

COVID-19 burdens 'child care deserts'^[1]

The limited supply of child care in Latino communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, pushes mothers out of the labor market and their families into poverty.

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EXCERPTS

Families have to navigate through a complicated maze to find child care that meets their needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated parents' struggles to find safe, affordable care, pushing women out of the workforce. While this is a challenge for families throughout the city, informational barriers to accessing care disproportionately impact communities of color. Further complicating this issue, Latino families in particular tend to live in communities considered "child care deserts" with insufficient child care. They also encounter barriers to enrollment.

Our research team recently had the opportunity to learn about this issue directly from Latina mothers. A Little Village mother explained to us that she had never seen a child care center in her neighborhood. Another said, "Everybody right here is like, 'Oh, my kids didn't go to Head Start' Because there's nothing close." The limited supply of child care in Latino communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, pushes mothers out of the labor market and their families into poverty.

Not only is there a limited supply of formal child care in Latino communities, but families also lack information about the programs that do exist. Child care providers do not have uniform eligibility requirements, wait list protocols, locations, schedules, costs, curricula, languages, class sizes, safety guidelines, and supports, which make it more difficult for parents to understand their options. Even within individual programs, eligibility requirements and costs are complicated by braided funding streams.

The purpose of work and income eligibility requirements is to prioritize serving families with the most need. But the complexities of these requirements can counteract these good intentions. It can be hard for families to get and understand information about program costs and subsidy eligibility, especially families with language barriers and the highly variable work hours that are common in Latino communities. Lack of information pushes even more mothers out of the labor market, since families may be deterred from seeking care if they are not sure they qualify or can afford it. Some mothers from two-parent households, for example, told us they had to reduce their hours or leave the labor market to qualify for affordable care.

The current system for finding child care can also feel transactional, which makes it hard for families to trust providers enough to complete enrollment. It takes time and resources to build trust so families feel comfortable asking questions about sensitive issues like immigration status, work status, income, and their children's specific needs. That trust is critical to families feeling comfortable leaving their children in another's care.

To address these barriers, it is important that policymakers, government agencies, child care providers, advocates, community-based organizations, schools and other key stakeholders work together now to promote equitable access to child care. As a mother from Belmont Cragin suggested to us, there should be a place where families could go to get information about the child care services in the community, "where they put up posters, where they inform, where they say you can come in, that here they can help you with such a thing."

Community-based childcare specialists within each Chicago community could provide streamlined, knowledgeable, and personalized support to help match families with the care that best meet their unique needs. This support should be neighborhood-based to cater to each community's specific arrangements, assets, needs, and culture.

Since trust is such a key factor in families' decision making, existing relationships with health clinics, churches, schools, and community-based organizations should be leveraged to help build that trust. The people providing this support should have a deep and unbiased understanding of the characteristics and eligibility requirements of the local child care arrangements and pre-K programs, including those offered by community-based centers, Chicago Public Schools, home-based providers, and private programs.

Providing coordinated support within each community to help match families with child care could also help communities track the barriers and service gaps that keep families from obtaining care. This information could be used to organize families with similar needs and advocate for solutions that eliminate common barriers.

The city's recent commitment to promoting equity and the system changes spurred by COVID-19 provide an important window of

opportunity to allocate and leverage resources to better support Chicago communities in matching families with the child care providers that best meet their needs, both during the pandemic and beyond.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: mother's labour force participation ^[4]

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women ^[7]

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[7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/women> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9092>