



The Effects of Family Income on Access to Quality Childcare Among Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

- The quality of childhood care has a significant impact on children’s mental and physical development; however, income inequality continues to play a significant role in the types of childcare available to families within lower income brackets.
- The purpose of this study was to examine the access barriers lower-income families, with special needs children face when searching for quality childcare options.
- This study utilized secondary data from a sample of N= 411 caregivers from the Child Care and Children with Special Needs: Challenges for Low Income Families cross-sectional study.
- Overall, the study’s findings suggest a significant relationship between reduction of work hours and estimated family income with a lack of access to quality childcare services.
- The study findings have important implications for social work practice, policy, and future research as results highlight the field's need to address the unique set of needs of children with developmental disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

- In the U.S., 6.6 million families are in poverty, and 1 out of every 6th child is diagnosed with one or more disabilities (United States Census Bureau, 2020; Zablotsky et al., 2019).

Purpose

- Inform policymakers and childcare providers by highlighting the linkage between poverty and barriers to access.

Research Question

- What effect does parental income have on access to quality childcare services for children with special needs?

Hypothesis

- Parents with lower income levels will experience more barriers while trying to access high-quality childcare for their children with special needs than those parents with a higher income level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Children raised in lower-socioeconomic households face a series of developmental effects as poverty is linked to negative life experiences. However, high-quality childcare serves as a buffer to several childhood risk factors.
- Services needed by children with disabilities create a financial burden and access barriers as childcare programs that are equipped to accompany a special needs diagnosis are more expensive.
- There is a gap in current literature as studies do not analyze the developmental barriers of the special needs' population.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

- The present study is a secondary analysis of the data from the Child Care and Children with Special Needs: Challenges for Low Income Families cross-sectional study. This original study was a mixed-methods, multi-level study conducted to assess the issues families face when trying to access childcare that effectively meets their child's special needs (Ward & Morris, 2018).
- The current quantitative study utilized cross-sectional parental survey data collected through phone interviews from the original study.

Sample

- The original study utilized non-probability convenience sampling. Survey participants (N=6,200) were recruited from Maine’s Child Development Services (CDS) and Maine Care (MC), two programs that provide services to children with special needs.
- The current study’s sample (N= 411) represents a wide range of child disabilities (non-behavioral, behavioral, speech/language, and multiple diagnoses with a behavioral component) and varying income levels (less than 25K to 80K and up).

Measures

Independent Variables:

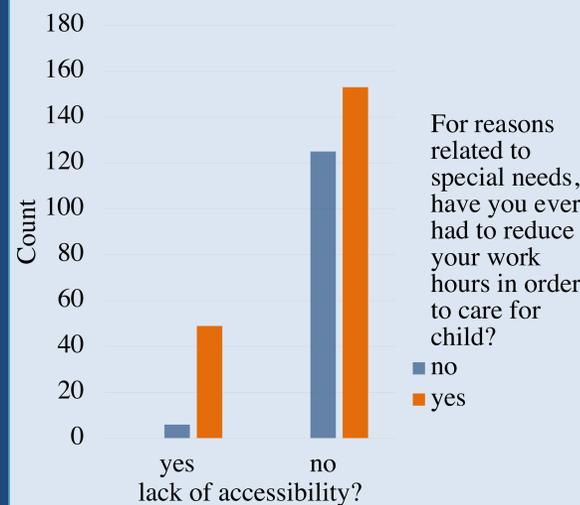
- Estimated Family Income
- Reduction in Work Hours

Dependent Variables:

- Access to Quality Childcare
- Type of Care Utilized
- Removal from Childcare due to cost
- Lack of Support from Childcare Provider
- Childcare met Childs Special Needs

| Independent Variables | n | % |
|--------------------------------|-----|------|
| Estimated Family Income | | |
| Less than 20k-45k | 230 | 52.2 |
| 45k-80k | 147 | 33.3 |
| 80k and up | 59 | 13.4 |
| Missing | 5 | 1.1 |
| Reduction in Work Hours | | |
| Yes | 247 | 56.0 |
| No | 185 | 42.0 |
| Missing | 9 | 2.0 |

RESULTS



- A significant association was found between family income and primary form of childcare utilized ($\chi^2(2) = 11.22, p < 0.01$). Families earning less than 20k-45k were more likely to use informal care (60.8%) as compared to those who made 45k-80k (27.2%) and 80k and up (12%).
- A significant relationship was found between caregiver’s reduction of work hours and reported lack of access to quality childcare services ($\chi^2(1) = 22.32, p < 0.01$). Results showed that those who have had to reduce their work hours to assist with their child’s unique needs were more likely also to report a lack of access to services (89.1%) than those who have not had to reduce work hours (10.9%).
- A significant association was found between the reduction of work hours and lack of special needs support from childcare providers ($\chi^2(1) = 19.46, p < 0.01$). 78.4% of those who have reduced hours also report a lack of support from their childcare provider.

DISCUSSION

Strengths and Limitations

- The current study’s limitations include: the study population was not found to fully represent varying family compositions (i.e., single or divorced parents), lack of information on outside aid, and restricted data lowered the sample size
- The current study’s strength include: provided additional information on the unique set of needs children with disabilities face daily and highlighted caregivers need to cut hours to fulfill their children's unmet needs

Implications & Future Research

- With families in poverty on the rise and the increasing prevalence of children diagnosed with one or more developmental disabilities, it is essential for research to identify childcare access barriers within this population
- Social workers must advocate for the removal of access barriers as current childcare services are not equitable. Professionals must assist families navigate the search for quality care while being mindful of the parents' immense stressors
- Macro-level policy reform is urgently needed as special needs childcare options are limited and costly. Policy makers and childcare providers must take action to remove barriers through supplemental aid, transportation assistance, and hearing directly from the affected for their additional needs

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