

Child-care services: a national picture

As more mothers hold jobs, the demand for child-care services continues to grow—especially for infant and toddler care—and is exacerbated by brief maternity leaves

SHEILA B. KAMERMAN

In 1983, for the first time, half of all mothers with children under age 6 were in the labor force.¹ Out of a cohort of 19.0 million children under age 6, 47 percent had working mothers. In the near future, the *majority* of preschoolers will very likely have working mothers, as most school-age children already do. How preschool children are cared for while their mothers work is something that relatively little is known about, although what is known suggests a quite complicated picture.

What is the picture today of child-care services for preschool aged children? To help the reader visualize the picture, four questions are addressed:

- Where are the children of working parents being cared for?
- What is known about the kinds of child-care services and arrangements that now exist?
- What is known about the quality of care now provided and what is happening to it?
- What are the current trends, developments, and emerging issues in the child-care services field?

For the purposes of this article, child-care services will include: family day care and center care, public and private nursery school and prekindergartens, Head Start centers,

Sheila B. Kamerman is a professor of Social Policy and Planning and co-director of Cross-National Studies Research Program, Columbia University and currently is a fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California.

all-day care, part-day care, and after-school care. (Non-monetized care by relatives and brief, occasional babysitting are not included.) The discussion is about relatively regular care or attendance: a specific number of hours per day and regular days per week of provision—in families and group arrangements—under both educational and social welfare auspices.

Types and amount of available child care

Unfortunately, in addition to the child-care picture not being very clear, it is not very complete. National data are not collected in any systematic fashion on: children in out-of-home care during the day; child-care arrangements used while parents work; or child-care service programs. To study what exists and who uses which type of care, one must piece together different, sometimes not fully comparable data, collected by different sources at different times.

In providing an overview of child-care services for preschool aged children, the types of services can be distinguished by the following:

- The age of the child:
 - infant and toddler care (0 to 2-year-olds)
 - preschooler care (3- to 5-year-olds)
- The locus of care:
 - in own home
 - in a relative's home
 - in a nonrelative's home
 - in a group facility (center or school)

- The auspice of care:
 - education (nursery school, prekindergarten, kindergarten)
 - social welfare (day-care center)
- The source of funds:
 - direct and indirect public subsidy (for example, public grants of monies to a provider or a tax benefit such as the child-care tax credit)
 - private subsidy
 - employer subsidy; parent fees

Preschoolers. Although there are no precise figures concerning the numbers of children in out-of-home care, by age of child and type of care, the most complete data to date are those on preschool children aged 3 to 5. However, even here estimates must be used.

The most recent national survey of day-care centers was completed by Abt Associates in 1977;² the numbers are known to have grown substantially since then. Moreover, these data do not include programs under educational auspices: nursery schools, prekindergartens, and kindergartens. These are the largest single type of child-care services for children of this age and the most rapidly growing component among child-care services for this age group.

The most currently published consumer data on 3- and 4-year-old children of working mothers are from a 1977 Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the Bureau of the Census.³ Only data on children *under age 5* and on the *youngest* child in the family were included. However, because the survey was carried out in June, when many schools are closed, children in group care programs are significantly underreported. For example, fewer than 21 percent of children of this age with mothers who worked full time in 1977 were reported as enrolled in group care, as contrasted with 31 percent of *all* children this age in 1976, according to Census Bureau school enrollment data,⁴ and 37 percent in 1980, as cited by the National Center for Educational Statistics.⁵ (See tables 1 and 2.) Furthermore, the proportion of youngsters enrolled in preschool programs was significantly higher when their mothers worked (44

percent). Moreover, these data do not report multiple modes of care: the “packages” of child-care arrangements which are most frequently used by working mothers.⁶ Such “packages” include some combination of a preschool program, family day care, and relative care; they may involve four or more different care givers during an average week. More extensive child-care data were collected in the 1982 Census Bureau’s national fertility survey, but these data had not yet been published when this article was prepared.

Using 1979 school enrollment data⁷ and data from the 1977 Abt supply study of day-care enrollment, it is found that almost two-thirds of *all* 3- to 5-year-olds and more than 70 percent of those with working mothers are in some form of group child-care program. These numbers are made up of the following: ninety-three percent of all 5-year-olds were in nursery school, kindergarten, or first grade in 1979. Thirty-five percent of all 3- to 4-year-olds were in nursery school or prekindergarten. A growing number of these preschool programs are full day; the proportion of 3- to 5-year-olds in a full-day program doubled during the 1970’s, from 17 percent in 1970, to 34 percent in 1980. By 1980, 37 percent of 3- to 4-year-olds were in preprimary programs. Although kindergarten enrollment for 5-year-olds is about the same whether or not mothers work (almost all 5-year-olds are in preschool or primary school), enrollment rates for 3- to 4-year-olds are significantly higher when mothers are in the labor force (44 percent, compared with 31 percent in 1980). All-day enrollment is, of course, far higher for children with full-time working mothers. Although these programs may be valued for their educational content, they are often used because they fulfill a needed child-care function.

Kindergarten enrollment increased by almost one-third between 1967 and 1980 (from 65 to 85 percent). However, the increase in nursery school enrollment has been even more dramatic, doubling in numbers during the 1970’s and more than doubling as a proportion of 3- to 4-year-olds enrolled (from 16 percent in 1969 to 37 percent in 1980).

Moreover, not only are children of working mothers more likely to be enrolled in preschool programs, but the enrollment rates are even higher when mothers have larger incomes and more education. Fifty-three percent of 3- to 4-year-old children in families with median or higher incomes attended a preschool program in 1982, as contrasted with only 29 percent of those in lower income families. As noted, enrollment rates increase as mothers’ education levels rise, and increase still more when those mothers are employed. Only for children whose mothers are college graduates is there no difference between those with working and those with nonworking mothers. For example, about half of such 3-year-olds and 72 percent of such 4-year-olds were in a preschool program in 1982.⁸

Given these data, one could argue that not only is there growing use of preschool as a child-care service for the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds with working mothers, but there is especially high use by affluent, educated, working families.

Table 1. Population of preschoolers, preprimary school enrollment, and labor force status of mother by child’s age, 1980

Child’s age (in years)	Total (in millions)	Enrollment		Percent with mothers in labor force
		Numbers (in millions)	Percent of total	
3 to 5	9.3	4.9 ¹	53 ¹	57
5	3.1	2.6	84 ²	85
3 to 4	6.2	2.3	37	43
4	3.1	1.4	46	52
3	3.1	.9	29	34

¹Preprimary programs only. An additional number are enrolled in primary school (about 3 percent of cohort).

²An additional 9 percent are enrolled in primary school.

NOTE: Data are for 50 States and District of Columbia.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, *Preprimary Enrollment 1980* (Washington, D. C., U. S. Department of Education, 1982).

Table 2. Preprimary school enrollment by child's age and labor force status of mother, 1980

[Numbers in thousands]

Labor force status of mother	Total		3-year-olds		4-year-olds		5-year-olds	
	Enrolled	Enrolled all day	Enrolled	Enrolled all day	Enrolled	Enrolled all day	Enrolled	Enrolled all day
All children, 3 to 5 years	4,878	1,551	857	321	1,423	467	2,598	763
With mother in labor force	2,480	1,002	497	260	755	332	1,229	413
Employed full time	1,445	713	292	198	457	260	696	255
Employed part time	811	196	163	42	245	44	402	111
Unemployed	225	94	41	20	53	28	131	46
With mother not in labor force	2,266	491	339	50	628	117	1,299	325
Keeping house	2,105	439	309	37	582	102	1,214	300
Other	85	15	15	3	23	3	47	9
No mother present	131	57	21	13	39	19	70	26
	Enrolled as percent of age group							
All children, 3 to 5 years	52.5	16.7	27.3	10.2	46.3	15.2	84.7	24.9
With mother in labor force	57.1	23.1	34.4	18.0	51.9	22.8	85.2	28.6
Employed full time	57.4	23.3	35.4	24.0	52.5	29.9	84.6	31.0
Employed part time	59.6	14.4	37.2	9.6	53.7	9.6	86.5	23.9
Unemployed	48.5	20.3	22.8	11.1	41.1	21.7	85.1	29.9
With mother not in labor force	48.9	10.6	21.5	3.2	41.5	7.7	84.5	21.1
Keeping house	48.5	10.1	20.9	2.5	40.2	7.2	83.9	20.7
In school	63.0	29.5	37.2	(¹)	56.1	(¹)	95.1	(¹)
Other	51.1	9.0	26.4	(¹)	38.3	(¹)	95.9	(¹)
No mother present	42.2	12.5	17.8	10.8	38.6	18.8	77.8	28.9

¹Base too small for presentation of percentage.

NOTE: Data are for 50 States and District of Columbia. Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, *Preprimary Enrollment, 1980* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Education, 1982).

Because most of these programs are private and relatively expensive, such high use by the more affluent raises serious questions about the consequences for those children in lower income families (below median income) without access to such programs, whether or not their mothers work.

According to the Abt survey, in addition to those children in preschool programs, about 10 percent of the cohort (900,000) were in day-care centers (most were 3- or 4-year-olds). Thus, there seems to be a total of 54 percent of the 3- and 4-year-olds with working mothers in some kind of group care for some part of the day. This figure is likely to be higher because nearly a half million children are estimated to have been enrolled in Title XX funded centers in 1981, a significant increase over the 1977 figures.⁹ (And 10 States were not included in the 1981 figure because they did not provide data.) Sixty-five percent of these children were 3- to 5-year-olds (and more than half were age 3 or 4); and almost all had working parents (these figures may have decreased in the past year). Also, Head Start serves nearly 400,000 children, largely 3- and 4-year-olds.

Federally funded (Title XX) centers have increased in numbers, too: there were an estimated 11,342 in 1981, a significant jump from the 8,100 identified in the Abt survey.¹⁰ Some of these centers may have closed in the past year as a consequence of cutbacks in funding, but no specific data on closings are available as of this writing. Head Start programs have also expanded since 1977 and about one-fifth are full-day programs. More than 40 percent of the day-care centers in the Abt survey were proprietary or for-profit establishments. Both the numbers and the proportion of proprietary child-care services have grown significantly since then. Because most of the large (multicenter) for-profit

child-care service companies did not receive Title XX money in 1981, these numbers are additive rather than overlapping.

In addition, about 42 percent of 3- to 4-year-olds whose mothers worked full time in 1977 (and 25 percent of those whose mothers worked part time) were cared for in someone else's home, usually in a nonrelative's home (family day care).¹¹ There is a significant, if unknown, overlap between the children in preschool programs and those cared for in a home, be it by a relative or nonrelative, part of the child-care "packaging" mentioned above, and particularly important for children whose mothers work longer than the preschool or school hours. About 100,000 children were in federally funded family day-care homes in 1981.¹² By far, most children in family day care (about 90 percent of the more than 6 million children estimated to be in family day care for 10 hours or more per week in 1975) were in informal, unregulated care.¹³ About 6 percent were in licensed care, including 2 percent in care provided in a home but under the sponsorship of an umbrella agency. However, most of these children were under age 3.

Infants and toddlers. As difficult as it is to estimate coverage and type of care provided for preschoolers, the data on infant and toddler care are far less adequate. A planned national survey of infant care, to be carried out by Abt, was cancelled. The much-cited National Consumer Day Care Study was poorly designed and inadequately analyzed. According to the 1977 Current Population Survey, the primary care arrangement for children under age 3 was family day care, usually in the home of a nonrelative.

Estimating from the CPS data, more than one-third of the children with working mothers were in either family day

care or group care in 1977. More specifically, about one-third of those under age 3 with full-time working mothers and 17 percent of those with part-time working mothers were in family day care; and more than 9 percent of those with full-time working mothers and 5.5 percent of those whose mothers worked part time were in group care. Infant and toddler care has been growing rapidly since the mid-1970's; thus, the coverage data are undoubtedly higher today.

The following rounds out this picture of how children are cared for while parents (especially mothers) are in the labor force:

- A small proportion of babies with working mothers are cared for, albeit briefly, by mothers on maternity leave. Fewer than 40 percent of working mothers are entitled to some paid leave at the time of childbirth, usually for about 6 to 8 weeks, and a somewhat larger group may remain home on an unpaid but job-protected leave for 3 or 4 months.¹⁴
- Some parents, especially those with preschool aged children, work different shifts in order to manage child care. Although this method of care has received very little attention thus far, researchers using three different data sets (the Current Population Survey, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the Quality of Employment Survey) have found that this may be a more significant pattern of work by parents with young children than suspected.¹⁵
- A very few employers, largely hospitals, provide onsite child-care services (about 230 hospitals; about 50 employers), and a few others subsidize payment of care.¹⁶

Child-care quality: programming and standards

More than half of all nursery schools are private, 66 percent. Eighty-eight percent of the kindergartens are public. There are limited national data available on these programs. On the other hand, a much more extensive picture exists regarding the more than 11,000 federally funded day-care centers that existed in the fall of 1981. This type of center is discussed here.

In early 1980, the Department of Health and Human Services issued proposed day-care regulations concerning group size, staff-to-child ratios, training qualifications for care givers, nutrition, health care, parent participation, and social services, to become effective in October. In the meantime, the Congress, in its Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1980, delayed the effective date of these proposed regulations. Before the proposals could become effective, the Social Services Block Grant Act was enacted. Among other things, this Act amended Federal requirements and standards regarding Title XX day-care centers. This meant that State and local standards, where they existed, were in effect. (Such standards are likely to be below those set by the Federal Government.)

The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act mandated the

Department of Health and Human Services to "assist each State in conducting a systematic assessment of current practices in Title XX funded day-care programs and provide a summary report of the assessment to Congress by June 1, 1981."¹⁷ According to the report, provider practices were in compliance with or surpassed the proposed Federal standards. More specifically:

- Despite the fact that 24 of the 47 States reporting have no group size requirements, all stated their centers had groups smaller than those set in the proposed regulations for all but the under-2-year-olds.
- Staff-to-child ratios were significantly higher than proposed for children aged 3 and older; however, they were significantly lower for those under 3.
- Although only half the States required the centers to provide training, nearly all provided such training and three-quarters of centers' care givers and one-half of family day-care mothers had gone through such a training program within the past year.
- Seventy-five percent of the centers (and half of the homes) provided the Department of Agriculture's recommended child-care food program.
- Seventy percent of the States assured children in care funded by Title XX the needed health services and 75 percent assured them needed social services.

Federal funding under Title XX has been significantly cut since 1981. Day care was one of the three highest funded Title XX services, representing 18 percent of all Title XX expenditures nationwide. Funding for the child nutrition program, a component of public support of day care, has also been reduced. Few programs have actually closed thus far, but this may occur in the future. Given the large cut-backs in Federal grants to States, most States are under growing financial pressure in this area. These States will view themselves as fortunate if they can maintain the quantity of care; they are unlikely to enforce standards, even if standards exist.

A question emerges regarding whether the extent of compliance that existed in 1981 was not related to the expectations of Federal standards and enforcement. From now on, the States will have primary responsibility for setting and enforcing standards concerning the health, safety, and developmental needs of children in care. Whether providers will continue to maintain these standards and whether States will monitor what providers do remains to be seen. Thus, day-care regulation joins preprimary school generally as an arena in which the protection of children will depend completely on the State.

Towards the future

The only significant Federal development is the expansion of the child-care tax credit in 1982 and, subsequently, making it available even to those who do not itemize deductions. However, unless the credit is increased, and made refund-

able, it will have no—or very little—value to low- and moderate-income families.

The Dependent Care Assistance plan and the salary reduction plan for certain private insurance benefits may open the way for some expansion in employer-sponsored child-care services.¹⁸ However, little has occurred as yet.

The major development in the field in recent years has been child-care information and referral services. These have burgeoned, especially in California, where they are publicly funded; this is an area in which more employers are considering involvement as well. Finally, concern with the quality of education is leading some States and localities to reexamine their preprimary programs. Some are now initiating full-day kindergartens; others are establishing pre-kindergarten programs; and still others are considering both.

The demand for child-care services continues to grow, and most parents of preschoolers want an educational program. Most such programs are private, particularly those below kindergarten level. Unfortunately, good programs are very often expensive. Moreover, there is still a scarcity of full-day programs, so many parents are “packaging” a group program with one or more other types of care, with consequences not yet known. The cutbacks in funding group programs are especially significant in their impact on ser-

vices for low- and middle-income children. Many of these children who were in publicly subsidized preschool programs are being transferred into informal and unregulated family day care as subsidies are cut back and programs close or parents lose their eligibility for a subsidy; the children must adapt to a new care giver, and often to the loss of friends.

The biggest current demand for child-care services is for infants and toddlers, because it is among their mothers that the increase in labor force participation has been greatest, and the scarcity of services most severe. Paid maternity (disability) leaves are available only to a minority of working women and are usually brief. There is an urgent need to expand and improve maternity-related benefits provided at the workplace.¹⁹ Data concerning how babies and toddlers are being cared for and what types of care exist are largely inadequate. Most of these children are in informal family day-care arrangements but, here again, little is known about these services.

Although the current child-care picture is hardly complete, all that is known suggests the likelihood of continuing demand. Accessibility, affordability, and quantity will remain central issues but questions regarding *quality* will increasingly come to the forefront. □

—FOOTNOTES—

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: This article is based on work done as a part of a national study of child-care services sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation.

¹Elizabeth Waldman, “Labor force statistics from a family perspective,” *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1983, pp. 14–18.

²U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, in collaboration with Abt Associates, Inc. (Cambridge, Mass.), *National Day Care Study* (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), and *National Day Care Home Study* (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980).

³*Trends in Child Care Arrangements of Working Mothers, Current Population Reports*, Series P–23, No. 117 (Bureau of the Census, 1982).

⁴*Nursery School and Kindergarten Enrollment of Children and Labor Force Status of Their Mothers, October 1967 to October 1976, Current Population Reports*, Series P–20, No. 318 (Bureau of the Census, 1978).

⁵*Preprimary Enrollment 1980* (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1982).

⁶Mary Jo Bane, Laura Lein, Lydia O'Donnell, C. Ann Stueve, and Barbara Wells, “Child care arrangements of working parents,” *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1979, pp. 50–56; and Sheila B. Kamerman, *Parenting In An Unresponsive Society: Managing Work and Family Life* (New York, The Free Press, 1980).

⁷*School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1979, Current Population Reports*, Series P–20, No. 360 (Bureau of the Census, 1981); and *National Day Care Study*.

⁸National Center for Education Statistics, unpublished data.

⁹*Report to Congress, Summary Report of the Assessment of Current State Practices in Title XX Funded Day Care Programs* (U.S. Department

of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 1982).

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Trends in Child Care Arrangements.*

¹²*Report to Congress.*

¹³UNCO, Inc., *National Child Care Consumer Study: 1975* (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1977).

¹⁴Sheila B. Kamerman, Alfred F. Kahn, and Paul W. Kingston, *Maternity Policies and Working Women* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1983).

¹⁵Steven L. Nock and Paul W. Kingston, “The Family Workday,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, forthcoming; Harriet B. Presser, “Working Women and Child Care,” in P. W. Berman and E. R. Ramey, eds., *Women: A Developmental Perspective* (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982); and Graham L. Staines and Joseph H. Pleck, “Work Schedules’ Impact on the Family,” Research Monograph, 1982, processed.

¹⁶Sandra L. Burud, Raymond C. Collins, Patricia Divine-Hawkins, “Employer-Supported Child Care: Everybody Benefits,” *Children Today*, May–June 1983, pp. 2–7.

¹⁷See *Report to Congress*. The data provided in this report are baseline data for future assessments of the quality of Title XX funded day care once these programs are no longer subject to Federal regulations.

¹⁸For a description of these benefits, see Sheila B. Kamerman, *Meeting Family Needs: the Corporate Response* (White Plains, N.Y., Work in America, forthcoming).

¹⁹Kamerman, Kahn, and Kingston, *Maternity Policies*.