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Decisions & Distance: Assessing the Relationship Between Child Care Access and Travel

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Issue

Child care is essential infrastructure, but supply in the U.S. has long fallen short of demand. In California, this discrepancy varies dramatically across neighborhoods that differ by income, race/ethnicity, and location. Existing research shows that access to child care is best in high-income urban neighborhoods with concentrations of well-educated professionals. Meanwhile, supply is far more limited in low- and middle-income areas, and in neighborhoods with high proportions of Latino residents. Outlying suburban and rural areas also face limited child care supply. Many families in these areas have no choice other than informal forms of child care.

When trying to understand barriers to the use of formal child care (care provided by professionals in a licensed child care facility), geographic accessibility is a critical factor. The majority of existing scholarship on “accessibility” focuses on proximity to employment; however, this literature does not consider that more than 25% of all work trips are chained, meaning that workers make a stop on their way to or from work. For workers with young children, these chained trips often include stops at child care centers. This travel pattern is particularly salient for women, who disproportionately shoulder household responsibilities that typically necessitate shorter and more efficient commutes. For women with children, and for parents and caregivers more broadly, employment becomes difficult without access to nearby child care.

This study seeks to address the gap in existing research on the topic of child care access, child care use, and travel. By linking household-level travel survey data to a measure of child care access, we examine the relationships between child care access, use, and travel distance to such care for households across California. We then propose a set of recommendations to reduce spatial barriers to child care.

Study Approach

This study assesses spatial access to child care in relation to two outcomes: a household’s decision to send its young children to formal child care, and the distance that a household travels from home to its chosen child care facility. To conduct this analysis, we created a spatial child care access metric using a two-step floating catchment area (2SFCA) method and produced descriptive statistics and regression models. The data for this study come from the 5-year American Community Survey (2015-2019), the California Department of Social Services, and the 2017 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) California add-on.

Key Research Findings

- » Latino households with young children had the lowest access to child care of any race/ethnicity (Figure 1), confirming prior research on child care deserts. Notably, Latino households comprised nearly 39% of households with young children in California, but were less than one-third of those that used formal care.
- » Among households with young children that made a home-to-child-care trip in California, the mean trip distance was 3.7 miles and the mean travel time was nearly 14 minutes.
- » Nearly 90% of home-to-child-care trips were made by private vehicles and nearly one-tenth were made on foot — but, within the study, not a single household made this trip using public transit. This finding suggests that households with access to a private vehicle benefit from the associated flexibility and access to a wider geographic range of child care options.
- » As child care access increased, households were more likely to use formal care and travel shorter distances.

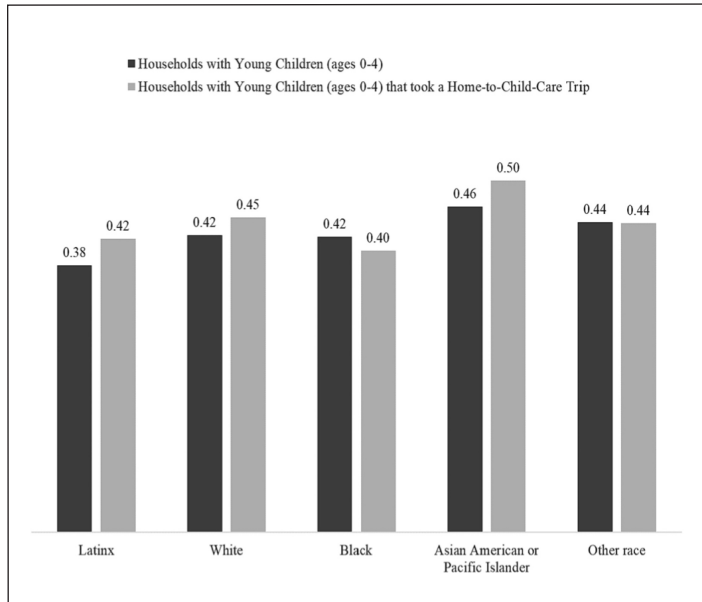


Figure 1.

The weighted mean of child care access according to household race/ethnicity in California.

Recommendations

Communities across California need greater public investment in child care. Current funding does not sufficiently meet the demand for child care in the state. Additional subsidies could support increased formal child care use, more expansive labor force participation, and better quality child care.

Transportation policies should aim to improve access to child care. Automobile subsidy and carsharing programs can make it easier for parents and other caregivers to reach child care centers. Local governments can also support and promote walking through incentivizing the development of child care centers near transportation infrastructure.

The analysis in this study is limited by the availability of current data, and **further research and data focused on child care access and travel is crucial.** To address knowledge gaps, the NHTS should be modified to clearly identify child care trips. There is also an ongoing need for data on the characteristics of child care centers in California, including cost and quality.

Conclusion

Across California, access to dependable and quality child care continues to fall short of demand. For many parents and other caregivers, their employment is dependent upon access to this essential infrastructure. Through increased public investment, targeted transportation policies, and greater support for relevant research and data collection, California can ensure that all households have sufficient access to quality child care. Further, these recommended policy and planning interventions can help address the often inequitable spatial barriers to accessing child care.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from an academic publication, [Decisions & distance: The relationship between child care access and child care travel](#), in the Journal of Transport Geography. For more information about the findings in this brief, please contact Evelyn Blumenberg at eb Blumenb@ucla.edu.

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