

Choices in the real world: The use of family, friend and neighbor child care by single Chicago mothers working nontraditional schedules ^[1]

Author: Illinois Action for Children

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AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf ^[2]

Excerpts:

This research project sought out single, poor and near-poor mothers to tell us how they provide for their young children's care while they are working nontraditional schedules: what arrangements they rely on – both formal and informal – and how the choices they make impact their and their children's well-being.

Today's single mothers carry the full weight of parenting. They are both the primary breadwinner and sole caregiver for their family. Working to meet the family's financial needs often requires multiple jobs and takes mothers away from their children during critical periods of development, leaving mothers struggling to balance both roles.

Child care provides a critical support for working mothers, allowing them to work. We also know that child care providers serve as critical sources of information, resources and networking that otherwise isolated single mothers might not have access to but desperately need and can benefit from. However, when child care arrangements break down, perhaps because a provider is ill or at the last minute is called to another job, it can negatively affect both the mother's work life – her attendance, her employer's opinion of her – and her family. A mother's stress increases due to the potential rippling effect on her work life as well as on the social network she relies on to support and provide for her children.

Fragile families include those whose mothers work non-standard hours and thus face particular challenges in securing child care. They work during times when fewer child care options are available and they typically earn low incomes, meaning they have less money to bargain with when arranging child care. For these reasons, as well as others, most parents working non-standard hours turn to family, friends or neighbors (FFN) to care for their children.

In the summer of 2012, we interviewed fifty single mothers in Chicago who work non-standard work schedules where at least some of their work hours include evening, overnight, weekend or variable hours. We sought to gain a fuller understanding of how well their child care arrangements, particularly their use of FFN child care, support the needs of their families. As part of this project, we then reviewed the findings and made policy recommendations to better support mothers working non-standard schedules.

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Policy Challenges to FFN Child Care

While FFN child care providers serve many parents with low incomes, particularly those whose schedules are nontraditional, we know little about the 'quality' of care children receive in these settings. Some educators and public officials are concerned that children in FFN settings may not be achieving the 'school readiness' they need in terms of their social, emotional and cognitive development. The critics believe that children in FFN child care do not receive the daily brain- and body-stimulating activities that children in more formal settings receive because the settings are not regulated or inspected, the providers are not required to meet any educational or training requirements and the child care providers are not easily included in most professional development opportunities available to the regulated provider workforce. For these reasons, some educators and public officials go so far as to recommend federal and state policies prohibiting the reimbursement of FFN providers for child care.

Regardless of the merits of these claims, it is clear that FFN child care meets a real need for our lowest-wage earners in Illinois and elsewhere. What, then, are the practices and policies needed to ensure working mothers receive the supports they need to engage in work activity while at the same time ensure children in FFN child care get what they need during the most critical period of social, emotional and cognitive development?

There is no easy answer.

If public policies limit public dollars from paying for FFN child care or makes that care illegal, mothers who work nontraditional schedules would have even fewer options than they have now.

We predict that many would opt for illegal child care and follow their provider underground - staying with what they know and trust already. However, such a turn of events would further isolate FFN providers and the families they serve, and further limit a state's ability to engage the providers in any professional development opportunities that might improve the care they provide to our most at-risk children. For these reasons, Illinois Action for Children believes the best public policies will focus on improving FFN child care rather than making it ineligible for assistance or driving it underground. At Illinois Action for Children, we believe the best public policies reflect the realities of those we most hope to support.

Region: United States ^[3]

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Links

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