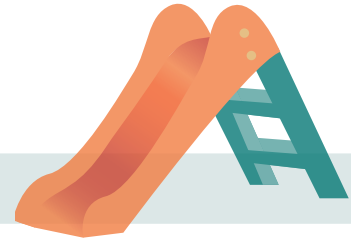




Access to Child Care

Finding and Affording Child Care for Mississippi Families

January 2019



Access to quality childcare is critical during a child's earliest years. This period of rapid brain development can be capitalized upon by ensuring babies, toddlers, and preschoolers enjoy engaging and responsive care. Parents rely on access to quality care when they are unavailable, knowing their child is being well cared for during their time apart from each other.

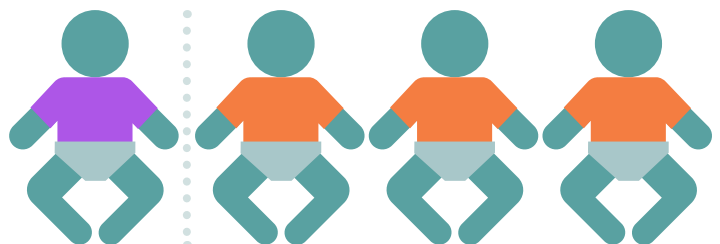
To better understand the current state of access to childcare in Mississippi, the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) at Mississippi State University conducted a telephone survey from February 2018 through May 2018. The full population of Mississippi child care centers were invited to complete a telephone survey, with 1,533 child care centers contacted. Respondents included 781 child care centers, resulting in a response rate of 52%. Child Care Center respondents were asked questions related to the number and age distribution of children enrolled, the number of children on their waiting list, voucher use among their center's families, and the use of developmental screenings in their center. This brief presents the results of survey questions related to access and affordability of child care.

Waiting for Space to Enroll in Child Care

More than half of the centers (57%) reported having a waiting list for enrollment, with a range of one to 450 names of children waiting to access care. The average center had 26 children on its waiting list, or approximately one child on the waiting list for every three children enrolled. Wait list data from survey participants were extrapolated to estimate the number of children on childcare center waitlists statewide - statistical estimates suggest that 22,600 total children are listed on child care center wait lists around the state. The high number of children on wait lists suggests that demand for quality child care presently exceeds the number of available seats for Mississippi's young children.

- 57% of child care centers in Mississippi have a wait list for enrollment
- Taken together, wait lists at Mississippi child care centers currently total approximately 22,600 children
- The average wait list has 26 children, but lists ranged from 1 to 450 children across the state

At the average child care center in Mississippi, there is **ONE** child on the wait list to enroll for every **THREE** children enrolled at the center



Paying for Child Care

\$442

Average monthly cost of infant care in Mississippi's child care centers, per child^[1]

\$389

Average monthly cost of care for four year olds in Mississippi's child care centers, per child^[1]

Given the substantial cost of center-based childcare for families, federal and state intervention programs have been developed to help families afford the cost of care for their young children. These intervention programs take the form of child care tuition vouchers. Child care vouchers are part of the federally-funded Child Care Certification Program / Child Care Payment Program, designed to provide financial help to parents for child care tuition costs. In order to be eligible for the program, parents must meet specific eligibility requirements and are responsible for paying a monthly co-payment fee to their child care provider as well as meeting the difference between what the Child Care Certificate Program pays and the child care provider's published tuition rate.^[2] Vouchers are made available to parents in order of priority according to the following guidelines: ^[2]

Priority 1

Top priority for child care vouchers is reserved for parents who are referred for vouchers by Healthy Homes Mississippi (home visitation program), agencies serving the homeless, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), TCC (Transitional Child Care), or Foster or Protective Services.

Priority 2

Second priority for child care vouchers is held for families in special need of extra support - specifically families who earn up to 85 % of the state median income and fall into one of the following categories [in decreasing order of priority]: single parents with disabilities, children with special needs, or parents deployed in the MS National Guard or Reserve.

Priority 3

The third priority group for vouchers is very-low income parents who are at risk of needing TANF services. For full-time child care, the parent must work at least 25 hours per week, or be enrolled in an approved educational program full-time. For two-parent families, each parent must be enrolled in school full time, or working at least 25 hours per week, with a gross income 50% or below the State Median Income.

Priority 4

The final priority group consists of low-income parents who are at risk of needing TANF services and who are working 25 hours per week and/or in an approved full-time educational or job training program, with an income that falls between 50% and 85% of the State Median Income. Voucher availability for Priority 4 parents is limited by the availability of program funding - voucher availability for these parents varies over time.

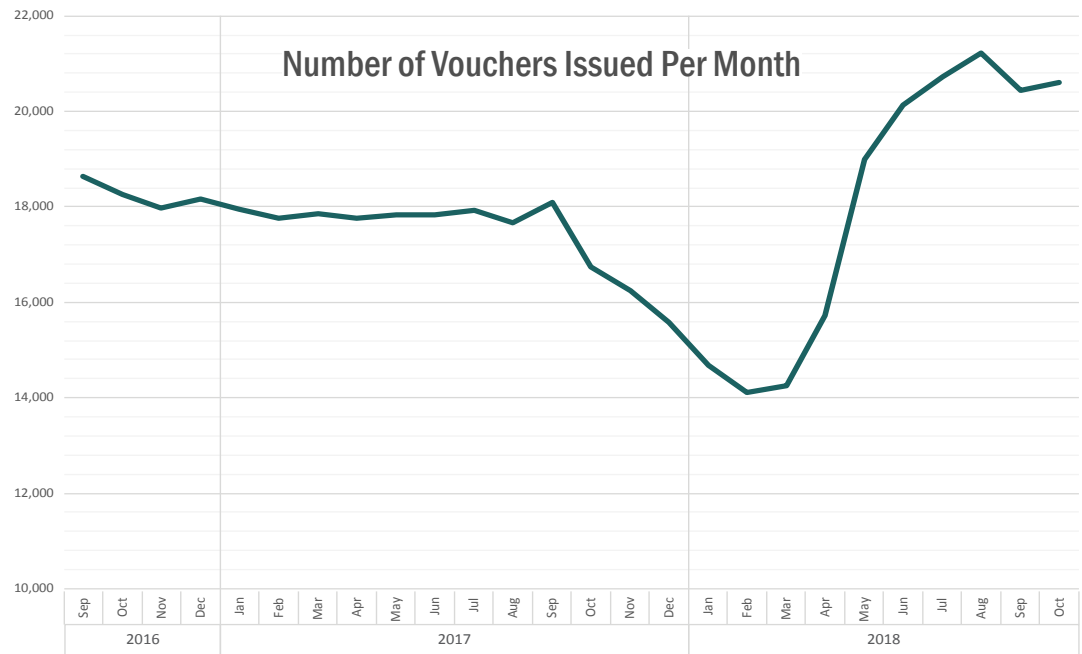
Family Size	80% SMI	50% SMI
2	\$2,333	\$1,417
3	\$2,917	\$1,750
4	\$3,416	\$2,000
5	\$4,000	\$2,333

Monthly Income Eligibility Levels

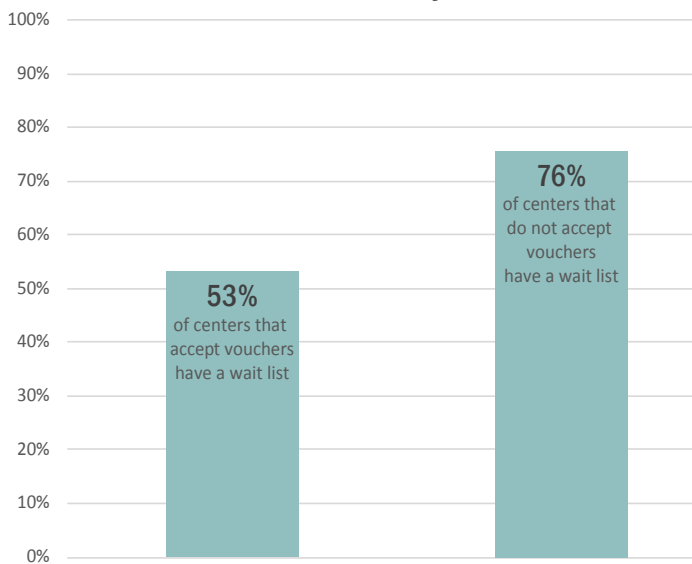
The monthly income eligibility benchmarks for common family sizes are displayed in the chart to the left. Monthly incomes under 50% of the State Median Income (SMI) qualify families as Priority 3 while monthly incomes between 50% - 85% SMI qualify families as Priority 4.^[2]

Voucher Use and Availability

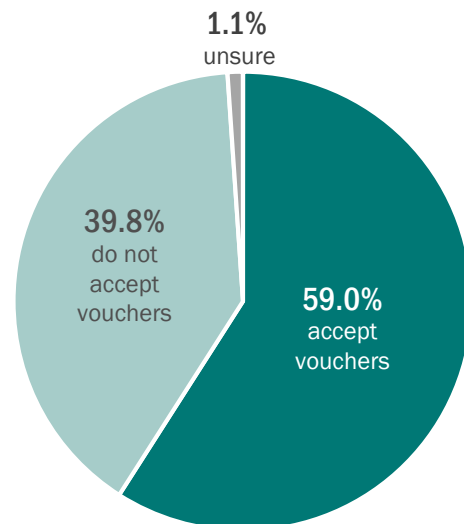
Because vouchers are assigned based on the availability of funding, there is no guarantee that all parents who qualify will receive a voucher for childcare tuition. The likelihood of parents in lower priority groups receiving vouchers is highly dependent on the total number of vouchers issued by the MS Department of Human Services in a given month. Among centers that accept vouchers, the majority (55%) reported that fewer children were using vouchers in Spring of 2018 than were using vouchers in 2017. As illustrated in the graph below, this finding coincides with a decrease in the total number of vouchers issued by MDHS. In August of 2018, MDHS concluded an eligibility verification of families in the CCPP program, resulting in a notable decrease in the number of program participants throughout late 2017 - early 2018. In February 2018, MDHS opened CCPP waiting list enrollment to families. By April 2018, MDHS restructured its CCPP eligibility criteria to more closely align with federal regulations. This restructuring resulted in a sizable increase in the number of program participants by October 2018, the most recent month for which data are available.^[3]



Wait List for Enrollment by Voucher Status



Voucher Acceptance by Providers



Results from the SSRC survey of child care providers indicate that the majority of child care centers in Mississippi participate in the child care voucher program: 59% of centers report accepting vouchers, 40% of centers do not accept vouchers, and 1% of centers were unsure. Results also indicate that centers that do not accept vouchers have enrollment wait lists more frequently than centers that do accept vouchers - this relationship is statistically significant ($p < 0.00$). Only 53% of centers that accept vouchers have a waiting list. At the same time, 76% of centers that do not accept vouchers have a waiting list.

Policy Recommendations

- **Promote adequate allocation of state funds and resources in the MS Child Care Payment Program so that all families meeting the eligibility criteria for child care vouchers are able to receive this support. Maximize federal, local, and other matching fund sources to increase the reach of these programs for child care in Mississippi.**
- **Provide professional development opportunities and incentives to increase the supply of high quality child care seats. Enlist public-private partnerships to increase the capacity of existing child care centers and the affordability of early child care services.**
- **Amend the Mississippi Department of Human Services' Child Care Market Rate Survey to include measures of the number of children at each age group in existing child care centers. Use these data to better assess demand and availability of child care in Mississippi communities.**

References

- 1: Figures calculated based on data available in Child Care Aware (2018). 2018 State Child Care Facts in the State of Mississippi. Retrieved: https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/3957809/State%20Fact%20Sheets/Mississippi_Facts.pdf
- 2: 24 Miss. Code R. § 18-17-4; See also: <http://www.mdhs.ms.gov/early-childhood-care-development/child-care-certificate-program/>
- 3: <https://secac.ms.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CCPP-Vol1-Issue2-08-04-17.pdf>

Additional details about this report, including study methodology, are available at: www.msdatapoint.com

Support made possible by funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation

