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CHILDCARE TO SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING IN LOUISIANA: WHAT THE DATA AND EVIDENCE SHOW

Background:

Louisiana ranks 48th in the nation in terms of child well-being as indicated by their economic security, educational engagement and capacities, health, and family and community safety and strengths (1). Key to ensuring child well-being requires focus on early childhood (i.e., children under 5), but all too often in our state, parents do not have sufficient support to ensure sustained security for their young children. High quality, affordable, and accessible childcare can be an instrumental means to help support parents of children under 5, facilitating employment for parents, as well as nutrition and development opportunities for young children. In the 20 years since Hurricane Katrina ravaged our state, especially New Orleans and southern Louisiana, rebuilding amid subsequent hurricanes and challenges has had to focus on surviving rather than thriving for too many families. It is time to shift from surviving to thriving, with a focus on our children.

Purpose:

In this brief, we review the economic situation facing families with children under 5 in our state over the past 20 years, as well as recent data and policies related to childcare and parental supports.

Children Under 5- What the Numbers Tell Us:

We analyzed U.S. Census data (2) to understand population size for children under 5 in Louisiana as well as for Louisiana residents as a whole and found that we are seeing serious population declines in the number of children under 5 in Louisiana compared to that we see for the population as a whole (See Figure 1). The U.S. overall has seen a decline in fertility rates (number of live births per 1000 women aged 15-44), from 62.9 in 2014 to 54.4 in 2023 (3). This decline is slightly less prominent in Louisiana, at 68.4 in 2014 to 60.4 in 2023 (4), which, taken with the observed decline in total population in Louisiana, suggests that we are losing young families from the state and not just seeing birth declines.

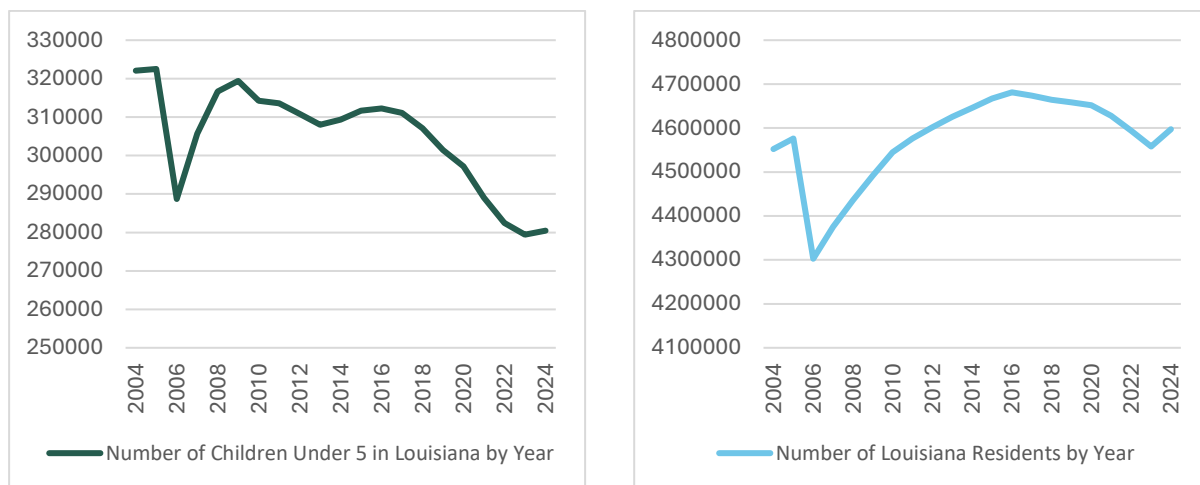


Figure 1. Population Size of Louisiana Children Under 5 and Total Louisiana Population by Year, from 2004 to 2024

Children under 5 in our state are more likely than Louisiana residents as a whole to be living in poverty, a notable concern in light of Louisiana being a state with a higher percent of people living in poverty than seen for the U.S. as a whole (1). (See Figure 2.) Importantly, we do see a notable decline in poverty for children under 5 in Louisiana from 2017 to 2023, from 31% to 26%. Medicaid expansion in Louisiana, established in 2016, may have contributed to this observed reduction in poverty for children under 5. National research documents that Medicaid and child health insurance programs reduce child poverty (5), and research from Louisiana found that Medicaid expansion reduced household medical debt (6).

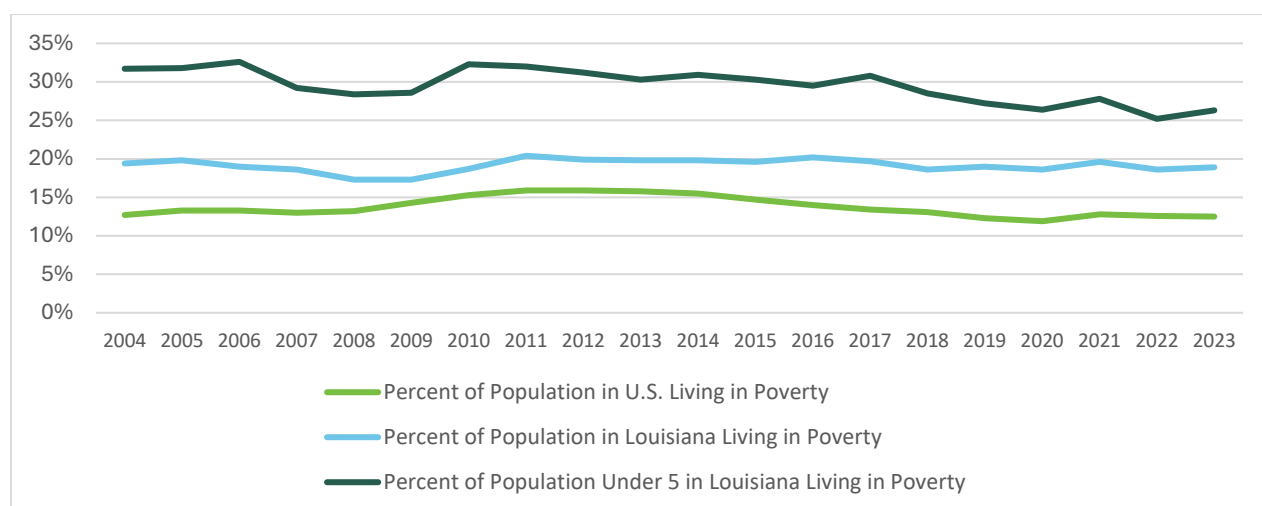


Figure 2. Population Living in Poverty by Year, 2004 to 2023

Childcare to Meet the Needs of Louisiana Families

A statewide survey conducted in 2023, the Louisiana Violence Experiences (LaVEX) Survey (7) was designed to capture experiences of violence and mental health in the state and yield population estimates on these, but it also included questions on parenthood and experiences with childcare that can provide state population estimates. The study included approximately 1000 Louisiana adults. Consistent with U.S. Census data (1), we found that women were more likely than men to have a child under the age of 18 in their home (33.7% vs. 25.0%) and more likely to have a child under 5 in their home (12.4% and 8.8%).

Among those reporting a child under 5 in their home, women were more likely than men to report reliance on outside support for childcare (68.3% of women vs. 60.3% of men); slightly lower reliance on outside childcare from men may indicate greater reliance of their spouse for childcare. As seen in Figure 3, women using outside childcare are more likely to rely on a public option where men rely more on private options, but for both men and women, reliance on family for childcare was most often reported.

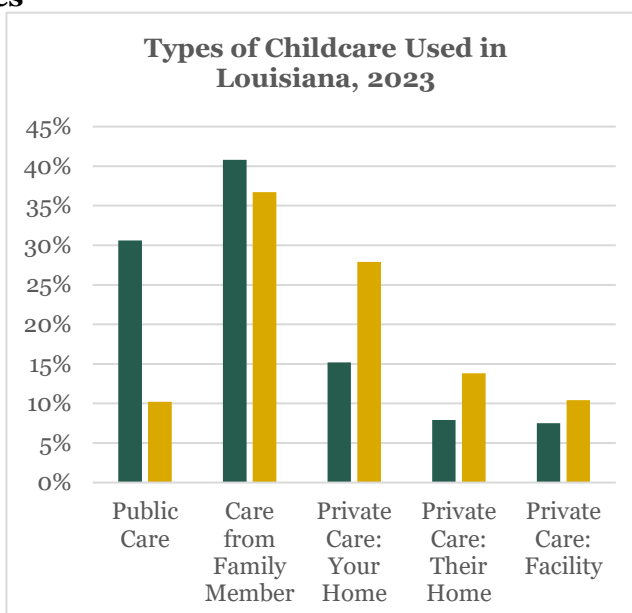


Figure 3. Forms of childcare used by women and men with a child under 5 in their household.

NOTE: *More than 1 form of childcare can be reported.

We additionally asked those who use childcare for their children under 5 if they have experienced 10 or more days of childcare loss in the past year. Of those with children under 5, 17.3% reported 10 or more days of childcare loss in the past year; this included 14.0% of women and 22.9% of men. Given higher prevalence of unreliable childcare for men relative to women and higher reliance of private childcare for men relative to women, we looked at childcare reliability for those using public care versus those using private care (in their home, someone else's home, or a private facility). Among those with a child under age 5 who reported using public care (including HeadStart), 24.3% reported experiencing 10 or more days of childcare loss in the past year. Among those with a child under age 5 who reported using private paid childcare, 30.4% reported experiencing 10 or more days of childcare loss in the past year.

Childcare access is critical to a healthy workforce and healthy families, yet 7 out of 10 parents in Louisiana worry about childcare affordability (8). Sixty-five percent of Louisiana families report borrowing money to cover childcare (9). Simply, Louisianans across socioeconomic statuses need access to affordable childcare.

Federal Childcare Policies that Can Help:

Federal programs such as the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start, and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) can help increase families' access to affordable childcare.

What is CCDF? CCDF subsidizes childcare for qualifying families living on low incomes. CCDF was established in Section 418 of the Social Security Act and is updated (at least) annually through federal and state regulations (10). CCDF is a federal block grant program, which means it functions like a partnership between states and the federal government, allowing for variability in how CCDF functions within each state but outlining basic requirements through federal measures. CCDF subsidizes childcare while families work, go to school or training programs, or look for work.

What is Head Start? Head Start and Early Head Start Programs ("Head Start"), established through the Head Start Act, help ensure that families living on low incomes also receive foundational education (ages 3 to 5) prior to entering elementary school. These programs are free for qualifying families.

What is CDCTC? CDCTC is a federal tax credit designed to help working families offset a portion of their expenses for childcare and dependent care expenses so that they can work or look for employment. For childcare, this includes credit for anyone with a child under the age of 13 years.

These programs - CCDF, Head Start, CDCTC - can be strengthened to lower childcare costs for families and increase the pay and benefits for childcare workers. For example, CCDF co-pay amounts can be lowered (11). States have flexibility in how they define income eligibility and can shift the income eligibility cap, so more people are eligible. In addition, states can choose the rate at which childcare providers are reimbursed. Expanding the thresholds of CCDF would increase the capacity of families living on low incomes to afford childcare and go to work and the availability of care.

In addition to addressing affordability, improving access to care demands that we increase supply of childcare providers. This can be done by increasing certification and training programs, subsidizing the cost of training programs, and strengthening professional development pipelines. States can also increase wages and offer workforce benefits to ensure the workforce continues to grow and sustains. Several states have addressed supply issues such as through offering subsidies for childcare workers to access childcare, establishing a loan repayment program for early childhood educators, and partnering with state colleges to create a sustainable pipeline for childcare workers (13).

What can Louisiana do to strengthen childcare supply and access?

1. Support and Strengthen the Childcare Workforce. To ensure the availability of high-quality childcare providers and facilities, low cost or free training and certification for providers could be made available. Public-private partnerships for start-up grants could be used for childcare providers to establish or enhance existing childcare programs. Support for home-based care and small group facilities could benefit low-resource and rural community access to childcare. Louisiana can also offer tax credits for childcare providers, an approach proven effective in increasing the number of providers in other states (14).
2. Support and Strengthen Access to High Quality, Affordable Childcare: Both Head Start and CCDF are under-utilized in the state (15, 16). Greater effort should be made to promote their availability, but improved subsidization, such as lifting the income eligibility threshold in Louisiana so that more families qualify may be useful. Geographic mapping of childcare availability relative to population density of those in need may also be useful, as well as efforts to increase access to Head Start in areas with high need.

For more information on recommendations to improve childcare subsidy systems, see: Prendergast et al., 2025 (17).

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