

# The Difficulty of Obtaining a Child Care Subsidy: Implications for Policy and Practice

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## ABSTRACT

Single mothers leaving welfare face a web of obstacles in accessing child care subsidies. This paper develops a model of child care selection and subsidy use among welfare leavers. Findings suggest that the level of trust between parents and child care providers and the availability of information about facilities were important decision-making criteria. Efforts to work with this population need to address their lack of information about subsidies to increase the range of child care alternatives and quality and also to promote trusting relationships between social workers and welfare leavers. Specific recommendations include combining ongoing case management with education about child care alternatives and subsidies. However, child care information services should be separated from subsidies to promote trust in relationships with clients.

Perceptions that welfare leavers have about child care subsidies and obstacles they face in accessing subsidies are essential for social work practitioners to understand in order to increase employment retention and access to high-quality child care. Single mothers leaving welfare face a web of obstacles in accessing child care subsidies, even though obtaining safe and reliable child care is essential to their employment retention. Efforts to work with this population need to address the lack of information about subsidies to increase the range of alternatives and child care quality and also to promote trusting relationships between social workers and welfare leavers in order to increase satisfaction with child care providers and job retention.

## High Rates of Return, Low Earnings, and Job Instability

The low wages of single mothers who have left Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF (see, for example,

Richer, Savner, & Greenberg, 2001), contribute to difficulties in their attempts to meet their most basic and necessary living expenses. According to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Pennsylvania—which has used market rates for housing, food, child care, and other expenses to determine the levels of income necessary for families to meet their basic needs—single-parent families with two children, one of whom is preschool age, usually spend half their income on housing and child care alone (Pearce & Brooks, 2001). The affordability of child care is a major factor in determining whether or not these families are able to meet their needs for housing, food, transportation, and health care as well as child care.

Given the high percentage of family income spent on housing and child care among these single-parent families, programs that can help them meet their child care expenses are particularly strategic in supporting their attempts to reach self-sufficiency. One of the currently implemented policies most relevant to assisting families in obtaining affordable child care is the federal child care

**TABLE 1.** *Self-Sufficiency Standard for an Adult in Philadelphia with One Preschool-Age Child and One Infant*

MONTHLY EXPENSES	SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD	CHILD CARE SUBSIDY	CHILD CARE + CHIP <sup>a</sup> + FOOD STAMPS
Housing	\$812.00	\$812.00	\$812.00
Child care	\$1,047.00	\$176.00	\$88.00
Food	\$330.00	\$330.00	\$253.00
Transportation	\$106.00	\$106.00	\$106.00
Health care	\$222.00	\$222.00	\$79.00
Miscellaneous <sup>b</sup>	\$252.00	\$252.00	\$252.00
SELF-SUFFICIENCY WAGE <sup>c</sup>			
Monthly	\$3,475.00	\$2,114.00	\$1,374.00
Hourly	\$19.74	\$12.01	\$7.81
Annual	\$41,701.00	\$25,371.00	\$16,492.00

<sup>a</sup>Parent would not qualify for Food Stamps if she received Medicaid at this income level, which is required in order to meet other necessities. Receiving only CHIP allows her to earn more while receiving these supports. <sup>b</sup>Estimated at ten percent (10%) of total expenses. <sup>c</sup>Net earnings after taxes (not equal to column totals).

subsidy for low-income families, which provides financial assistance to families, who are then only required to contribute through a co-pay system (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2002).

According to the Self-Sufficiency Standard, a single parent living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with one infant (age 0–3) and one preschool-age child (here defined as age 3–5) would need to earn \$19.74 per hour and work 40 hours per week in order to meet her basic monthly expenses with no subsidies or other program supports (see Table 1). If she received a child care subsidy, the monthly wages she would require in order to meet these monthly expenses would drop to \$12.01 per hour. If she received all the transitional benefits for which she remained eligible at this income level, including food stamps and free child health care through the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), she would need to earn only \$7.81 per hour, 40 hours per week, in order to pay her monthly expenses in 2001 (Pearce & Brooks, 2001).

The wage rate of \$7.81 per hour that a single mother with two children under 5 would require to pay her basic monthly expenses is much more attainable than the higher figure of \$19.74 per hour and slightly lower than the currently reported average earnings of former TANF recipients. In Philadelphia, a recent study of randomly selected welfare leavers reported that single mothers leaving welfare earned an average of \$8.90 per hour (Michalopoulos et al., 2003).

Studies of welfare leavers generally report unstable employment experiences (Strawn & Martinson, 2000) and that many former recipients do not appear to work either full-time or year-round (Richer et al., 2001). A recent study found that in only two states, out of the 13 included in the study, single mothers with two children earned more than \$1,200 per month on average (the federal poverty level), which remains only slightly below

the Self-Sufficiency Standard if these mothers were able to obtain all of the transitional supports for which they were eligible (Jarchow, 2002).

## Child Care Decision Making

Studies have also found that information about available child care options (Kisker & Ross, 1997) and the level of trust between the child care provider and the parent (Fuller, Sharon, Caspary, & Gauthier, 2002) may influence welfare leavers' child care choices. First, the lack of information that parents receive from child care providers can cause parental worry about their children's well-being while in a group care setting (Uttal, 2002). In one study, mothers cited stories about government employees referring women to neglectful and overcrowded child care settings (Dodson, Manuel, & Bravo, 2002). Second, low-income single mothers reported that they experience difficulties obtaining information about child care subsidies and facilities (Paulsell et al., 2002). Research on administrative barriers to subsidy use has, to date, focused on the lack of knowledge about subsidies and eligibility for subsidies (Shlay, Weinraub, Harmon, & Tran, 2004).

The perceptions of welfare recipients about different types of child care influence their selection of child care providers. The role of consumer perceptions about child care providers in the selection process has not been addressed in the literature. A better understanding of these problems can help improve the administration and delivery of child care information services and subsidies for low-income single mothers who have recently left TANF. Understanding the decisions of welfare leavers in relation to employment, child care, use of transitional supports (e.g., federal child care subsidies), and welfare cash assistance is vital to the development and implementation of effective programs that can better assist this group of low-income mothers in making the transition from welfare to work. Therefore, this study seeks to clarify how mistrust toward child care providers and a lack of information about child care options affect subsidy take-up rates for welfare leavers. Using an ethnographic research approach that creates a model of decision making (Gladwin, 1989), I find that welfare leavers select child care providers based largely on the level of trust, after evaluating information regarding child care options.

## Policy Implementation

The Child Care and Development Fund (aka Child Care and Development Block Grant) guarantees federal assistance for child care costs to parents who leave welfare for employment. Subsidies cover the entire cost of child care within preset limits, with the exception of a co-pay determined on a sliding scale. Parents in Pennsylvania whose income does not exceed 200% of the federal

poverty level are eligible for subsidized child care (State Policy Documentation Project, 2000); TANF leavers are given priority (NCCIC, 2004). At the time this study was conducted, welfare leavers had to be authorized to receive a child care subsidy by their welfare caseworker. Another characteristic of Pennsylvania's program was that parents could use subsidies for kith and kin (i.e., friend and family) child care providers in addition to family child care homes and center-based care (Child Care Works, 2001).

The take-up rate for child care subsidies is generally low among former welfare recipients. Nationally, subsidy utilization among welfare leavers is estimated to be less than one third of those eligible (Adams et al., 2002; Wilkins, 2002). In Philadelphia, the child care subsidy take-up rate was recently reported at 33% among low-income families (Shlay et al., 2004). Some have suggested that low-income parents do not utilize subsidies because of administrative barriers (Shlay et al.), including long waiting lists. While these barriers may be one reason for low subsidy take-up rates, little research has been done to document the reasons single mothers do not utilize subsidies. Since the high cost of child care does not appear to be enough incentive for welfare leavers to use a child care subsidy, this paper seeks to understand the reasons for such low utilization rates.

## Methodology

### *Decision Tree Modeling*

This study employs the method of ethnographic decision tree modeling to explain two child care-related decisions: (a) the selection of child care providers and (b) the decision whether or not to use a subsidy. The methodology of decision tree modeling provides an innovative approach to the study of subsidy utilization. By involving potential recipients of subsidies who make decisions about child care, the interviews and the resulting decision tree model reveal the actual decision-making process.

In order to construct a decision tree model, a researcher must conduct ethnographic interviews to elicit informants' descriptions of their actual decision-making process (Gladwin, 1989). Ethnographic interviewing uses questions that include words that are meaningful for the informant rather than research terminology. Asking open-ended questions, the interviewer starts with very broad questions (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995)—such as “What is it like to work and arrange child care for your preschool child(ren)?”—and gradually increases in specificity at later stages of the research. Another crucial element of ethnographic interviewing is to avoid leading the informant toward any particular response, thus asking questions only to clarify responses and not to influence the informant.

The first step in model development of a decision tree is to identify the decision being studied (Gladwin, 1989). Recent research suggests that administrative barriers and

paperwork problems contribute to low subsidy take-up rates (Shlay et al., 2004). In order to investigate the role of administrative factors that create challenges in accessing subsidies, from the recipients' perspective, as well as the opportunity costs (e.g., time, missed days of work, cost of transportation) of the application process, the choice of whether or not to *receive* rather than apply for a subsidy was selected as the decision of interest.

The next step in model development is to identify the options from which the informants will select in the decision process. In this study, the child care providers from which informants selected included a child's father, family member, friend, home day care center (known in the literature as a family child care home), preschool or Head Start, day care, or actually opting not to work in order to care for the child oneself.

The third step in developing the decision tree model is to identify and clarify decision criteria by distinguishing between the criteria (i.e., positive factors) that lead to a decision outcome and the constraints (i.e., negative factors) that prevent a decision outcome.

After the development of individual decision tree models that accurately reflect the actual decision-making process of each informant, the researcher develops a logical, composite model that integrates all of the key decision criteria from the individual decision trees. This model must accurately reflect the decision process of each individual and also include criteria that are ordered in a logical manner (Gladwin, 1989). To test whether the composite version of the model is consistent with qualitative data from the original interviews, a continual review process of all individual decision tree models and the original interviews on which they are based is required. In addition, multiple interviews with informants are necessary to test the model on study informants, a process analogous to the development of a quantitative survey instrument. To create a survey instrument, a researcher pretests on a sample of respondents and then revises the instrument based on initial interviews, evaluating the validity of the survey instrument's questions and assessing the wording of the questions (Fowler, 2002).

The fourth and final step in decision tree modeling is to identify the particular criteria that divide or “cut” the sample into those who chose one child care decision outcome, such as using a family member for child care, and those who chose another, such as using a professional child care center (Gladwin, 1989). Upon identification of the dividing criteria, the remaining questions are organized chronologically in the decision-making process.

### *Study Sample*

Study participants were recruited from a list of single mothers who responded to a flyer about a welfare advocacy group and attended one or more of the group's meetings in Philadelphia between 1999 and 2002. Given

**TABLE 2.** *Background and Educational Attainment of Study Participants (N=20)*

CHARACTERISTICS	NUMBER	PERCENT
Racial-ethnic background		
African American	16	80%
Caucasian	1	5%
Biracial	3	15%
Highest level of educational attainment		
No high school diploma	4	20%
High school diploma	12	60%
Some college	3	15%
Bachelor's degree	1	5%

**TABLE 3.** *Age and Number of Children of Study Participants (N=20)*

CHARACTERISTICS	%	MEAN	RANGE
Informant age		31.0	22 - 46 years
Number of children	70	3.5	1 month - 22 years
Age 5 and under	26	1.3	
Age 6 and older	44	2.2	

that the database of welfare recipients was in chronological order according to the date of attendance at the first meeting, systematic sampling with a random start (Henry, 1990) was used to ensure that the group of informants reflected the range of child care and subsidy alternatives in the population of welfare leavers. Using systematic sampling from the list and inviting mothers who met the inclusion criteria to participate (i.e., the mother had left welfare and worked in the previous year and had a child age 5 or under), 20 participants were recruited from the welfare advocacy group database of 675 welfare recipients.

Study participants were fairly representative of the larger population (see Table 2), with the exception that the participants were more educated on average than the welfare population in Philadelphia according to a study by Michalopoulos et al. (2003).

Participants had on average 3.5 children and were on average 31 years of age. Seventy percent of study participants had one or more children between the ages of 3 and 5 eligible for preschool or Head Start (see Table 3).

During the focal period, defined as the most stable recent employment period during the year prior to study onset or during year one of the study, more than half of the women (55%) used a family member as child care provider while working. One third of the women (30%) used center-based care during the hours they worked, and 5% used the child's father, a close friend, or a Head Start program as their primary child care arrangement.

Among those who did not use a subsidy (65%), the average out-of-pocket child care cost to the mother was \$156 per month, about one seventh of the market rate for child care as determined by the Self-Sufficiency Standard (Pearce & Brooks, 2001).

It is important to note that participants in the welfare advocacy group attended an orientation where they received assistance in finding and selecting child care programs. Since these women chose to attend the welfare advocacy group meetings of their own accord, the sample may contain selection bias, as those who attend these meetings may display certain unobservable differences that make them more likely to select a subsidy or more likely to seek out information about child care. However, the similar take-up rate in this sample and in other studies conducted in Philadelphia (Shlay et al., 2004)—around 35%—suggests that these women are not more likely to select a subsidy, even with this information. Indeed, if these welfare leavers continued to indicate gaps in their awareness of child care/program alternatives, then one may presume that others who do not have access to this additional information source may have even greater gaps in their knowledge about these options.

## Findings

The ethnographic interviews suggested that the following factors were primary criteria in mothers' decisions regarding child care selection and subsidy use: concerns about the safety and general well-being of children, particularly infants and toddlers in child care; a greater receptivity to using Head Start and preschool programs among those mothers who were reluctant to use center-based care; a higher comfort level with child care facilities with a strong educational component; and a demonstrated compelling desire for information about the well-being of children in child care settings. The concerns about safety and child care quality are particularly relevant to social work practitioners because more information is needed to assist parents in selecting child care and accessing subsidies.

### Child Care Selection

Mothers in this study expressed a reluctance to use group care for infants and toddlers who could not yet talk, for fear of child mistreatment or neglect. Study participants reported observing the facilities their children attended. Karima (names are pseudonyms), a 27-year-old African American mother with a high school diploma and five children ages 2, 3, 9, 10, and 11, explained her concerns about children's safety in the following quote:

A lot of places, you can't trust them. You can't trust a lot of day care centers. You don't know what they're doing to your child, especially the little babies that can't really talk. This [child care provider] I had, my older kids were there and they were telling me everything that was going on, but when I wasn't there, anything could happen to my boys.

Another example is Yvonne, an African American mother with three children ages 3, 5, and 9 who worked overnight and coordinated work shifts with the two fathers of her children, who worked day and overnight shifts, respectively. She expressed the following concerns about the consistency of the child care providers' behavior when asked what she looks for when choosing a child care facility:

It's all if I can trust them. If I think I can trust them, if my child [is] young, and I think I can trust them, as far as me popping up and calling or whatever, even if I'm paying for child care and I'm off that day, and I just want to sit around and watch. I want to see if that's the same way you act. Or see how you act with other kids when they parents not there. So it's all, it's a whole big thing.

Mothers in this study who were reluctant to use center-based care demonstrated more receptivity to using Head Start, preschool programs, and prekindergarten programs. When programs were available, parents with both preschool- and school-age children coordinated child care arrangements by enrolling children age 5 and under in early childhood programs located in the same school attended by the older child. Among the mothers who expressed reluctance to use center-based care, 80% had enrolled their child, age 3 to 5, in a preschool or Head Start program either during the year prior to study onset, when the mother left cash assistance for employment, or at a later point during the course of the study.

Mothers generally expressed a higher comfort level with center-based care that was seen as very high in quality and with a strong educational component. Tara, an African American mother of two children ages 5 and 8, stated she would like to use an expensive child care center frequented by professors and staff of the University of Pennsylvania if she could afford it. She described her observations of workers at this center and in the nearest Head Start in the following way:

You just see something different. I know it's hard to explain, but it's what I've observed—and what I've seen in the school Head Start. They have a whole system set up for [the kids] and stuff. I walk in, and they looked like they wanted to be there.

Distrust of child care facilities based on observations emerged as a repetitive theme from interviews with these women. Mothers reported instances of child neglect after observing facilities their children attended or seeing the physical condition of the children when picked up from child care. Kimberly, a 27-year-old biracial mother of three children ages 2, 4, and 7 with an eleventh-grade education, worked at a fast food restaurant and received a

subsidy for her father to provide in-home care for the children. She described her child's condition after not having had his diaper changed or not being cleaned throughout the day in the following account:

There's times that my dad would actually pick him up from day care and he would have vomit down his clothes . . . He had diaper rashes so bad that, oh my God, it looked like somebody actually stabbed him . . . with a knife. That's how deep and disgusting them blisters were on my son.

This story is more extreme than what most mothers reported about their lack of trust in child care facilities. However, these examples illustrate the type of child care experiences that these mothers observed. These firsthand experiences were often reaffirmed for mothers through stories from friends and relatives about neglect, molestation, and child rape. Experiences like these made mothers fearful of leaving their children in a child care facility.

In fact, Kimberly decided to have her father provide child care and explained:

My dad's the only person I can trust with my kids. My dad and my mom, because of the conditions of day cares. What my son has been through, I would never put my son in day care.

The mothers' frequent observations of child care centers and, in many cases, negative reactions to these observations suggest a deep concern for their children's welfare in group care settings and a strong desire for information about what happens to the child in these facilities. Mothers expressed concerns about the treatment of their children in center-based care that did not allow parents to drop by unannounced. Sheila, a 30-year-old African American mother of a 5-year-old child, had a high school diploma and one year of college. When asked if she had ever had a bad experience with child care, Sheila responded:

Not so much experience, but why do you have to call first to come? If I want to come any other time, why do I have to call? That's what made me stop taking her to [that center]. It means something else is up other than that, you know what I mean? . . . Why do I have to call? I can pop in any time I want. It makes me think something else is going on.

The interviews clearly suggested a strong relationship between a previous negative experience with center-based care and a reluctance to utilize these providers at the time of the study. Ultimately, the themes of trust and information, demonstrated by child neglect and a desire to observe their child's treatment in center-based care, emerged from these interviews.

### **Subsidy Utilization**

The themes of trust and information that were so prevalent with child care facilities were also common with the subsidy program staff. In the same way that a negative experience with center-based care resulted in mothers avoiding that type of child care provider, a previous bad experience with the subsidy office was associated with a lack of subsidy use.

Negative experiences with a subsidy office included frustration from the mother's perspective due to: (a) moving from one subsidy district to another during the application process and therefore being required to reapply in the new district, (b) discontinuation of a subsidy already received because the parent moved from one district to another, or (c) termination of the application process or discontinuation of a subsidy already received because the parent lost or quit her job. Mothers tended to view a loss of subsidy in these situations as a hassle, in essence creating a barrier to obtaining a subsidy. Mothers who had previously been turned down for a subsidy and those who had not completed the application for a subsidy due to moves or job changes tended to not apply for a subsidy during the study period.

Similarly, the process of leaving welfare and obtaining a subsidy was fraught with paperwork problems resulting from miscommunications and gaps in information. Brenda, a 24-year-old African American mother of a 5-year-old, was working at a fast food restaurant and using a center-based care facility with a sliding-scale fee. She reported that, while her caseworker had authorized her to receive a subsidy, she was unaware of the authorization and did not read the letters she had received from the subsidy office, believing the documents were only general information rather than specific application materials she needed to submit. As a result, Brenda lost her priority status as a welfare leaver because her authorization had expired.

Women in the study often associated subsidy offices with the welfare system in general, contributing to a negative perspective of the subsidy system and to a lack of subsidy use. For example, Yvonne's experience with the child care subsidy office led her to conclude that the staff members would not provide accurate information nor would they understand her fears of having her child neglected or mistreated in center-based care, particularly in this case, where the child was very young and not able to talk. She describes her interaction with a staff member as follows:

If I'm asking you if something happened at child care, neighbor's home, or whatever, and I'm asking you, "Do I have to call and wait around for another child care?" and you [saying], "Well, I wouldn't just take him out," that's not what I asked you: "Would you just take him out?" What's the process I would have to go

through? Would I have to wait? Well, you should see and try to investigate. Who am I gonna talk to? My baby can't talk this young. So no.

This mother, whose child was 1 year old at the time of this incident, was still not using child care subsidies or facilities by the time the child was 4. Thus, the inability of the subsidy office to answer her question contributed to this mother's lack of trust in the subsidy program according to this mother's explanation.

Many mothers' worries about the safety of child care facilities, combined with a lack of responsiveness from subsidy offices, result in a lack of trust in the "system." Indeed, even though many of these mothers knew they could use a subsidy to pay a family member or friend instead of center-based child care, distrust of the subsidy office still appeared to make the women choose to not receive subsidies. Administrative problems, as well as information gaps and miscommunications during the application process, further contributed to nonuse of subsidies.

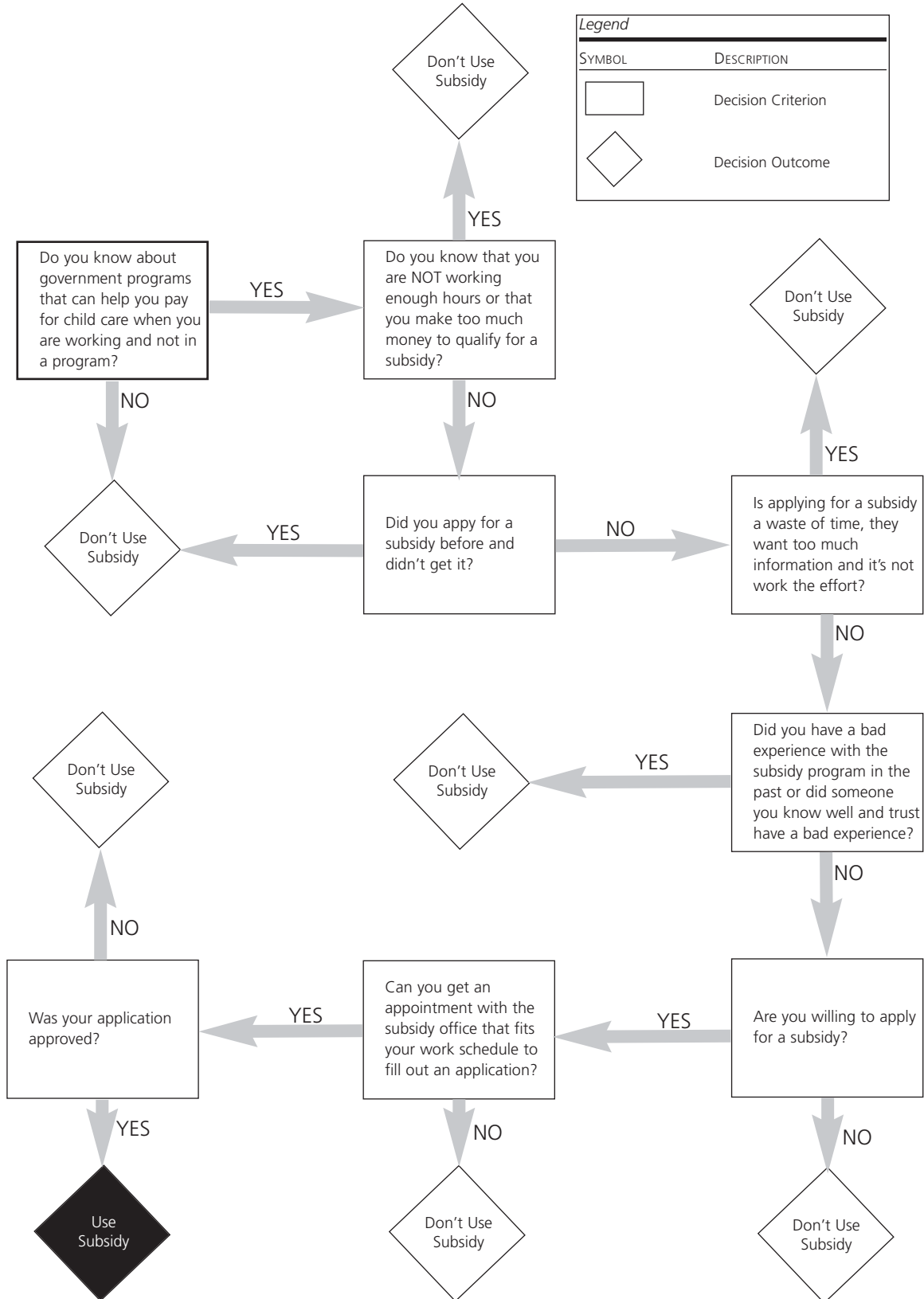
### **Decision Tree Model**

#### **Child Care Selection**

From the outset, cost constraints limited these mothers' child care options to low-quality center-based care characterized, in many cases, by child neglect. Consequently, the women interviewed were more concerned with trust and information than they were with cost when making decisions about child care. The two major themes of the lack of trust about child care facilities and the need for information about the welfare of their children in child care facilities produced a decision tree model with the following question at the top: "Did you have a bad experience with day care in the past, or did someone you know well and trust have a bad experience with day care?" This model suggests that a previous negative experience with center-based care is the main variable that predicts a mother's selection of child care facilities. In this decision tree model, the path traveled by informants who answer yes to the question about bad experiences with center-based care predicts the type of child care they selected.

If the mother (a) had a bad experience with center-based care, or if someone she knew well and trusted had a bad experience with center-based care, *and* (b) the child's father was not trustworthy, willing, and able to watch the child(ren) during the hours she was working, *and* (c) she had a family member available to watch the child(ren) during the hours she was working, *but* (d) she did *not* have a trustworthy family member willing to babysit every day for free or whom she could afford to pay *or* her job did *not* pay for a babysitter, *then* (e) she would go to the subsidy decision tree and we would see if she passed the constraints that might prevent her from receiving a subsidy. If she did not receive a subsidy, her

FIGURE 1. Subsidy decision tree model.



Note. This decision tree model is the author's logical, composite representation of the order of decision criteria that study participants navigated in deciding whether or not to use subsidies.

ability to pay out of pocket for child care would limit her options at this point.

Mothers who answered no to the first criterion question, “Did you have a bad experience with day care in the past, or did someone you know well and trust have a bad experience with day care?” are immediately faced with the cost constraint in the very next criterion, “Can you afford to pay for day care?” This path in the decision tree model centers on a mother’s ability to afford day care, posing the question of whether or not the mother can find a way to pay for center-based care, either through (a) the child’s father or a family member paying for day care, *or* (b) receiving a subsidy, *or* (c) enrolling the child(ren) in a nearby free preschool or Head Start program. Therefore, when informants travel down this path on the decision tree model, cost is pivotal in the selection of the *type* of child care provider.

### **Subsidy Utilization**

In relation to subsidy use, mothers’ concerns about the safety of their children continue to play a fundamental role in decision making. An apparent lack of intimate knowledge of how child care subsidies work, in combination with mothers’ fears of child abuse and experiences with neglect, contribute to low service use. In this study, reluctance to use subsidies often centered on communication gaps between the welfare district office, subsidy office, and the mother as well as on a perceived lack of flexibility of the subsidy program in responding to frequent job changes, moves, and the desire to be able to change child care providers according to changes in the mother’s view of the quality of care.

Study participants generally tended to confuse transitional child care subsidies for which they were eligible after leaving cash assistance, with the child care allowance which covered child care expenses for welfare recipients attending welfare-to-work programs. Informants who were aware of the existence of child care subsidies (95%) tended to report that they learned what they know about child care subsidies through advertisements on buses and public transportation passes in addition to hearing about the program through friends they had met in welfare-to-work programs or jobs.

Factors affecting the use of subsidies included whether or not the mother received assistance from a welfare caseworker who authorized her to receive a subsidy or from a welfare-to-work program staff member who assisted her in the subsidy application and enrollment procedures. However, lack of information continued to plague this process, as in the case of Brenda. Although her caseworker authorized her to receive a subsidy, Brenda was unaware of the authorization and did not read the letters she received from the subsidy office, believing they were only general information rather than application materials she needed to complete. Although Brenda was still

hoping to receive a subsidy, she was told she would have to apply directly to the subsidy office, therefore losing her priority status as a welfare leaver, because her authorization had expired. This example illustrates the need for ongoing case management, which will emerge as one of the recommendations from these study findings.

The findings from decision tree modeling contribute to a clearer understanding of child care decision making and subsidy use among welfare leavers in relation to the following:

1. The primacy of concerns about children’s safety and experiences with neglect in child care facilities
2. Negative perceptions of subsidy district offices and service providers whom welfare leavers associated with the welfare system
3. Administrative barriers that hindered the subsidy application process and the retention of subsidies once they are received
4. The fact that welfare leavers desperately wanted information about high-quality child care options and how to access them

The decision tree model in Figure 1 illustrates in graphic detail the number of hoops that an eligible parent must jump through in order to actually receive a subsidy. Mothers such as those in this study may be disgruntled about their experiences with the welfare system and have recently joined the ranks of parents who struggle to find a balance between the demands of work and parenting. These realities coincide with the ongoing struggle to survive at below-subsistence wages and be an involved parent to their children, which Edin and Kefalas (2005) recently documented as highly valued among this population.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Findings from this study suggest that single mothers leaving welfare experience a great deal of apprehension and fear about arranging child care for their preschool-age children. However, these mothers want information about affordable, high-quality child care and early childhood education programs. They also need better information and assistance in accessing child care subsidies. The various administrative requirements of receiving a child care subsidy, even after welfare leavers receive authorization for a subsidy, which often does not occur, underscore the difficulty of accessing subsidies.

The study examined in depth the relationship between factors that impact child care selection and subsidy use, rather than depict the prevalence of these variables in the population of welfare leavers. However, as previously discussed, these findings may not be generalizable, given that the study participants were selected from a welfare advo-

cacy group, although this author and other researchers anticipate that further investigation will support and amplify the findings I have presented here. In addition, this study's findings are limited because the decision tree model was tested only on the original sample of women who helped to create the model. Therefore, future steps for this research are to test the decision tree model findings on a larger sample of single mother welfare leavers to determine the model's accuracy in predicting child care decisions, with the aim of achieving a predictive accuracy rate of 85% to 90%, which Gladwin (1989) suggests is indicative of a good model for the population. Further research may also include mapping the child care selection and subsidy utilization decisions for non-TANF leavers who are also eligible for subsidies.

### ***Policy Implications***

States are currently allowed to transfer up to 30% of their TANF block grant funds to the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) to fund child care, or states can use TANF funds directly to fund child care without transfers (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2003). However, the auditor general of Pennsylvania released a report in 2000 criticizing the state for diverting funds away from the subsidized child care program to cover state expenses unrelated to low-income families. A public media campaign drew attention to what the auditor general called a misuse of funds and to extensive waiting lists for subsidies that required low-income parents who were not given priority through authorization by their caseworker to wait six months to one year before obtaining a subsidy (Dilanian, 2000). Such diversion policies are likely to continue to deter welfare leavers from obtaining child care subsidies. Since mothers have found subsidies to be inaccessible, as the findings I have presented here suggest, policies which require mothers to be placed on a waiting list before receiving subsidies are likely to further exacerbate low utilization rates. A number of states have shifted funds away from services to low-income families; most of these states spent less on services for this population after welfare reform in 1996 than before (Nolan, 2001).

Another avenue to improve access to high-quality child care and early education would be the expansion of school-based programs and, in particular, Head Start, with which mothers are familiar and to which they are highly receptive. Indeed, the model of Early Head Start, which emphasizes the development of an ongoing personal relationship between a service provider and the parent of a child from age 0 to 3, has been effective in increasing utilization of higher quality center-based care (Love, Constantine, Paulsell, Boller, & Ross, 2004).

Potentially the most effective way to assist and support these parents in a manner that promotes trust between the service provider and parent would be to combine ongoing

case management with educational programs for parents about assessing safety in child care, understanding subsidy eligibility guidelines to effectively access child care subsidies, and finding affordable child care programs with educational value. Strategies to increase the availability of high-quality child care facilities are essential to address the child neglect that occurs in low-quality group care. A major initiative currently underway, both locally in Philadelphia as well as nationally, is the progression toward providing full-day Head Start by offering funding for child care centers that meet the high-quality Head Start Performance Standards for centers to receive funding through Head Start Supplemental Assistance. Increased funding and training opportunities in how to meet these performance standards are strategic ways to promote higher quality full-day early education and child care programs.

### ***Practice Implications***

Educational efforts are most likely to be effective if they are separated from the application process for child care subsidies, as parents may respond negatively to efforts aimed at influencing their child care choices from direct service workers at the subsidy office. Lipsky (1980) pointed out that frontline workers in public agencies exercise a high level of autonomy in their interactions with clients and that clients do not trust these workers to provide services that are in the clients' best interests. Similarly, Palmer (1983) suggested that social workers must promote the separation of bureaucratic power from the exercise of authority in order to build a trusting relationship with clients. Child care subsidy workers are in a position of power because of their identification with the organization that has the power to grant or deny access to funding for child care. In contrast, social workers in welfare-to-work programs are situated appropriately to build trust and facilitate the process of accessing these essential services.

Since mothers in the study tend to view child care subsidy offices in the same light as the welfare system—and because their perceptions of the welfare system and, by extension, the subsidy office are often negative—service providers in child care subsidy offices and welfare-to-work programs need to be well trained, personable, and more adequately staffed. The service structure needs to emphasize the development of ongoing personal relationships between welfare leavers and service providers in order to be most effective in providing assistance. Policies aimed at improving information on center-based care and promoting trust between parents, subsidy office staff members, and child care providers can increase child care subsidy utilization rates among welfare leavers. By helping more mothers use child care subsidies, policy makers can improve opportunities for transitioning from welfare to work.

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