the children for which they provide care, sharing information about the study in communities of practice, and asking for referrals from parents we interviewed. We also attended local community events designed for parents who might be participating or eligible to participate in the subsidy system, and collected data using a short survey instrument focusing on the five access dimensions. We included a final question asking respondents about the interest in participating in a future interview or focus group.

Activities to Develop and Refine Evaluation Questions, Recruitment Strategies, and Instruments

We developed semistructured qualitative interview and observation protocols and obtained approval from our institutional review board so we could engage with participants and collect data. Then, we engaged specific priority groups to inform our refinement of the evaluation questions, methods, and data collection protocols. As we collected and analyzed data, we used findings from early activities to refine overall evaluation questions, methods, and protocols. Specifically, we interviewed subsidy administrators, observed participants by engaging with communities of practice, interviewed and held focus groups with child care providers, and obtained family perspectives using various methods.

INTERVIEWS WITH SUBSIDY ADMINISTRATORS

We began by interviewing OSSE subsidy system administrators to learn about recent changes to payment practices and rates, how providers experienced these changes, and priority questions. We relied on our strong partnership and the OSSE co-principal investigator's relationship with District leaders. She facilitated setting up interviews with key administrators and staff who provided insight about the implementation of recent innovations in the subsidy system.

We then scheduled interviews and focus groups with other subsidy administrators, caseworkers, and staff to learn their key questions of concern as well as their perspectives about variation in policy implementation. We probed to hear their perspectives about families' and providers' experiences with implementation, flexibility in implementation, and differences based on several factors that could affect equitable implementation. Findings from these conversations informed refinements in overall study questions and protocols we used to capture perspectives of subsidy administrators, staff, providers, and families. Engaging with leaders and staff early in the process helped us understand the historical and contemporary implementation of policy changes and details about implementation of practices and processes that affect providers and families.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Participant observation is a qualitative method in which researchers join group meetings or activities.³ We participated in communities of practice composed of (a) different providers, including larger and smaller centers and home-based providers, who offer child care to subsidy-eligible parents; and (b) parents receiving or eligible to receive subsidies. In the communities of practice meetings, we introduced the study team and the study and listened to providers' and parents' experiences with and perspectives on both the child care subsidy system and other ways of accessing child care, along with their priority areas of concern. Participant observation also gave us a chance to collect important background information that helped us identify additional questions and informed our refinements to data collection instruments with different study populations.

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS WITH PROVIDERS

We heard from providers who care for children whose families use child care subsidies (Level 1 facilities) and those who also have been authorized by OSSE to determine eligibility and copayment rates based on the regulations (Level 2 facilities) about their experiences and perspectives with subsidy system policies and practice.

We developed survey instruments aligned with key constructs of interest to capture the perspectives and experiences of child care providers. We pilot-tested two surveys: a short one and a long one. The short survey is designed to provide a snapshot, and the long survey is designed to probe and to more deeply capture information associated with each construct. Each survey included closed-ended questions associated with each of the five dimensions of the access framework (Thomson et al. 2020). See appendix B for the short survey.

We recruited providers to complete the surveys in various ways. We began by sending email invitations to providers with a link to a short five-minute survey. We also attended local community events and collected data in person from providers serving families receiving child care subsidies via a version of river sampling, offering a \$15 gift card incentive. River sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which researchers go where people with the relevant characteristics tend to be and recruit study participants as they “float” by (Lehdonvirta et al. 2021).

We recruited providers to the focus groups and interviews through a combination of outreach at communities of practice and email outreach, and then followed up with up to four reminder emails and one phone call offering a \$50 incentive. We determined that this amount was the minimum incentive needed to obtain responses based on cold outreach to providers. Through this outreach we learned the importance of using different methods and reaching out over email at different times of day. Through our interviews we learned that providers have been contacted by many research initiatives and have limited time to participate given the demands of their job, even when incentives are offered. In response to this concern, we developed the long and short survey and shifted to in-person data collection.

SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, AND FOCUS GROUPS OF FAMILIES

We recruited families receiving or eligible to receive subsidies and learned about their experiences navigating the subsidy system and the impact of changes in their eligibility and /or co-payment rates on their child care through interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

As noted earlier, we engaged in participant observation in parent led meetings to better understand families’ experiences participating in the DC child care subsidy system and related systems. We used information from these meetings to inform our development of both the interview and focus group protocols and the long and short surveys. We developed interview and focus protocols that explore how strongly (or weakly) parents believe that, with reasonable effort, they can access affordable child care that meet their and their children’s needs. The protocols also explore whether families believe changes in subsidy policies are leading to equitable access to child care with reasonable effort.

We then recruited families for the interviews and focus groups using purposive sampling strategies: we approached providers who cared for priority populations and asked them to share information about the study in their networks. We used this approach to enhance the likelihood that we would reach the groups most likely to receive child care subsidies and to be affected by changes in subsidy policies and practices. We also posted flyers advertising the study at local community events attended by parents. In addition, we attended a local community event to collect data in person via modified river sampling (Lehdonvirta et al. 2021).

We piloted surveys of different lengths to capture family perspectives. We determined that the long survey allowed us to capture more in-depth information from families to support the research on the five dimensions of access mentioned previously.

Analytic Approach

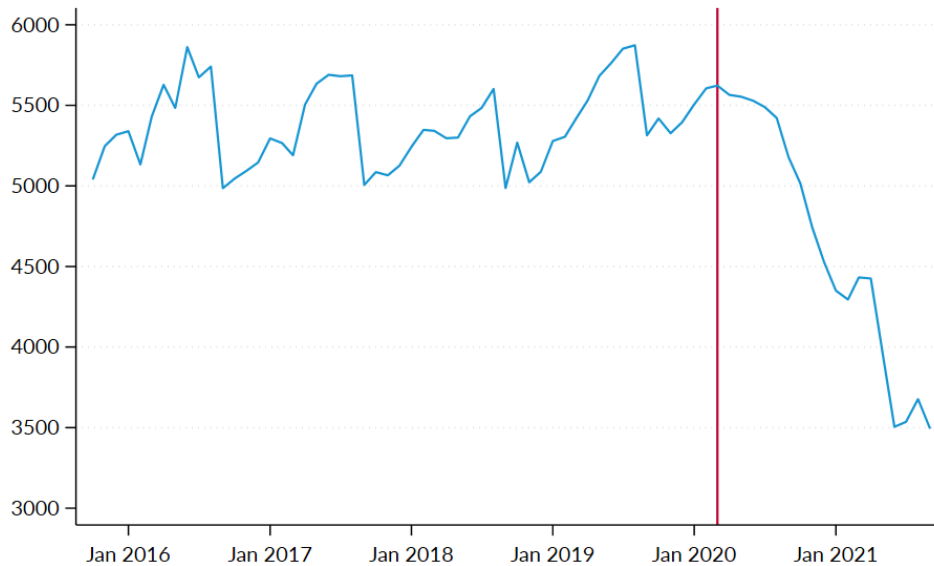
We analyzed the administrative data and qualitative data to determine the most appropriate analytic approaches we would propose in the full evaluation plan. Below we describe how we analyzed the administrative data and then briefly describe our proposed approach from the full evaluation plan.

ANALYSIS OF ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

We performed simple descriptive statistical analyses of the administrative data and explored possible inferential statistical analytic techniques. We also produced figures illustrating changes over time. We learned that analyses of administrative data can describe trends in the child care subsidy system in DC. We determined that for the full evaluation plan, we would develop figures similar to figure 1, below.

FIGURE 1

Number of Children from Birth to Age 5 Represented in OSSE Administrative Data, 2015–21



Source: 2015–21 OSSE administrative child care subsidy record data.

Notes: Estimates represent deduplicated counts of children. In the source data, children may appear multiple times within a month if they used multiple subsidies for different types of care arrangements. Vertical line represents March 2020.

Figure 1 shows a number of analyses we include in the evaluation plan. First, we can demonstrate seasonality trends in subsidy use that likely reflect spikes in child care need over the summer. Second, we can describe trends over time. For instance, notwithstanding seasonality trends, the number of records is fairly stable for the first four years. Third, we can describe breaks in trends. For example, seasonality trends break beginning in March 2020, which is expected given the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to developing figures that illustrate changes, we plan to perform these analyses for different subgroups of children, such as by age group or facility type, so we can explore questions of equitable access. We will also perform similar analyses based on quality designations to explore questions about access that supports child development.

We also determined the types of analytic models that appear feasible to examine questions of impact of policy changes on the supply of care. We began to develop analytic models using a quasi-experimental approach that could isolate specific policy variables to show the relationship between policy changes and desired outcomes.

Finally, analysis of administrative data helped us identify what additional primary data would be needed to answer questions about each dimension of child care quality. This helped us prioritize new survey and qualitative data collection efforts that will allow us to evaluate whether changes are leading

to care that meets families' needs and that providers and families believe supports children's development.

APPROACH TO ANALYZING PRIMARY DATA

We used qualitative techniques to analyze data we collected from our interviews, focus groups, and participant observation using a modified version of grounded theory. We looked for emerging themes that were not previously identified in the research. Since survey data collection for our sample involved a nonrandom sample, we treated survey data from providers and families as qualitative data. We looked for patterns and identified themes by manually coding the data. We tracked the demographic characteristics of the sample to determine if our sampling approaches were yielding higher shares of priority populations but noted that the findings were not generalizable.

From our discussions with providers and subsidy administrators, we learned that parents gain access to child care subsidies through different paths. This underscored the importance of asking families about their path to receiving subsidies and their perceptions of the range of choices they have for child care. Our discussions with providers revealed that families and facilities use various terms to describe child care subsidies, including *subsidies*, *vouchers*, and *scholarships*. Further, in some cases, providers not participating in the subsidy program told us that they participate in scholarship programs designed to reduce rates for child care through programs outside the official government-funded subsidy system.

Based on analyses of the primary data collected, we propose to continue the mixed-methods analytic approach in the full evaluation plan. For qualitative data, we propose to continue using a grounded theory approach. For survey data based on non-probability samples, we will continue to treat the data as qualitative since it cannot be generalized. For survey data from a random sample of providers and families, we will perform simple descriptive statistical analyses as well as inferential analyses based on the final sample sizes and response rates.

Promising Approaches

We identified numerous promising approaches in the activities we completed to develop the child care subsidy evaluation plan. We believe the following 10 approaches strengthened the plan.

- **Partnered with the agency responsible for the CCDF.** Our ongoing collaboration with OSSE was marked by regular meetings and input from policy leaders. We engaged a policy leader within OSSE as a co-principal investigator and met with her biweekly to discuss planned and

implemented activities, methods and measures, and changes in child care subsidy policies and practices. Moreover, the co-principal investigator worked with the team to develop and strengthen a research design to measure implementation and outcomes of policy-relevant questions.

- **Incorporated community-engaged methods⁴ through engagement and collaboration to shape the design, qualitative protocols, survey instruments, and secondary analysis approach.** We took steps to hear the perspectives of those implementing and affected by the subsidy system: families, child care providers, agencies, administrators, community leaders, and policymakers. In turn, these groups informed the evaluation design, protocols, and instruments, as well as the approach to our analysis of administrative data. We plan to continue to work with community members at regular meetings, during which we will share findings through data walks and ask for input to inform our analysis of administrative data.
 - » To effectively implement this approach, we engaged in community meetings to foster connections with parents, providers, administrators, and other community members and groups by participating in “participant observation” – a qualitative method in which researchers engage in activities as participants (George 2023). These engagements allowed us to meet community members, introduce our team, and stay updated on child care and subsidy-related perspectives and concerns. By participating in Quality Improvement Network (QIN)⁵ (Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership Program)⁶ meetings and Capital Quality Communities of Practice meetings,⁷ we gathered insights from parents and providers serving subsidy-eligible parents in large and small centers and home-based settings. What we learned about providers’ and parents’ experiences navigating the subsidy system and closely related systems, informed the refinement of our data collection tools. This method also gave us the time and ongoing engagement to establish trust with people who informed the overall design.
 - » Additionally, we interviewed the organization providing coaching for child care directors and implementing the DC SSBA. The DC SSBA provides business and operational support to participating facilities. Interviews and engagements with these important community organizations, yielded important insights into the subsidy system and the important role these and other community organizations play in supporting child care providers and families with young children.⁸

- **Applied a racial and economic equity lens to shape the evaluation design.** Policies and practices shaped by structural racism and classism have limited the educational and employment opportunities for families who are Black and Latinx and those with lower incomes (Adams and Pratt 2021). We deliberately focused on structural racism and considered how race shapes personal interactions. As such, we engaged people who identify as members of these groups to hear their perspectives to inform the evaluation design, ensuring their voices reach policymakers. DC’s neighborhoods are segregated because of historical and ongoing discriminatory policies and practices. We conducted focused outreach in wards (defined geographic areas in DC) disproportionately composed of families who identify as Black/African American and Hispanic to ensure a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse range of perspectives were captured.

We also incorporated an intersectional lens to the study design to document how race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other key social identities influence individual experiences and viewpoints within the subsidy system. Intersectional “means that people belong to more than one group and, consequently, may experience overlapping health and social inequities and have overlapping strengths and assets related to their group identities or membership” (Mbah et al. 2022, 2). We emphasized recruiting a diverse sample, encompassing various racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, including representation from DC’s priority populations.

Families from racially marginalized groups are affected by historical and ongoing systemic oppression, such as barriers to employment and educational opportunities, increasing the likelihood of needing subsidized child care. The District of Columbia, like most American cities in the United States, is racially segregated as a result of historical and ongoing structural racism in housing. DC is composed of eight wards that have different racial, ethnic, economic, and family demographic characteristics. Wards 7 and 8 are predominately Black and have the highest shares of households with children and families living in poverty. Wards 4 and 5 are majority Black and predominately non-white groups, with moderate shares of households with children and families living in poverty. Ward 6 is majority non-white families. Wards 1, 2, and 3 are majority white, with lower poverty rates, shares of households with children, and families in poverty. We kept this in mind as we engaged in outreach with child care facilities in the District, given that parents and caregivers often select child care close to their homes or workplaces.

In our discussion with agency administrators and community members with vested interest in child care subsidies underscored the importance of examining changes in access for families who belong to priority populations, including lower-income families, families experiencing

homelessness, and teen parents, given they disproportionately need subsidy assistance. We also sought out child care facilities and other community organizations that serve these populations to ensure we capture the perspective of these priority populations in our study design.

We also incorporated a racially and economically diverse range of perspectives in our evaluation plan and used a range of approaches to sample from priority populations most likely to need subsidies. To increase the validity of the overall approach, we reached out to providers serving priority groups, shared research details in vested communities of practice, and asked providers to spread the word in their networks. We focused on connecting with providers and families reflecting cultural and linguistic diversity, along with facilities providing care to families with very low family incomes, experiencing homelessness, children with special needs, and children of teen parents. We also piloted innovative recruitment strategies by attending a community event in a neighborhood with priority populations and collecting data on site.

- **Analyzed CCDF administrative data to determine how to best describe changes in supply of quality care for families participating in the subsidy system.** We worked closely with our partner to access child care licensing and other administrative data (OSSE 2023). We carefully developed a legal agreement that outlined how our team would protect the confidentiality and privacy of child care subsidy data. After securely accessing the data, we evaluated the scope and quality of the data, to identify what questions we could answer through secondary analysis and to prioritize the types of data we would need to collect through interviews, focus groups and surveys.
- **Took steps to be flexible to capture unanticipated changes in subsidy policies and practices.** We developed a plan that accounted for the need to accommodate possible future policy and practice changes, recognizing that they change over time. Our plan captured past policies and practices but included sufficient flexibility to capture additional changes. Throughout the two years, we learned about new and planned changes in policies and practices. For example, the District of Columbia planned new payment policies and expanded child care subsidy eligibility in October 2023. We also learned that the District of Columbia had developed a new family portal where families could directly submit their voucher applications, to then be reviewed and approved by DHS, rather than completing the process in-person. The District of Columbia planned this new portal to provide families with easier access to subsidies and allow for parent choice. Systems are typically updated once a year; therefore, we plan to update our approach to capture this information

- **Exchanged ideas with other researchers planning to evaluate child care subsidy policies to enhance the evaluation design.**⁹ We gained insights about approaches other researchers were taking to examine child care subsidy policies. The US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families sponsored regular meetings of research teams to exchange ideas and approaches with other researcher-agency partnership teams. Through these meetings, we identified constructs and theories of change that were similar across states and communities. We shared ideas about methods and specific instruments to capture implementation and outcomes of child care subsidy innovations. The opportunities strengthened the design and likelihood that findings will be comparable across locations.

Conclusion

By employing these promising strategies, we designed a robust plan to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the District of Columbia’s child care subsidy system innovations. We will apply these lessons when we execute the evaluation to provide evidence that will inform improvements in child care subsidy implementation and outcomes.

Appendix A. Key Constructs Addressed in Formative Protocols

Subsidy Leaders, Administrators, Providers, and Leaders from Community-Based Organizations

- About the respondent
 - » Role, education, characteristic, background knowledge
 - » Other
- Subsidy payment policies: current policies, recent changes, and planned changes in relation to reasonable effort, affordable, supports child development, meets parents' needs, and is equitable
 - » Co-payments
 - » Eligibility
 - » Rates
- Subsidy payment practices: current practices, recent changes, planned changes, anticipated implementation barriers, perception of how implementation effects on staff and families, variation in implementation across five dimensions of access. Probe to learn about providers differences:
 - » Level 1 versus Level 2
 - » Types
 - » Characteristic (demographic, neighborhood, size)
 - » Share of families accessing subsidies

Probe to learn about perceptions of family experience across five dimensions of access based on

- » Provider level, type, characteristic, etc.
- » Experiences with subsidy system
- » Other

- Desired and perceived effects of policies and practices related to each dimension of access on
 - » Community-based organizations
 - » Child care providers
 - » Families based on family characteristics and experiences
- Context affecting subsidy policy and implementation in the District of Columbia regarding each dimension of access. Probe to explore
 - » Post-pandemic context changes
 - » Pay equity fund
 - » Pre-kindergarten expansion
 - » Changes in overall labor force and early care and education labor force
 - » Other
- Perceptions and experiences of child care providers and subsidy case workers who determine child care subsidy eligibility on each dimension of child care access. Probe for differences based on
 - » Characteristics (length of tenure in role, education and experiences, ward, etc.)
 - » Variation in implementation of policies and practices
 - » Training, supports, and information shared with providers, caseworkers, and others about changes
 - » Others involved in the system whose role is important to document
- Advice to inform recruitment strategies
 - » How did you learn about our study?
 - » Is the gift card incentive appropriate?
 - » What advice to you have for us to enhance our response rates for an online survey?
 - » What other advice do you have for us that could improve our follow-up research activities?
- Other
 - » Anything else you think we should ask or consider?

Families

- About the respondent
 - » Role, education, characteristic, employment
 - » About children in the family
 - » About type of subsidy (Level 1 or Level 2)
 - » Current co-payments
 - » About length of experience with subsidy system
 - » Other
- Perceptions of subsidy payment policies: current policies, recent changes, and planned changes in relation to reasonable effort, affordable, supports child development, meets parents needs and is equitable
 - » Co-payments
 - » Eligibility
- Perception of subsidy payment practices: current practices, recent changes, planned changes, anticipated implementation barriers, perception of how implementation effects on staff and families, variation in implementation across five dimensions of access. Probe to learn about family perceptions based on
 - » Provider level, type, characteristic, etc.
 - » Experiences with subsidy system
 - » Characteristic of the provider (demographic, neighborhood, cultural and linguistic competence, size)
 - » Other
- Context affecting subsidy policy and implementation in the District of Columbia regarding each dimension of access. Probe to explore
 - » Post-pandemic context changes
 - » Pay equity fund
 - » Pre-kindergarten expansion
 - » Changes in overall labor force and early care and education labor force
 - » Other

- Perceptions of child care providers and subsidy case workers who determine child care subsidy eligibility on each dimension of child care access. Probe for differences in perception based on
 - » Characteristics (length of tenure in role, education and experiences, ward, etc.)
 - » Experiences with interactions and quality of interactions
 - » Others involved in the system whose role is important to document
- Advice to inform recruitment strategies
 - » How did you learn about our study?
 - » Is the gift card incentive appropriate?
 - » What advice to you have for us to enhance our response rates for an online survey?
 - » What other advice do you have for us that could improve our follow-up research activities?
- Other
 - » Anything else you think we should ask or consider?

Appendix B. Short Provider Online and Paper Survey Instrument

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. A research team at the Urban Institute created this survey. We will use what we learn from your answers to understand early childhood educator's experiences with and perspectives on the child care subsidy system. Eligible survey participants must be over 18 years old and provide child care in DC. Survey participants can make only one survey submission. The first 10 early childhood educators who meet eligibility criteria will receive a \$50 e-gift card.

Insert the informed consent:

By submitting the survey, I indicate that I have read the information provided and consent to participate.

1. How do you rate your overall treatment in your interactions with government administrators managing subsidy payments?
 - a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
 - f. Not applicable
2. How do you rate current **subsidy payments** to your facility?
 - a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
3. How do you rate **cost of child** care to families in the District of Columbia?
 - a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good

- d. fair
 - e. poor
4. How do you rate **quality of child care** available to families in the District of Columbia?
- a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
5. How do you rate whether **child care** available to families in the District of Columbia meets parents' needs?
- a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
6. How do you rate whether **child care** available to families in the District of Columbia meets the needs of children in care?
- a. Excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
7. Please check each item that describes your facility:
- a. Center, Level 1
 - b. Center, Level 2
 - c. Child development home
 - d. Other
8. Zip code of your facility _____
9. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity? (Select all that apply)
- a. Asian American

- b. Black/African American
- c. Hispanic/Latinx
- d. Native American
- e. White
- f. Race, ethnicity, or origin not listed: please indicate _____

10. What is your gender:

- a. Woman
- b. Man
- c. Nonbinary
- d. Identity not listed: _____

11. Are you interested in talking with us to share your thoughts about child care in DC? Participants in interviews will have an opportunity to access another \$50 gift card.

- a. Yes. Please send enter your email or phone number → _____
 - b. No.
-

Appendix C. Short Parent Online and Paper Survey Instrument

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. A research team at the Urban Institute created this survey. Survey participants can make only one survey submission. The first 10 parents who meet eligibility criteria will receive a \$50 e-gift card.

Insert the informed consent:

By submitting the survey, I indicate that I have read the information provided and consent to participate.

1. How do you rate your **overall treatment in your interactions with those managing child care subsidy forms?**
 - a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
 - f. Not applicable
2. How do you rate your **overall treatment in your interactions with those managing co-payments?**
 - a. Excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
 - f. Not applicable
3. How do you rate **cost of child care?**
 - a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good

- d. fair
 - e. poor
4. How do you rate **quality of child care**?
- a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
5. How do you rate **child care** in **meeting your needs as a parent/guardian**?
- a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
6. How do you rate **child care** in **meeting the needs of your child(ren)**?
- a. excellent
 - b. very good
 - c. good
 - d. fair
 - e. poor
7. Please check each item that describes your family. Please check all that apply:
- a. Parent or guardian of child or children under age 13
 - b. Use a child care subsidy voucher
 - c. Use a child care center
 - d. Use a family child care home
 - e. Teen parent
 - f. Foster parent
 - g. Access TANF
 - h. Family experiencing homelessness
 - i. Child has disability
 - j. Parents or guardians have disability

8. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity? (Select all that apply)
- a. Asian American
 - b. Black/African American
 - c. Hispanic/Latinx
 - d. Native American
 - e. White
 - f. Race, ethnicity, or origin not listed: please indicate _____
9. What is your gender:
- a. Woman
 - b. Man
 - c. Nonbinary
 - d. Identity not listed: _____
10. Are you interested in talking with us to share your thoughts about child care in DC? Participants in interviews will have an opportunity to access another \$50 gift card.
- a. Yes. Please send enter your email or phone number → _____
 - b. No.
-

Notes

- ¹ “Coordinated Evaluations of Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Policies and Initiatives: Implementation Grants,” HHS-2023-ACF-OPRE-YE-0040, Grants.gov, accessed September 24, 2023, <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/search-grants.html?keywords=HHS-2021-ACF-OPRE-YE-1901>.
- ² “Shared Services Business Alliance for Child Development Homes, Expanded Child Development Homes and Child Development Centers Licensed in the District of Columbia,” Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), accessed August 30, 2023, <https://osse.dc.gov/sharedservices>.
- ³ According to Tegan George, “Participant observation is a research method where the researcher immerses themselves in a particular social setting or group, observing the behaviors, interactions, and practices of the participants. This can be a valuable method for any research project that seeks to understand the experiences of individuals or groups in a particular social context. See Tegan George, “What Is Participant Observation? Definition & Examples,” Scribbr, March 10, 2023, <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/participant-observation/>.
- ⁴ “Community Engagement Resource Center,” Urban Institute, accessed September 24, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/research-methods/community-engagement-resource-center>.
- ⁵ “Quality Improvement Network (QIN).” OSSE, accessed August 30, 2023. <https://osse.dc.gov/qin>.
- ⁶ “Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships,” HHS, ACF, Office of Early Childhood Development, last updated November 4, 2020 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/early-learning/ehs-cc-partnerships>.
- ⁷ See OSSE’s “Capital Quality Community of Practice” January 19 and 27, 2018, presentation, <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/documents/Group%203%20Jan.%202018%20CoP%20%28Final%29.pdf>.
- ⁸ See “Shared Services Business Alliance for Child Development Homes, Expanded Child Development Homes and Child Development Centers Licensed in the District of Columbia,” Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), accessed August 30, 2023, <https://osse.dc.gov/sharedservices>.
- ⁹ “DC Child Care Policy Research Partnership,” Urban Institute, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/projects/dc-child-care-policy-research-partnership>.

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