How Parental Preferences and Subsidy Receipt Shape Immigrant Families’ Child Care Choices

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Introduction and Purpose
Children of immigrants account for one in four children under age 6 in the United States (Zong and Batalova 2017). They are disproportionately more likely to be in poor families, have parents with low educational attainment, and grow up speaking 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 from 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, 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). But 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, Lahaiie, and Waldfogel 2006).

Research suggests such differences may be because of limited availability of early care and education programs in geographic areas with high rates of limited English proficiency 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).

But much research on the topic has relied on small qualitative samples in select locations. Although qualitative studies suggest that immigrant families who do access child care subsidies use center-based care at higher rates, limited data have been available to test this association in a representative sample of US families. Further, researchers have lacked the data to tease out the relative importance of parent preferences and structural constraints in shaping immigrant and limited English proficient (LEP) parents’ child care choices. Our research uses new survey data to fill that gap and provides valuable information to inform child care subsidy policy.

We analyze data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) to (1) document the parental preferences and child care arrangements of immigrant families with young children; (2) determine the factors that predict immigrant families’ child care settings, including the relative roles of parental preferences for different care types, family characteristics, employment characteristics, the local community context, and local child care marketplace characteristics; (3) identify the state subsidy policies that promote subsidy participation among eligible immigrant families, and (4) estimate how much subsidy receipt facilitates access to regulated care settings for potentially eligible immigrant families.

In this brief, we review our research questions and methods and then focus on the challenges and questions that arise when using secondary data to look at early care and education experiences of immigrant households, with implications for future research.

Research Questions
Our study examines five research questions:

1. What child care settings do immigrant and LEP parents use and how do they differ from those used by families headed by US-born and English-speaking parents?

2. What information do immigrant and LEP parents report researching when searching for prospective providers? What factors are important to them in their child care search? What are their perceptions of different care settings: center-based care, family child care, informal care, and parental care? How do these perceptions differ
from those of families headed by US-born and English-speaking parents?
3. What factors are associated with the type of care families with young children use, such as parental care preferences, family demographic characteristics, parental employment and school enrollment, community demographic characteristics, and local child care market characteristics? How do factors differ between immigrant families and US-born families?
4. Among low-income immigrant families, is child care subsidy receipt associated with greater use of center-based care?
5. Among low-income immigrant families, what state subsidy policies (e.g., waiting lists, application verification requirements, approved activities, minimum work hour requirements) are associated with higher subsidy uptake and greater use of center-based care?

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework undergirding the proposed study is shown in figure 1. We hypothesize direct influences of family (box A), work and school (box B), and community characteristics (box C) on child care settings used (box G). We also expect that family characteristics, work and school situations, and community contexts shape parental preferences (box D), given that parents think about their child care preferences within the context of the child care they received, their family situation, work lives, and what they hear from others in the community about various child care options. We expect that parental preferences shape care settings used. And we expect that local child care markets facilitate or constrain parents’ ability to find and access their preferred child care setting, depending on the available supply and cost of care.

We aim to examine the state child care policies (box E) that affect eligible immigrant families’ propensity to take up a child care subsidy (box F), net of the other factors shaping rates of subsidy take-up (boxes A, B, and C–arrows between these factors and subsidy receipt omitted for simplicity). Finally, in question 5, we investigate how subsidy receipt (box F) shapes child care settings used (box G) net of the other factors shaping child care settings used (boxes A, B, C, D, and H). In doing so, we explore how the generosity of subsidy policies (box E) encourages subsidy program participation (box F) and shapes the relationship between subsidy receipt and care choice (boxes F and G).

This figure is a simplified description of how different family, work or education, community, and policy influences may shape child care choices. The figure does not explain all possible influences on any
of the boxes in the model. The purpose of the framework is to illustrate the key pathways of interest and to be an organizing framework for knowledge about these pathways.

Methods
Our study draws on the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Policies Database. The NSECE is a nationally representative set of surveys conducted in 2011 and 2012 that provide a portrait of available early care and education in all types of care settings across the United States and the care preferences and experiences of US households. It is a cross-sectional survey and includes four components: a household survey, a survey of center-based providers, a center-based provider workforce survey, and a home-based provider survey.

We rely primarily on data from the NSECE household survey (N = 11,629) but merge on data from the NSECE center-based provider survey to capture characteristics of the local child care market. The household survey collects information on nonparental caregivers for every child under age 13 and uses a calendar data-collection method to document parental work hours against care use. The household survey randomly selects a child under 13 in the household to be the focal child for questions regarding the last care search, parental care preferences, and parental perceptions of different care types. For our analytic sample, we restrict the NSECE household survey sample to households with a focal child under age 5 so we can analyze together parental perceptions and care settings used.

We use the CCDF Policies Database to identify state-level child care subsidy policies and link that information to the NSECE household survey data using state identifiers in the restricted level 2 data file. Variables from the American Community Survey are included in the NSECE household survey data file so each household has a set of community characteristics (e.g., poverty rate).

First, we generate descriptive statistics and conduct simple comparison tests to address the first two research questions. We examine all households with young children and then restrict the sample to low-income households under 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Next, for the third research question, we use the full sample of households with a focal child under age 5 and run multivariate, multinomial regression models predicting the child care setting families use for the focal child, considering the most formal arrangement when there are multiple arrangements.

For the fourth and fifth research questions, we restrict the sample to households we estimate are eligible for child care subsidies according to the subsidy policies in their state, including income and work and school requirements. We run logistic regression models predicting the likelihood of receiving a subsidy among subsidy-eligible households, based on state subsidy policies. We then run multinomial regression models to analyze the relationship between subsidy receipt and the chosen care setting. We use survey weights to account for the sampling design and survey nonresponse error.

Methodological Challenges
We sought to document immigrant parents’ child care preferences, the care settings immigrant families use for their young children, and the factors that shape the child care settings they use—in particular, factors related to state subsidy policies and the local supply of center-based care. Our aim was to examine if immigrant families are observed using regulated care arrangements less than other families, and if so, potential reasons why. Results would point to whether child care subsidies can support parental choice and increase low-income immigrants’ access to regulated care settings.

We aimed to study immigrant families broadly, but we recognized that immigrant families are diverse and that immigrant subgroups may have different child care preferences and experiences. Ideally, researchers would have data with a broad and diverse sample of immigrants, representative of the full immigrant population in the area, to account for different characteristics of immigrant households and to study their diverse experiences. It could be that being born and raised abroad strongly shapes parents’ child care preferences and use, or it could be that being a recent immigrant who is less connected to US support systems most strongly shapes child care use. Perhaps immigrants from some countries show different patterns than parents from other countries because of child care norms in their home countries or other cultural factors. Or it could be that limited English proficiency is the more important
determinant of child care use, not immigrant backgrounds.

A full understanding of child care preferences and use among immigrant households would require examining the following characteristics:

- Whether all parents in the house are foreign born or whether one is US born
- Parents’ countries of birth
- Children’s countries of birth
- Parents’ English ability and the primary language spoken at home
- Whether any adult in the household is proficient in English
- Parents’ citizenship and immigration status (legal immigrants versus unauthorized immigrants)
- Parents’ year of entry into the United States and their age at entry

The NSECE contains helpful details on immigrant backgrounds but has only a subset of these characteristics. The NSECE collects and reports the following data:

- The countries of birth of all adults in the household
- The country of birth for all children under age 13 in the household
- The language(s) usually spoken in the household
- The language in which the interview was conducted (English or Spanish)
- Parents’ year of entry to the United States and their age at entry

But the NSECE lacks the following data that, ideally, we would have been able to examine:

- Parents’ English ability
- Whether any adult in the household is proficient in English
- Parents’ citizenship and immigration status (legal immigrants versus unauthorized immigrants)

Notably, the NSECE, like most US surveys, was available only in English and Spanish. A household screener was administered using different communication methods (mail, telephone, and in person) to identify households with children under age 13. The screener was written in English and Spanish. If an eligible respondent consented to the full survey, the interviewer administered the survey in person or by telephone. Interviews were done in English or Spanish. Perhaps because respondents would have needed sufficient English or Spanish proficiency to complete the screener, the survey team did not encounter any households unable to complete the survey in either English or Spanish. As a result, the NSECE may underrepresent limited English proficient immigrant parents from non-Spanish-speaking countries. Prior efforts by survey firms to accommodate additional languages have run into cost constraints.

Perhaps one of the most detailed early childhood surveys in capturing immigration and home language experiences is a recent cohort of the Head Start Child and Family Experiences Survey (FACES 2009), a nationally representative portrait of Head Start programs, classrooms, and participating children and families. In response to the rise in children of immigrants and dual-language learners in the country, specifically in Head Start, researchers began collecting additional information on home language. Items include

- all languages other than English spoken at home;
- the number of adults and number of children in the household that speak a non-English language to the Head Start child;
- the first language the child learned to speak;
- the language the child speaks most at home;
- the adult respondent’s first language;
- the primary language the respondent uses to speak to the child;
- how well the respondent understands, speaks, and reads English; and
- how well the respondent understands, speaks, reads, and writes in his or her first language, if not English.

FACES also collects information on all household residents, their age, and their relationship to the Head Start child; the country of origin of the child and the child’s mother and father; and the number of years a foreign-born child or parent has lived in the US. The parents’ age and number of years in the US would produce the age of the parent upon arrival in the US. Yet the FACES parent interview is only available in English and Spanish.

As another example, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey 2010 Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) asks parents of kindergarteners whether
each household member speaks, reads, writes, or understands English very well, pretty well, not very well, or not well at all, in addition to questions about all languages spoken in the home and the most commonly used language at home. It also asks about each household member’s birth country, how old each household member was when he or she came to the US, in which year the child came to the United States, and whether the child is a US citizen. The ECLS-K has information on the number of child care arrangements, provider types, and the setting location, as well as the language spoken by providers, and it has limited information on the type of child care center. The ECLS-K does not have information about parents’ preferences.

The American Community Survey, administered by the US Census Bureau, includes measures of all household members’ country of birth, language spoken at home, English speaking ability, the year each person “came to live” in the United States, age (which can be used to calculate age at entry), and citizenship status. But the American Community Survey has less information on early care and education experiences, measuring just whether children ages 3 and older are in school (e.g., nursery school, preschool, or kindergarten) and whether that school is public or private.

The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) contains a similar set of immigration measures. One key difference is the public-use data files report year of entry in categories rather than single years. Further, the latest panels of the SIPP do not include exact country of origin but rather only broad world regions. One benefit of the SIPP is that it asks whether each household member age 15 or older entered the United States with a green card for lawful permanent residence (LPR status). The 2008 SIPP panel asked noncitizens who did not enter as an LPR whether they adjusted to LPR status after entering the country, allowing for an approximate identification of unauthorized immigrants. But the 2014 SIPP omitted this latter question. In terms of information related to child care preferences and settings used, the SIPP has information on the types of providers used and measures parents’ satisfaction with their arrangements. The SIPP does not have information about parents’ care preferences.

The NSECE contains much—but not all—of the information we would want to understand the diverse experiences of immigrant households. The same challenge exists for many surveys that can be used to study the early care and education experiences of immigrant households. Accordingly, we had to make decisions about how to define an immigrant family and justify our reasoning.

Solutions
We tested different experiences of immigrant households based on nativity and place of origin. Because of our interest in the respondents’ perceptions of different care types (i.e., ratings of centers, family child care, relative or friend care, and parental care on different quality dimensions), we focused on the immigration background of the respondent, not on other adults in the household.

Based on the data available and data suppression requirements when reporting small sample sizes, we first identified US-born respondents and foreign-born respondents, and among the latter, respondents born in Mexico (because they are the largest immigrant group in the country and in the NSECE household data), respondents born in another Latin American country, and respondents born in another country. The sample size did not permit breaking out other national origin groups.

For foreign-born respondents, we used the variables for the respondents’ age and the year of their arrival in the US to construct two variables: arrived in the US in the past 10 years (recent arrivals) and arrived in the US before age 13 (child arrival). We assumed recent arrivals may not be as familiar with the child care system in the US and may have less information, fewer social networks, and more barriers to access than other families. In contrast, we assumed child arrivals may have personal experience with the US child care system, have more connections to individuals or groups that can inform their child care decisionmaking, and have preferences and perceptions about care more similar to US-born respondents.

We then looked at survey respondents with limited English proficiency (regardless of nativity), assuming language may be a barrier to accessing subsidies and publicly supported early care and education. Because the NSECE household survey does not ask respondents about their English language proficiency directly, we created a proxy based on (1) whether the respondent took the NSECE survey in English or
Spanish, and (2) whether the respondent reported that English was spoken in the home. Any respondent who took the survey in Spanish and reported that the household speaks only Spanish, Spanish Creole, or another language and not English at home was assumed to be LEP for this study.

In our descriptive analyses (research questions 1 and 2), we focused on several key subsamples: (1) families in which the NSECE household survey respondent was born outside the United States (immigrant households), (2) families in which the respondent was born in the United States (US-born households), (3) families in which the respondent is LEP according to our definition, and (4) families in which the respondent is not LEP. We examined these subgroups at all income levels and then restricted the sample to low-income families under 200 percent of the federal poverty level. We tested whether care patterns varied by socioeconomic levels given the link between income and access.

We also looked at families in which the respondent was born in Mexico, another Latin American country, or a non–Latin American country; families in which the respondent is a recent arrival; and families in which the respondent is a child arrival.

Figure 1 shows the share of low-income children under age 5 who have no regular child care arrangement, meaning they are only in the care of their parents. We find a significant difference between US-born respondents and foreign-born respondents, with more children of foreign-born respondents in parental care only (53 percent versus 41 percent). This pattern is similar when we look at all households regardless of income (not shown), but with lower shares: 34 percent of children in US-born households and 49 percent of children in foreign-born households.

When we break down the foreign-born group by nativity and age at arrival, we see this difference is driven by new arrivals and respondents from Mexico and non–Latin American countries. Low-income respondents from other Latin American countries look similar to US-born respondents. English language proficiency is also an important factor; LEP respondents are less likely to use nonparental child care.
When we examine the types of child care arrangements children use, we find statistically similar rates of center-based care use for children of both foreign-born and US-born respondents overall (48 percent and 45 percent, respectively) and in low-income households (42 percent and 35 percent, respectively). But children of LEP respondents, regardless of income, are less likely to be in center-based care than children of English-proficient respondents (34 percent and 46 percent, respectively). Among low-income households, children of LEP respondents and English-proficient respondents are more similar: 33 percent and 37 percent, respectively, use center-based care, with no significant difference (figure 2).

Again, looking at subgroups of low-income foreign-born respondents, we find differences by country of origin and recency of arrival, with Mexican-born respondents and recent arrivals being less likely to use a center. Simply knowing the respondent was born in another country tells only part of the story.
**Figure 2**
Share of Low-Income Children under Age 5 in Center-Based Care, among Children in Nonparental Care
*By survey respondent’s place of birth and English proficiency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Share</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>0%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US-born</td>
<td>Foreign-born</td>
<td>English proficient</td>
<td>Limited English proficient</td>
<td>Mexican-born</td>
<td>Born in other Spanish-speaking country</td>
<td>Born in another country</td>
<td>Recent immigrant</td>
<td>Came to US before age 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Notes:** “Recent immigrant” indicates someone who entered the US in the past 10 years.

**Implications for research**
As children of immigrants and dual-language learners increase in number across US communities, considering the needs of immigrant families is no longer a task that falls only on service providers in large urban areas and in southwestern states. As this group becomes more diverse in its national origins, with growing shares of immigrant families coming from countries in Asia, simple accommodations for Spanish-speaking, Mexican immigrant families are no longer sufficient.

Future data-collection efforts that wish to capture the diverse experiences of immigrant households, which include one-quarter of all young children in the country, should consider their sampling techniques, language accommodations, and the survey questions they include to capture immigrant experiences.

Future data users should use caution when simplifying analytic models to control for “immigrant status,” as findings may be different depending on the immigrant subgroups included.

Our study also highlights the importance of using multiple measures and collecting detailed information on country of origin, year of arrival, and language proficiency of each household resident or family member to capture the complete story of a family’s background and a child’s home experience.

**For more information:**
See “Child Care Choices of Low-Income, Immigrant Families with Young Children” by Heather Sandstrom and Julia Gelatt. [http://urbn.is/2yHYGLM](http://urbn.is/2yHYGLM)