

Issue BRIEF

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The research questions

1. What are the primary reasons that parents choose informal child care?
2. Are informal child care providers interested in promoting their own economic advancement through providing care to young children, and how might they do so?
3. How do bartering and other nonmonetary exchanges support informal child care?
4. What types of quality do children experience in informal child care settings?
5. What types of support do parents and informal child care providers get, want, and need?

Informal Child Care in Detroit

Since 1930, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) has strived to support children's development by reducing vulnerability caused by economic and social inequity.

In November 2016, in partnership with the Kresge Foundation, WKKF launched the year-long initiative *Hope Starts Here: Detroit's Early Childhood Partnership* to develop a strategic plan to ensure that all children in Detroit have access to high quality early childhood experiences. Through community engagement, stakeholder collaboration, and research, WKKF is learning about existing caregiving and support networks in Detroit and trying to find ways to enhance them. WKKF asked Mathematica Policy Research to carry out the Informal Child Care in Detroit (ICCD) research project. Mathematica conducted the research from June 2016 to December 2017.

Mathematica prepared three briefs to summarize ICCD project findings for WKKF, community leaders, program staff, parents, child care providers, and other stakeholders. This brief highlights the role of informal child care in Detroit and Wayne County, Michigan; the second describes parent and informal caregiver networks; and the third discusses barriers to children receiving high quality care and offers recommendations for overcoming them.

What is informal child care?

For the ICCD project, we defined informal child care as provided by someone other than a child's parent or guardian outside a licensed child care center or family child care home. The caregiver may be a family member, a friend, or a neighbor; the care may be regular or occasional; and it may take place in the home of the caregiver or the child. Other terms for informal child care are family, friend, and neighbor, relative, or kith-and-kin care; and unlicensed, unlisted, or license-exempt care.

WHY DO PARENTS CHOOSE INFORMAL CARE?

Detroit's children and families need it

Home-based child care is common in the United States, and informal child care makes up a large part of it.¹ In 2012, about 4 million home-based caregivers, the vast majority of whom we would classify as informal caregivers, provided child care

for over 7 million children in the U.S.² Research on informal child care in Detroit is sparse, but what there is indicates that informal care is widespread, given that the city can accommodate only 47 percent of children from birth to age 5 in licensed child care slots.³ Key informants we interviewed agreed that informal child care is prevalent in Detroit. For example, one key informant described Detroit as a diverse area with several new immigrant communities; often, new immigrant parents

Study activities



1. **Twelve interviews with key informants** who were staff at nonprofit organizations, consulting and research organizations, and a state government agency in Detroit, Wayne County, or Michigan. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about existing informal child care programs and networks. WKCF recommended some key informants; others were identified via contacts with stakeholders who were working with organizations that provide family and children's programming and services. We recruited key informants by email and phone, and conducted interviews with them from November 2016 to March 2017.



2. **Eighteen site visits** to nonprofit and other organizations and public libraries in Wayne County. During these visits, the research team conducted interviews with 95 parents and informal caregivers to learn about their experiences using and providing informal care, and drew 51 ecomaps (graphic representations of social systems and supports). The study targeted adult parents and caregivers who use or provide informal child care on a regular or occasional basis for young children, with a focus on those living or providing or receiving child care in Detroit. We invited parents and caregivers to participate in the study individually or in group settings. We conducted interviews with them from January to April 2017.

do not know about formal child care options and thus turn to their family members for informal child care. Another key informant reported that Detroit's parents use informal child care because too few formal child care centers in the city are open all day or after traditional business hours, when many parents need child care.

Parents, caregivers, and key informants identified four reasons why parents choose to use informal child care: it is flexible, affordable, trustworthy, and nearby.

Informal child care is flexible

Parents, caregivers, and key informants agreed that informal care is provided either as needed or on a regular schedule, depending on parents' needs. They also agreed that as-needed informal care is more common because it better accommodates parents' work and school schedules and other needs. Informal child care is particularly important for parents who work evenings, overnight, and on weekends, as well as for those whose work schedules change frequently. Informal care is more flexible and dependable than formal care, parents related, because informal caregivers are available whenever parents need child care.



My daughter works for [national retailer] and her hours are flexible and I'm her transportation. It [informal child care] depends on her hours. She works different shifts, like 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. [or] 2:00 to 10:00 p.m. With [that company], you just don't know their hours.

A Caregiver

Parents need affordable child care

Parents and caregivers reported that informal child care is often unpaid. Even when parents pay for informal child care, payments are substantially less than what child care centers would charge. Given that informal child care is free or low cost, informal care is particularly important for families facing economic barriers to formal child care.



I have three [children]. To pay \$500, why even go to work? They [formal child care centers] are going to take my whole paycheck."

A Parent

Parents trust informal caregivers

Parents, caregivers, and key informants agreed that informal child care in Detroit is frequently

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¹ Bromer, J., and Korfmacher, J. "Providing High-Quality Support Services to Home-Based Child Care: A Conceptual Model and Literature Review." *Early Education and Development*, vol. 28, no. 6 (December 2016), pp. 745–772.

² NSECE (National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team). Characteristics of Home-based Early Care and Education Providers: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education. OPRE Report #2016-13. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016. Available at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/characteristics_of_home_based_early_care_and_education_toopre_032416.pdf. Accessed August 20, 2017.

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³ IFF. The System We Need: A Neighborhood Snapshot of Early Childhood Education in Detroit. IFF, 2015. Available at <http://kresge.org/sites/default/files/library/iff-detroit-report-final.pdf>. Accessed August 20, 2017.

Profiles of sites visited

Organization	Type of organization
Advantage Living Center NW	Skilled nursing and rehabilitation center providing services to seniors in surrounding communities
Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS)	Community nonprofit providing social, economic, health, and educational assistance to the Arab immigrant population
Chadsey Condon Community Organization	Community organization providing services and other supports to children and families in the Chadsey Condon neighborhood
Development Centers	Nonprofit organization providing behavioral health and prevention programs, housing placement, and employment training services to Detroit residents
Family Alliance for Change	Family resource center providing support, training, resources, and education for parents of children with special needs in Wayne County
Hanley International Academy	Charter school dedicated to providing a safe learning environment that promotes the academic, physical, social, and emotional development of its diverse learning community
Matrix Center	Nonprofit organization offering youth, families, adults, and seniors an array of supportive services and referrals through programming and collaboration with partners
Public library branches (Campbell, Chandler Park, Garden City, and Redford)	Public library branches providing literacy-based programs and services for children and families in the surrounding communities
Starfish Family Services	Nonprofit organization serving vulnerable children and families in metropolitan Detroit, with a focus on providing resources, services, and other supports for early childhood development
Thrive by Five	Collaborative partnership between four Detroit social service agencies that provides Head Start services for children ages birth to five

Note: We visited some sites more than once to interview different groups of parents and informal caregivers. Great Start Collaborative of Wayne County, a community organization that provides a coordinated system of services and resources to families, arranged the site visits conducted at Development Centers, Family Alliance for Change, Hanley International Academy, and Matrix Center. Congress of Communities, a community organization that assists in developing natural leaders in the neighborhoods it serves and advocates for change in the areas of education and public safety, arranged the site visit conducted at Thrive by Five.

provided by family members (most often a child’s grandmother, aunt, or great-aunt), and occasionally by friends and neighbors. Parents reported feeling more comfortable leaving their children with caregivers they know and trust rather than with strangers in a child care center. Moreover, some parents and caregivers said that informal caregivers and children love each other, so caregivers enjoy spending time with the children and giving them nurturing, affectionate care; some parents expressed concern that caregivers in formal child care settings care for children “for a paycheck” and

not out of love. Similarly, some caregivers perceived that the care a trusted family member or friend provides is better for children, particularly young children who “don’t have the mouth to tell you what happened or what hasn’t happened” at a child care center.



[I don’t understand] how anybody leaves their children in the care of somebody you have not known your entire life.

A Caregiver

Study sample characteristics

146
parents and informal
caregivers
participated in
the study

40
was the
average age

Over
90%
were female

About
50%
were
African American

20%
had less than a high
school education

29%
had a high school
diploma or GED

26%
attended some
college

16%
had at least a
college degree

Parents need child care close to home

Parents reported that when choosing between informal and formal care, they considered where the child care would take place. Both parents and caregivers reported that the lack of convenient public transportation in Detroit makes it difficult to transport children to and from home, school, and child care settings. Having child care close to home is important for parents who prefer not to travel far for child care, and for those who prefer that their children be in familiar, comfortable settings. Parents who live in communities without formal child care options are more likely to choose informal child care from providers who live close by than to seek formal child care farther away. Sometimes the child's home is also the caregiver's home—one key informant noted an increase in the number of informal caregivers who live in the same residence as the children they care for.



My daughter doesn't drive, therefore she can't get them [from formal child care].

A Caregiver

WHY DO CAREGIVERS PROVIDE INFORMAL CARE?

To help family and friends

Parents, caregivers, and key informants agreed that informal caregivers' primary motivation is to help family and friends. Caregivers in the study generally reported that they are not interested in making child care a career. For example, one caregiver explained that while she is directly caring for the children, she is also indirectly caring for the parent by "helping them care for their family." For some caregivers, informal child care is a cultural or family tradition. One Latina caregiver shared that, in the Latino community, it is preferable to care for your own "rather than outsource" care to strangers.

Caregivers frequently said that they do not see child care as a source of income, and they do not expect money for providing care. They related that kind gestures or small favors from the families—and feelings of love and "paying it forward"—sufficed as payment. Caregivers also

acknowledged that the families cannot afford to pay them. Several caregivers and key informants reported that some caregivers provide child care only temporarily to help family or friends during stressful times. One key informant noted that caregivers may already have jobs and are caring for children during their free time to help family and friends, so they are not interested in child care as a career.

A few informal caregivers, however, reported that they consider providing child care to be their career even though they do not have a child care license. One said that informal care is her full-time career, and she documents her income from child care for tax purposes. Another caregiver stated that she can no longer work in the formal workforce because she is disabled; informal care is now her full-time job.

DO BARTERING AND IN-KIND EXCHANGES SUPPORT INFORMAL CHILD CARE?

Parents and caregivers often trade child care

Parents and caregivers reported trading informal child care with each other. They found this in-kind exchange of child care mutually beneficial in two ways. First, it facilitates reliable and consistent caregiving arrangements between families. Second, the children involved have the opportunity to interact with other children and learn valuable lessons, such as the importance of helping others. For example, one caregiver said that although she had not planned to serve as an informal caregiver, a child care trading arrangement formed organically between her and a friend. The two women live close to each other, are members of the same church, and their children attend school together. The respondent said that she cares for her friend's children often and her friend, in turn, provides care for her own when she needs it. She also explained that the children have developed close relationships, and have learned an important lesson about helping others when they need it.



"Scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" [in regard to exchanging child care with his caregivers].

A Parent

DO CHILDREN GET HIGH QUALITY, SAFE INFORMAL CHILD CARE?

Caregivers understand the basics of providing quality care but need more training and resources

Parents and caregivers demonstrated a basic understanding of the factors that contribute to high quality child care. They talked about engaging in activities that foster children's cognitive and social-emotional development, as well as taking action to ensure the safety of the children in their care. However, parents, caregivers, and key informants identified ways in which caregivers can do more to improve the quality of child care in these two areas.

Caregivers need a deeper understanding of early childhood development and access to developmentally appropriate materials and settings

Some caregivers see themselves only as babysitters—that is, responsible only for keeping children safe and fed—and do not focus on providing child development opportunities for the children in their care. Parents and caregivers both noted that friends or neighbors are more likely than family members to restrict their care to babysitting when they provide informal child care. Key informants in our study frequently expressed the opinion that most informal caregivers, whether family members or not, view themselves as babysitters and do not offer enriching learning opportunities to the children. As mentioned above, trust for caregivers is one of the main reasons parents choose informal care, and some parents may choose to prioritize trust for a caregiver over the provision of enriching opportunities for their children.

Some caregivers do foster children's cognitive and social-emotional development by promoting early literacy and math skills, taking children on learning-oriented outings, and facilitating child-to-child interaction. Others struggle to provide these early learning opportunities for two reasons. First, most informal caregivers reported that they are not trained in child development. These caregivers operate on their own understanding of what young children should learn and know at specific ages, which may or may not be based on proven, established child development theory and best practices.

Second, some caregivers reported that they do not have access to child-centered materials or activities because they lack money or transportation. Some parents and caregivers expressed concern that children in informal settings without other children present do not have the opportunity to socialize with other children, although a few parents said that their children still had the opportunity to socialize with other children when caregivers took them out to play in the neighborhood. For children in informal care settings with other children, parents and caregivers frequently reported that group sizes were manageable—fewer than six children—and said that caregivers balanced teaching children how to socialize with giving individualized attention to children. One key informant who runs a program that offers free child-centered materials and services to informal caregivers said that caregivers appreciate the free field trips and car seats they provide for outings to child-centered settings. Nonetheless, economic and transportation barriers can make accessing child-centered materials and participating in learning-oriented outings difficult for caregivers.

Parents and caregivers have some concerns about the safety of informal child care settings

Although caregivers strive to provide safe environments for children, they as well as parents and key informants voiced some concerns about the structural safety of the homes in which care is provided, the physical safety of the children in the homes, and the safety of the neighborhoods.

Parents and caregivers reported that they are generally satisfied with the structural condition of the homes, but key informants expressed some concerns. Parents and caregivers noted that children have enough indoor space to move around freely, and some caregivers have enough space to set up an area for activities such as naps and play. Caregivers also reported having safety measures in place, such as making sure children do not stray too far from the caregiver and having electrical outlet covers and smoke detectors. One key informant, however, identified exposure to unsafe building materials, including exposure to lead paint, as a potential health hazard in informal settings, a problem which the key informant believed was familiar to many low-income families in Detroit. Other key informants expressed concern that caregivers may lack carbon monoxide detectors, fire extinguishers, or cabinet locks.

Study limitations

Findings from this research project have several limitations. The generalizability of the findings is limited because the project included a small convenience sample of parents and caregivers who either lived or worked in Wayne County. In addition, the distribution of languages in the sample is not random, as interviewer ability and availability to conduct interviews in languages other than English was a factor in determining the individuals we interviewed. For these reasons, findings from the research project are not representative of the city of Detroit, Wayne County, or the state of Michigan. Moreover, individuals who chose to participate in the project may be different—they may, for example, hold more positive views on informal caregiving—than individuals who declined to participate or were not asked to do so.

Parents, caregivers, and key informants also reported that adults other than caregivers may be present in the homes. Caregivers occasionally spoke of this in a positive sense, stating that adult family members or other adults in the home or neighborhood help provide care when the child care providers need assistance managing children. Other parents and key informants noted the negative aspects of other individuals being present in the informal child care setting. For example, one parent said that a cousin was sometimes present when her brother was caring for her children. Because the parent did not want her children around the cousin, she found another option for child care when the cousin was expected to be around. Key informants said it was difficult to know who might be visiting caregivers; they cautioned that home-based care exposes children to all aspects of the caregivers' personal lives.

The safety of the neighborhoods where children receive care is also a concern for parents, caregivers, and key informants. Generally, parents and caregivers reported that children do play outdoors and go for walks with their caregivers, but they

will spend less time outdoors if a neighborhood is perceived as unsafe. Parents and caregivers frequently said that they would rather children play in a fenced-in or secluded backyard than in the front yard, but caregivers occasionally mentioned that they are comfortable letting children play in the front yard under supervision. Parents and caregivers also have reservations about other dangers: loose dogs, drug users, and abandoned houses in the neighborhood where potentially dangerous people loiter. In addition, caregivers occasionally reporting feeling uneasy because they do not know their neighbors well.

Nevertheless, some parents and caregivers felt comfortable with the neighborhoods in which children receive care. Two parents noted that they know everyone in their neighborhoods, including long-time elderly residents, people who grew up in the neighborhood and recently returned to the area, and family members. For example, one parent said she grew up on the same street where she lives now, her grandmother lives across the street, and her sister lives next door to her grandmother.

Summary of findings about informal child care in Detroit

This brief presents findings on the first four research questions. Key findings include:

- Informal child care is common nationwide and in Detroit.
- Children and families need informal child care because it is flexible, affordable, trustworthy, and close to home.
- Caregivers provide informal child care to help family and friends; most are not interested in child care as a career.
- Parents and caregivers often trade child care rather than pay for care with money.
- Parents and caregivers in the study understand the basics of high quality child care but are not trained in child development and lack money and transportation for developmentally appropriate materials and activities.

The next brief in this series examines informal child care arrangements in more detail and explores parents' and caregivers' sources of support related to child care. The third brief addresses the fifth research question by discussing barriers to providing high quality child care and offering recommendations for overcoming them.

