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## The Child Care Crisis and Its Impact on Hispanic Families

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## The Child Care Crisis and Its Impact on Hispanic Families

### Abstract

While the child care crisis has touched nearly every corner of America, impacting families of diverse racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, this report will examine its impact on the Hispanic community. With a population of 59.9 million, Hispanics are the largest minority population in the United States and contribute to the rich and diverse fabric of American life. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget defines Hispanic as “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.” Hispanic families in the United States, made up of both immigrants and nativeborn citizens, disproportionately lack access to a varied array of affordable child care providers. Nearly 60 percent of Hispanic families reside in a child care desert.

### Keywords

child care, crises, Midwest, Hispanic American families, poverty

### Disciplines

Christianity | Family, Life Course, and Society | Inequality and Stratification

### Comments

Online access: [The Hatfield Prize Report 2020](#)

# THE CHILD CARE CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON HISPANIC FAMILIES

By Katie Bogle and Abby Foreman, Ph.D.

## DISCOVER

Angelica Lopez, a single mother, lives in a small town in the Midwest. Every morning, she wakes her two-year-old daughter Camila up at 5:30 a.m. in order to drive the 25 miles to the nearest child care center. More than a third of her paycheck goes to child care, but in this rural community, it's her only option. She drops off Camila and spends the next 12 hours working a factory shift during the day and waitressing in the evening to provide for her daughter. The daycare closes at 6 p.m., and Angelica's mother or sister, each of whom have also worked all day, pick Camila up and watch her until her mother returns home. Angelica's work schedule varies from week to week, making child care scheduling an ongoing challenge. She arrives home exhausted and wishing she had more time to spend with her daughter.

While Angelica's story is a fictional account, this picture of fatigue and limited options due to a lack of affordable and accessible child care is reality for many families. Quality, affordable child care in the United States is out of reach for many families, especially for parents who do not have the option to stay home with their children because of financial constraints. More than half of American families currently live in a child care desert, meaning that there are more than three times the number of children as licensed care providers within an area.<sup>1</sup> Researchers

refer to this lack of available, affordable child care as the "child care crisis," as years of increasing care costs and barriers to accessibility have put strains on families and child care providers.<sup>2</sup>

While the child care crisis has touched nearly every corner of America, impacting families of diverse racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, this report will examine its impact on the Hispanic community. With a population of 59.9 million, Hispanics are the largest minority population in the United States and contribute to the rich and diverse fabric of American life.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Office of Management and Budget defines Hispanic as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race."<sup>4</sup> Hispanic families in the United States, made up of both immigrants and native-born citizens, disproportionately lack access to a varied array of affordable child care providers.<sup>5</sup> Nearly 60 percent of Hispanic families reside in a child care desert.<sup>6</sup>

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## Quality, affordable child care in the United States is out of reach for many families.

Child care is especially important for families for whom having both parents in the workforce is not a choice, but a necessity. As of 2018, 15.5 percent of Hispanic families were living in poverty. Hispanic children make up one-fourth of all children in the U.S. and yet are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty as compared to their non-Hispanic peers.<sup>7</sup> Hispanic workers are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs, and more than half of Hispanic workers are employed at workplaces with irregular or non-standard work schedules.<sup>8</sup> This presents

significant challenges for parents with young children who must remain in the workforce, but are limited in their ability to afford the rising costs of child care. Even when child care is affordable, non-standard work schedules often leave families constantly putting together a patchwork of care. Irregular and non-standard work schedules combined with low wages can make it difficult for families to grow and develop, and can hinder a family's long-term economic mobility.

### **Child Care in America**

Child care within this report is defined as care for children ages zero to five that is provided by an adult who is not the child's parent or legal guardian. This definition includes for-profit center-based care, nonprofit and faith-based center-based care, licensed in-home providers, and informal care provided by a friend or family member.<sup>9</sup> This report will explore the child care needs and preferences of Hispanic families with children ages zero through five years old, with a focus on government-subsidized care available to low-income families.

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## **Nearly 60 percent of Hispanic families reside in a child care desert.**

High-quality child care refers to a healthy and safe environment in which children are encouraged to learn and grow in a developmentally appropriate manner. It promotes positive socialization for children under the supervision of competent, qualified care providers.<sup>10</sup> The United States Department of Health and Human Services defines affordable child care as care that is seven percent or less of a family's total annual

income.<sup>11</sup> However, the average cost of child care in the United States is between 9 to 15 percent of a family's income and can be as much as 35 percent for those living at or below the poverty line.<sup>12</sup> Available child care is defined within this report as care providers with open slots, meaning a family will not have to be put on a waiting list, and that are in reasonable geographic proximity to the families in need of care.

However, the quality, cost, and availability of care are not the only factors that should be considered when evaluating the landscape of care. The diversity or range of providers within a given region, as well as the cultural competency of providers, must also be examined. Cultural competency is defined here as not only an awareness of cultural differences, but as ongoing and intentional efforts to ensure that programming is attentive to and informed by cultural norms and preferences of those served.

Every family has unique needs and preferences for child care, and necessarily, the landscape of child care options in America is diverse. This report will discuss child care within two broad categories: government-subsidized and non-government subsidized child care. Subsidized child care includes for-profit centers, secular and faith-based nonprofit centers, and licensed in-home care providers. Non-government subsidized care includes any kind of care not subsidized by government, whether in a for-profit or nonprofit (secular or religious) center, in-home care providers, or informal care by relatives or friends.

### **Government-Subsidized Child Care**

The federal government, through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, supports child care for low-income families through two mechanisms: vouchers (or certificates)

given directly to families to use for subsidized care at the provider of choice, and grants or contracts awarded directly to child care providers to provide subsidized care. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), administered by the Office of Child Care within the Administration for Children and Families at the United States Department of Health and Human Services, provides funding to state governments which then administer funding to families and child care providers.<sup>13</sup> In 2018, an average of 1.32 million children received CCDBG-funded child care each month.<sup>14</sup>

The CCDBG prioritizes vouchers over grants and contracts to promote diversity and parental choice, and the majority of federally subsidized care is paid for via vouchers. Eligible families can apply for and use vouchers to subsidize their child care costs at the child care provider of their choice, including secular and faith-based centers as well as in-home care providers. Child care providers are also eligible to receive direct federal funding through the CCDBG via grants or contracts. This allows providers to subsidize the cost of care for families.

#### *Secular and Faith-Based Nonprofit Providers*

While some families choose for-profit center-based care options, other families may prefer to use secular or faith-based nonprofit child care in their community. Faith-based child care is defined as care that is affiliated with or housed within a church, synagogue, temple or other faith-based organization, or that provides explicitly religious instruction and programming.<sup>15</sup>

Some nonprofit care providers are privately funded; however, many receive funding either directly or indirectly through the

Child Care and Development Block Grant.<sup>16</sup> Families are able to use a voucher at faith-based and nonprofit child care centers, which helps increase the diversity of affordable child care providers available to families.<sup>17</sup> Faith-based organizations may compete for direct funding via grants or contracts to enable them to offer subsidized child care to low-income families. However, as a condition of accepting such direct funding (rather than being paid through a voucher or certificate brought by an eligible family), faith-based organizations must remove their faith-based practices, programming, and environment from the care being provided. This essentially disqualifies many faith-based organizations who view their faith-identity as inherent to their mission and care provided.

#### *Licensed In-Home Care Providers*

Licensed in-home child care centers provide care within a home setting. These providers are registered with the state and are required to follow health and safety guidelines.<sup>18</sup> This form of child care is preferable for many families because it mimics a home setting and often offers more flexible hours of care. Families are able to use vouchers at in-home care providers, which helps to contribute to the diverse landscape of providers. It is estimated that nearly 25 percent of all vouchers are used on in-home care providers.<sup>19</sup> Providers of subsidized in-home care, like providers of center-based care, may also receive federal support via the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Reimbursement Program, which reimburses child care programs for healthy meals and snacks.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Headstart and Early Headstart*

Headstart and Early Headstart are two government programs that provide eligible

low-income families with subsidized early childhood education, and, as part of that, child care. Early Headstart serves families with children ages infant to two years and Headstart serves three to five years olds. These programs operate out of local child care centers, schools, nonprofits, and churches, and receive funding through the Headstart Act, which is reauthorized each year by Congress and administered by the Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>21</sup> The Headstart and Early Headstart programs also provide other services, including education and mentoring for new mothers and bilingual in-home consultation programming. In 2017, the Headstart programs served approximately one million low-income children.<sup>22</sup>

### **Non-Government Subsidized Care**

While the government subsidizes a diverse range of child care providers, many families also use non-subsidized child care options. Unsubsidized child care providers supply care that is either entirely paid for by other sources, such as the parents or a church, or through unlicensed care from a friend or family member.

#### *Informal Child Care*

Informal child care, sometimes called kinship care, is defined within this report as consistent care provided by friends, neighbors, or relatives for more than five hours per week. This type of care is very common but is generally exempt from licensing by state governments. Because many of these care providers are not officially licensed with the state, families do not have access to state resources, and there are no state regulations on quality of care. In the U.S., an estimated 42 percent of families consistently use an informal child care

provider.<sup>23</sup> Informal child care is often more affordable, mimics an in-home care setting, and has flexible hours, making it preferable for many families.<sup>24</sup>

### **Hispanic Families and Child Care Barriers**

The child care preferences of the Hispanic community are unique and should be considered when looking at the utilization of and barriers to care. Research shows that Hispanic families tend to rely more heavily on informal care provided by a family member or friend as opposed to formal, center-based care options.<sup>25</sup> It may appear that the Hispanic community utilizes informal child care options simply because that is their preference due to cultural, religious or other reasons, and for some families this may be true. However, a National Survey of Early Childhood conducted in 2016 found that Hispanic families look just as favorably on center-based child care as their non-Hispanic peers.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that the lack of center-based child care utilization within the Hispanic community may be due to other factors and barriers in place, rather than a choice based on preferences.

Low-income Hispanic families face several key barriers to high quality, affordable child care. Cost, convenience of location, availability of child care during irregular hours, inadequate information, and a lack of cultural competency within the care system all contribute to the child care crisis among Hispanic families.

#### *Cost*

Parents face many barriers to accessing child care for their children, but cost is often the most significant of these barriers. Child care is one of the leading household expenses

in the U.S. for families with children under five years old.<sup>27</sup> The Center for American Progress developed a 50-state cost model for center-based care that considered the cost of licensure, adult to child ratios, salaries, and benefits for employees. This study found that the average cost of running a licensed child care facility is approximately \$15,000 annually for just one child.<sup>28</sup> As a result, child care centers must charge high rates to be able to continue operating. In many parts of the country, child care costs as much as three times the amount that a family pays on rent or a mortgage.<sup>29</sup> A national study by the National Women's Law Center in 2017 concluded that over one-third of families have reported that child care has caused financial problems.<sup>30</sup> This situation is in part due to the fact that the cost of child care in the U.S. has more than doubled in the last 20 years, while wages have remained fairly consistent.<sup>31</sup> The lack of affordable child care is especially common in rural and low-income urban areas where fewer child care providers mean fewer available openings.

#### *Geographic Location and Child Care Deserts*

Geographic location can also affect the availability of child care options within a community. Rural and low-income urban communities often have fewer child care resources available. Hispanic families are more likely than any other minority group to live in a child care desert: more than 60 percent of the Hispanic population lives in such an area.<sup>32</sup>

Employment in jobs with non-standard schedules, common among low-income Hispanic families, also presents challenges. Over half of Hispanic parents work irregular or non-standard hours.<sup>33</sup> Many government-subsidized care options offer limited hours of care. These hours cater towards families

working a standard nine to five schedule on weekdays and leave out families who are working non-standard or unpredictable hours.<sup>34</sup> This reality has caused families to find alternative methods of care, such as leaving children with older siblings, relatives, neighbors or babysitters during the interim times when formal care is unavailable.<sup>35</sup> This type of unpredictable and inconsistent patching together of child care providers makes scheduling care a perpetual challenge.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Underutilization and Inadequate Cultural Competency Among Providers*

Historically, Hispanic families have underutilized government assistance, often due to cultural or religious preferences. Within the context of child care, only eight percent of eligible Hispanic parents are currently utilizing child care subsidies through CCDBG.<sup>37</sup> Only one-third of children enrolled in Headstart are Hispanic, despite more Hispanic children living in poverty than children of any other race or ethnicity.<sup>38</sup> While some families may have preferences that limit their utilization of assistance, for others, a lack of clear information contributes to low take-up rates. Many families may not know they are eligible or may not know how to access available subsidies. Vouchers through the CCDBG are available to immigrant families living in the U.S. and eligibility is dependent on the immigration status of the child.<sup>39</sup> If a family has legally immigrated to the U.S., the child was born in the U.S., or the child is protected by the DREAM Act, then the child is eligible for federal child care assistance.<sup>40</sup> They may also be unaware of the range of providers, including faith-based and in-home centers, that vouchers can be used at.<sup>41</sup>

Language can also be a barrier for families seeking high quality and affordable child care.<sup>42</sup> Applications for the voucher program and child care centers often have very technical language that is difficult to understand for families whose primary language is not English. Even when there is translated paperwork available, many child care centers, including Headstart, require an interview as a part of the acceptance process which presents a challenge for families trying to access care through a center that does not have bilingual staff.<sup>43</sup>

### Looking Ahead

In today's society, work and family often compete instead of complement one another.<sup>44</sup> For many Hispanic families, high quality, affordable, and culturally competent child care is a necessity, but is too often out of reach. Communities should strive to maintain a diverse range of high quality child care providers, including subsidized secular and faith-based care, that are both culturally competent as well as representative of Hispanic families themselves.

## FRAME

**F**amily is the most basic of human institutions from which all growth and development begins. Flourishing families provide children with the support needed to grow into contributing members of society.<sup>45</sup> For families to thrive, parents must be able to fulfill their responsibilities as both workers and caregivers. For low-income parents for whom work is a necessity in order to provide for their families, work and child care is a precarious balance. However, many single parents or two-parent households are unable

to afford child care. In these instances, both government and civil society play a role in helping eligible working families access high quality child care.

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### **For families to thrive, parents must be able to fulfill their responsibilities as both workers and caregivers.**

Diverse and varied, every family has unique preferences, desires, and needs for child care. Parents bear primary responsibility for the growth and development of children – the family is where children are nurtured – and as such, parents must be at the center of child care decisions.<sup>46</sup> Part of both government and civil society's responsibility, then, is to prioritize support that respects parental choice and aligns with familial preferences. A diversity of child care providers must exist – from for-profit center-based care, to government-subsidized center-based care offered by secular and faith-based organizations, to in-home care centers. The ability for parents to be in the workforce depends upon child care, and child care depends on the family being able to afford and access it.

To meet the varied needs, values, and preferences of families, it is important to work towards a child care landscape that includes a diversity of providers. As Christians, we recognize the importance of both work and family. Both are significant and should complement one another; however, these two essential things are often in conflict.<sup>47</sup> We also believe that all people are made in the image of God and affirm the inherent worth and dignity that all possess. To honor this dignity, it is important to recognize and affirm diversity of families



as well as the diversity of civil society institutions that comprise the child care landscape.

The first five years of a child's life are critical to their overall cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development.<sup>48</sup> Child care is designed to be a place where children can grow, develop and explore in an age-appropriate manner, and care providers play an important role in this process. Child care has the ability to either help or hinder the development of a child by providing or denying the child a safe, stimulating and developmentally appropriate environment in which they can grow and learn. Child care also impacts families as it allows parents to stay in the workforce. Many families do not have the option of having a parent stay home to care for the children, so a safe, affordable child care provider is vital to the health of the family.

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**To meet the varied needs, values, and preferences of families, it is important to work towards a child care landscape that includes a diversity of providers.**

The Hispanic community is disproportionately impacted by inadequate access to high quality and affordable child care. A public justice perspective suggests that there is a role for both government and civil society in promoting policies that lead to flourishing for all families. Government has a responsibility to promote human flourishing through just public policy. At the same time, government has a responsibility to create space for civil society institutions, including secular and faith-based nonprofits, houses

of worship, and businesses, to make their distinct contributions to the common good.<sup>49</sup> Ensuring nurturing child care for Hispanic families will have a long-term impact on the well-being of families and communities.<sup>50</sup>

**Recommendations for Government in Addressing the Child Care Crisis**

Government has a responsibility to uphold a healthy public commons in which the great diversity of human activities is maintained for the well-being of everyone. According to the Center for Public Justice's Guideline on Family, "Government should recognize and protect the family as an essential expression of its responsibility to uphold a just society." The Guideline continues, "Government's policies should aim to uphold the integrity and social viability of families, which do not exist in a social, economic, or political vacuum. Public policy should, therefore, take carefully into account the ways that other institutions and the dynamics of society impact families positively and negatively from the earliest stages of family formation."<sup>51</sup>

For families for whom child care is a necessity, not a luxury, government can support and promote strong families by providing basic assistance for care. At the same time, government also has a responsibility to honor the diversity of caregiving preferences, informed by religious or cultural convictions. To do this, government must support the flourishing of a diversity of child care providers, including faith-based providers.

*The Child Care and Development Block Grant*

The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) is the federal government's primary mechanism for subsidizing child care for low-

income families. Most states use certificate funding, which means that parents receive a voucher (also known as a certificate) to use at their provider of choice, including faith-based or licensed in-home care. Vouchers positively promote parental decision-making regarding the care of their children.

However, as discussed earlier, many eligible families do not utilize child care vouchers. In the United States, Hispanics are less likely than other racial or ethnic groups to participate in government-funded assistance programs. According to a report by the National Research Center of Hispanic Children and Families, “Although the reasons for this are not fully understood, we do know that Hispanic families, and particularly immigrant families, face a number of unique obstacles to accessing public assistance, including limited English proficiency, less familiarity with government programs and how to navigate them, residency and citizenship status eligibility requirements, and fear of deportation or other immigration-related concerns.”<sup>52</sup>

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### **A public justice perspective suggests that there is a role for both government and civil society in promoting policies that lead to flourishing for all families.**

It’s important to both recognize barriers for eligible families as well as honor cultural or religious preferences that may make a Hispanic family unlikely to seek assistance. However, government should address these barriers and make child care assistance as accessible as possible for families who choose to use services.

Local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies, which connect families with information about local child care options, should continue to provide clear information about eligibility, the application process, and eligible care providers. This includes information about which providers offer Spanish-language services as well as faith-based care. All materials should be available in Spanish, and information should be available at trusted community institutions like community centers, libraries, schools, churches, doctors’ offices, and Hispanic-owned businesses. As the National Research Center on Hispanic Children and Families report notes, “[trusted community institutions] may be more accessible and less intimidating to prospective applicants, especially those worried about issues related to legal status or citizenship.”<sup>53</sup>

All subsidized providers should receive cultural competence training from the local CCR&R. The agency should also actively recruit and train Hispanic center-based or in-home care providers, whether faith-based or secular. While cultural competence training is important for non-Hispanic providers, local agencies also should invest in supporting Hispanic care providers through things like training and technical assistance, thereby ensuring that care options better represent the community that is being served.

#### *Federally Subsidized Care by Faith-Based Organizations*

Nearly 80 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. identify as Christian, and 84 percent identify religion to be either somewhat or very important in their lives.<sup>54</sup> This trust and involvement with the Church is a strength that should be magnified in the landscape of child care. Faith-based child care providers are unique in their ability to meet the needs

of families who desire faith-based care for their children. Currently, about one in every six child care centers are housed in a religious facility, and some of the largest networks of child care centers are religiously based.<sup>55</sup>

Faith-based providers have equal access to direct funding (grants or contracts) and indirect funding (vouchers), though direct funding carries some limits to the nature of the provider's religious activity. The CCDBG requires states to prioritize the use of vouchers as opposed to grants and contracts. This allows for a greater diversity of providers, including faith-based organizations. Because vouchers go directly to parents to use at their provider of choice, faith-based providers can accept the federal funding without having to remove their faith-based practices, mission, or programming. Although voucher funding is prevalent in most states, in many localities there may not be care options that reflect the Hispanic community or meet cultural or religious preferences. At minimum, it's important that there are multiple faith-based providers that are culturally competent. However, recruiting and training Hispanic networks to develop qualified care providers should also be prioritized. Local communities can advocate that the county or regional child care agency recruit and train providers that are more representative of the populations being served. A network of local churches, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, could work together to identify needs among the congregations and develop qualified providers.

Currently, faith-based organizations are able to receive funding via grants and contracts through the CCDBG, however, that funding has restrictions attached. Federal and state funding cannot be used to fund any explicitly religious activities, but it can be used to fund the child care related services provided by

the organization. Additionally, organizations receiving funding from grants and contracts must comply with federal and state quality standards, including education of staff and regulation of child care facilities.<sup>56</sup> These organizations must also comply with federal nondiscrimination policies, meaning that

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### **For families for whom child care is a necessity, not a luxury, government can support and promote strong families by providing basic assistance for care.**

they cannot discriminate against children or staff based upon religious reasons.<sup>57</sup> While this funding is available for faith-based organizations, the pressure to strip an organization of religious activities that comes with the funding limits families' ability to make decisions about the type of care they want to utilize.

#### *Headstart and Early Headstart*

Headstart and Early Headstart are government programs that subsidize child care for low-income families. While this program serves about one million families annually, the reality remains that there is still not enough care available to meet the need.<sup>58</sup> Headstart and Early Headstart receive \$10.6 billion in federal funding, however, only 31 percent of eligible children have access to these programs.<sup>59</sup> While some eligible parents may choose to access different types of care, many others find that there are not enough available openings in which to enroll their children.<sup>60</sup>

Through legislation, Congress should consider changing Headstart and Early Headstart program statutes to be more inclusive of faith-based providers. Approximately five percent of Headstart Centers operate out of faith-based organizations, including houses of worship. However, the statutes of the Headstart and Early Headstart programs prohibit religious hiring and explicitly religious activities. Allowing faith-based organizations to provide religious programming would support a more diverse range of affordable child care for families to choose from.

Throughout its history, Head Start's effectiveness has often been questioned. Standardizing child care requirements across the U.S. cannot account for the unique needs of individual communities. Ensuring that these programs are meeting national standards of safety and quality is important, however, allowing them the autonomy to make decisions based on the needs and strengths of the community may help improve the access and effectiveness of the program as a whole. This could be accomplished by providing Headstart development and cultural competency training to local child care providers and then using the Headstart funding to help support and grow local child care programs instead of placing the traditional Headstart programs into a community.

Government is taking steps to help ease the child care burden through CCDBG funding in the form of vouchers and grants, as well as through programs like Headstart and Early Headstart. Government should continue to sustain a diversity of child care providers, recognizing that certain providers may be better suited than others in meeting a family's unique preferences.

### **Licensed In-Home Care**

Supporting families also requires supporting a diverse range of providers. Licensed in-home care providers have the ability to provide care in a home-based setting with flexible hours for parents. However, there are unique challenges to this kind of care.

The National Association of Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies works with over 700 state and local agencies to provide education and resources for all child care providers, including licensed in-home care providers.<sup>61</sup> These agencies provide information on state care regulations, expected child development timelines, and best practices for caring for children. They can also inform providers of potential grant opportunities for which they may be eligible, such as funding to cover healthy snack foods or diapers for children. Improving awareness of and accessibility to these services would help improve the overall quality and safety of child care, as well as equip these caregivers with the resources they need to succeed. The agencies can also do more to provide cultural competency training and resources, as well as prioritize recruiting and training Hispanic center or home-care providers.

Additionally, these agencies can also directly support Hispanic families seeking care. They may help connect these families with available in-home care providers and assist with translation services if needed. Agencies can also provide information about whether a center or in-home provider is Spanish speaking or faith-based, for example. Making this sort of information available at trusted institutions such as doctors' offices, community centers, Hispanic-owned businesses, and libraries is important.

### **Employer Recommendations**

Employers also have a unique role to play in supporting families. Some employers may have the resources to provide their employees with child care subsidies or on-site care. However, the majority of employers are unable to do this. Employers can, however, maintain fair and consistent scheduling practices. Hispanics are over-represented in low-wage jobs that typically have non-standard schedules.<sup>62</sup> These factors contribute to the increase in child care challenges for the Hispanic community. Employers could consider things like two-week advance schedule change notice, providing minimum guaranteed hours, and giving workers more control over their schedule through technology that allows co-workers to swap shifts if needed. These types of practices promote stability and allow for parents to make child care decisions more aligned with their preferences.

### **Informal Care Recommendations**

If a parent prefers informal care, government and civil society should seek to equip and support these caregivers. Community organizations, such as local libraries or advocacy organizations, can support providers by making information on safety guidelines and suggested best practices available. Disseminating this information at community institutions such as libraries, schools, houses of worship, and community centers may increase access to information.

Supporting local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies in providing free or low-cost consultations regarding safety and childhood development in a home setting would also allow these caretakers to provide more confident and competent child care. Civil society institutions, such as local child

welfare nonprofits and health and human service agencies, can provide trained staff members who are able to go into a home and work with the caregivers to provide recommendations. Currently, Early Headstart provides similar services by working with new parents to provide training, education, and recommendations. However, expanding these services to include other informal child care providers would improve quality and provide needed support. Additionally, community institutions, such as family centers, churches and community centers, can create opportunities for these providers to support one another by meeting in groups, such as play groups for children or support groups for caretakers. Such meetings would also be spaces for the children's socialization, and would give children a place to learn and grow together.

### **Towards Family Flourishing**

As discussed at the outset, family is foundational. Healthy families contribute to healthy communities. However, not all families have the same access to child care when they need it. Low-income, working Hispanic families, in particular, face significant barriers to child care. Government should seek to honor parental choice in child care decisions and ensure that families have access to affordable, culturally competent care. Civil society institutions like child care providers and employers also have a significant responsibility in promoting more stability for families balancing work and care. Hispanic children are part of the next generation of citizens, leaders, parents, and educators, and society has a responsibility to support and promote their well-being from their earliest years.

## ENGAGE

**J**osefina Martinez\* is a young Hispanic mother living in Sioux Center, Iowa. She is married and has two young children ages two and five. She desires to be a part of the workforce and to help support her family. However, without available child care that fits her family's needs at this time, she stays home to care for her children. This has posed a financial hardship for her family, as well as inhibited her from pursuing a career. Josefina shared her experience with child care in an interview which has been translated to English for this report.

"I have looked for some kind of child care here in town, but the only available one I could find was a woman giving in-home day care," Josefina said. "But she didn't speak any Spanish, and I don't speak any English." Josefina also expressed her desire for her children to be in a child care setting where they can learn in both English and Spanish so that they are prepared to enter the public school system.

"In an ideal world I would be able to find a child care center with people who speak both English and Spanish," Josefina said.

Josefina's story is just one account of the child care challenges faced by Hispanic families in Sioux Center, Iowa, however, it is representative of the experiences of many families.

Sioux Center, a small, rural community in Iowa, is home to approximately 7,450 people.<sup>63</sup> The nearest large city, with over 100,000 residents, is Sioux City, approximately 40 miles away.<sup>64</sup> Sioux Center's economy centers around agriculture,

and much of the land is used for cattle and hog farming, as well as corn, soybeans, and various other crops. In addition to agriculture, Sioux Center houses several pork harvesting and packing plants, with more than 250 employees.<sup>65</sup> The agricultural and pork harvesting industries, in conjuncture with the education and health system, make up the largest employment opportunities in Sioux Center.<sup>66</sup>

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**The number of Hispanic families in Sioux Center has more than doubled since 2000, contributing to the cultural tapestry of this area by forming churches, creating businesses, and shaping other important community institutions.**

Within this community, approximately 10.5 percent of the population is Hispanic. The vast majority (85%) of residents are white.<sup>67</sup> In the early 1990s, Hispanic workers began migrating to Iowa because of the large number of open factory and agricultural job opportunities.<sup>68</sup> These workers moved from all over the United States, with many moving from California, Illinois, New York and Texas.<sup>69</sup> With the job opportunities and a relatively low cost of living in Iowa, immigrants began moving directly to Sioux Center, with the majority in this community coming from Mexico.<sup>70</sup> The number of Hispanic families in Sioux Center has more than doubled since 2000, contributing to the cultural tapestry of this area by forming churches, creating businesses, and shaping other important community institutions.<sup>71</sup>

The growing Hispanic community in Sioux Center has inspired the creation of several local nonprofits which seek to work alongside and serve this population. One such organization is the Center for Assistance, Service and Advocacy (CASA) in Sioux County, which was started in 1999.<sup>72</sup> CASA's mission is to promote "healthy, diverse communities through empowerment, education, and advocacy." They hope to see the northwest Iowa communities "welcome, empower, and celebrate people from all cultures."<sup>73</sup> Over the past 20 years, CASA has worked with other institutions to provide ESL classes, immigration lawyers, food assistance, and programs that support Hispanic young adults in their educational and professional goals.<sup>74</sup> CASA seeks to recognize and magnify the strengths of the Hispanic community in Sioux Center while also addressing unique needs.

### **Child Care in Sioux Center**

Hispanic workers are often employed by hog and dairy farms and local manufacturing plants.<sup>75</sup> The National Bureau of Labor Statistics found the average wage of someone working in the meatpacking or slaughterhouse industry in Iowa to be approximately \$15.36 per hour.<sup>76</sup> At this wage, the annual income for a family of four with no other income hovers right above the national poverty line of \$25,750.<sup>77</sup> Low wages, in conjuncture with the demanding work hours often required in agricultural and industrial work settings, makes quality, affordable child care for the Hispanic community a necessity.

The primary options for child care in Sioux Center include Kidzone, a church-based, afterschool child care center for children ages five to 10 years, Headstart and Early Headstart, the Early Childhood Center and

in-home care providers. Families are able to use vouchers at the Early Childhood Center and at licensed in-home providers. Each of these child care providers, with the exception of Kidzone and in-home providers, are also federally subsidized through grants and contracts.

Even with these child care options, there are still not enough care opportunities to adequately meet the need. Currently 68 percent of families with children under six years old in Sioux County, in which Sioux Center is located, have both parents working outside of the home. This means that nearly 2,000 children in this community are in need of some child care.<sup>78</sup> However, a survey of all child care centers, including registered in-home care providers, shows that there are only 1,619 registered child care slots.<sup>79</sup>

In 2015, Sioux Center conducted a Community Health Needs Assessment Report (CHNAR) and identified child care as a top priority need. The report cited "lack of available spaces and limited after-hour care" as two of the biggest needs within the local child care system.<sup>80</sup>

"Even though we live in such a small community, child care is a huge problem in this area, especially for [the Hispanic population] and the waiting list is very long," Martha Draayer, teacher and consultant for the Northwest Area Education Agency, said.

The lack of available care has limited options for families. This absence of sufficient care coupled with the growing Hispanic population has led to an increased demand for culturally competent child care that providers are struggling to meet.

## Barriers to Child Care in Sioux Center

The child care needs of families in Sioux Center are diverse, however, there are three clear barriers to accessing care that stand out in this community: availability of child care slots, affordability, and cultural barriers.

### *Availability*

As previously mentioned, one of the biggest challenges to child care in Sioux Center is the lack of available child care options. There are simply not enough options for families to choose from when it comes to making child care decisions. This takes away the autonomy of the family to decide what is best for their children.

When asked about the biggest needs in the community, Amy Zebroski, Director of Kidzone, a local faith-based, child care agency, said, “More. We just need more child care, more availability, and more people willing to work with children.”

Kidzone was created by First Reformed Church in order to provide high quality, affordable, after school care to all children ages kindergarten through fourth grade. It is funded almost entirely by the local church, with some funding supplementary funding coming from Dordt University and the local public elementary school. Parents desiring to send their children to Kidzone can do so at no cost. However, Kidzone is only offered two days per week and is not available for non-school aged children.

Melissa Juhl, regional director of Northwest Iowa’s Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&R) within the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, discussed the problem of a lack of available child care, and said that care providers in

Sioux Center have a difficult time retaining employees because the wages and benefits are not competitive with other local industries.

In northwest Iowa, the median child care worker’s wage is \$9.50 per hour and maxes out at \$12.40 per hour.<sup>81</sup> According to Juhl, this low wage range means that many community members are not seeking jobs in this field, which further limits the amount of child care that a community can provide. Unemployment is incredibly low in Sioux Center, reaching only 2.7 percent in November of 2019.<sup>82</sup> This shortage of workers is causing centers to be understaffed and unable to care for more children.

Child care providers across all types of care are also struggling to generate profit or cover expenses.

“Exponentially what is happening across the state of Iowa and across the nation is the people who are doing child care are realizing that there is a certain dollar amount that their families cannot afford to pay any more than for child care,” Juhl said. “This amount is different depending on whether a community is in a city, suburb or rural, but the cost of running a child care in each of the places remains the same...Child care providers are charging true cost or even below true cost of care because they realize that families cannot afford to pay a higher price.”

But even with government subsidies, many of these care providers do not find it profitable enough to remain open and are faced with the difficult decision of charging their families more for care or closing their doors and cutting off that opportunity for care altogether.

The shortage of available child care is often exacerbated within the Hispanic community



because of the language barrier.

“The fact that there is limited availability is an issue, but then there is also the problem of having access to an application because of the language barrier,” Draayer said. “Many families don’t even know how to get signed up for child care.”

While the local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency has resources and staff members available to help families overcome this language barrier, many families are unaware of these services.

Limited access to translated documents and bilingual caregivers who are able to work alongside these families provides yet another set of steps that inhibits this community’s ability to access the limited number of available child care slots in Sioux Center.

#### *Affordability and Underutilization of Vouchers*

Because of the insufficient access to available child care and the high cost of sustaining a child care center, finding affordable child care is another challenge for many Hispanic families in Sioux Center. The average cost of child care for both centers and home-based care in Sioux Center is approximately \$1,352 per month.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, the median household income in Sioux Center is \$63,476, which means that a family paying for full-time care without financial assistance would spend approximately 25 percent of its income on child care.<sup>84</sup> This is not feasible for many families, especially those families living at or near the poverty line. Currently, 11.7 percent of Hispanic residents in Sioux Center are living at or below the poverty line.<sup>85</sup>

“You also have the barrier for child care for the Hispanic community being financially

unaffordable, and at this time many of the subsidies are not available,” Draayer said.

Because CCDBG funding given to providers in order to subsidize care costs is already used up or maxed out, families are facing the challenges of finding available child care at an affordable price.

“[Vouchers and certificates] are not utilized in Sioux Center...” Draayer said. “None of the families that I have worked with have ever even known about them.”

This underutilization of available funding plays an important role in perpetuating the cost barrier within this community. While there is little research that concludes the exact reason for the underutilization of vouchers in Sioux Center, there are some clear contributing factors. One of these factors is the social stigma associated with receiving federal aid in small, conservative communities. Families in Sioux Center may be hesitant to pursue federal aid for child care because of the general attitude of disapproval towards government assistance. The “pull yourself up by the boot-straps” mentality is seen as a way of life in this area and asking for help of any kind can be perceived as a weakness.<sup>86</sup> In addition to the social stigma, Hispanic families may face increased fear of receiving government assistance because of immigration policy. Fear of accessing government assistance combined with social stigmas attached to receiving aid and compounded by difficult application procedures makes the underutilization of the voucher system common in this area.

A final reason for the underutilization of vouchers in this community is a lack of information about where the vouchers can be used.<sup>87</sup> Because the number of center-based child care providers in Sioux Center is

limited, many families choose to use in-home child care options. Research shows that the Hispanic community is more likely to choose this form of care over a center-based child care.<sup>88</sup> However, due to a lack of available information, many of these families are not aware that child care vouchers can be used for non-center based child care. This further limits these families' access to affordable child care options that align with their unique needs and preferences.

### *Quality Child Care*

A final concern with child care in Sioux Center is ensuring that all families have access to high-quality child care options.

"Quality is of major importance to the families and to us as workers," Kendra Rensink, regional director of Headstart and Early Headstart, said.

Melissa Juhl of CCR&R echoed this, saying that ideally all child care providers would register with the Department of Health and Human Services.

"Iowa allows non-registered care for providers caring for five children or less, which makes it difficult to get resources and information out, and they are not being annually inspected for safety," she said.

Juhl explained that CCR&R works with child care providers, families and communities to try to fill needs and "support each of these three populations to the best of our ability."

Through CCR&R, child care providers have access to trainings and consultants who go on-site and evaluate how to improve the quality of care to help facilities meet the state's standards, as well as national best-practice standards. CCR&R also has resources

that are available to families which help them find available child care openings. The online services are offered in both English and Spanish, and translators are available to help Hispanic families utilize any in-person or telephone resources. CCR&R staff members also receive cultural competency training to help them understand the child care preferences of diverse populations.

### **The Future of Child Care**

Josefina's story, told earlier, portrays a mother who is committed to providing for her children. However, her desire to be a part of the workforce and help to support her family is hindered by her inability to access child care that fits her family's needs. She is not alone.

In Sioux Center and in communities across the country, families must make difficult decisions related to work and child care. Many families live in child care deserts where any care providers, let alone ones that meet the preferences of families, are scarce. Hispanic families disproportionately reside in child care deserts nationwide and face unique barriers to care. Sioux Center offers a useful case study for how local institutions, in coordination with state and federal government, might begin to effectively address the child care crisis and promote the flourishing of all families.



*\*Name has been changed to protect the identity of this individual.*