

Research Priority Areas for Understanding and Improving Access to Early Care and Education (ECE) for Children in Low-Income Hispanic Families

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Despite high rates of parental employment, two-thirds of Hispanic^a children under age 18 live in low-income families^b, making them a key target for public investments in ECE.¹ A growing body of research (including work from the [National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families](#)) has examined the ECE needs, priorities, and experiences of low-income Hispanic families. It shows that utilization patterns are changing—particularly for preschool-aged children and for programs with public funding and/or intentional outreach.^{2,3} At the same time, this research highlights heterogeneity within the Hispanic population, as well as significant variation in their access to high-quality ECE.⁴ In this brief, we summarize the research implications of a recent synthesis of the literature on early care and education^c (ECE) access for low-income Hispanic families.⁵ The priority research areas detailed below can expand our understanding of key issues and inform policy and practice efforts to support equitable access to the types of ECE settings that benefit children, families, and communities.



Future research should examine areas of potential disconnect between Hispanic families' needs for ECE and the ECE options available to them.

- Mismatch between work schedules and ECE care.** Nonstandard work hours—that is, hours outside of 9:00 am to 5:00 pm Monday through Friday—and unpredictable or inconsistent work schedules are common features of Hispanic parents' work lives.⁶ ECE policy (e.g., Child Care and Development Fund) increasingly reflects this reality, but most publicly funded early childhood programs, including public pre-k and Head Start, are only open during traditional weekday hours. New research should identify ways to facilitate better access to these early learning opportunities for children of parents who work nonstandard schedules. Possible supports include wrap-around care, transportation, and innovative collaboration among local providers. Additionally, more information is needed about the characteristics and quality of care during nontraditional hours, which has been understudied in the field despite its unique considerations and challenges.⁷
- Mismatch in available care for some populations.** Infants and toddlers face particularly notable shortages in affordable high-quality ECE, as do children with disabilities and chronic health needs.⁸⁻¹¹ More research is needed about the experiences of low-income Latino families trying to access these types of care. ECE utilization gaps between Latino and non-Latino families are more pronounced for infants and toddlers than for older children.²

^a We use "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably throughout the brief. Consistent with the U.S. Census definition, this includes individuals having origins in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, as well as other "Hispanic, Latino or Spanish" origins.

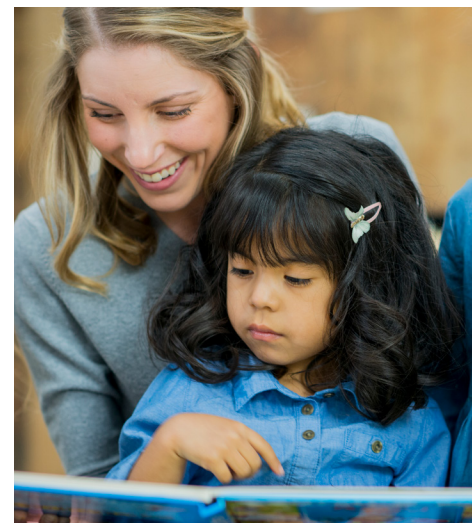
^b Low-income families are defined as those with income below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold.

^c We use the term "early care and education" broadly to refer to the full range of nonparental arrangements that provide basic care and early learning opportunities for young children, in center- and home- based settings.

- **Mismatch in workforce characteristics and preparedness.** Research interest is growing in the cultural and linguistic responsiveness of ECE programs and staff. This work includes studying whether the workforce is adequately prepared to meet the needs of diverse populations, and whether programs have staff who reflect children’s racial/ethnic backgrounds and fluently speak the same language.^{12,13} However, large-scale data on these aspects of ECE quality and their role in facilitating equitable access remain limited.

Key questions about Hispanic families’ access to ECE should capitalize on existing data, but will also require investments in new measures, methods, and data sources.

- Hispanic families in the United States are incredibly diverse. Some important data elements that help unpack this heterogeneity are present in most publicly available datasets; however, more of these elements need to be included to fully capture the diversity of this population.¹⁴ Moreover, **sampling strategies are needed that ensure sufficient sample sizes of key Hispanic subgroups** so that variation in ECE access and utilization by such factors as country of origin and English language proficiency can be examined.
- Few existing large-scale datasets offer detailed information about both parents’ employment and children’s early learning experiences, focusing instead more heavily on one or the other. Given the interdependence between these two domains, **research should examine how low-income families make employment and ECE decisions in relation to one another, along with the degree to which they experience (in)compatibility between these two contexts.** Research on work-family conflict or balance has focused primarily on higher-income parents and is largely lacking for Hispanic families.
- Most ECE studies, especially those using national surveys, focus on the priorities, perceptions, and decisions of only one caregiver (often the mother). **New studies should examine how ECE decisions are made at the family or household level.**¹⁵ This type of data may be especially insightful for low-income Latino families, whose household structures vary in several ways from their non-Latino white and black counterparts.¹⁶ For example, low-income Hispanic children with at least one foreign-born parent are more likely to live with their biological father than other low-income children.
- Several publicly available national datasets offer the opportunity to study aspects of ECE access and utilization for Hispanics.¹⁴ However, **innovative methods and data sources provide an important complement to national survey data.** Some promising approaches for combining data sources to investigate ECE access include mixed-methods studies, geographic mapping, state policy scans, and integrated data systems analysis.^{3,17-19}
- Most national studies lack information about the unique experiences of immigrants and communities of color, including information on such factors as acculturation, experiences of discrimination, resiliency, and the role of social networks. **A new longitudinal data collection with such variables and multiple indicators of household employment, family life, and ECE experiences would yield critical data on Latino families,** building knowledge and supporting better-informed policy and programming.
- **Research from other fields—such as healthcare—on access to services for low-income and racial/ethnic minority families may provide insights for studying ECE access among Hispanics.**²⁰ Some barriers and facilitators may be shared across types of services. In addition, drawing from other disciplines may suggest new variables, methods, and measures, as well as effective outreach and implementation strategies.



As ECE-related policies at the federal and state levels evolve, research must continually assess the implications of these changes for young children in low-income Hispanic families.

- The 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) substantially overhauled one of the primary federal programs designed to improve ECE access for low-income families, with increased emphasis on (1) promoting administrative processes that are more family-friendly (particularly for working low-income parents), (2) expanding access for several underserved groups, and (3) increasing the number of children in high-quality ECE.²¹ As states develop and implement strategies to meet these aims, **research should consider the intended and unintended impacts of policy change on Hispanic families.** Policy scans can be a useful strategy for documenting state-level variation in policy features that may differentially impact Hispanic families. Additionally, implementation studies can examine how on-the-ground practices facilitate or impede ECE access for Hispanic families with different household and community characteristics.
- **Research must continue monitoring the impact of immigration-related policies, which can have important implications for Hispanic children's access to early learning opportunities.** Fear of separation and deportation because of a household member's documentation status has been shown to deter families from seeking and accessing publicly funded services for which they are eligible, including ECE services.^{22,23} In addition, unfavorable public and policy discourse on immigration can have chilling effects even for U.S.-born Hispanics because of increased discrimination and reduced feelings of safety and belonging.²⁴



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About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is a hub of research to help programs and policy better serve low-income Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and economic self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to Child Trends, in partnership with Abt Associates and New York University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of Maryland, College Park. The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is supported by grant #90PH0025 from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The contents are solely the responsibility of the National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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