



Finding Child Care in Two Chicago Communities: The Voices of Latina Mothers

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This study explores how Latino families living in predominantly Latino communities in Chicago make child-care decisions given the amount of formal care options in their communities. This brief report summarizes our study methods, findings, and recommendations. For more details, read the full report at ssa.uchicago.edu/finding-childcare-in-two-chicago-communities

BACKGROUND

Finding child care is a major challenge for families. Childcare decisions are complex and require aligning several pieces of a complicated puzzle. These pieces include sufficient supply of safe, affordable, quality programs; clear information about options; clarity about childcare preferences; and provider schedules that meet families' needs. Previous studies have explored how families understand and navigate their childcare options, although research specific to Latino families is limited. A few studies have suggested that Latino families hold similar values about the role of childcare as other racial and ethnic groups.ⁱ However, studies show Latino families are more likely to have a limited supply of childcare programs in their communities.ⁱⁱ In addition, Latino families may experience some unique factors related to their historical, cultural, and political circumstances when seeking child care for their children.

STUDY OVERVIEW

To attend to these particular cultural and community contexts, this study focused on how Latino families living in two predominantly Latino communities in Chicago make childcare decisions, relative to the supply and types of formal childcare options in their communities. Despite having similar population sizes, one focal community, Belmont Cragin, had 13 licensed centers and 62 licensed family childcare homes (a total of 6,695 childcare slots). The other community, Little Village, had only 5 licensed centers and 19 licensed family childcare homes (a total of 1,886 childcare slots) when we began this study. These numbers do not include a large number of unlicensed and license-exempt home-based providers for which there are no publicly accessible data.

This report draws from 32 in-depth interviews with Latina mothers from Belmont Cragin and Little Village with at least one child 5 years old or younger, eight interviews with directors of childcare centers in both communities, insight from two community-based organizations, and co-interpretation meetings with community-based organizations and community members. By considering the different sources of information used by Latino parents and the range of factors that shape their childcare decisions, this study aims to offer new information to equip communities to better meet Latino families' childcare needs.

The interviews for this study were completed during 2018–19, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency closure of many childcare programs in Chicago and nationwide. As this report goes to press, our communities continue to deal with this pandemic. Families are facing unprecedented levels of unemployment and suffering serious health crises that disproportionately affect Latino communities and other communities of color. These times have also laid bare the structural racism and violence that Black and Brown communities endure on a daily basis. Given the timing of our study, this immediate context is not reflected in the interviews that we conducted or our findings. Even so, we believe that the key takeaways and recommendations remain current—and even more critical during these times.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study asked three research questions about Latino families' perception of childcare options and the decision-making process.

1. **How do study participants in Belmont Cragin and Little Village perceive their childcare options?**
2. **How do study participants get information about their childcare options?**
3. **How do study participants make childcare decisions and what factors affect their decisions?**

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Childcare Options

Most mothers in both Belmont Cragin and Little Village perceived a shortage of childcare, but in slightly different ways. Mothers in Little Village noted the scarcity of formal childcare *programs* in the community. Mothers in Belmont Cragin were more likely to discuss a shortage of slots, and experiences of being waitlisted or referred elsewhere. A few mothers in both communities reported that there were sufficient childcare options, but that families lacked the knowledge and information to take advantage of these options.

Study participants varied in their knowledge about public supports to pay for childcare. Mothers who were aware of the Child Care Assistance Program and Head Start did not fully understand their eligibility requirements. Moreover, interviews with childcare center directors suggested that many families who knew of and were interested in participating in subsidized programs were ineligible due to the programs' specific work and income requirements. Some directors reported that their centers offer financial supports other than CCAP, such as scholarship and emergency funds.

In some cases, misconceptions about childcare options and eligibility requirements seemed to deter families from even beginning the search process. Mothers who participated in co-interpretation meetings noted that some parents assume that childcare is too expensive or that they would not qualify for assistance without actively looking into what might be available.

*"I've never even seen [a childcare center] around Little Village... And I'm pretty familiar with the area."
(Little Village mother)*

*"I would like for parents to know that there are many options and to know about the different payment options... I think if they knew more about these things, they would use childcare more."
(Little Village mother)*

“There should be places where they put up posters, where they inform, where they say you can come in, that here they can help you with such a thing because I didn’t know anything before that. The truth is that I didn’t know anything, and there in the meetings I go on Fridays I find out things that I say, ‘Wow!’”ⁱⁱⁱ

(Belmont Cragin mother)

“I started looking and there was no one to tell me anything. I wanted a program, or some activity, something. And there was nothing, so I started searching the Internet and everywhere.”^{iv}

(Little Village mother)

In other cases, administrative requirements for enrolling in formal childcare deterred families from pursuing these arrangements. During their interviews, several center directors reported that administrative requirements, including providing proof of work and income were a burden for some parents, particularly for those who are paid in cash for their work. Additionally, some directors noted that after the 2016 election, center enrollment declined because undocumented parents feared that sharing their status could lead to deportation.

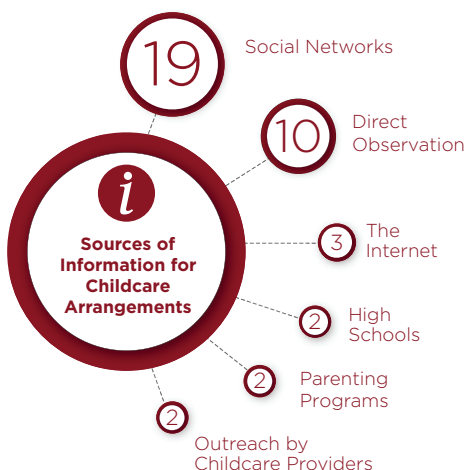
Thus, the difference in density of formal childcare programs in these two communities does not appear to be the primary factor influencing families’ awareness of programs. In both Belmont Cragin and Little Village, participants reported a need for more and better information on childcare options in their communities. There was a great deal of variation in parents’ knowledge; the variation was greater between participants within each community than across communities. For example, in both neighborhoods, mothers whose primary language was English, or who spoke both English and Spanish equally well, were more likely to know about their community’s childcare options than those whose primary language was Spanish.

Information Sources

Study participants indicated learning about their childcare options through their social networks, direct observation, the internet, their high schools, parenting programs, and through outreach by childcare providers (see Figure 1). Social networks, including friends, neighbors, and relatives, were the most frequently cited information source by far. The next most common was direct observation, such as seeing or visiting a childcare center or program on the street. Of the 25 participants who named specific sources of information about childcare, more than half reported obtaining information from multiple sources.

Often, social network members were also deeply embedded in mothers’ childcare decision-making processes. In particular, participants reported that partners and grandparents were often involved in the decision about what kind of care to use or whether to use childcare at all, based on their beliefs or financial considerations.

FIGURE 1.
MOTHERS’ SOURCES OF INFORMATION
ABOUT CHILDCARE ARRANGEMENTS (N=25)



Decision-Making Factors

The study aimed to understand how participants made decisions about childcare given the availability of options in their community, their preferences, family circumstances, previous experiences, goals, and other work, school, and caregiving factors that previous research indicates affect parental childcare decisions. The interviews revealed that parents in both Belmont Cragin and Little Village use similar decision-making strategies.^v

Similar to other research on parental decision making, interviews suggested that **family belief systems influence decisions regarding whether to seek work outside of the home and use nonparental childcare while working.**^{vi} Several participants expressed a general view that mothers should be home with their very young children. Other mothers said the choice to stay home with their child was based on unique circumstances, such as the temperament or health needs of the child. Whatever the reasoning, sometimes these views led to decisions not to seek paid work or pursue education, especially before a child was 3 or 4 years old. Mothers who participated in our co-interpretation meetings confirmed the importance that families placed on parental care and noted that preferences to stay home with children are often reinforced by husbands or grandparents.

Even parents who wanted to combine caregiving with work outside the home sometimes could not do so because care was too expensive. These mothers commented that it would not be worth it to work outside the home because a significant portion of their wages would go to pay for childcare. Other participants attended school or were employed but arranged it around their partner's or mother's work schedule to avoid additional childcare costs.

*"The idea of my husband is that parents should take care of their children. That is the healthiest, when you can."^v
(Belmont Cragin mother)*

*"I don't think anybody really makes the decision like I'm gonna stay at home or I'm gonna work. It's like I have to stay at home 'cause I can't afford to be at work and pay for childcare, or I have to work 'cause I can't afford not to work."^v
(Little Village mother)*

The interviews also echoed previous research on the complexity of childcare decision making. Mothers reported that several factors shaped their childcare decisions; rarely did parents seek care based on only one factor. Broadly, their decision-making factors fell into three overarching categories: *convenience*, *affordability*, and *responsiveness* to children’s well-being (see Figure 2). Convenience and affordability factors often determined the breadth and scope of childcare options available to families. At the same time, parents also sought care that was trustworthy and safe, and that met their children’s developmental needs.

Many mothers reported that they decided to enroll their children in a specific childcare arrangement due to its proximity to their home or place of work. However, concerns about trust and safety sometimes outweighed the desire for a nearby arrangement. For example, one mother from Belmont Cragin discussed her decision to enroll her child in a center that was “far away” from home because of her familiarity with and confidence in the center:

“That’s why you, as a parent, do the effort and look for it. It may be far away. . . It was far away. . . I already have the experience [with the program]. There are many Head Starts. But I don’t know how they will be treated. There are many in my area, but I don’t have the trust. When you have a child, you love him and want to give him the best. You don’t want him to suffer, or for a teacher to treat him badly. So, if you have already seen a place where they treated you fine, you continue there.”^{vii}
(Belmont Cragin mother)

FIGURE 2.

DECISION-MAKING FACTORS

Convenience	Affordability	Responsiveness to Child Well-being
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling • Proximity • Accommodating siblings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free or low-cost relative childcare • Subsidized care • Paid child care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety and trust • Child development • Child needs

In brief, the multiple factors that affected the childcare decisions of mothers in our sample were consistent with those found in prior literature and underscore a key finding of our study: Latina mothers in this study seek similar arrangements for their children as mothers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. They want convenient, affordable arrangements where their children will thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings suggest that Latina mothers' knowledge of childcare arrangements is informed primarily by their local surroundings. They learn about options through their social networks, community ties, and personal experiences in their neighborhoods. Families' decision-making processes were similar in both communities, despite differences in the density of formal childcare arrangements in Little Village and Belmont Cragin. Latino families in both communities also perceived several barriers preventing them from accessing formal childcare arrangements. We suggest several policy and practice recommendations that are suggested by the study findings (see Figure 3).

This set of recommendations was drawn from the interviews with mothers in both communities and shaped by input from community partners. Community partners emphasized the importance of tailoring new initiatives and policies to the unique needs of neighborhoods and drawing on the strengths of neighborhood institutions. They shared the many resources already in place in each community and the challenges that community members and agencies face.

We recommend a multipronged intervention strategy that involves multiple stakeholders. The strategy emphasizes knowledge creation and dissemination as well as improvements in childcare access and supply. Our recommendations include several suggestions for improving and diversifying outreach and disseminating information to the Latino community. Community partners emphasized that gaining trust and showing respect to families is necessary for effective outreach, especially outreach by formal providers and childcare agencies. Greater provider outreach is valuable, and our findings also suggest that word of mouth communication through families' social networks is especially effective. Our community partners echoed this finding and expressed that parents value having people who "look and sound like them" sharing their personal experience and guidance. Thus, for these reasons we emphasize recommendations that leverage and build upon existing community relationships and networks to promote the spread of reliable and trustworthy information and guidance.

Our recommendations apply to both communities. However, by targeting formal childcare providers, community-based organizations, and city and state-level policymakers, they attend to and expand upon each community's particular childcare landscape. By centering the recommendations around the particular barriers that Latino families in Belmont Cragin and Little Village face, we believe that stakeholders will be better equipped to support Latino families and meet these communities' unique childcare needs.

FIGURE 3.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving Knowledge and Awareness	Increasing Accessibility and Supply
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain and regularly update bilingual directories outlining childcare options in the community and nearby areas. Expand dissemination strategies to increase awareness of resources • Work with local organizations to form informal support groups for new parents which can serve as spaces for parents to share knowledge and experiences • Promote local hiring of childcare providers, which can facilitate the spread of information within communities • Encourage childcare programs to hold open houses and highlight safety features in marketing materials • Encourage enhanced methods of engagement between Illinois Action for Children and local childcare providers to disseminate information on the CCAP subsidy program • Encourage provider outreach to be rooted in personal connections as opposed to consumer relations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for increasing the CCAP subsidy income eligibility threshold, especially for two-parent households • Loosen identification requirements to access care • Increase the transparency of eligibility requirements for childcare assistance and childcare programs • Increase supply of formal childcare arrangements, paying particular attention to low-cost arrangements at unique and diverse sites such as ESL locations • Encourage childcare providers to increase the number of slots for infants and toddlers, and increase public funding and support for this care • Equip existing community access points, such as libraries, home visiting programs, and ESL sites, with information and resources to help families enroll in formal childcare.

END NOTES

- ⁱ Guzman, L., Hickman, S., Turner, K., & Gennetian, L. (2016). *Hispanic children's participation in early care and education: Parents' perceptions of care arrangements, and relatives' availability to provide care*. National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families. <http://www.hispanicresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2016-60His-pECEParentPerceptions.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ Malik, R., Hamm, K., Adamu, M., & Morrissey, T. (2016). *Childcare deserts: An analysis of childcare centers by zip code in 8 states*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2016/10/27/225703/child-care-deserts/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Original Spanish quotation: "Debería haber de repente lugares donde pongan carteles, donde informen, donde digan que puedes ir a este lugar y que te pueden ayudar con tal cosa. Porque yo no sabía nada, la verdad es que yo no sabía nada. Ahí en la reunión que voy los viernes me voy enterando de cosas que digo "Guau!" (Madre de Belmont Cragin)
- ^{iv} Original Spanish quotation: "Empecé a buscar y no había quien me dijera nada. Yo quería un programa, alguna actividad, algo. Y no había nada, entonces busqué en Internet y en todas partes." (Madre de La Villita)
- ^v Original Spanish quotation: "La idea de mi esposo es que los padres deben cuidar a sus hijos. Eso es lo más sano, cuando se puede." (Madre de Belmont Cragin)
- ^{vi} Durand, T. M. (2011). Latina mothers' cultural beliefs about their children, parental roles, and education: Implications for effective and empowering home-school partnerships. *The Urban Review*, 43(2), 255–278.
- ^{vii} Original Spanish quotation: "Por eso uno busca, uno como padre hace el esfuerzo y si me toca lejos, me toca ir allá. Aunque estaba lejos, no me decían que tenía que vivir en la zona. Con mi otro hijo, decidí el mismo lugar, dije "ya tengo experiencia". Hay muchos Head Starts. Pero no sé cómo los van a tratar. Sí hay muchos en mi área, pero yo no tengo la confianza. Cuando tú tienes un hijo, lo amas y quieres darle lo mejor. No quieres que sufra ni que vaya a haber una maestra que lo trate mal. Entonces, si ya has visto un lugar donde te trataron bien, dices "yo sigo ahí." (Madre de Belmont Cragin)

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