

Chicago Mothers on Finding and Using Child Care During Nonstandard Work Hours

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Abstract

Few issues confound child care policy more than the fact that very large numbers of mothers work evenings, overnight, or weekend hours when fewer child care programs operate. The authors interviewed 50 single Chicago mothers with nontraditional work hours about their experiences finding and using child care. Participants' responses addressed multiple reasons that many parents choose informal family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) child care even if they can afford licensed child care. FFN care was reported to be more personal or trustworthy and more flexible with respect to payments, schedule (particularly variable schedules), and caring for ill children. This perspective was noted even among parents who felt that FFN care did not meet their children's needs educationally or socially as well as a more formal setting would. The authors suggest directions in federal and state child care policies that could better support parents and children by including and improving FFN care.

Introduction

Significant numbers of parents in the United States work some evenings, overnight hours, or weekends; however, few established child care options exist during those hours. To the extent that federal and state child care policies may fail to reflect or actively exclude parents who need such care, they are also out of step with families' economic realities.

Parents now work evening, overnight, weekend, or variable hours so commonly that terms such as "nonstandard" and "nontraditional" work schedules may no longer be applicable. Nationwide, about 40% of U.S. employees were working at least some evening, overnight, or weekend hours as early as 1997 (Presser, 2003, p. 9–10). In Illinois in 2004, for example, 43% of working parents with children under age 14 regularly worked some evening, overnight, or weekend hours (Illinois Action for Children, 2007). Mothers were more likely than fathers to work nonstandard hours (Illinois Action for Children, 2007). Research has noted several factors associated with increased likelihood that a woman in Illinois would work some nonstandard hours, including being single, having a child, having a child under age 6, and earning lower incomes.

In an Illinois study using 2004 data, 61% of all single women with household incomes below \$24,000 and 56% among all single mothers had nonstandard schedules (Illinois Action for Children, 2007). For the current study, the authors applied these rates to 2010 Census data on children and families (U.S. Census as reported in Illinois Action for Children, 2012), estimating that almost 308,000 Illinois children under 6 had a single mother or two parents who worked some evenings, nights, or weekends, with about 152,000 of these children living in a household headed by their single employed mother.

Table 1 shows the number and percentages of programs offering nontraditional care in Illinois in both 2004 and in 2012, the latest available year. In both years, few child care centers offered evening, overnight, or weekend child care. Family child care homes are more likely to offer nontraditional hours than child care centers are. However, only a minority do so, and they have fewer spaces available than centers have. In Chicago, percentages similar to those shown in Table 1 prevail, although with somewhat higher coverage for child care homes (Illinois Action for Children, 2013). The researchers estimated that the available slots during nontraditional hours in Table 1 would cover

barely 10% of the 306,000 Illinois children under age 6 whose parents worked nontraditional schedules. This estimate does not include an additional 300,000 children ages 6–12 who would need care during those hours. Thus it is unlikely that all parents working nonstandard schedules will find child care programs for the hours they need.

A number of sources have indicated that some two-parent families address this child care shortage by staggering the parents' work schedules so that each can care for the children while the other parent works. Single mothers might also trade child care with a working relative or friend with whom they stagger work schedules. An indication that some mothers make such decisions about their work schedules based on their child care needs can be found in a 2004 Census survey, which reported that 41% of Illinois mothers who worked weekend schedules said that they chose those schedules for child or family reasons (Illinois Action for Children, 2007). In other families the children's grandparents, older siblings, other relatives, or the mothers' friends or neighbors are available for child care during those evening, overnight, or weekend hours.

Table 1
Known Illinois Child Care Providers With Nonstandard Hours of Care, 2004 & 2012*

Type of Child Care	Total		Percent of All Listed Centers or Homes	
	2004	2012	2004	2012
Total Listed Child Care Centers	5,376*	5,614*	100%	100%
Centers With Any Nontraditional Care	780	NA**	15%	NA**
Evenings	85	132	2%	2%
Overnights	22	52	0%	1%
Weekends	39	53	1%	1%
Rotating Shifts	705	902	13%	16%
Total Listed Family Child Care Homes	10,524*	9,857*	100%	100%
Homes With Any Nontraditional Care	6,231	NA	59%	NA
Evenings	2,715	4,444	26%	45%
Overnights	1,722	3,205	16%	33%
Weekends	1,085	1,443	10%	15%
Rotating Shifts	4,715	4,077	45%	41%

Sources: Illinois Department of Human Services, [Illinois Child Care Reports](#), FY 2004 & FY2012.

Notes

* The FY2012 numbers might not be fully comparable with FY2004 numbers because in FY2004 some licensed programs that did not wish to be listed might have been omitted from the count.

** The FY2012 report did not provide total numbers of centers and homes offering any nontraditional hours of care.

Such informal child care arrangements are known as family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care. The Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which helps subsidize child care for eligible low-income families, pays FFN providers the lowest reimbursement rates of all providers. In April 2015, FFN providers would receive \$16.22 per child per day for full-time care, five or more hours a day. A provider caring for a child for five hours, then, would receive \$3.24 per hour, and one caring for a child for eight hours receives just \$2.03 per hour. By contrast, CCAP would pay licensed Cook County home providers \$29.92 to \$35.30 per full day (depending on the child's age), while licensed centers would receive \$32.72 to \$46.49 a day. (For current Illinois CCAP rates, see the state's [Payment Rates](#) page.) Although CCAP covers a portion of their child care costs, parents are responsible for a copayment based on their income and family size. In Illinois in 2012, the copayment averaged 7% of a family's income and could reach as high as 10%.

Methods

Purpose of the Research

For the qualitative study reported here, 50 single mothers in Chicago were interviewed about their experiences finding and using child care during nonstandard hours. We sought a fuller understanding of how well child care arrangements, particularly their use of family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) child care, supported the needs of participants' families.

Participants

Participants were recruited from sites that administer the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program in Chicago and from community-based organizations that provide early intervention services or programming to children under the age 5. Staff at those programs identified eligible mothers and invited them to participate in the interview process.

Participants met the following criteria: They worked at least 20 hours a week, used evening or weekend child care at least once a week, had at least one child under the age of 6, and were at least 19 years of age (to provide consent for participation in the interviews). Participants did not need to be single or the sole head of their household, and in fact three of the parents whom program staff identified as eligible lived with the father of one of their children. Another seven participants lived with another adult, usually their parent or parents.

The participants were predominantly African American, but some Latino and non-Hispanic white mothers were also included. Most had between one and three children under age 13; about half had teenage children as well. Some relied on the older children for child care.

Half of the mothers interviewed had a high school education or less. A fifth had achieved an associate's degree or higher. While several had earned bachelor's degrees and one a graduate degree, all reported they were underemployed in the weak economy of 2012. Most of the interviewees reported an annual income under \$23,000, and almost half reported incomes under \$15,000—far below the median income of Chicago single-earner families, which was \$34,245 in 2011 (U.S. Census, 2012). As a result, they qualified for the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP); all but five interviewees received this assistance to help pay for their child care during work hours.

Interviews

In the summer of 2012, the authors interviewed the mothers using telephone interviews. Interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes each. Before participating in the interview, each mother was informed of her right to confidentiality and to opt out of the survey at any time.

The interviewer asked open- and closed-ended questions about participants' experiences as low-income working mothers using child care during nontraditional hours. Follow-up questions were used to elicit clarity and details. Questions addressed participants' work schedules, child care arrangements, and the challenges they faced in balancing their work, child care, and family life.

Findings

Employment and Work Schedules

The participants' jobs fell primarily into four categories: retail, food service, health care, and education/child care. Other industries included security, financial services, and social services. Their jobs typically pay lower wages: sales or customer service representatives, teacher assistants, office assistants, food servers or packers, and certified nurse assistants. Only one participant held more

than one job. Full-time work (35 or more hours per week) and part-time work were about evenly represented. Variable schedules were as common among the full-time workers as among the part-time workers.

More than half of the interviewees worked at least some evenings or nights and half worked weekends. Almost half worked *both* evenings and weekends. Two-thirds of the participants had variable schedules; the days they worked or their start and end times changed from day to day or week to week. Some were on call or filled in for coworkers at the last minute, as needed. An airport worker said she might need to work mandatory overtime if a flight was delayed. A food service cashier reported being sent home early if business was slow. A certified nurse assistant said she could increase her hours if she saw extra clients.

Some participants reported that they preferred nonstandard work schedules. For example, a mother might prefer to work at night so she could take care of her young children at home during the morning. Several interviewees were happy with their schedules. "I think overnights are the best shift," commented one mother. Another parent expressed ambivalence: "It's hard because during the evening I can't have enough interaction with them [her children]. But on the weekend it isn't bad because I work early so they're still sleeping."

Most of the interviewees, however, desired to change their schedules, often for reasons related to family needs. Typically they preferred to work traditional weekday hours to allow them more time with their families. Some preferred to have a more regular schedule. One participant commented, "I wish I could change it to one set morning shift. I wish I could have my schedule a month in advance and just work it." Another reported that she just wanted two days off in a row. Some wanted to reduce their work hours to increase family time, while others reported needing more paid hours.

Child Care Arrangements

Child care provides an essential support while single mothers work. Child care providers can 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 (Bromer & Henly, 2004, 2009). Breakdowns in child care arrangements, perhaps because a provider is ill or is called to another job at the last minute, can negatively affect both the mother's work life (i.e., her attendance, her employer's opinion of her) and her family life.

With formal child care options scarce during evenings and weekends, most of the single mothers interviewed reported using family, friends, or neighbors for all or part of their child care arrangement, most commonly family members. Among the family child care providers, the child's grandparent was the most common provider, but children were also cared for by their older siblings, aunts and uncles, and other extended family. Some parents who worked predominantly daytime schedules used center care supplemented by a relative or friend caregiver to cover their evening or weekend shifts. Many interviewees reported relying on a patchwork of individuals or centers to provide child care during their work hours. It was not uncommon for parents to report using two or more child care providers. Only two said they regularly relied on the child's other parent to care for the child while they worked. Table 2 shows the types of child care arrangements reported by participants.

Table 2
Participants' Child Care Arrangements

Type of Arrangement	Number of Mothers
Center Only	4
1 FFN Provider	29
2 FFN Providers	2
3 FFN Providers	2
1 FFN Provider & 1 Licensed Home	2

1 FFN Provider & 1 Center	9
2 FFN Providers & 1 Center	2

Parent Satisfaction With Child Care Arrangements

The mothers we interviewed expressed various levels of satisfaction with their caregivers. Overall, most who used FFN child care were happy with their arrangement. They found it convenient and reported that they trusted their providers and felt they did a good job caring for their children. One parent said, "It fits me and my kids perfect." Another parent indicated satisfaction with an arrangement that involved her mother and oldest daughter watching her younger children in the children's home while they were sleeping. Overall, the mothers appeared satisfied with the quality of the FFN child care their children received. One mother said about her neighbor: "She actually works with them and teaches them letters and stuff like that."

Parents reported that they appreciated how much their providers did for them and wished the providers could be better compensated. One mother said, "I wish I could pay more. My mom does a lot and helps out more. I don't feel that she is adequately compensated. If I have a little extra I try to give her more." Similarly, another parent said her provider "watches four children to feed them, help them with their homework, and get them to bed" and feels he should be paid more. These findings are consistent with those of an unpublished 2010 survey by Illinois Action for Children in which 6% of 249 Chicago mothers with low incomes indicated that they felt their providers should be better paid.

While the majority of participants reported that they preferred to keep their current arrangements, some also identified specific features they would change. Parents' three most common responses were that they wished their care was more affordable, that their children could socialize more with peers, and that their centers or home child care settings were open longer hours, including weekends. About program schedules, one mother reported, "If they had weekend or late night hours, I would feel like I hit the jackpot. It is so hard to find child care on the weekend or evenings."

Not all mothers reported satisfaction with their child care arrangements. About 30% said they would choose a different provider if they could. Some said they wanted a more educational environment, such as a child care center. A mother whose mother cared for her 1-year-old stated that she would prefer center care "because the kids are more into hands-on learning and they get to enjoy the experience more of being around kids. They are doing different kinds of activities, get them off the bottles, teach them to walk, potty train them, and teach them to wash their hands." Another mother who relied on an FFN provider to care for her 4-year-old said, "I would go for something more professional, a day care center, or a more serious baby sitter. ... They [a child care center] have more activities and more stuff for the kids than just sitting at home." The mothers who preferred centers, however, indicated that their cost is prohibitive or the ones they knew of and trusted were too far away.

Other mothers who were dissatisfied with their care wished that their child care provider's schedule would fit their hours better with extended hours, including weekends. "If the day cares were open seven days a week, I wouldn't be restricted as to the type of job I could take," one mother commented. The mothers with this preference, however, did not know of any such programs. Some mothers expressed a desire for more consistent or reliable care, particularly on the weekends. Finally, a few parents of toddlers wished the child's grandmothers could care for their children but indicated the grandmothers were not available.

Child Care Challenges Related to Working Nonstandard Hours

Participants reported several common challenges related to child care and their nonstandard work hours. Even parents who expressed satisfaction with their care arrangement encountered difficulties. These challenges included difficulty finding child care, arranging for a variable schedule, and

unreliability of some child care arrangements.

Interviewees indicated that variable work schedules posed special challenges when it was necessary to arrange child care on short notice. The majority of the participating mothers received at least one week's notice of their schedule, and some received their schedule at least two weeks or a month in advance. About one quarter of participants with variable schedules, however, received less than a week's notice of their schedule; they might learn their schedule on Thursday or Friday for the next work week. Others reported getting a same-day notice of overtime or a request to fill in for a co-worker.

Finding Care

Finding child care is a common challenge among all working parents, regardless of work hours, because they must weigh issues of affordability, convenience, and quality and/or trust. Parents working nonstandard hours are further challenged because of the limited number of child care programs offering evening, weekend, and variable-hour care. Forty percent of the interviewees said it was somewhat or very difficult to find child care. One parent reported:

I had to switch to a different child care provider because day cares don't do evenings. I asked family members and friends to see who had the availability to do it. I went through the (referral) program to find child care in the evening, and it wasn't helpful because they were only home day cares and they wanted the money up front until I got approved [by the Child Care Assistance Program] and I couldn't afford it.

Other comments included:

Since I work in the hospitals and the hours vary, I would have to look for a day care that has hours that vary as well.

Every day care is not 24 hours. Sometimes I get out at 3 a.m. And not every day care has transportation.

If I didn't have her [a family friend], it would be difficult, because a lot of people in my family work. ... And the day cares charge a little more.

Many parents specifically mentioned the difficulty with finding care on the weekends. One commented, "People want to go out and relax, and it's hard to find people."

Challenges Arranging Care With a Variable Schedule

Working varying schedules challenges parents in coordinating these work schedules with the schedules of their providers, who may also work or have other obligations. When we asked mothers about the challenges of working nontraditional schedules, one parent replied, "Just the scheduling of it. Me and my provider work diligently to make sure my needs can fit her needs." Another parent agreed and said her challenge was "just going by someone else's schedule in case she has anything else she wants to do."

Half of the mothers interviewed said that finding last minute child care was somewhat or very challenging. The parents who received less than a week's notice of their work schedule, in particular, experienced problems arranging child care and had to turn to backup care more frequently, if it was available.

It happens once a week I'll have problems. If my babysitter is not available, I would go to my sister and then my mom.

It depends on the sitter's availability. Sometimes they'll switch my days from Thursday or Saturdays. Sometimes she (the sitter) has other obligations, and then I would have to

find someone else to watch her.

Well sometimes I try to arrange ahead of time when I can find out. The people I ask are not usually reliable, so I have to keep asking two days before that.

Challenges of Unreliable Care

Unlike parents using center care, parents using FFN child care face problems when one of their caregivers cancels on them at the last minute. In our group of parents, one third said their child care would fall through as often as once or twice a month, and for a few mothers this occurred weekly. In these situations, parents turned to a family member, if one was available, or they took off work.

Parents reported a variety of experiences when asked how often their providers canceled at the last minute:

Once a week. Then I go to whoever's going to watch the kids, it could be my little brother, mom, spouse.

My previous provider cancelled 13 times in three months. I had to call off work and I lost money. And I got a write up. It hinders the children definitely. With my current provider it is their first day so I haven't had issues yet.

It happens once a week. ... If I can't find anyone, then I have to take off and stay home.

Maybe like twice a month, I usually have ... my friend's mother to see if she's not doing anything or I have to call off.

Just not having a consistent person, or I ... have to miss work because no one wants to watch her today. Or I have to pray someone says "yes." I would rather my child be with me; I don't want to throw her off on anyone. I only give her to people that I trust. I don't want to have to worry about her while I'm at work.

Challenges of Affording Care

Of the 50 study participants, all but five said they paid at least one provider. The challenge of paying for child care is not exclusive to parents working nonstandard hours, but jobs for which nonstandard hours are common are typically more low-skilled and low-paid (Illinois Action for Children, 2007). Perhaps more importantly, parents with variable schedules may not know their incomes from week to week, and this makes it harder for them to budget for child care.

As indicated above, most of the mothers interviewed had low enough incomes (at or below 185% of the federal poverty level) to participate in the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). All but five mothers received CCAP to help them pay for all or part of their child care expenses. Three of the remaining five did not pay their providers at all, as their providers were their mothers and/or an older child. Six of the mothers with CCAP also used a secondary provider whom they did not pay (in all cases a relative).

Two-thirds of the mothers said that paying for child care was either somewhat or very challenging, the same proportion that Illinois Action for Children found in a large unpublished survey of working parents conducted in 2013. Almost half of the mothers said they occasionally or frequently have difficulty paying their copayments.

Mothers who used center care more typically experienced challenges paying for care, reflecting the reputation of centers for being less flexible with payments. One mother who had difficulty every month explained her experience with her center: "Because I'm a single parent, I have to pay all of the bills. If I miss a payment with the day care on the 30th, then on the 1st I get late fees of \$10 the first day and \$20 after the fifth day."

While FFN providers typically accept the rate they receive from CCAP, many centers charge rates higher than the CCAP reimbursement rate and charge parents the difference. One mother who frequently had trouble making payments described the high cost: "There's a copayment aside from what [CCAP] pays, plus the weekly center fees, which is an additional \$120."

The parents who said their providers were flexible regarding payments were those using FFN child care:

Just mostly by me being a little pressed for cash. I am a single mom caring for two boys. Things come up, and I have been late in the past, and I'm blessed to have someone [her neighbor] who will work with me on that.

It's been kind of hard lately, but she [a friend] has been working with me and been understanding.

Sometimes it depends on what day I get paid on, or if I can pay it all at once. Sometimes I have to make payments. [Her providers are her mother, her sister, and her friend.]

Because it's my mother, she works with me. It happens every couple of months.

Discussion

Since the participants were not selected randomly, data from these interviews are not necessarily representative of the experiences of all working mothers in Chicago or elsewhere. Instead, we sought a rich discussion of their individual experiences and the challenges they faced as mothers with lower incomes in need of nontraditional child care hours for young children. Inasmuch as this population of working women is often underrepresented in research, these interviews were particularly valuable.

The single mothers we interviewed were not homogenous with regard to family life, occupations, or type of nonstandard work schedule, nor were they identical in the support they received from their extended families. Nevertheless, as a group they were challenged by a combination of low income, low or modest educational attainment, and nonstandard work schedules. They also tended to use FFN care as they sought to balance work and family life.

Given the prevalence of nontraditional work schedules among working mothers, it is a serious issue that relatively few child care centers or family child care homes offer child care during nontraditional hours.

Child care policies in many states discourage parents from using FFN care. Some states deny child care assistance to children in FFN care. In 2011, in 20 states, less than 4% of children with assistance had FFN providers (Office of Child Care, 2013, Table 6). By contrast, that figure was 38% in Illinois, suggesting that Illinois policy was more in touch with parents' economic reality (Office of Child Care, 2013, Table 6).

Yet even in states such as Illinois, public policy could do more to address needs of parents who work nonstandard schedules. Several federal and state policy options are available.

States can explore ways to expand capacity in high-quality child care centers and licensed homes during evening, overnight, and weekend hours and over variable hours of care. For example, the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program could increase its reimbursement for care during those hours for children of working parents.

States also could undertake alternative ways to promote optimal child development that do not discourage parents from using FFN providers. State policies could allow mothers to use both high-quality child care programs during the day and their trusted FFN providers when work requires care at night or on weekends, which would promote use of programs that provide high-quality educational and social experience for young children while encouraging a blended child care arrangement that benefits the working parent. As Table 2 shows, about one-third (17) of the 50 participants in this study used more than one child care provider, and about one quarter (13) combined a licensed

program with a FFN provider.

States might also explore ways to improve quality in child care provided during nonstandard hours. Because so many parents with lower incomes use FFN care during nonstandard hours, states could target FFN providers for quality supports, such as training and mentoring, and quality incentives such as paying an add-on for higher quality in child care. Many FFN providers are relatives of the child; states might pursue family support strategies to reach and educate those providers about quality in child care. Support strategies for FFN providers typically include home visiting programs, peer support groups or networks, and enrichment programs for the children in FFN child care.

Given the reported need for backup or emergency child care, a need that is particularly acute for parents working nonstandard hours, states might also explore ways to expand backup or emergency child care. Subsidies could be made available for providers willing to offer back-up care, and states could support networks of such providers and help create a referral process for parents needing backup or emergency care.

Employers could reduce parent stress by giving them notice of their work hours far enough in advance that they could more easily arrange their child care schedules. State and federal policymakers may be able to exert some influence on employers' use of nontraditional work schedules. Even if officials are unwilling to regulate employers' scheduling of work shifts in more family-friendly ways, they might explore use of tax incentives to encourage employers to post work schedules farther in advance or to reduce the use of variable schedules.

Policy options in general should reflect the economic reality of low-income parents who must work nonstandard hours and who now have few alternatives to using FFN child care.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported in part by grants from the Chicago Foundation for Women and the Ms. Foundation for Women.

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