

Are There Seasonal Differences in Subsidized Child Care Enrollment?

A Snapshot from DC's 2024 Fiscal Year

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October 2025

Child care subsidy programs help families with low incomes access licensed child care. However, factors like copayment costs, the availability of care options, and families' individual care needs can influence families' access to care (Betancur, Jimenez Parra, and Sandstrom 2025; Thomson et al. 2020). Families' care needs can change over time, such as when children age, work schedules change, or policies affecting subsidy eligibility or the supply of child care are revised (Speirs, Vesely, and Roy 2015). Care needs can also change during the year, including transitions from the school year to summer breaks. In DC, families with children old enough to attend public preschool¹ (beginning at age 3) are more likely than families of younger children to enroll their children in subsidized child care for shorter periods (Nikolopoulos et al. 2025).

As part of the project [An Evaluation of the District of Columbia's Innovative Subsidy Policies and Practices](#), this brief examines whether and how families' use of subsidized child care changes throughout the year. These changes have implications for child care providers,² who often make decisions about staffing and salaries based on their expected enrollment (Farr et al. 2025b). Tracking changes in subsidized enrollment helps providers plan for uncertainty and identify when to maintain full enrollment (Rohacek and Adams 2017). These changes also affect subsidy caseworkers,³ who process subsidy applications. Knowing when enrollment peaks ensures caseworkers have the support they need during busy application seasons (Schilder et al. 2025). Overall, examining enrollment patterns in the subsidy program helps policymakers make evidence-informed decisions that account for these changes.

Methods

This brief addresses the following questions:

1. How did subsidized child care enrollment change throughout the year? What were providers' perspectives about these changes in enrollment during the year?
2. Were there seasonal differences in subsidized enrollment by age?

To answer these questions, we first performed descriptive analyses of monthly child care subsidy payment data from September 2023 to September 2024, corresponding with DC's 2024 fiscal year.⁴ The Urban Institute research team received these records through a data-sharing agreement as part of an ongoing research-policy partnership with DC's Office of the State Superintendent of Education. We examined monthly trends in subsidized child care enrollment and identified months where children stopped or started using their subsidies. We also explored differences in these patterns by age.

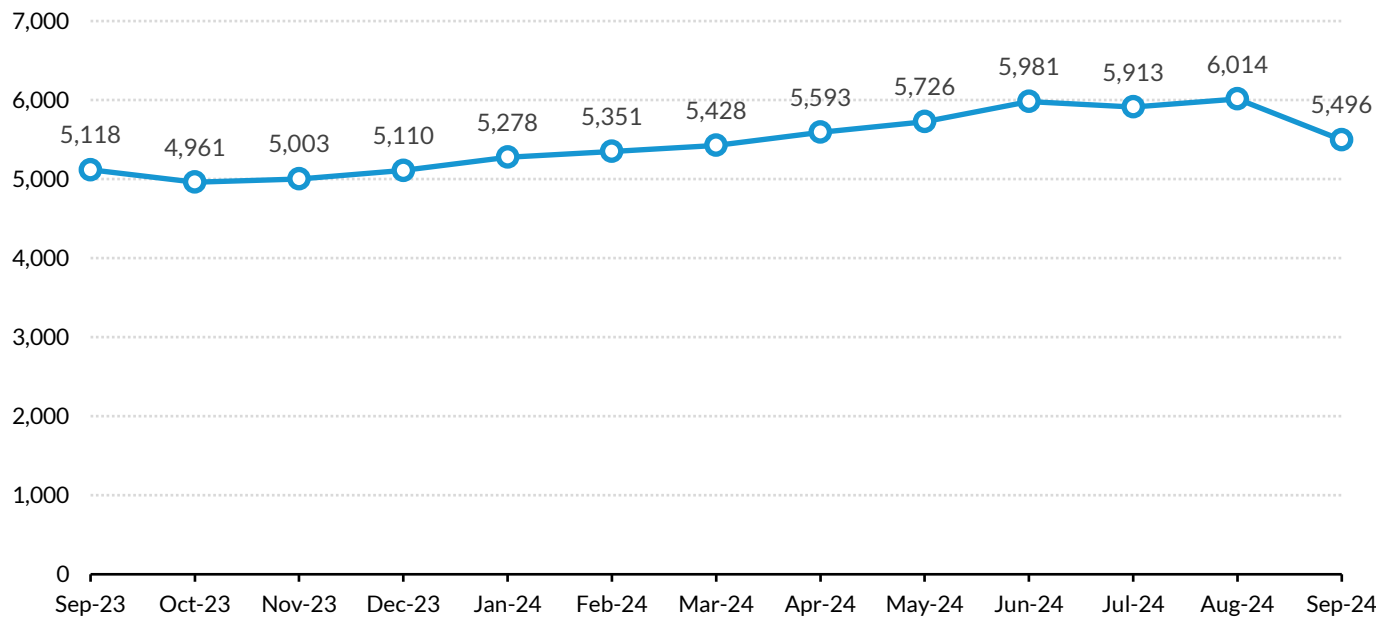
We supplement these findings using qualitative data from focus groups with 18 child care providers participating in the subsidy program, conducted from February to May 2025. We performed a thematic analysis of focus group transcripts to learn more about providers' perspectives about changes in enrollment over time.

How Did Subsidized Child Care Enrollment Change throughout the Year?

From September 2023 to September 2024, the number of children enrolled in subsidized child care increased by 7 percent (figure 1). This increase aligns with subsidized enrollment trends beginning in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Nikolopoulos et al. 2025) and is consistent with parents’ perceptions that applying for subsidies—a key step for enrollment—has become easier in DC due to postpandemic policy changes (Doyle, Wagner, and Schilder 2025). In focus groups, providers similarly reported only recently returning to prepandemic enrollment levels, following the enrollment drops they experienced during the pandemic.

Throughout the year, seasonal trends in subsidized enrollment aligned with the school year, as families used care the most while school was not in session. Enrollment dropped from September to October 2023 and again from August to September 2024, at the start of the new school year. For the remainder of the year, enrollment steadily increased before reaching a plateau during the summer months. In interviews, subsidy caseworkers reported increases in subsidy applications from June to October (Schilder et al. 2025), which may be reflected in the sudden rise in enrollment during the summer.

FIGURE 1
Number of Children Enrolled in Subsidized Child Care, September 2023 to September 2024



Source: Authors’ analyses of FY 2023 and FY 2024 subsidy payment data obtained from DC’s Office of the State Superintendent of Education.
Notes: This figure includes data from 8,634 children whose care was paid for using a subsidy from September 2023 to September 2024. Data are captured monthly and represent subsidy payments to child care providers on behalf of a child.

For providers, drops in child enrollment during the school year mean less revenue from subsidy payments. Some providers reported that these changes in enrollment and revenue make it difficult to maintain staffing levels throughout the year; they must let go of some staff during periods of lower enrollment and quickly fill vacancies when enrollment spikes. One center director shared the following during a focus group:

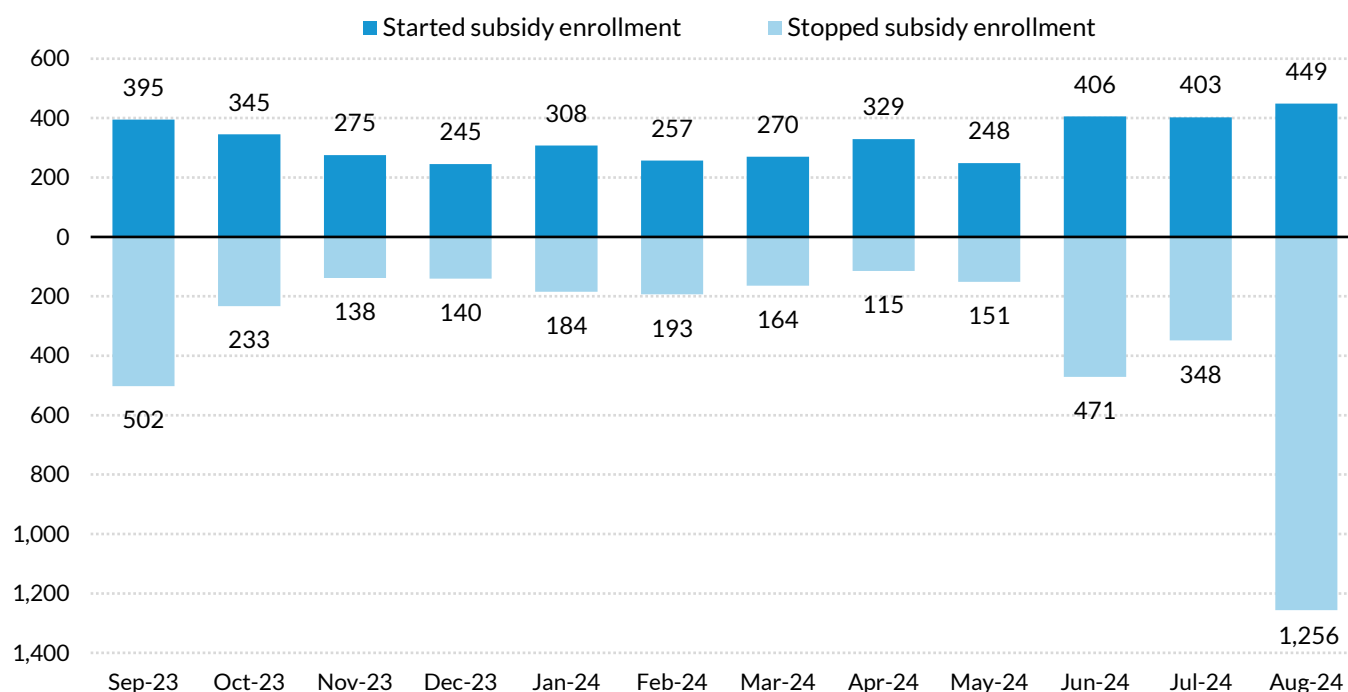
“Around September, October, that’s when enrollment drops low, that’s when staffing has to change. Because if we have 80 children, and we go to 50 through those months, then we have to lay people off or reduce hours. That’s what we try to do, just reduce hours.”

Aggregate trends can mask volatility in subsidized enrollment that may be occurring from month to month. Each month, some children may start or return to subsidized enrollment after not being enrolled the month prior, and others may stop their subsidized enrollment.

Most subsidy enrollment starts and stops occurred in the summer months and at the beginning of the new school year (figure 2). For the subsidy program overall and for providers enrolling children using subsidies, June through September may be characterized by an influx in demand—such as a higher volume of subsidy applications (Schilder et al. 2025), more open slots and new enrollments, or a greater need for child care staff. At the same time, large increases in the number of families stopping their subsidy use could introduce volatility for providers planning around their expected enrollment through the child care subsidy program (Rohacek and Adams 2017).

Subsidy starts were fewer yet remained steady during the school year, whereas subsidy stops became more infrequent. Child care slots that opened up because families stopped using their subsidies were not immediately filled by families starting subsidy enrollment in the same month. Rather, throughout the year, subsidy starts were substantial enough to outpace subsidy stops, leading to an increase in overall subsidy enrollment.

FIGURE 2
Number of Children Starting versus Stopping Subsidy Enrollment, by Month



Source: Authors’ analyses of FY 2023 and FY 2024 subsidy payment data obtained from DC’s Office of the State Superintendent of Education.
Note: This figure includes data from 8,634 children whose care was paid for using a subsidy from September 2023 to September 2024. A start to subsidy enrollment occurred if a child was not enrolled in subsidized care in the previous month; the child may or may not have received subsidized care further in the past. A stop to subsidy enrollment occurred if a child was not enrolled in subsidized care in the subsequent month; the child may or may not have received subsidized care in the future. We omitted September 2024 from our analyses because we could not determine whether it was the last month in which a child experienced subsidized care.

In focus groups, providers reported experiences that align with findings from the analysis of child care subsidy payment data, stating that they gain new enrollees throughout the year—both with and without a subsidy—but see a peak in the summer alongside a substantial number of children leaving for different kinds of school-year care. Some providers also stated that January can be a transition period for certain families who return to child care after having tried prekindergarten for the fall semester. This slight increase is present in the administrative data as well, although overall enrollment increased only modestly from December 2023 to January 2024. One center director shared the following:

“In the August to September timeframe with the turn of the [school] year, we see the most change, not only of our children either graduating, moving on, but also families just seeking a new center. I would say there's definitely more enrollment inquiries during that timeframe.”

Were There Seasonal Differences in Subsidized Enrollment Patterns by Age?

Whether children exhibited seasonal patterns in their subsidy starts and stops differed by their age (figures 3 and 4):

- **For infants and toddlers, subsidy starts and stops occurred more evenly throughout the year.** We did not find consistent seasonal trends for younger children. However, subsidy stops among toddlers were more common in August, which some providers in focus groups attributed to toddlers becoming eligible for public prekindergarten (in DC, beginning at age 3).
- **In contrast, subsidy starts were highly concentrated in the summer months for preschool- and school-age children,** indicating more seasonal patterns in their enrollment that may revolve around the school year. For instance, about 20 percent of subsidy starts among school-age children occurred in June, potentially reflecting a need for out-of-school care during the summer. Additionally, over 40 percent of subsidy stops among preschool-age children occurred in August, at the start of the new school year.

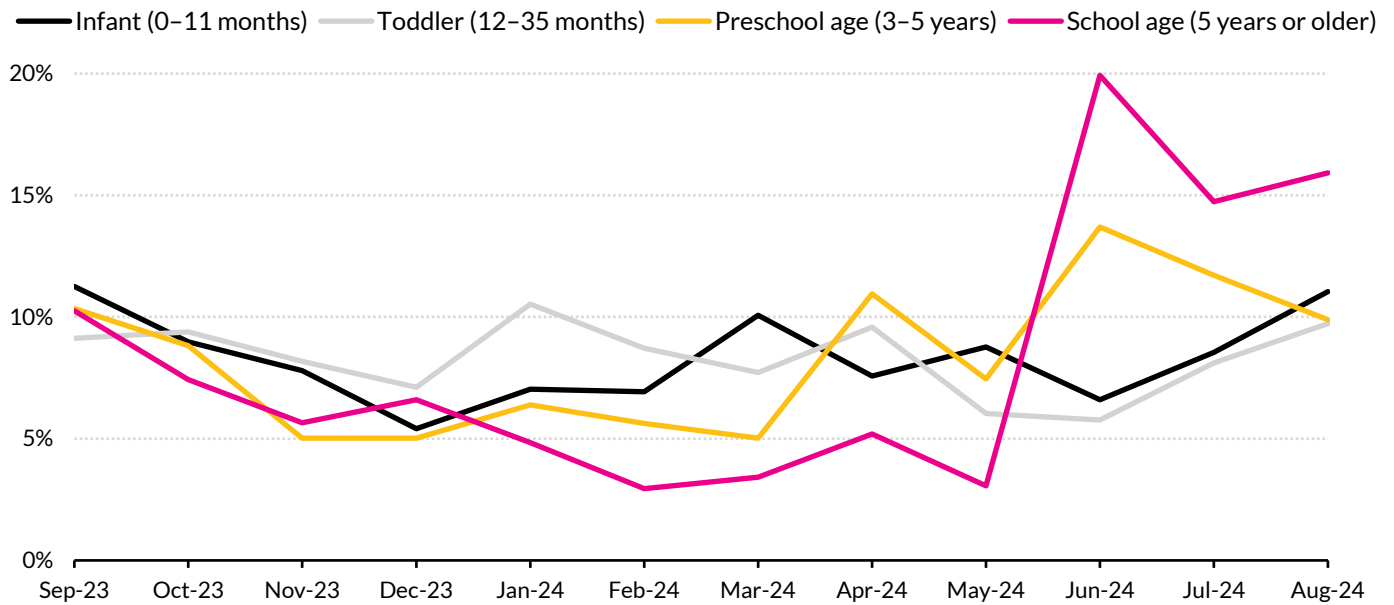
This finding builds on prior evidence that children’s age is associated with families’ need for and use of subsidized child care (Nikolopoulos et al. 2025). Generally, changes in aggregate enrollment across DC may be driven more by differences in enrollment patterns and care needs for older children. Especially for infants, changes in care use trends may reflect broader population patterns, such as birth and maternal employment rates (Coley et al. 2014), rather than true seasonal variation in demand for child care.

In focus groups, providers shared similar observations to the trends documented with administrative data. For example, one center director described experiencing spikes in open slots and new enrollment in summer and early fall:

“By...July, August, we're losing a good deal of children because the majority of them are turning three or are three turning four and...we're sending them to school. And so that is the time that we have to get on our grind to get more children in.”

FIGURE 3

Distribution of Subsidy Starts, by Age

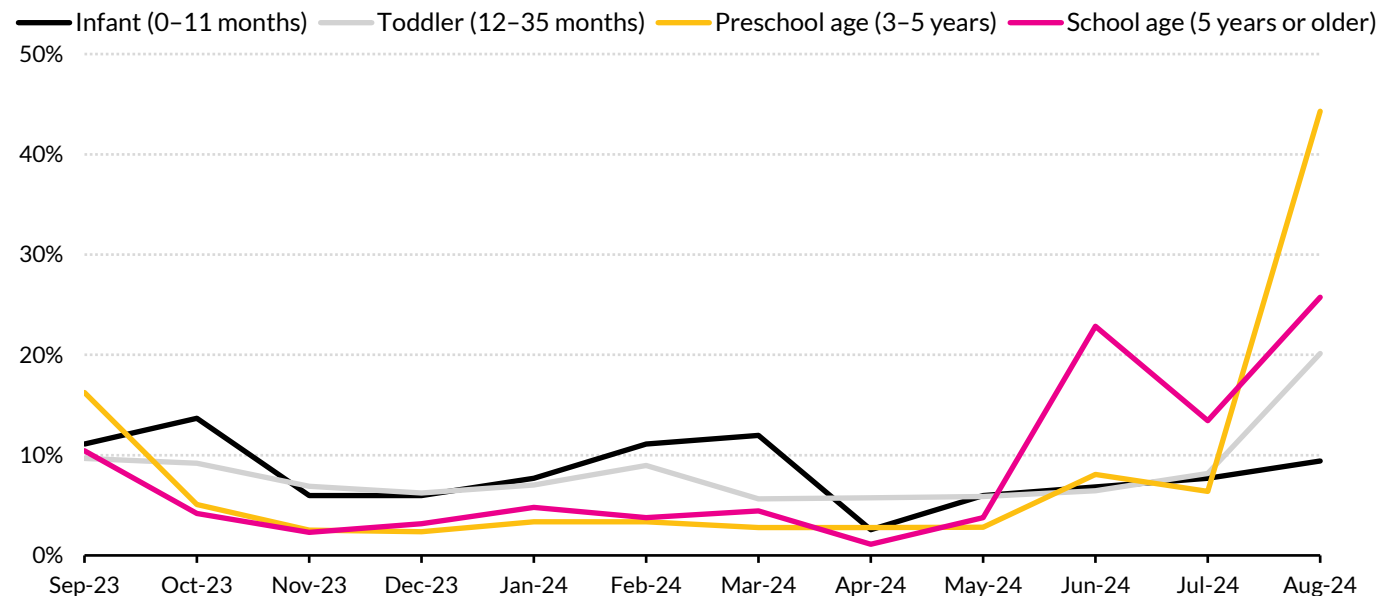


Source: Authors' analyses of FY 2023 and FY 2024 subsidy payment data obtained from DC's Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

Notes: The figure includes data from 3,775 children who experienced a start to their subsidy enrollment from September 2023 to August 2024. Figure shows the distribution of individual subsidy starts throughout the year within an age group.

FIGURE 4

Distribution of Subsidy Stops, by Age



Source: Authors' analyses of FY 2023 and FY 2024 subsidy payment data obtained from DC's Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

Notes: This figure includes data from 3,695 children who experienced a stop to their subsidy enrollment from September 2023 to August 2024. Figure shows the distribution of individual subsidy stops throughout the year within an age group.

Implications for Providers, Policymakers, and Families

In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, total enrollment in DC's child care subsidy program has been rising (Nikolopoulos et al. 2025). However, this increase in enrollment has not been uniform; instead, it is characterized by seasonal patterns in how some families—especially those with preschool- and school-age children—use their subsidies. Key findings include the following:

- **Subsidized enrollment patterns differ by age.** Analysis of subsidy payment data shows that infants and toddlers start and stop using subsidies evenly throughout the year, indicating that families' subsidy use may be determined by individual circumstances that are not tied to the time of year. In contrast, preschool- and school-age children's subsidy enrollment starts and stops are more concentrated in the summer and early fall, which might be influenced by the timing of the school year and the heavy presence of universal school-based public prekindergarten for DC children starting at age 3.
- **Providers experience challenges because of seasonal enrollment patterns.** In focus groups, providers shared that fluctuations in subsidized enrollment mean inconsistent revenue from subsidies, which can impact their staffing plans. Some providers indicated that many families stop their child's subsidized enrollment in early summer, necessitating a reduction in staff; when children reenroll in child care at the beginning of the new school year, they must quickly hire new staff to meet the increased demand. These enrollment decisions are not unique to families using subsidies, as private-pay families may also make decisions tied to the summertime that could further complicate providers' enrollment and staffing situations. Inconsistent staffing levels can make it hard for staff to feel secure in and satisfied with their jobs, potentially leading to higher turnover (Bryant et al. 2023).
- **Providers may experience different impacts based on the ages of children they serve.** Less seasonality in the enrollment of infants and toddlers can be a challenge for some providers and an opportunity for others. Some providers may find it especially difficult to predict when changes in subsidized enrollment will occur, leading to difficulties projecting revenue and future staffing needs. Other providers, however, may feel that this enrollment uncertainty is expected and thus operate on the assumption that they should always be recruiting families and staff. Providers serving older children may better anticipate seasonal shifts in enrollment but may still struggle to maintain consistent staffing and offer full-time hours. Enrollment and staffing challenges may be compounded for providers serving all age groups, who may need to employ a mix of business and recruitment strategies to maintain enrollment levels for different types of families.

Policymakers could consider policies that mitigate the negative impacts of seasonal subsidized enrollment on providers. Such policies can stabilize the child care market by helping child care providers maintain more consistent revenue, reducing educator turnover, supporting DC's child care supply, and increasing families' access to child care in the long term (Grunewald, Nunn, and Palmer 2022). DC has already made progress to this end by updating the cost estimation model used to determine subsidy payments and by basing subsidy reimbursements on enrollment rather than attendance.⁵ Providers who participated in focus groups shared that these policy updates helped them maintain their revenue and staffing levels (Farr et al. 2025a). These policies were designed to impart providers with greater stability and margins that may help them plan for seasonal enrollment variations that can affect revenue.

Policymakers can support subsidy caseworkers and families during peak demand. The higher concentration of subsidy starts in summer and early fall may correspond with a high volume of subsidy applications, which can strain administrative capacity. In an interview, the subsidy caseworkers who process these applications reported increased workloads and stress during these months. They recommended policymakers consider seasonal changes in applications when making caseworker staffing decisions (Schilder et al. 2025). Delays in processing applications due to imbalances of staff relative to the increase in applications during these months could prevent families from accessing subsidies when they need them most (Kasselman 2025) and keep providers from offering open slots to families with subsidies (Gunderson and Chavez Cruz 2025).

More research is needed to understand the causes and impacts of seasonal enrollment trends. These trends could reflect changes in family preferences or care needs, subsidy policies, or the supply of child care. In our data, seasonal patterns were largely explained by the timing of the school year, but because DC has an unusually large take-up of public preschool among 3- and 4-year-old children, more research is also needed to understand whether these trends occur in jurisdictions beyond DC. Since public prekindergarten expansion often comes with unintended impacts on the child care market (Brown 2018; Hoiting et al. 2025), policymakers in other jurisdictions might assess how child care enrollment is impacted, both overall and seasonally, in conjunction with the rollout of public prekindergarten, transitional kindergarten, or other public schooling options. More broadly, researchers might continue to explore the age-specific considerations that influence families' need for and use of subsidized care. Changes in enrollment decisions throughout the year may also impact children, families, and providers in different ways, and understanding these effects can help policymakers adjust subsidy policies and practices to improve families' access to child care and providers' experiences with the subsidy program.

Notes

- ¹ DC public prekindergarten is administered through a mixed-delivery system, with about 92 percent of seats located in traditional public and public charter schools and the remaining 8 percent in community-based organizations. However, children attending public prekindergarten at a community-based organization do not need a subsidy to access the program unless they are also enrolled in before and after school care. Thus, most families do not need a subsidy while their child is enrolled in public prekindergarten.
- ² In DC, child care providers are businesses and nonprofit organizations that operate one or more child care facilities.
- ³ In DC, subsidy caseworkers help to process families' child care subsidy applications and determine their eligibility for subsidies. For more information, see Schilder et al. (2025).
- ⁴ During this time, DC determined subsidy payment amounts based on the attendance of children with subsidies at a child care provider. These monthly payment data reflect whether a child attended a provider for at least one day in the month.
- ⁵ Other than a short period during the COVID-19 pandemic, DC has disbursed subsidy payments based on the attendance of children with subsidies at a child care provider. In November 2024, DC switched to enrollment-based payments, which means that providers receive a subsidy payment even if a child is absent for a short time (OSSE 2024).

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Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (US) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award (Grant Number 90YE0298) totaling \$1,200,000 to date, with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, ACF/HHS or the US government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, [Administrative and National Policy Requirements](#). We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples. Copyright © October 2025. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.