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Y Ahora Qué?!: Addressing Unaffordable and Inaccessible Quality Child Care for Low-Income Latine Families & the Nation

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El Problema: The Disproportionate Cost of Unaffordable, Low Quality Early Childhood Education for Latine Children

Children are not only our future, but they play a vital role in the fabric of our present society. Nonetheless, far too many Latine children lack equitable access to high quality early childhood education programs that meet their needs. The disproportionate impact of inaccessible quality child care programs has significant implications for Latine families as well as child care providers, and employers. Government agencies like the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Children and Families, Department of Education, child welfare and education nonprofits, policymakers, and the nation as a whole are also impacted. This brief explores the necessity of quality early childhood education and the major barriers that low-income Latine families face in attaining and benefiting from such opportunities on a national level.

Context: How Did We Get Here?

Nearly 250 years after this country's inception, child care continues to be a cornerstone of American society. It provides stability and progress for children, families, and a growing nation who are dependent on the vitality of a strong, current and future

workforce. On an individual level, quality child care allows children to form indispensable relationships with trusted adults, helping them learn more about themselves and the world around them. A child's experiences during the first 5 years of their life are indispensable to their physical, social, and emotional development into adulthood (Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness, 2024). By age 5, 90% of the brain is developed, with early experiences shaping the brain's architecture in ways that later experiences do not (Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness, 2024; Nelson III & Tierney, 2009). This is true both for positive and negative happenings in a child's life.

While many may not deem negative early childhood experiences concerning, such memories pose a significant threat to the short and long term wellbeing of children. Approximately 9.4 percent of children younger than 5 have experienced two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs refers to childhood trauma producing toxic stress that when experienced over an extended period of time increases children's chances for chronic health problems in addition to subpar academic, and economic outcomes (Gibbs & Schneider, 2023).

As a result, access to early childhood education (child care), is not only about child safety but rather setting up the foundations for higher learning and social emotional competence, therefore making quality crucial in this setting.

Recognizing the societal costs of inaccessible child care, the federal government has invested in early childhood education for the last 92 years.

Key Terms and Definitions

Early Childhood Education (ECE) - Used interchangeably with "childcare" throughout this brief.

Home-Based Child Care (HBCC) - Early childhood education programs run at a provider's house.

Center-Based Care- Child care centers, on-site care at work, faith-based programs, preschool, nursery schools, etc....

Family, Friend and Neighbor Care (FFN) - Includes childcare by relatives, and non-relatives like babysitters, which unlike HBCC & Center-Based Care, is typically exempt from licensing, and quality regulations.

Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG) - A federal program that helps low-income families pay for childcare via state-administered subsidies for children ages 0 through 12.

Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) - Rating tool used in most states to systematically assess, communicate, and improve the quality of childcare.

In 1933, the Emergency Nursery School Program provided child care for children whose parents worked in jobs created by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019). It was not until President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, that the American government implemented policies targeted at low income families with Head Start (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019). A remnant of the Civil Rights Movement, Early Head Start and Head Start support low-income families with children ages 0-3 and 3-5. These programs provide school readiness, nutrition, development, and social services through family engagement and subsidized child care primarily via Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG) (Administration of Children & Families, 2024a).

In the US, families typically resort to three types of care all of which vary in quality and the degree to which they are subsidized: home-based child care (HBCC), center-based care, and family, friend, and neighbor care (FFN). In 2024, the Administration of Children and Families (ACF), Office of Child Care (OCC) finalized a new rule limiting co-pays to no more than 7 percent of a family's income, in line with the federal definition of affordable child care (Administration of Children & Families, 2024b).

Más Allá Del Problema: What Does the Current Child Care Landscape Look Like for Income-Restricted Latine Families?

A closer look at the current child care landscape for income-restricted Latine families reveals the need for a multifaceted, comprehensive approach at addressing this issue. Currently, 1 in every 4 children in the US is Latine and by 2050, Hispanic children are expected to account for more than 30 percent of the American child population (Crosby, Helms, &

Mendez, 2016). For every 3 Latine children, one is low-income (Smith, 2020). Poverty, in turn, has been shown to increase the chances of exposure to ACEs and, therefore, long-term health issues like alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, obesity, lower educational achievement, and recurring cycles of poverty (Murphey & Sacks, 2018).

ACES can also result from unequal access to wealth and resources, discrimination, traumatic immigration trajectories, and other factors. Nonetheless, quality child care can prevent ACEs while mitigating its negative effects. ECE programs like Head Start achieve this by screening for developmental delays and family needs, connecting both children and their families to essential resources, including food and mental health support. Yet, only about half of Latine non-immigrant infants and toddlers and one third of their immigrant peers obtain ECE services (Crosby & Mendez, 2024).

The underutilization and limited access to formal child care arrangements within the low-income Latine community stems from a plethora of interacting challenges specific to their experiences in the US. Cost remains one of the biggest barriers. In 2021, the national average cost for full time child care was \$10,600 a year (ChildCare Aware of America, 2022). This cost is approximately 16 percent of the annual median income for Hispanic households (Guzman, 2024). For many Latine families, this cost exceeds college expenses in many states (Workman, 2021). Another major hurdle is the misalignment of hours of operation and Hispanic parents' work demands and schedules. As evidenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, Latines make up a significant portion of service-

industry jobs, many of which were considered "essential work" at the height of the public health emergency. Overrepresented in low-wage positions, many Latine parents hold multiple jobs with non traditional, irregular work hours, and limited employment benefits (Guzman et. al, 2023). Research highlights that parents working in jobs with unstable, unpredictable, and nonstandard work hours are less likely to utilize child care subsidies (Guzman et. al, 2023). Working on weekends, after 5pm, and experiencing last minute changes to work schedules often misalign with the current availability of care options throughout various child care settings especially in center based care.

Additionally, geographic factors present considerable hurdles to accessing quality ECE. Legacies of discriminatory practices like redlining and limited to no access to transportation impede parents from living near and accessing higher quality child care programs even when these are partially or completely subsidized (National Head Start Association, 2022). Furthermore, low thresholds of income eligibility typically keep two-earner, and economically mobile families who may still benefit from financial help without subsidies or state funded ECE like HeadStart (National Head Start Association, 2022). Lastly, lack of culturally and linguistically competent curriculums and family engagement within licensed programs leave many parents to opt for unlicensed FFN care who typically offer lower costs, greater time flexibility, shared language, and cultural competency (Torres, 2018). Cost paired with other challenges leave many low income Latine parents to make important trade offs of when, where, and how to provide ECE for their children.

Beyond costs to Latine families via their child’s development, loss of work hours, inability to meet other basic needs, or pursue higher paying job opportunities, these barriers also come at an exorbitant price tag to the nation. While initiatives like Head Start have aimed to address these issues for low-income families since the late 20th century, the ongoing prevalence of inadequate child care access underscores the urgency for further intervention. In Spring of 2021, during the pandemic, more than 1 in 5 Latines reported child care challenges with almost a quarter of these parents reporting that they had lost their job or quit due to child care disruptions (Crosby & Mendez, 2024). Loss of hours or employment all together not only affect Latine parents in this context but also their employers, who have to find alternatives in short notice or invest time and energy in hiring new employees due to these changes. Lack of adequate child care costs the nation approximately \$8.3 billion annually in lost wages (Jacobs et. al, 2019). These national financial implications are staggering especially when considering the fact that if Latines formed their own country, they would have the fifth largest economy in the world at \$3.6 trillion (Contreras, 2024). As Latine communities continue to grow in size, economic influence, and political power, addressing the child care crisis becomes increasingly critical.

Recognizing this necessity, a number of states across the country have taken proactive steps towards child care reform. New Mexico (NM), a state where Latine children make up more than 60 percent of its child population, began a multi-year, \$18 million state level investment to address the unmet needs of families and child care providers (Guzman et. al,

2024b). The state changed its governance structure by creating the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD). ECECD serves as a centralized body responsible for overseeing prenatal to age 5 initiatives ranging from home visiting, early intervention, to the subsidy program (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2023).

Additionally, they updated FOCUS, NM’s QRIS, with a focus on three key quality areas within the “Full Participation of Each Child” Focus Criteria: family engagement, inclusive practices for children with developmental delays or

disabilities, and culture and language support (New Mexico Early Childhood Education & Care Department, 2024). The fact that the aforementioned three categories remain a consistent focus area throughout each additional star (quality rating level) showcases the importance of cultural competency in overall ECE program quality. Please refer to Figure 1 for more information about NM’s changes to the child care landscape and its projected impact

Where Do We Go From Here?

In order to address this multifaceted policy issue, it is

How Child Care Can Transform New Mexico

A Theory of System-Level Change

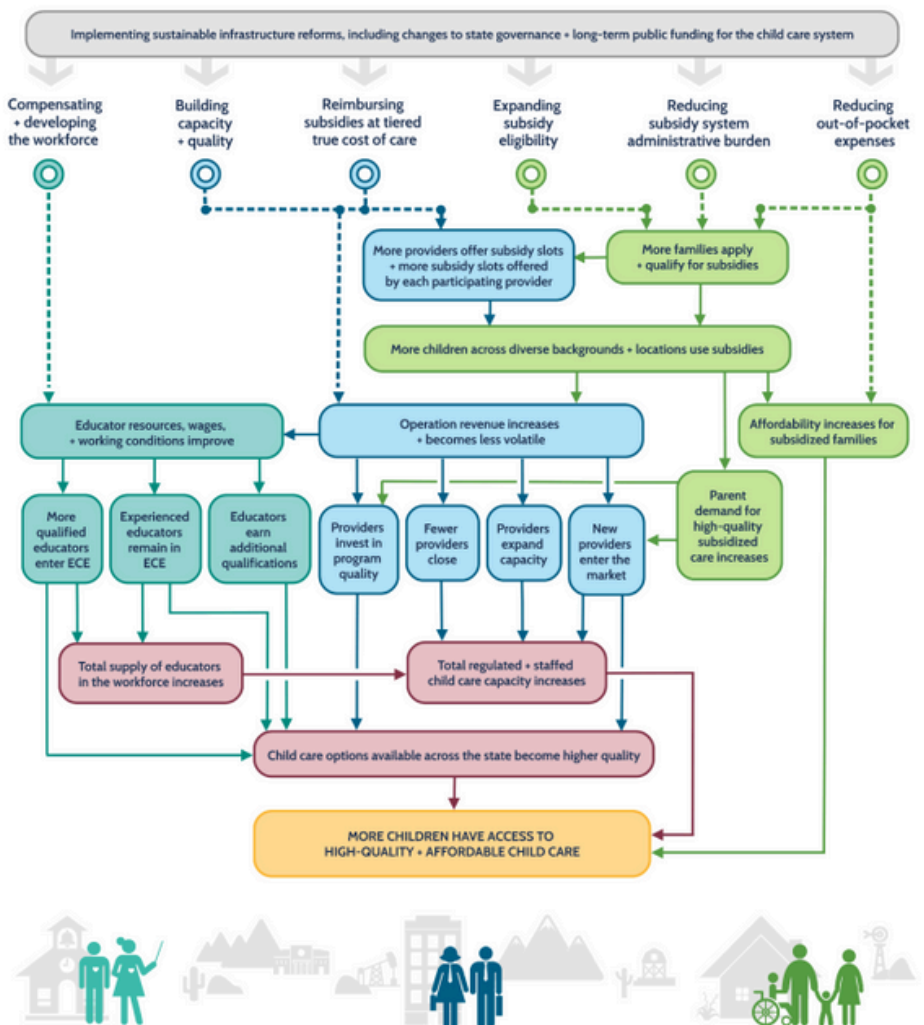


Figure 1. Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center. (2023). Transforming the Child Care Landscape- A Case Study of New Mexico [Infographic]. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from:

important to consider a comprehensive approach that meets the unique needs of each child and family across different populations and states. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, New Mexico serves as a valuable case study due to its bold, wide-ranging approach to building a stronger, more sustainable ECE infrastructure that considers the needs of (1) children, (2) families, and (3) the workforce to increase the quality and affordability of child care. Nonetheless, there needs to be more robust evaluations of NM's approach to test if the child care reforms have indeed caused its intended impact. Additionally, further consideration should be given to incentivizing the creation of ECE centers and programs with non-traditional hours in order to meet working parents' labor needs.

Recognizing the developmental significance of quality ECE and the overrepresentation of Latines living in poverty, lack of affordable and quality child care poses a serious threat to Hispanic families' ability to meet all of their children's needs and progress economically. What many would consider a private matter (securing adequate child care) also represents a major public policy problem not only for Latine children, families, and their communities, but also educators, employers, economists, policymakers, and the nation as whole. To ignore the personal and societal costs of this disproportionate lack of quality child care presents serious consequences to todos- the present and future of America.

Endnotes

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