

Extra Help for Extra Needs

Perspectives from Families Receiving Child Care Assistance Through At-Risk Eligibility

Background

Access to affordable and reliable child care has been identified through research as an effective support for reducing child maltreatment.¹ Although the reasons for this relationship have not been clearly established, access to care may reduce parental stress and prevent children from being left with inappropriate caregivers. These issues are particularly important in New Mexico, where rates of child maltreatment exceed national rates (see Figure 1). In recognition of this, New Mexico since 2018 has offered child care assistance with additional supports and flexibility to families identified as having particular risk factors. This includes families who have had contact with Child Protective Services, families experiencing homelessness, those with histories of family violence or substance use, or those with other complicating needs or circumstances. Child care assistance generally provides families with a voucher to subsidize the cost of child care. For families with higher risk eligibility, the documentation required to sign up for the voucher has been substantially limited and streamlined, and they are supported by a specialized cadre of child care eligibility workers who maintain lower caseloads and are trained in trauma-informed practices with families. Additionally, co-pays for this population are always waived, even outside New Mexico's current practice of waiving co-pays for most families. At-risk eligibility is intended to be conferred only once, to support families through particularly destabilizing periods or events. Benefits were originally provided for six months, but families now receive them for a full year. At the end of a year, families may apply for traditional assistance if they are eligible, or at-risk eligibility can be extended at the discretion of case workers. The at-risk eligibility category is funded with state dollars, enabling New Mexico to serve families with needs and circumstances that may complicate their eligibility through the federal block grant that funds traditional child care assistance.

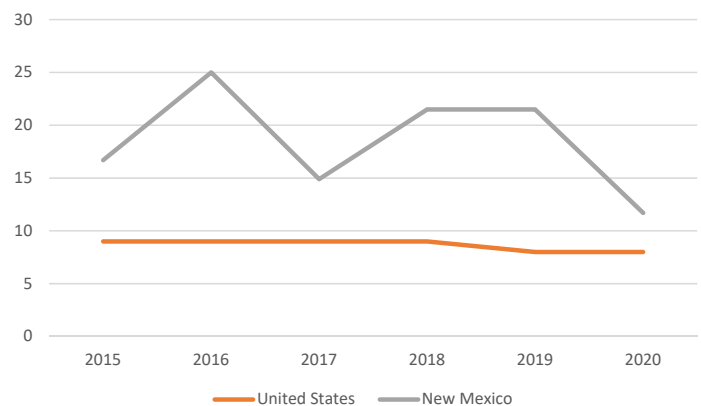
This Study

Researchers from the University of New Mexico Cradle to Career Policy Institute partnered with the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department to interview 35 caregivers receiving child care subsidies through at-risk eligibility. The study examined families' perspectives and experiences, and specifically explored factors that limit or enhance vulnerable families' access to child care, their experiences accessing subsidized care, the goals they are working toward for their families, and whether child care access is central to those goals. Interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2023.

Key Study Findings

- Families reported very positive interactions with their eligibility workers. Some workers' names were raised repeatedly by different participants, and positive words were used to describe these workers including "understanding," "patient," "attentive," and "incredible." Workers were described as going "above and beyond," following up proactively, and helping participants with each step of the application process.
- Families' experiences enrolling in child care assistance through at-risk eligibility were mostly positive, with participants reporting that they faced little to no administrative burden and minimal documentation and paperwork requirements. This is especially noteworthy because research into child care assistance more broadly tends to find that families report administrative difficulties with enrollment.²

Figure 1. Child Maltreatment in New Mexico and the United States, Rate per 1,000 Children



Source: "Statistics on children, youth and families in New Mexico from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and New Mexico Voices for Children." <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data?location=NM#NM>

- Families noted some uncertainty about what would happen at the end of their year of benefits. They reported being unsure about whether their subsidy could be extended through at-risk eligibility and about whether they would be eligible for federal or traditional benefits.
- Many families reported ongoing access challenges due to a lack of care in their communities that provided non-traditional hours, transportation, or care for children with special medical and behavioral health needs. These families reported a high level of need for care with non-traditional hours due to their work hours, and many had children with special needs.
- Families described a variety of goals for their families, with themes around improving their housing situations, saving money to purchase vehicles, getting new jobs or promotions, and enrolling children in care that would support their cognitive and social development.
- Families reported that their child care subsidies were integral to these goals in two ways: By providing adults with the time they need to work toward their goals without their children present, and by allowing them to save money that they would otherwise have to spend on child care. Families described child care assistance as having a stabilizing effect on their routines and finances, and in some cases allowing them to access formal, high-quality care for the first time.

Interview Participants

- *The majority of caregivers (69%) reported they were the only adult caregiver in the home.*
- *More than half (57%) of interviewees were mothers followed by grandparents (17%), fathers (14%) and other relatives (11%).*
- *About three-quarters (77%) of participants were working and 66% were working full time. Five respondents (14%) were students.*
- *Caregivers reported an average of 2-3 children in their homes (range = 1-5) with an average of 1-2 children in child care (range = 0-5).*
- *Children in care ranged in age from 9 weeks to 12 years with a median age of 3.*
- *About 43% of caregivers reported their child had a behavioral health or medical condition that impacted care.*
- *The median reported number of weeks of subsidized care was 24.*
- *Sixty percent of respondents lived in U.S. Census (2020) designated metropolitan areas and the other forty percent lived in rural areas.*
- *Most participants (66%) reported Hispanic race/ethnicity followed by White (31%), Native American (10%), and African American (3%). Numbers sum to greater than 100% due to participants with multiple racial and ethnic identities.*
- *Two interviews were conducted in Spanish, with the rest conducted in English.*

Implications for Policy

- Investments in state child care eligibility workers have direct impacts on families. This study indicates a potentially significant value in investing in the recruitment, training and retention of eligibility interviewers so that more families can have the positive, supported experiences that families with at-risk eligibility describe. Given widespread risk factors in New Mexico's population, it is likely that families with traditional eligibility could also benefit from such supports. As New Mexico expands its early childhood system and more funds are available, funding eligibility workers' training and reducing caseloads can help support all families in accessing child care subsidies and affordable care.
- Families could benefit from enhanced clarity about whether their at-risk eligibility can be renewed, and support in understanding whether and how they can transition to a subsidy with traditional eligibility at the end of their initial enrollment period.
- All families using child care, particularly those in this sample of families with complex risk factors, would benefit from increased access to care that is offered during non-traditional hours, provides transportation, and is prepared to serve children with special behavioral and medical needs.

¹Yang, M. et al., 2019. "Child care subsidy and child maltreatment." *Child & Family Social Work*, 24(4), 547-554.

Maguire-Jack, K. et al., 2019. "Preventive benefits of US childcare subsidies in supervisory child neglect." *Children & Society*, 33(2), 185-194.

Zhai, F. et al., 2013. "Estimating the effects of Head Start on parenting and child maltreatment." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(7), 1119-1129.

²Jenkins, J. M., & Nguyen, T. (2022). Keeping kids in care: Reducing administrative burden in state child care development fund policy. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 32(1), 23-40. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muab020>

Sandstrom, H., & Huerta, S. (2013). The negative effects of instability on child development: A research synthesis. Urban Institute, Washington, DC.