



Child Care Choices of Low-Income, Immigrant Families with Young Children

Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education

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Children of immigrants account for one in four children under age 6 in the United States.¹ Their families are disproportionately more likely to be poor, have parents with low educational attainment, and speak languages other than English at home (Fortuny, Hernandez, and Chaudry 2010). In part because of this socioeconomic disadvantage, children of immigrants from some world regions, particularly Mexico and Central America, start school at a learning disadvantage relative to their US-born peers (Crosnoe and Turley 2011).

Although there is substantial variation by national origin group, in general, low-income children of immigrants are less likely to access child care and early education outside their homes (Brandon 2002; Karoly and Gonzalez 2011; Matthews and Ewen 2006). Yet enrollment in early education has been shown to boost school readiness for children of immigrants and English language learners, in some cases even more so than for their US-born peers (Crosnoe 2007; Currie and Thomas 1999; Magnuson, Lahaie, and Waldfogel 2006).

Researchers find that differences in enrollment may be caused by limited availability of early care and education programs in geographic areas with a large limited English proficient (LEP) population and limited access to support networks that provide reliable information about available programs (Matthews and Jang 2007). Parental preferences and family needs may also play a role (Chaudry et al. 2011). Although information on parents' immigration status, including a Social Security number, is not required for child care subsidy applications for citizen children (Matthews 2017), evidence suggests

eligible Hispanic children, many of whom are children of immigrants, are disproportionately underrepresented in the child care subsidy system in all but one state (GAO 2016), which may explain their lower use of formal child care.

In this brief, we explore differences in the child care settings foreign-born, US-born, LEP, and English-proficient parents select for their young children. We also explore differences in their child care preferences and perceptions and in the household characteristics that might explain their patterns. In this way, we shed light on how being an immigrant and having limited English proficiency, among other factors, might influence parents' interest in and ability to access different child care.

Using new data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE), we address the following research questions:

1. What child care settings do low-income, immigrant, and LEP parents use for their young children? How do they differ from US-born and English-proficient parents?
2. What factors are important to parents in their child care search? How do these factors vary based on country of origin, recency of immigration, and English proficiency?
3. What are parents' perceptions of different care settings, specifically center-based child care, family child care, informal care, and parental care? How do their perceptions differ from US-born and English-proficient parents?

We analyze data from low-income households with a child under age 5. We focus on low-income households so we can compare subgroups of families with similar income levels because income is closely tied to access. Low-income families may have additional barriers to accessing early care and education because of high costs, particularly in communities with few subsidized care options. All figures and charts represent weighted characteristics, nationally representative of low-income households with a child under age 5.

BOX 1

Data Source

We use household survey data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE), a nationally representative, coordinated set of surveys of households and child care providers in center-based and home-based settings conducted from November 2011 to June 2012. The NSECE's goal is to provide a representative portrait of available early care and education in all types of settings across the United States to understand the child care and early education preferences and experiences of US households, particularly low-income households.

The household survey included a nationally representative sample of US households with children under age 13. The household survey sample was drawn from a sample of US addresses. First, 219 primary sampling units were selected from across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Next, 755 secondary sampling units were selected, including an oversample of low-income areas (where over 40 percent of residents had income below 250 percent of the federal poverty level) and oversamples in New York and Illinois. A household screener, available in English and Spanish, was used to identify households with at least one child under age 13. Surveys were conducted with a parent or guardian of at least one child under age 13 living in the household, most commonly with the mother. The survey was conducted in English or Spanish. The NSECE team reports that households generally included at least one member who spoke one of the two languages proficiently. The household survey included 11,629 households, representing a weighted response rate of 62.2 percent. The household survey captured information on patterns of nonparental care use, child care payment methods, parental care preferences, parents' work experiences and schedules, and parental searches for care.

We use an analytic sample of all low-income households, which we define as households with incomes under 200 percent of the federal poverty level, that have a selected focal child under age 5 ($N = 2,720$). The focal child is a randomly selected child in the household who is the focus of questions related to a recent child care search and perceptions of different care types (centers, family day care, relative or friend care, and parental care). We exclude a small group of households in which the selected focal child was not born in the United States.

Using the large sample of foreign-born and limited English proficient (LEP) survey respondents in the restricted-access NSECE household survey file, we examine the care settings of focal children and variations across subgroups. We also draw on detailed survey measures of parents' desired care characteristics and how they rate different child care types along those characteristics.

Ninety percent of US-born respondents are parents of the focal child, compared with 87 percent of foreign-born respondents. About 75 percent of US-born respondents and 70 percent of foreign-born respondents were mothers. Accordingly, this brief often refers to respondents as parents.

The NSECE household survey does not ask respondents directly about their English language proficiency. We designate respondents as LEP if they took the survey in Spanish and reported that their household speaks only Spanish or another language other than English.

Household Characteristics

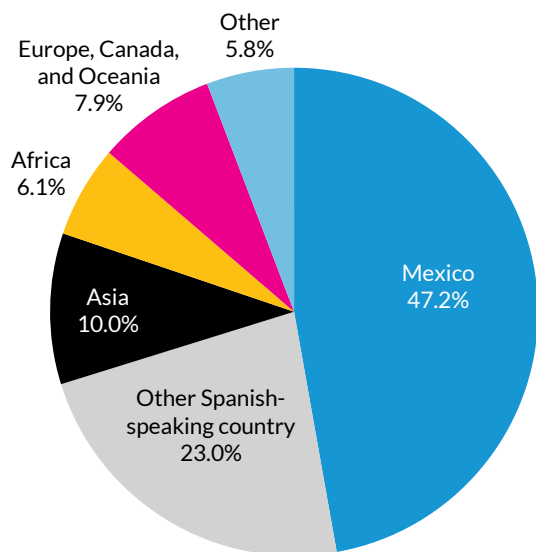
In our first set of analyses, we examine the characteristics of low-income households (with family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, or FPL) with a selected child under age 5. We find that 21 percent of survey respondents are foreign born and 9 percent are LEP. Among low-income, foreign-born respondents

- 47 percent were born in Mexico, 23 percent were born in another Spanish-speaking country, and 30 percent were born in another country that does not speak Spanish (figure 1);
- 27 percent came to the United States before age 13, and 30 percent came to the United States within the past 10 years; and
- 39 percent are LEP.²

FIGURE 1

Place of Birth among Low-Income, Foreign-Born Survey Respondents

Among respondents with a selected child under age 5



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

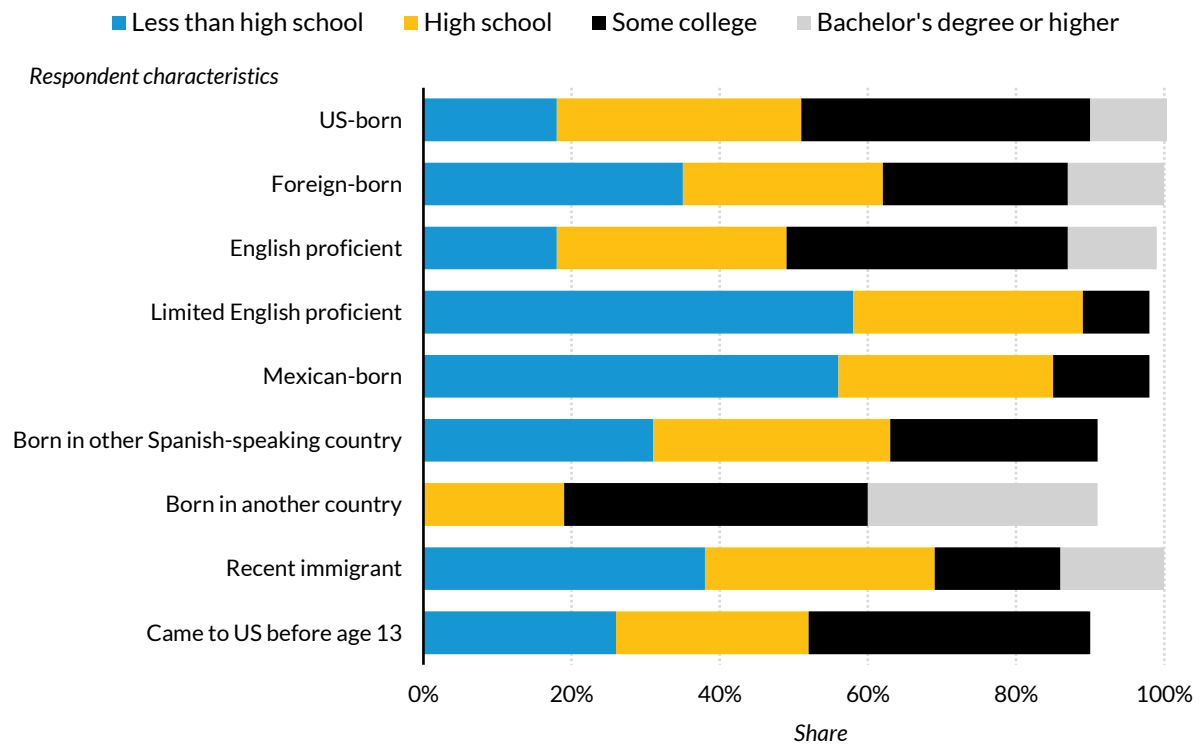
Educational Attainment

Foreign-born respondents in low-income households, on average, have lower educational attainment than US-born respondents in low-income households (figure 2), but respondents who arrived in the US before age 13 graduate high school and complete college at about the same rate as US-born respondents. Mexican-born parents have the lowest educational attainment, whereas immigrant parents born in countries outside Latin America have the highest educational attainment (even higher

than US-born parents). This difference may reflect, in part, the fact that the survey was only conducted in English and Spanish, and so LEP European and Asian immigrants (who likely have less education) were not included. Additionally, low-income foreign-born respondents have lower rates of enrollment in school or training than low-income US-born respondents. The same difference was found between LEP and English-proficient respondents.

FIGURE 2

Educational Attainment among Low-Income Survey Respondents with a Selected Child under Age 5
By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Notes: "Recent immigrant" indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. Some information is suppressed because of survey disclosure rules.

Household Structure

Consistent with previous research (Woods et al. 2016), in the NSECE, foreign-born parents and LEP parents are significantly more likely to have two-parent families than US-born and English-proficient parents (figure 3). This holds true regardless of country of origin or recency of arrival.

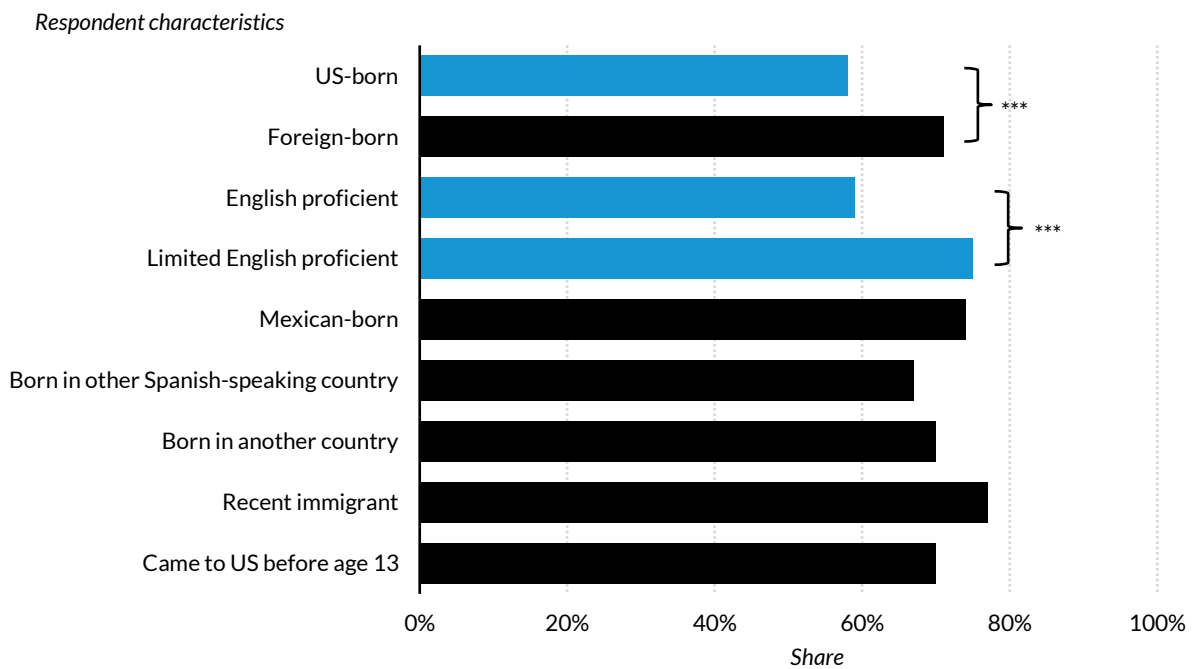
Foreign-born parents are also more likely to have a nonparent adult relative, such as a grandparent, in the home (67 percent versus 51 percent). This adult relative could be a source of child care, but the survey did not ask this. Yet foreign-born parents are less likely than US-born parents to have a relative

within a 45-minute drive who could provide paid child care (52 percent versus 66 percent). (We cannot assess from this survey question how much the payment would be, so in some cases, parents may have responded affirmatively to this survey question even if their relative would not charge them or would offer child care in exchange for a family favor or other goods or services.) Whereas immigrant families are more likely to be multigenerational and have other adult caregivers in the home, US-born families may have more family ties in their local area and can turn to relatives to provide care.

FIGURE 3

Share of Low-Income Survey Respondents with a Selected Child under Age 5 in Two-Parent Households

By survey respondent’s place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Note: “Recent immigrant” indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups.

*** $p < 0.001$.

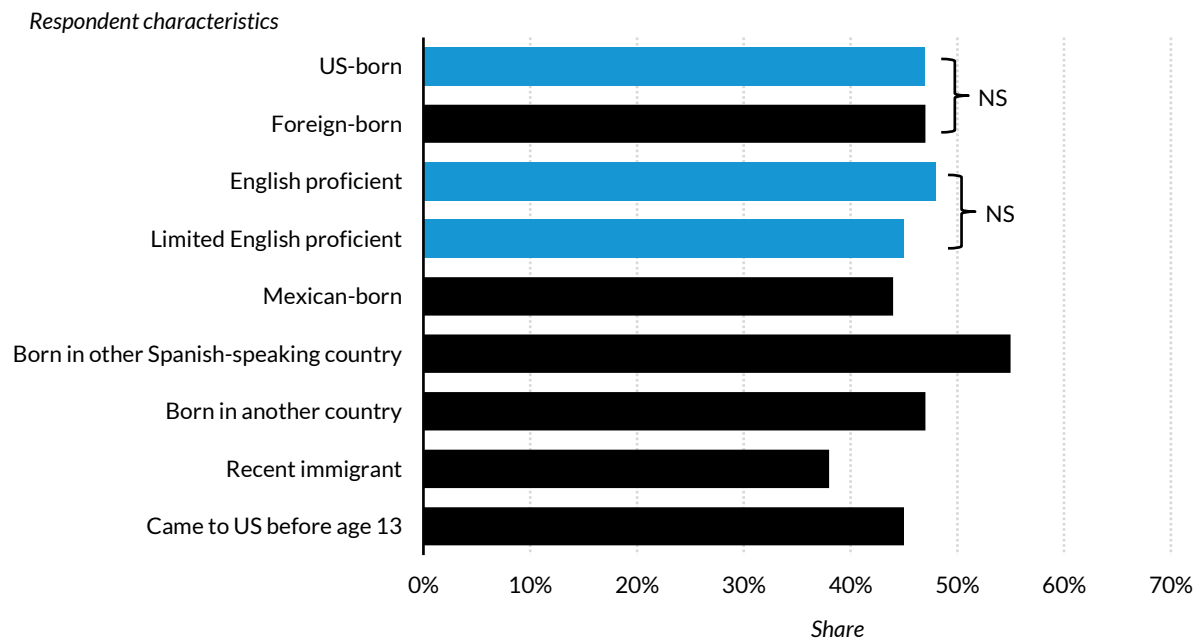
Parental Employment

We also looked at differences in parental employment, which may shape demand for and use of child care. We found that employment rates among respondents were similar across groups. Just under half of low-income US-born and foreign-born respondents were employed, with similar rates for English-proficient and LEP respondents (figure 4). Foreign-born respondents were less likely to work

nonstandard hours than US-born respondents, and LEP and English-proficient respondents showed similar rates of working nonstandard hours.

We also checked whether there were differences in employment rates or work hours between mothers and fathers using calendar data, which capture hours worked by both parents rather than just the survey respondent. Foreign-born and US-born mothers have similar rates of employment and similar work hours. LEP and English-proficient mothers also have similar work patterns. Overall, a higher share of mothers of preschoolers (children ages 3 to 4) work than mothers of infants and toddlers (children ages 2 and younger), but within each child age range, we find no differences in employment rates between US-born and foreign-born mothers. In other words, a low-income immigrant mother with an infant or toddler is just as likely to be employed as a low-income US-born mother with a child of a similar age. Among fathers, however, foreign-born fathers and LEP fathers have higher rates of employment than US-born and English-proficient fathers, respectively. But work hours are similar among working fathers.

FIGURE 4
Employment Rates among Low-Income Survey Respondents with a Selected Child under Age 5
By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Notes: "Recent immigrant" indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups. "NS" indicates results were not statistically significant.

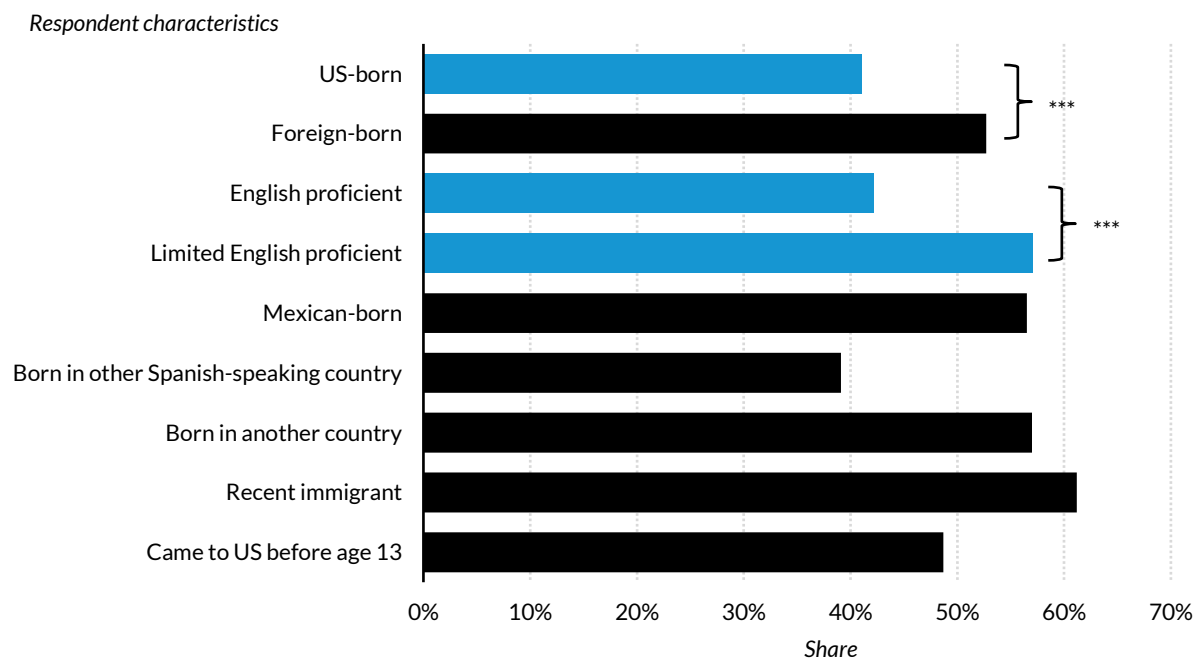
Child Care Settings

Next, we examine the types of care settings that parents regularly use for the selected focal child, which is weighted to be nationally representative of households with children under age 5. Figure 5 shows the share of children who receive parent care only. We find that children of low-income foreign-born and LEP parents are less likely than their counterparts to have a regular nonparental care arrangement. (Note, we use the term “parent” to refer to the survey respondent and his or her country of origin and language, and not to refer to any parent in the household. It is possible that a child had a US-born parent who responded to the survey and an immigrant parent who is not accounted for in these analyses.)

FIGURE 5

Share of Low-Income Children under Age 5 in Parental Care Only or No Regular Child Care Arrangement

By survey respondent’s place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Note: “Recent immigrant” indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Children under age 3 are especially more likely to only receive parental care, with 60 percent of infants and toddlers with a foreign-born parent in parental care only, compared with 48 percent of their peers with a US-born parent. Although most 3- and 4-year-olds across low-income households are in a

regular child care arrangement, a 12 percentage point gap remains in the share of preschoolers in parental care only (43 percent with a foreign-born parent versus 31 percent with a US-born parent).

The data available in the NSECE household survey permit us to identify care type in terms of location (in the child's home, in someone else's home, or in a center-based setting), the relationship between the child and caregiver (relative or nonrelative), and payment (paid or unpaid). We use this combination of variables to construct four different care types (children may be in more than one care type):

- center-based care
- unpaid relative care in the child's home or in a relative's home
- paid care by a nonrelative outside the child's home (e.g., family child care)
- paid care by a relative or nonrelative in the child's home (e.g., babysitter, nanny)

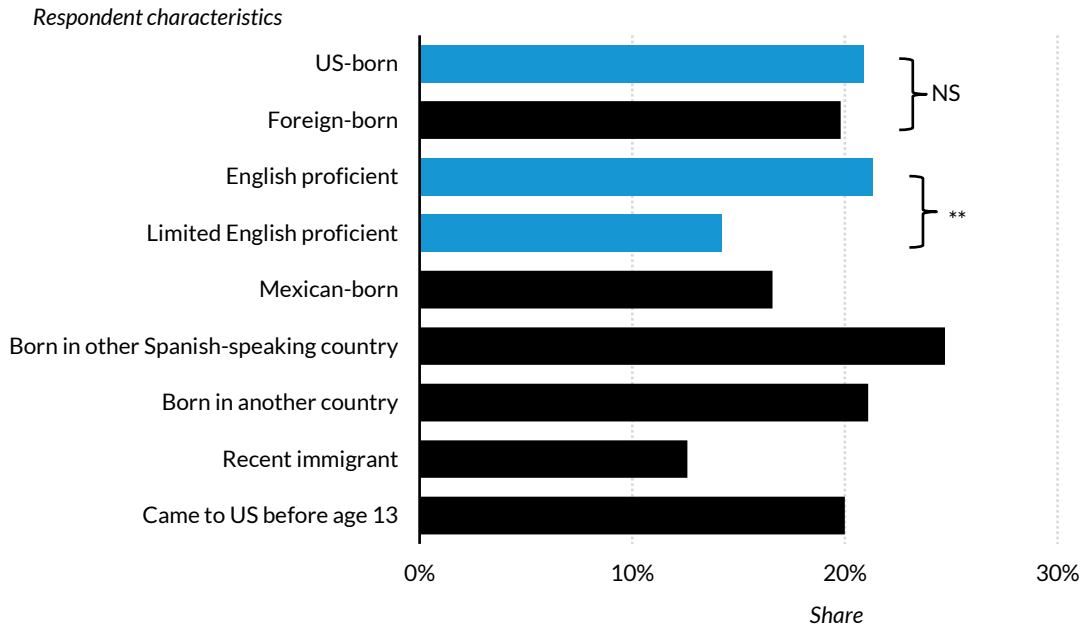
We find that children with foreign-born parents and children with US-born parents are enrolled in center-based care at the same rate (about 20 percent, as shown in figure 6), but children with LEP parents are less likely than children with English-proficient parents to have a center-based care arrangement (14 percent compared with 21 percent, respectively). Recent immigrants and Mexican-born immigrants have lower rates of using center-based care than immigrants who came to the US as children and those born in other countries.

When we separate infants and toddlers from preschoolers, we still find rates of center-based care use to be similar among US-born and foreign-born parents. The rate is lower for children ages 2 and younger (12 percent of children with a US-born parent and 9 percent of children with a foreign-born parent) compared with children ages 3 and 4 (36 percent with a US-born parent and 34 percent with a foreign-born parent).

FIGURE 6

Share of Low-Income Children under Age 5 in Center-Based Care

By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Notes: "Recent immigrant" indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups. "NS" indicates results were not statistically significant.

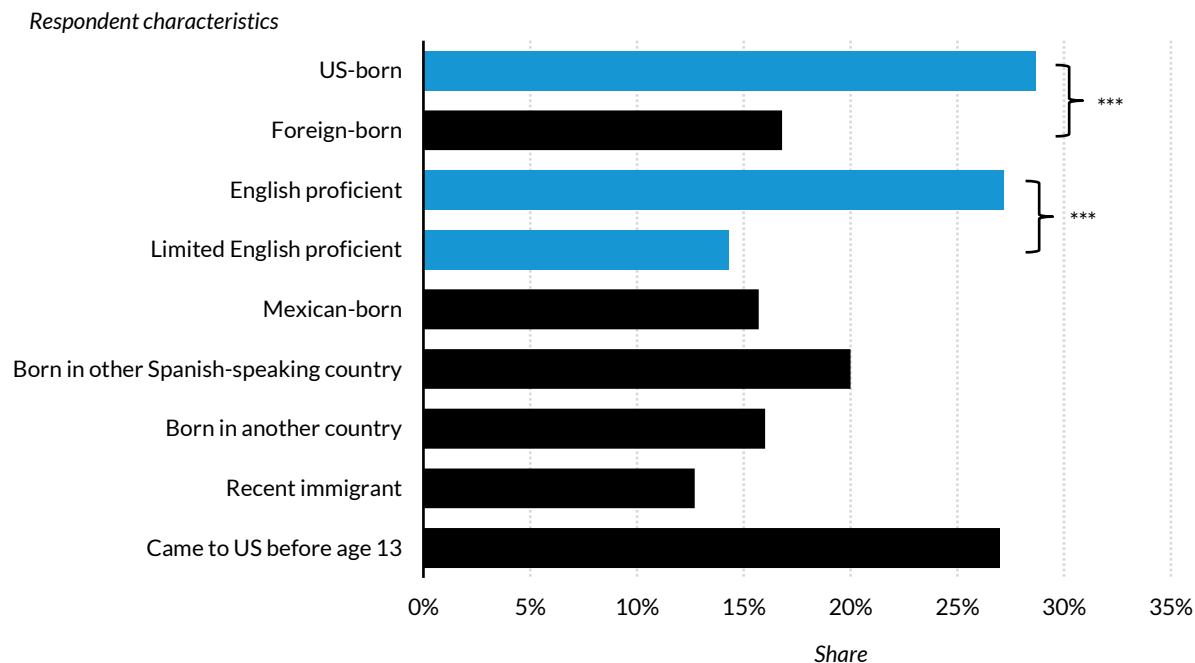
** $p < 0.01$.

Children of US-born and English-proficient parents are significantly more likely to receive care from an unpaid relative compared with their counterparts (figure 7). Among immigrant subgroups, those who came to the US as children are most likely to use unpaid relative care, at a rate similar to that of US-born parents. Recent immigrants are less likely to use unpaid relative care, suggesting more recent arrivals may not have relatives nearby who they can rely on for care.

FIGURE 7

Share of Low-Income Children under Age 5 in Unpaid Relative Care

By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Note: "Recent immigrant" indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups.

*** $p < 0.001$.

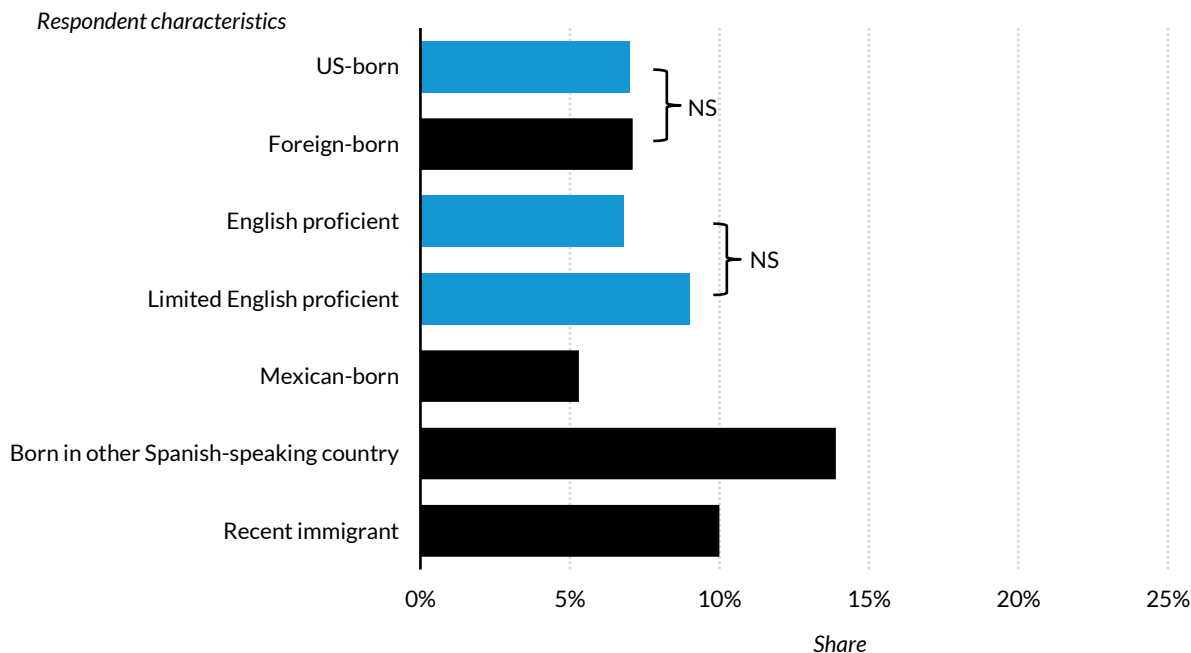
The NSECE does not identify registered or licensed family child care providers directly, so we created a proxy measure that identifies providers who are paid nonrelatives providing care outside the child's home. Usage rates are low across subgroups—less than 10 percent—with no significant differences by country of origin or English proficiency (figure 8).

We also examine the share of children in the care of a paid relative or paid nonrelative in the child's home (e.g., nannies, babysitters). These groups are small, so we needed to combine them because of disclosure risks. The rates are low, between 6 and 7 percent across subgroups, with no significant group differences.

FIGURE 8

Share of Low-Income Children under Age 5 in Paid, Nonrelative Care outside the Home

By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Notes: "Recent immigrant" indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Some subgroups are omitted because of NSECE disclosure rules. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups. "NS" indicates results were not statistically significant.

When we restrict the sample to children with a regular child care arrangement other than parental care, we see slightly different patterns (figure 9). The rate of center-based care is slightly higher among children of foreign-born respondents (42 percent) compared with children with a US-born parent (35 percent). The difference is not statistically significant but trends in a higher direction for children of low-income immigrants. This suggests low-income, foreign-born respondents are less likely to use nonparental care, but those who do are as likely—if not slightly more likely—than US-born parents to use center-based care.

We also look at the data by child age group and find no statistically significant group differences. Nearly 60 percent of preschoolers with a foreign-born parent attend a child care center, if they use child care at all, compared with 52 percent of preschoolers with US-born parents. Rates are lower for children under age 3 and similar regardless of parental country of origin: 22 percent of infants and toddlers with US-born parents use centers compared with 23 percent of peers with a foreign-born parent.

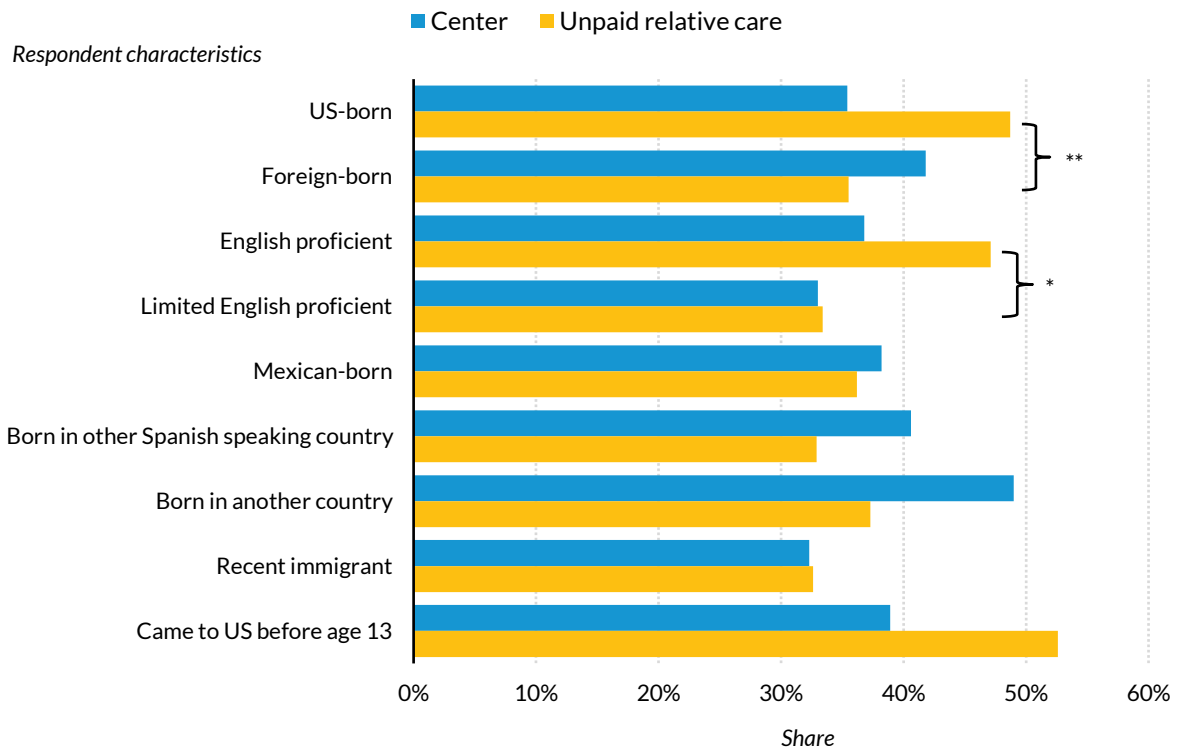
Nearly half of all children of US-born parents and English-proficient parents use unpaid relative care, if any child care, and at a significantly higher rate than their counterparts (figure 9). The difference

in rates of using unpaid relative care is driven by 3- and 4-year-olds. Among children under 3, rates are about the same for the two groups, but 41 percent of preschoolers with US-born parents use unpaid relative care, compared with 24 percent of preschoolers with a foreign-born parent. But children of US-born parents are more likely than children with foreign-born parents to have multiple child care arrangements. And preschool-aged children are more likely than infants and toddlers to have multiple arrangements. These findings suggest US-born parents often use unpaid relative care as a secondary care arrangement alongside a paid arrangement outside the home.

FIGURE 9

Share of Low-Income Children under Age 5 in Center-based Care and Unpaid Relative Care, among Children in Nonparental Care

By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Note: "Recent immigrant" indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups. Only group comparisons marked with asterisks are statistically significant.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Meanwhile, children of LEP parents who use any nonparental care use center-based care and relative care at relatively the same rate (33 percent). They are also more likely than their peers with English-proficient parents to access paid, nonrelative, home-based care such as family child care (21

percent compared with 12 percent; not shown in figure). Parents’ desire to have a home-based provider that speaks their language could be influencing care decisions alongside other supply factors, such as cost, care hours, availability of an open slot, and so on.

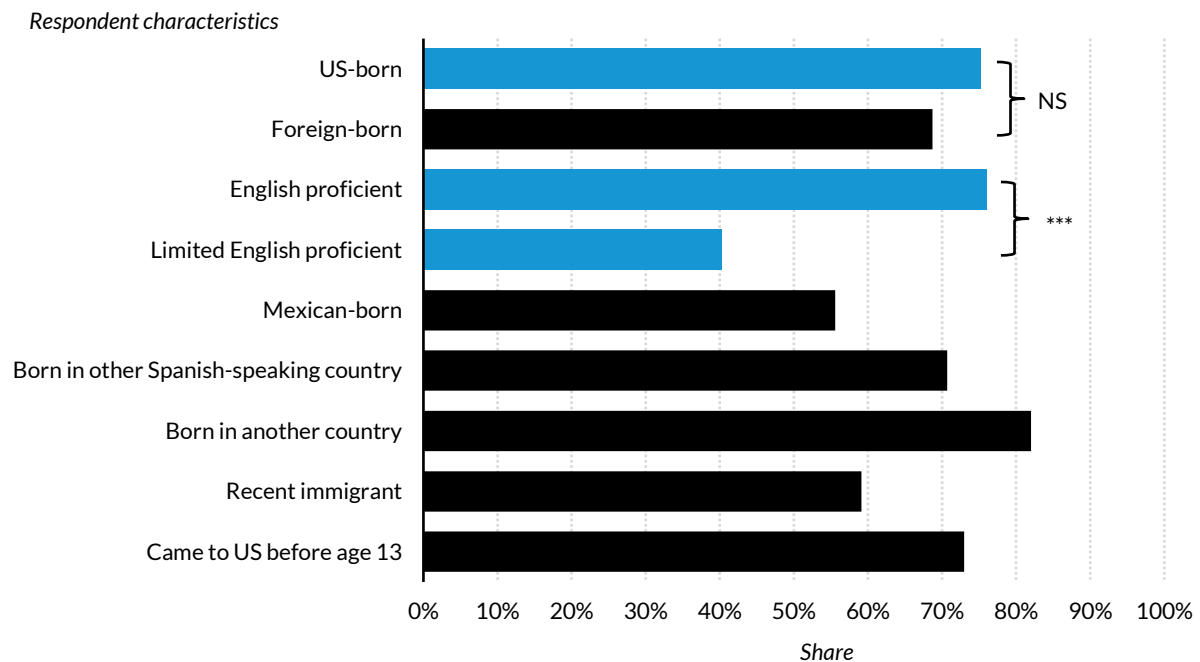
Parents’ Considerations and Preferences during Recent Child Care Search

Among households that recently conducted a child care search for the focal child, immigrant and US-born households were equally likely to consider a center-based provider (figure 10). But LEP households were less likely than English-proficient households to consider a center-based provider. Country of origin was also a factor among immigrants, with lowest rates among Mexican immigrants. Recent immigrants were less likely to consider a center-based provider than those who had lived in the US since childhood, who did so to nearly the same degree as US-born parents.

FIGURE 10

Share of Respondents Who Considered a Center-Based Provider during a Recent Care Search

By place of birth and English proficiency, among low-income households with a selected child under age 5



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

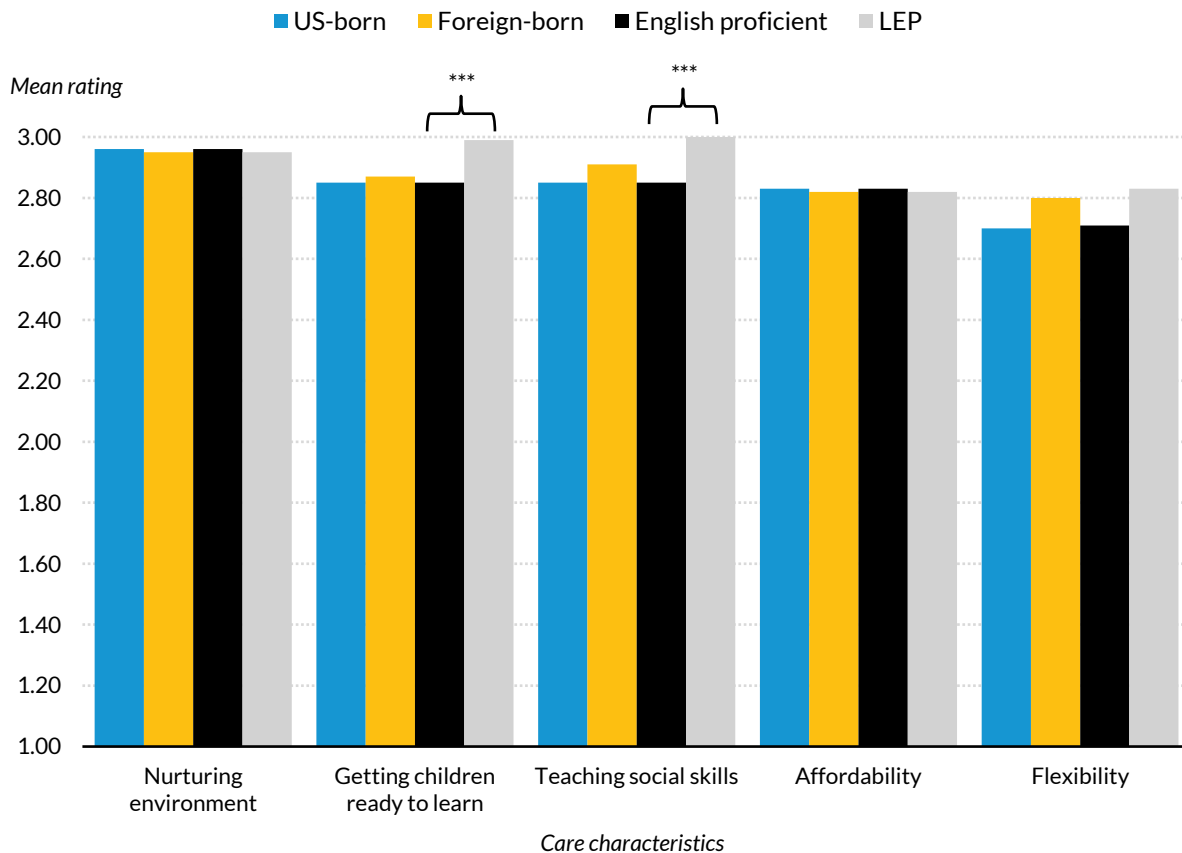
Notes: Recent immigrant indicates someone who entered the country in the past 10 years. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Other rows reflect subgroups of foreign-born respondents. Because of limited sample sizes, we do not statistically compare estimates among foreign-born subgroups. “NS” indicates results were not statistically significant.

*** $p < 0.001$.

The survey prompted parents to think about their most recent care search for the selected focal child and to rate the importance of five care characteristics (a nurturing environment, preparing children to learn in school, teaching children to get along with others, flexibility for parents, and affordability) on a scale of one (not very important) to three (very important). Among parents who had conducted a recent care search and had an opinion, nearly all rated each characteristic as very important, with limited differences among subgroups. Foreign-born and US-born parents had similar ratings on every care characteristic (figure 11). A larger share of LEP parents rated preparation for learning and teaching of social skills as very important compared with English-proficient parents.

FIGURE 11

Low-Income Respondents' Ratings of Care Characteristics Important for Selected Child under Age 5
By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Notes: Respondents rated each care characteristic on a scale of one (not very important) to three (very important) in regards to their most recent care search for the selected child. Mean ratings represent the average across the specified subgroup. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. Only group comparisons marked with asterisks are statistically significant.

*** $p < 0.001$.

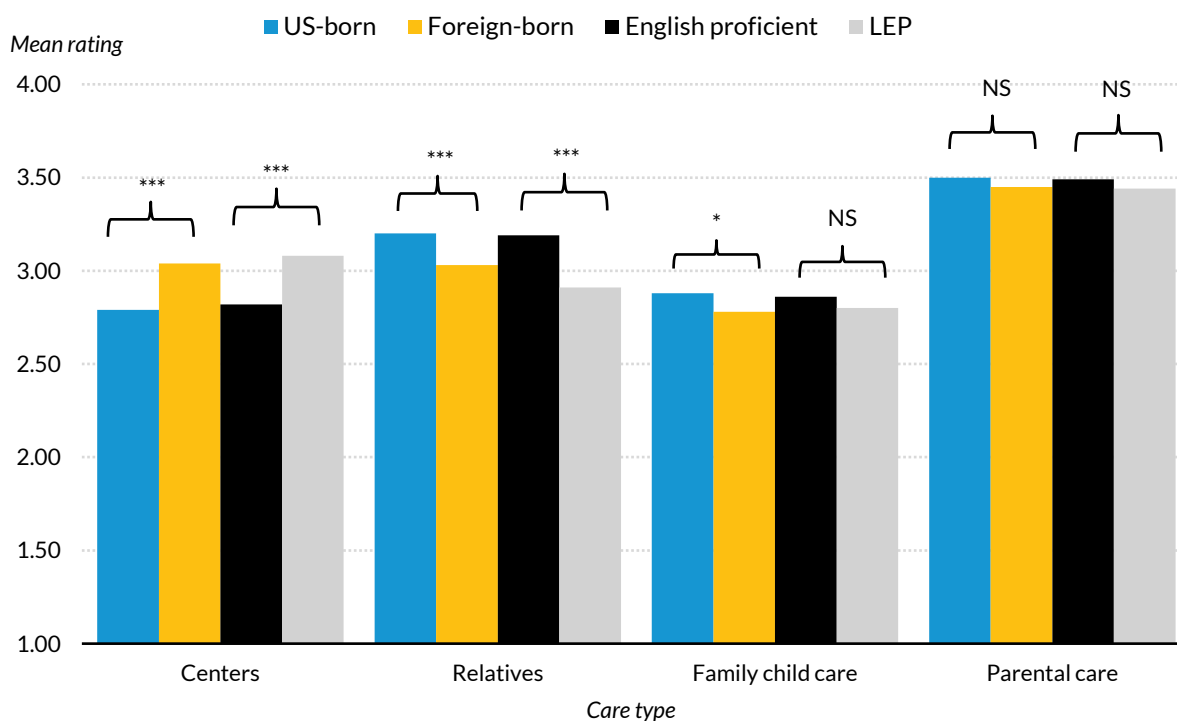
Parents' Perceptions of the Quality of Different Care Types

Survey respondents were asked to rate four care types (centers, relatives, family day care, and parental care) on six quality factors: nurturance, safety, affordability, flexibility, how much they prepare children to learn in school, and how well they teach children to get along with others. They rated each factor on a scale from one (poor) to four (excellent). Among respondents with opinions on these quality factors, we average how they rated each type of care across the six factors (figure 12). Because parents' perceptions may change based on their child's age, we analyze ratings from parents of infants and toddlers separately from parents of preschoolers (figure 13).

FIGURE 12

Low-Income Survey Respondents' Perceptions of Child Care Types

By survey respondent's place of birth and English proficiency



Source: Authors' analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Notes: Respondents rated each care type along six quality indicators on a scale of one (poor) to four (excellent): nurturance, safety, affordability, flexibility, how much they prepare children to learn in school, and how well they teach children to get along with others. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. "NS" indicates results were not statistically significant.

*** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$.

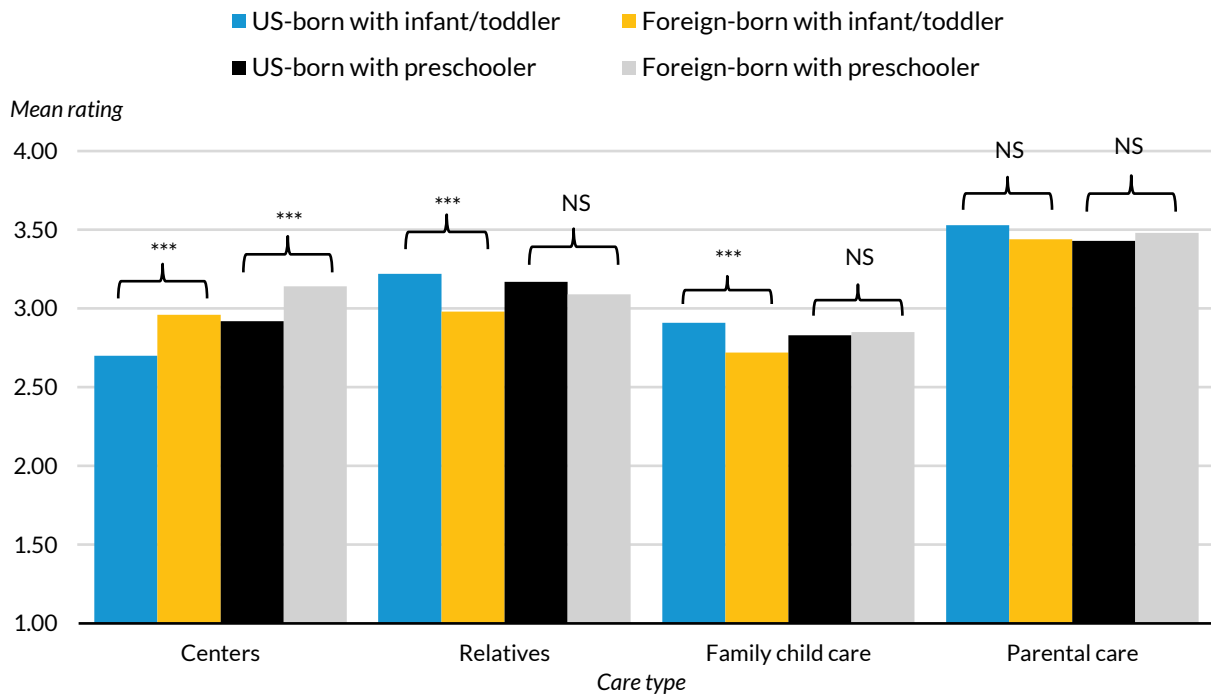
Foreign-born parents and LEP parents rated center-based care more highly than US-born or English-proficient parents, respectively. Foreign-born parents rated relative care less highly than US-born parents, and US-born and English-proficient parents rated relative care higher on these factors

than center care. US-born parents preferred family child care for infants more than foreign-born parents, who rated centers more highly for infant care. All these subgroups of parents rated parental care as the highest on these dimensions.

FIGURE 13

Low-Income Survey Respondents’ Perceptions of Child Care Types, by Age Group of Child

By survey respondent’s place of birth



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Survey of Early Care and Education data.

Notes: Respondents rated each care type along six quality indicators on a scale of one (poor) to four (excellent): nurturance, safety, affordability, flexibility, how much they prepare children to learn in school, and how well they teach children to get along with others. T-tests compare US-born and foreign-born respondents, and separately, English-proficient and LEP respondents. “NS” indicates results were not statistically significant.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Conclusions

More than half of low-income children of immigrants do not have a regular child care arrangement, a higher rate than that seen among children of US-born parents. This lower use of nonparental care may be related to more children of immigrants residing in two-parent households. We find no differences in maternal employment rates based on country of origin or English language proficiency, and low-income foreign-born fathers are actually more likely to be working than low-income US-born fathers, so parental employment alone is likely not driving differences in use of nonparental care.

Center-based care is the most common care type among children of low-income immigrants in child care. Immigrant parents most commonly use center-based care for preschoolers and relative care for infants and toddlers, and the same is true of US-born parents. These findings suggest that children of immigrants in low-income households, particularly preschoolers, may be accessing center-based early care and education programs at higher rates than they have historically. At the same time, US-born parents rate relative care higher than other types of nonparental care, are more likely to have a relative nearby who can provide care, and are more likely to use unpaid relative care (though it could be for a secondary arrangement).

Although we do not find lower rates of center-based care for children of low-income immigrants than children of natives, we do find that children with LEP parents are less likely to experience center-based care than children with English-proficient parents. When they do have a regular child care arrangement, a large share of children with LEP parents are in family child care.

Parents' ratings of care characteristics are more similar than they are different across groups, suggesting that differences in values and preferences are not driving care choices. Both foreign-born and LEP respondents have positive perceptions of centers, and US-born and English-proficient respondents have slightly more positive perceptions of relative care and family child care. But LEP respondents were less likely to consider a center in their most recent care search. The local child care market and the availability of centers in their neighborhoods, particularly centers with staff members who speak their language, likely played a large role in their choice.

Historically, researchers have focused on low rates of center-based care among children of immigrants, but our findings suggest that more attention should be paid specifically to recent immigrants and parents with limited English proficiency. In particular, immigrants who arrived in the US before age 13 look more similar to US-born parents than to any other immigrant subgroup, which reflects an integration and acculturation to US norms.

Notes

1. Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, March 8, 2017, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>.
2. We compared these estimates with nationally representative data on children of immigrants from 2012 from the Urban Institute's Children of Immigrants Data Tool (which uses American Community Survey data). Among households with a working parent and income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level in these data, 76 percent of children of immigrants had an LEP parent compared with the 39 percent we observed among low-income (not necessarily working) immigrant parents in the NSECE sample. This difference may have two causes. First, we coded LEP status based only on the respondent, and the national data were considering whether *either* parent in the household was LEP. Families with one LEP parent may have selected the English-proficient parent to answer the NSECE survey. Second, our measure of limited English proficiency only applied to Spanish-speaking households. Because the NSECE does not directly measure English proficiency, we used speaking only Spanish at home and answering the survey in Spanish as proxies for LEP status. Therefore, any LEP respondents in the NSECE who spoke another language and had help taking the survey in English were not counted as LEP in our data.

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