MANY FAMILIES IN ALABAMA EXPRESS A PREFERENCE FOR HOME-BASED CHILD CARE DURING THE PANDEMIC

ALABAMA FAMILIES’ EXPERIENCE WITH CHILD CARE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: BRIEF #2

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

What forms of child care are families interested in using during the COVID-19 pandemic?

How do current care preferences compare with care use prior to the pandemic?

KEY FINDINGS:

Only 11% of families surveyed used home-based child care prior to the pandemic, but 40% report that home-based child care is the only type of child care they are comfortable using now.

Higher-income families are more likely to report being comfortable using only home-based child care arrangements during the pandemic.

The supply of licensed family child care in the state is likely not sufficient to meet families’ needs, given the steep decline in family child care providers in the last decade.

INTRODUCTION:

The Alabama Partnership for Children (APC) conducted an online survey of working families between May 18, 2020 and June 9, 2020 that received over 500 responses. You can find a report with full survey results at https://alabamapartnershipforchildren.org/parent-survey-results/. The results are pertinent to reopening child care programs safely, understanding the needs of families, and reconciling the competing needs of returning to work and providing child care.

This is the second brief highlighting key findings from the survey. You can read the first brief about child care experiences by household income at: https://alabamapartnershipforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Parent-Survey-Brief-1-Final.pdf
METHODS:

This brief uses survey responses from the 343 families who meet these criteria: 1) They report having at least one child under six years of age; 2) They used some form of non-parental child care prior to the pandemic; and 3) They responded to the survey questions about care preferences.

The survey asked families to identify what alternative forms of child care they would feel comfortable using for the duration of the pandemic from a selection of eight care types. Families could select as many types of child care as they wanted, or they could say they do not feel comfortable with any child care. We categorized responses as:

**Home-based arrangements**
- Licensed family day care home (1-6 children in a provider’s home)
- Licensed family day care group home (7-12 children in a provider’s home)
- In-home care (care provided in the child’s own home, such as a nanny)
- Relative or other home-based care (care in the home of a family member or neighbor)

**Center-based arrangements**
- Licensed child care centers (12+ children in a state-licensed center)
- License-exempt child care centers (a faith-based entity not regulated by the Department of Human Resources)
- First Class Pre-K classrooms (state-funded program for four-year-olds)
- Head Start/Early Head Start programs (federally-funded program for families meeting income requirements)
WHAT TYPES OF CARE DO FAMILIES FEEL COMFORTABLE USING?

13% of respondents are not comfortable using any form of child care. Approximately 28% report they are comfortable with center-based care, 19% report they are comfortable with using either center-based or home-based care, and 40% report they are comfortable only with using home-based care.

This is in stark contrast to families' care arrangements prior to the start of the pandemic. 89% of respondents report that they were using a center-based care arrangement prior to the pandemic. Only 10% were using home-based care, and 1% were using both home-based and center-based care.

Among families using home-based care prior to the pandemic, 2% were in licensed family child care or group family child care; 6% used family, friend, or neighbor care; and 2% used in-home care, such as a nanny or babysitter.

“Due to the uncertainty of this virus and how it is affecting our children now, I am frightened to send her into any environment right now. The positive numbers have increased, and that gives me further hesitation sending her anywhere at this time.”

“I am extremely concerned about putting my children in any facility with other children from homes that are not taking this virus seriously.”
HOW DO CARE PREFERENCES VARY BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME?

Survey results reveal differences in care preferences by household income. Families in the lowest income group more frequently report a preference for center-based care arrangements. Those in the higher income groups more frequently report being comfortable only with home-based arrangements or with no child care. The chart below shows care preference results by household income.

Together, these results highlight that most families comfortable with non-parental care prefer a home-based arrangement. This makes sense given the features of home-based child care: there are smaller group sizes, care is provided in a home, siblings can often receive care together, and there is a consistent care provider. These are not often features of center-based settings. Additionally, licensed home-based care tends to be less expensive than center-based care, and it is more likely to meet child care needs in rural communities and to be available during non-traditional hours when many essential workers need care.

“"A family member that is without work has helped while I still had to go to work. The change was needed because I had to find reliable, safe care with someone I trusted that was affordable."
The current preference for home-based care may or may not continue after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important to note that Alabama has experienced a steady decline in the number of licensed family child care programs, with the number of providers declining nearly 50% in the last decade. This steep decline indicates that supply of licensed home-based care is likely to be inadequate to meet families' needs. It also mirrors nationwide trends: the number of family child care homes declined nationally by 48% between 2005 and 2017 [1].

The decline in licensed family child care disproportionately affects low-income and rural families, as well as families with infants and toddlers. Family child care providers are likely leaving the field due to insufficient compensation and benefits, challenges in operating a small business, high work demands, and increased regulations [2], although more research is needed to confirm this.

**DECLINE IN LICENSED HOME-BASED CHILD CARE**

This graph shows the decline in the number of licensed home-based child care providers in Alabama from 2010-2019 using Alabama Kids Count data [3].
RECOMMENDATIONS

Gather more information from Alabama families about their child care needs and preferences. This parent survey highlights the potential demand for more home-based child care. It will be important to continue to explore and track this pattern throughout and after the pandemic.

Offer financial support for child care providers, both center-based and home-based. The recent child care stabilization grants offered through the Department of Human Resources are an excellent example of the type of financial support that helps providers continue to operate. However, given the ongoing nature of the pandemic, more relief funds are needed.

Provide recruitment incentives for new family child care providers to become licensed, especially in communities with low child care access and high demand.

Continue to fund and expand programs that support home-based providers. Alabama has a strong history of supporting home-based providers through initiatives like Family Child Care Partnerships, Kids and Kin, and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships. These programs offer crucial support to licensed family child care and relative care providers that improve quality.

Ensure home-based providers are included in state initiatives related to early childhood education. One promising development is that family child care providers are now able to participate in Alabama Quality STARS. The state should develop and implement a model for First Class Pre-K that is based in family day care and group homes. This is especially needed in rural areas where center-based early care and education is not feasible.

Support business training and shared services alliances for home-based providers. Partnering to share costs helps providers operate in a more streamlined and cost-efficient way. Providers may be able to share services like accounting, technology, and substitute staffing [4].

Seek family child care providers’ input about regulatory barriers. Asking providers about barriers to becoming or remaining licensed or participating in the child care subsidy program may reveal simple policy or implementation changes that will support providers’ continued operation.

For more information or if you have questions related to this report, please contact Dr. Alison Hooper at alhooper2@ua.edu.


[3] https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#AL/2/0/char/0