

# One of the worst states at caring for low-income babies and toddlers <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Over the summer, Kinsley, age 19 months, was just starting to develop her vocabulary. Sometimes her mom, Christian Gobert, laughed about it, because the word Kinsley knew best was “no.”

But jokes aside, the New Orleans mother worries about her child’s language development, which she says is slower than some of her daughter’s peers.

Gobert tries to monitor her child’s learning, but it’s hard with her grueling schedule: She works a 40-hour week as a customer service representative in her mother’s small business and, on top of that, takes night classes at a local graduate school twice a week.

The 25-year-old single mom thinks her daughter would do well in an early-learning facility. But Gobert only makes \$21,000 a year and cannot afford the cost. She applied for financial assistance from the state of Louisiana, but, though she says she meets the income cutoff, she had by early September yet to hear if she qualified.

Gobert relies on her grandparents to care for Kinsley while she works, but the arrangement will likely not last long: The elderly couple may not always be up to the task of caring for a toddler. Without child care, Gobert can’t work. She says every day she doesn’t receive help, she feels her family’s ability to survive financially is threatened.

“It’s extremely stressful,” Gobert said. “Because, ultimately, if I don’t get assistance, I really don’t know how I will go about making this work ... time is definitely ticking.”

According to the state Department of Education, hundreds of thousands of parents like Gobert are thought to be financially at-risk and should warrant help from the Child Care Assistance Program, the only state-administered initiative in Louisiana that assists low-income families to pay for care and education for children under the age of 4. Yet, few families actually get the assistance they need.

A combination of state budget cuts, a lack of federal funding directed specifically for child care, and changing eligibility requirements means fewer than 30 percent of families thought to need childcare assistance actually receive it. The situation is so dire that some experts say Louisiana is among the worst in the nation at subsidizing early-education costs for low-income kids younger than 4.

For Gobert, chances of getting immediate assistance may be slim.

That’s because, until this year, strict rules on income eligibility and requirements that parents work or go to school a certain number of hours per week made it difficult for many to qualify, even if they were thought to be in need of some kind of assistance. Some of those rules have changed to make it easier for parents, but the policy changes didn’t come with extra funding.

Before, the state didn’t have a waiting list because requirements rendered so many ineligible, but experts anticipate that to change this year.

Many mothers in Louisiana are in more dire situations than Gobert, who can keep her job by relying on family—for now.

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 27 percent of children in Louisiana lived below the poverty level in 2014. That means a family of four with two children survived on \$24,008, the income level at which a family is considered to be extremely poor by the federal government.

Research suggests average families need twice the poverty level amounts to meet their basic needs, the report says.

According to a 2015 report by the advocacy non-profit Child Care Aware, the average cost of center-based infant care in Louisiana—one of the four poorest states in the nation—was roughly \$110 a week in 2014. Although this average cost is among the lowest in the country, it is still an amount experts say is difficult for middle-class parents to pay, much less those with lower incomes. In New Orleans, some of the

best early education centers cost as much as \$275 a week.

Julie Joseph, who works at Clara's Little Lambs Preschool Academy on New Orleans's West Bank, can't afford tuition at her own place of employment. Right now, her daughter goes to school there, but only because the owners agreed to temporarily give her a discount. Like Gobert, Joseph says her situation is not sustainable.

Joseph's 1-year-old daughter, Jani, is among the 48 percent of children in the Crescent City who live in single-mother households. Last December, Joseph applied for childcare assistance, but was told she made \$70 too much. To qualify, she needed to make less than \$2,150 a month, or \$25,800 a year.

"If \$70 is the difference, I don't think that's a good reason to reject someone for childcare assistance," Joseph, 22, said recently. "It's not like I'm asking for the money to go shopping or something frivolous. I'm asking to send my child to school."

Two-thirds of children in Louisiana have parents in the workforce, and experts say a lack of viable early-education options for many kids is taking its toll: In Louisiana, nearly 46 percent of kids are unprepared for kindergarten.

The situation wasn't always so alarming. Over the previous seven years, the Child Care Assistance Program was cut by nearly 70 percent, a plunge experts attribute to two sources: a dearth of state funds being funneled into early education and the continued misuse of federal money meant to help the poor.

The result is that as of recently about 12,700 children receive assistance under the program every month, down from about 39,400 in the 2008-09 school year, according to Melanie Bronfin, the executive director of the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children.

The Pelican State focuses what resources it does put toward early childhood on 4-year-olds, Bronfin says. In addition to CCAP and the federal Head Start program, children have access to five public pre-k programs, which enroll 87 percent of at-risk kids in that age group. The state Department of Education defines children as "at risk" if they live in families with an income of 185 percent above the federal poverty level or less, if they have special needs, are English-language learners, are in foster care, or are homeless.

Simply put, families that consist of one parent and one child like Kinsley's and Jani's are "at risk" if the parent makes about \$29,630 or less per year.

For children age 3 and younger, the state relies on just three programs: the depleted Child Care Assistance Program; the federally funded Head Start program; and Early Head Start, a companion program, which last year covered about 2,400 kids from birth through age 2.

Last year, the Louisiana Department of Education reported that about 168,300 at-risk children were under age 4. With state resources going to 4-year-olds, a little more than 14 percent of these younger children received public assistance. Without the aid, families of the remaining children—almost 144,000 kids—had little hope of affording licensed child care.

Data on at-risk families with 1-year-olds—kids like Kinsley and Jani—was even more alarming: Only 7.3 percent of these families were served, leaving some 39,000 in the lurch.

The root of the problem, according to Bronfin, is the state's reluctance to spend its own money. According to the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children, Louisiana is slated to spend less than half of 1 percent of state general funds on early childcare and education this year.

The Child Care Assistance Program is funded through the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. It's the primary source of federal funding for childcare subsidies in states around the country, and it is designed to encourage qualifying parents to work or go to school by enabling them to send their children to quality childcare centers.

But, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, at current funding levels for the Child Care and Development Block Grant, only one out of 10 eligible children will get assistance.

Although states are required to provide matching dollars to a portion of the fund, that money is often diverted to other state programs. According to the Louisiana Department of Education, most of the state's matching block-grant funds go to refundable early education-related tax credits and not into the coffers of the Child Care Assistance Program.

Louisiana is on par with national trends in how it spends its federal block-grant money, the Center for Law and Social Policy found. In 2014, total spending on childcare assistance nationally fell to \$11.3 billion, the lowest level since 2002, as 29 states decreased spending on the block grant. About 1.4 million children received the money in an average month, the smallest number served since 1998.

Louisiana was one of nine states that decreased the block-grant spending over three consecutive years, since 2011, the Center found.

Louisiana officials have long said there's not enough state money to divert into early childcare, at least not in a substantial way. But experts point to funding specifically designed to help low-income parents and their children: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

When the federal government overhauled America's welfare system 20 years ago, TANF replaced the former cash-assistance program. The idea was to help the poor achieve self-sufficiency through work by allowing states to come up with innovative ways to provide assistance—including help with childcare—that did not foster a "culture of dependency."

The law allows states to spend TANF money directly on childcare assistance or subsidize early education by transferring up to 30 percent of the funds to the Child Care and Development Block Grant.

But that's not exactly what happened in Louisiana.

Over the past two decades, the Pelican State has “steadily diverted money” intended for struggling families, according to a report released last month by the Louisiana Budget Project (LBP).

In the report, “TANF at 20: Failing Louisiana’s Poor,” the LBP’s Grace Reinke charged that Louisiana took block-grant dollars and used them as a “slush fund” to plug holes in the state budget created by tax cuts that mostly benefited the wealthy.

Last year, only 11 percent of block grant spending in Louisiana was put toward core tenets of welfare reform—cash assistance, child care subsidies, and programs to help the needy join the workforce. The average state, by comparison, spends half its welfare dollars on those goals, according to the LBP report. Moreover, in Louisiana, 2 percent was put toward childcare in 2015, down from 34 percent in 2000.

In the two decades since welfare was reformed, Reinke said, “Louisiana’s high poverty rate has barely budged.”

Liz Schott, a senior fellow with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, says not a penny of Louisiana’s TANF funds went to the Child Care Assistance Program. Instead, as with the block grant that funds childcare assistance subsidies for the state’s youngest students, \$5.2 million went to refundable tax credits. Those are programs critics say largely fail because an end-of-the-year refund does not help the poor pay monthly bills for early education.

“Louisiana is literally taking the food out of mouths of poor children and using it to plug budget holes,” Schott said. “This is really a cautionary tale.”

The office of Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards did not respond to requests for comment on Reinke’s criticisms in the LBP report.

Jenna Conway, the assistant superintendent for early childhood at the Louisiana Department of Education, said in a recent interview that her state agency, too, would not comment specifically the criticisms.

However, Conway noted the education department has worked to serve “as many at-risk children as possible” from birth to age 5. Moreover, she pointed out that some TANF federal funds that could be used for education for children ages 3 and under have been used to support pre-k, which, in Louisiana, starts for budgeting purposes at age 4. “Louisiana children need both quality childcare and prekindergarten to help prepare them for kindergarten,” Conway said.

Conway and other Louisiana-based experts note that there are bright spots in Louisiana’s gloomy childcare picture, despite the state’s budget troubles.

Beary Cherry Tree, an early childcare center located just outside New Orleans in Metairie, Louisiana, is one of these bright spots. There, the ratio of adults to children in infant’s classrooms is 1 to 4 —well under the state’s requirement. On a weekday in late August, a childcare provider named Sylvia Levy sat one-on-one with a 6-week-old infant, reading her a book about animals.

Close attention allows teachers to work with children as young as 1 on language development, but also on more complicated skills, such as self-concept, according to the center’s director, Paula Polito. “Interactions are crucial,” Polito said simply. “They are really what give you success.”

More centers are becoming like Beary Cherry Tree thanks to a 2012 law that raised standards in early care. For one, Louisiana’s Act 3 moved the Child Care Assistance Program from the state’s Department of Children and Family Services to the Department of Education. The move came with a new accountability rating system and gave early-education teachers more support so they could reach those higher standards. The idea is to no longer think of daycare as babysitting, Conway said, but to give kids desperately needed education.

Experts in Louisiana have long said the change was needed, pointing to arguments made by economist James Heckman, who says early education for disadvantaged families can strengthen states’ economies in the long run. He touts the importance of investing in children even before they turn 4, since 90 percent of a child’s brain development takes place before age 5.

Under the Child Care Assistance Program’s new management, in-classroom changes aren’t the only ways poor families benefit. The Louisiana Department of Education recently lowered the number of hours that parents are required to work per week to qualify and increased the subsidy amount, too. Parents who had to work 30 hours to qualify for childcare assistance now only have to work 20, fulfilling more needs among those who have part-time jobs. Others who had a childcare copay of \$95 a week before now pay as little as \$37.50. The changes were implemented because of what the state Department of Education “heard from the field,” Conway said. “Parents were having high out-of-pocket costs which were basically preventing them from going to work,” she explained. “It’s why families weren’t able to take advantage of the program.”

Without additional funding, however, those changes are a double-edged sword. While the changes are great for parents who qualify, they also add to the program’s cost, meaning there are fewer slots overall to offer new parents.

Conway says there is a solution, but it all boils down to one concept: investment. “We are raising the bar in what we want our kids to experience,” Conway said. “It does require more funding per child. We are trying to level our playing field and do that with a sustainable model.”

-reprinted from The Hechinger Report

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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