



Child Care Challenges for Parents Working Nonstandard Hours

AUTHORED BY

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ABOUT THE
**RUTGERS CHILD CARE
RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE**

With funding and support from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, the Center for Women and Work, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and the National Institute of Early Education Research have joined together to form the Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative for the purpose of conducting research and facilitating community conversations that develop a broad and comprehensive understanding of New Jersey's child care landscape. Our research aims to increase understanding about the needs and interests of parents in New Jersey, the supply and motivations of the child care workforce, and the capacity of the child care sector to meet demand for child care today and into to future within our diverse state.



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There are a number of occupations where parents work outside the typical work hours of 7 AM and 6 PM. This may include shift work, or work that starts or ends outside of the typical hours. With this brief, we intend to:

1. Describe the demographic characteristics of parents who work nonstandard hours, paying close attention to those living in New Jersey.
2. Describe the occupations and work industries of these parents.
3. Review the current literature outlining their child care choices.
4. Review the literature outlining the obstacles or issues these parents face when choosing care.
5. Review the unique circumstances of these families when it comes to using subsidies for child care.
6. Outline how the Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative (see box) intends to take the information we have gathered and use it to research child care choices of those who work nonstandard hours.

KEY FINDINGS

- Nearly a third of children in New Jersey have parents who work some nonstandard hours.
- Parents who work nonstandard hours often rely on a combination of formal and informal care for their children, sometimes using multiple forms of care to cover different parts of the day.
- When relying on multiple forms of care, there are more points at which parents may lose care and therefore need to use emergency back ups or lose working hours.

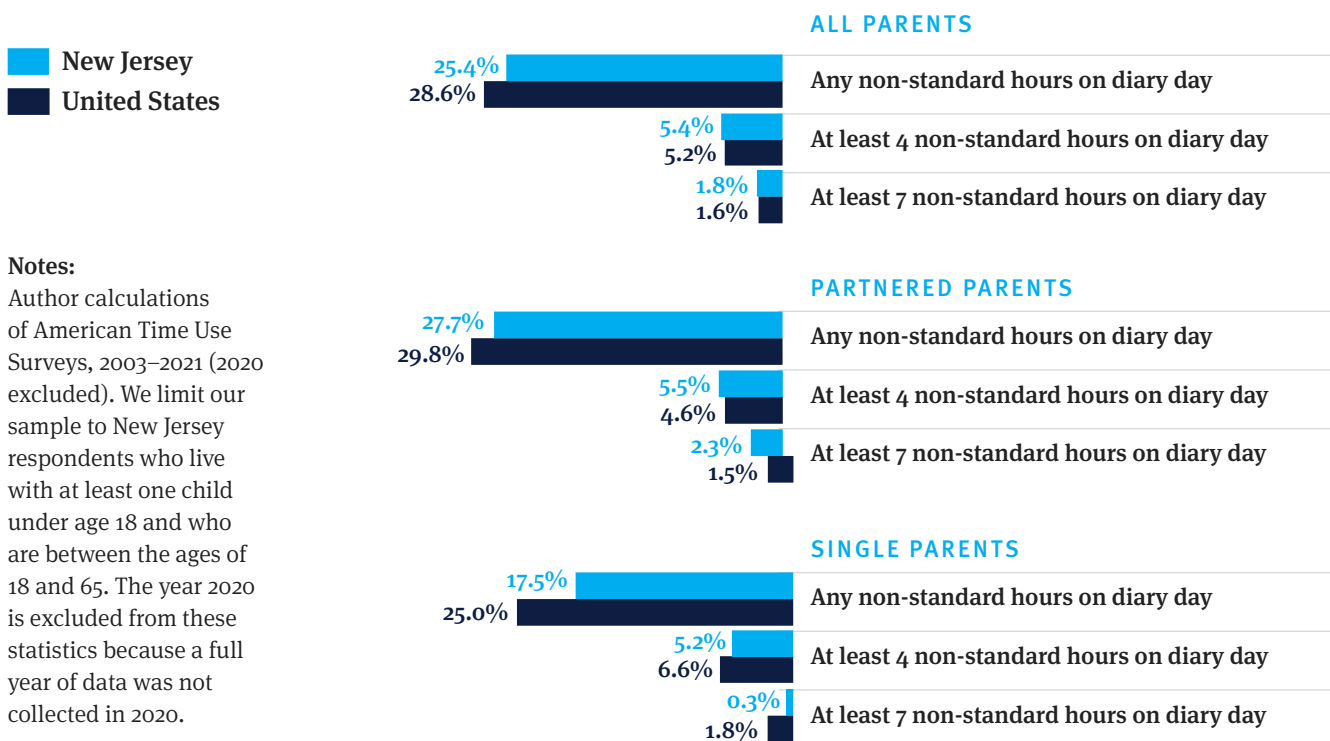
- It is difficult for low-income parents working nonstandard hours to find child care providers that accept subsidies and provide care outside of standard hours.
- Working nonstandard hours is associated with worse mental health outcomes for parents.
- Younger children with parents who work nonstandard hours experience worse cognitive and behavioral outcomes than those whose parents work standard hours. However, older children may experience a protective effect of parents who work nonstandard hours, as their parents are able to supervise them after school and share dinner with them if the nonstandard hours are overnight.

▲ Who are the parents working nonstandard hours?

Parents working nonstandard hours are often defined as those who work before 7AM, after 6PM, or who work unpredictable hours. Between 2015 and 2019, approximately five million children under the age of six in the United States had parents who worked nonstandard hours (Adams et al., 2022), representing around 36% of all children in this age group.

Using the American Community Survey (2015-2019) and the 2016 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), Schilder et al., (2021) found that New Jersey’s working population displays similar trends, with around 31% of children under the age of 6 having a parent(s) working nonstandard hours (Schilder et al., 2021). The children under age 6 with the highest percentages of parents working nonstandard hours are those (1) whose families make less than 100% of the Federal Poverty Line, (2) who come from Black, Latinx, or multiracial families, (3) whose parents have a high school diploma or less, and (4) who live in single parent households.

FIGURE 1. Nonstandard Hours Recorded in Time Diaries



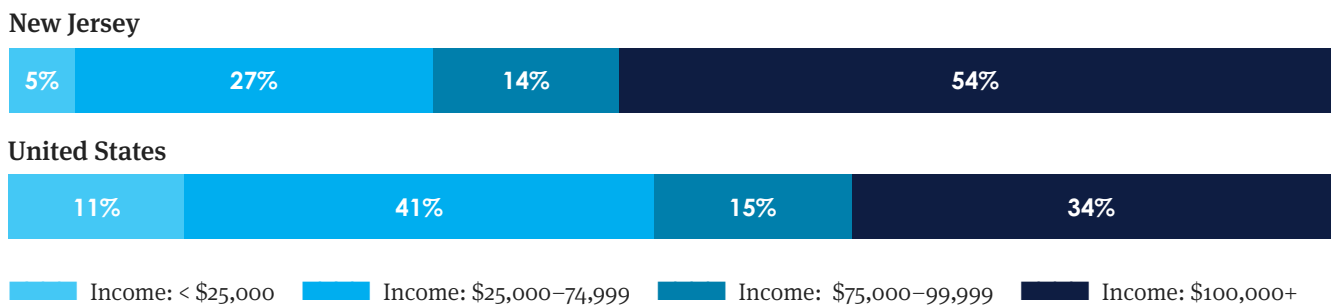
Notes:
 Author calculations of American Time Use Surveys, 2003–2021 (2020 excluded). We limit our sample to New Jersey respondents who live with at least one child under age 18 and who are between the ages of 18 and 65. The year 2020 is excluded from these statistics because a full year of data was not collected in 2020.

We used the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) to examine more closely how New Jersey parents spend their time. The ATUS is a survey that uses time diaries to track one day in a participant’s life. Participants record a full 24 hours of activity the previous day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Using ATUS data from 2003–2021, we found that 25.4% of New Jersey parents (with children under age 18) between the ages of 18 and 65 are working in a job with nonstandard hours (outside the hours of 7AM to 6PM).¹ However, many of these individuals still work the bulk of their day in standard hours: just 5.4% of New Jersey parents worked more than three nonstandard hours and just 1.8% worked at least seven nonstandard hours on the day they recorded their time diary. This is not especially different from United States trends overall, as shown in Figure 1.

In this ATUS sample, just 17.5% of single parents worked nonstandard hours, but the rate among partnered was higher at 27.7%. This may be because partnered parents can rely on another parent caregiver, allowing them to pursue work outside typical child care providers’ hours.

Around 46% of New Jersey households with a parent working nonstandard hours earn less than \$100,000 annually, as shown in Figure 2. Among all New Jersey families in the ATUS sample, around 55% earn less than \$100,000. Nearly a third of New Jersey households with a parent working nonstandard hours earn less than \$75,000. Among all New Jersey households in this sample, around 45% of families earn less than \$75,000 annually. In this ATUS sample, families with a parent who works nonstandard hours are more likely to make over \$100,000 than the full sample of New Jersey parents. Only 5% of New Jersey families with parents who work nonstandard hours had incomes below \$25,000, which is very close to 100% of the federal poverty line.

FIGURE 2. Family Incomes of Parents Working Nonstandard Hours

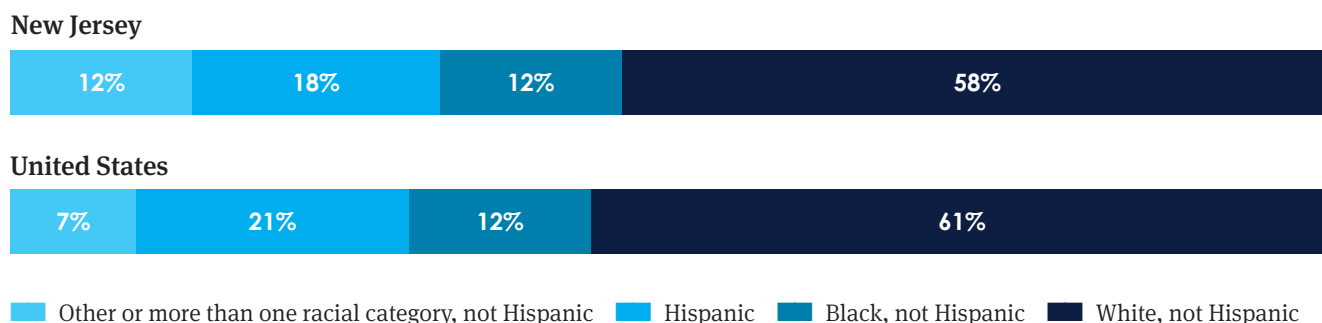


Notes: Author calculations of American Time Use Surveys, 2013–2021 (2020 excluded). An important change was made in the editing procedure of this income variable in 2010, which makes it difficult to use it spanning the years before and after 2010. For this reason, we examine income data from 2013 to 2021. We limit our sample to New Jersey respondents who live with at least one child under age 18 and who are between the ages of 18 and 65. The year 2020 is excluded from these statistics because a full year of data was not collected in 2020. Information on family income was collected 2 to 5 months prior to the respondent’s time diary during the Current Population Survey.

1 In American Time Use Survey calculations used throughout this report, we limit our sample to New Jersey respondents who live with at least one child under age 18 and who are between the ages of 18 and 65. The year 2020 is excluded from these statistics because a full year of data was not collected in 2020 and because nonstandard work hours may have been temporarily higher than usual due to pandemic-related school disruptions.

As shown in Figure 3, among New Jersey parents working nonstandard hours, 58% are non-Hispanic and white, 18% are Hispanic, and 12% are non-Hispanic Black. This is very similar to nationwide averages. Among all New Jersey parents in this ATUS sample, 53% are non-Hispanic white, 24% are Hispanic and 11% are non-Hispanic Black. So, among New Jersey parents in this sample, those working nonstandard hours are less likely to be Hispanic than in the full population and more likely to be non-Hispanic white. The non-Hispanic Black and Other race categories are a similar proportion in both the population working nonstandard hours and the full population of parents. The numbers from this sample are different from those in the report from the Urban Institute (Schilder et al., 2021). This may be reflective of the different ways of data collection as well as the differences in the sample populations. We will discuss this further in the final section of this brief.

FIGURE 3. Racial and Ethnic Distribution of Parents Working Nonstandard Hours



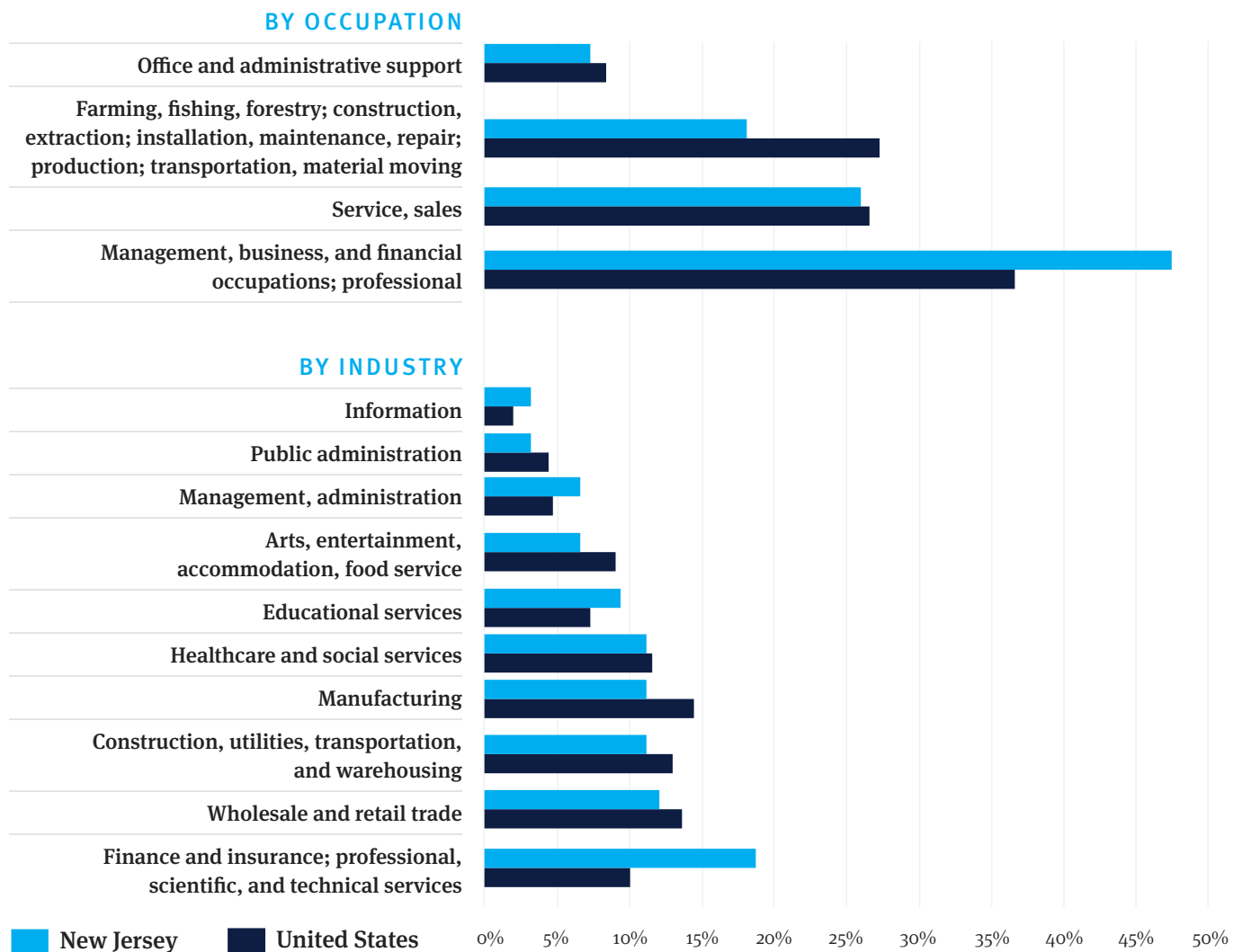
Notes: Author calculations of American Time Use Surveys, 2003-2021 (2020 excluded). We limit our sample to New Jersey respondents who live with at least one child under age 18 and who are between the ages of 18 and 65. The year 2020 is excluded from these statistics because a full year of data was not collected in 2020.

▲ Where do they work?

Across the nation, parents working nonstandard hours are often working in restaurants, grocery stores, arts and entertainment, retail, healthcare, and/or hospitality industries (Adams et al., 2022). While some nonstandard work hours are set shifts outside of typical work hours, others have changing shifts or variable hours from week to week. Service sector occupations and laborer occupations like those who stock shelves or move materials are associated with nonstandard and variable schedules (Enchautegui, 2013; Hepburn, 2020). These occupations are among the lowest paid, with nearly half of those working nonstandard schedules with wages in the lowest 25% of earnings, compared to only around 30% of those working standard hours (Enchautegui, 2013).

Using ATUS data, we find that the share of New Jersey parents working outside 7AM to 6PM employed in sales and service jobs is similar to the national average. However, in New Jersey, a large share of parents working nonstandard hours are in management, professional, and finance jobs, as seen in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4. Share of Parents Working Nonstandard Hours, by Occupation and Industry in New Jersey and United States



Source: Author calculations of American Time Use Surveys, 2003–2021 (2020 excluded). We limit our sample to New Jersey respondents who live with at least one child under age 18 and who are between the ages of 18 and 65. The year 2020 is excluded from these statistics because a full year of data was not collected in 2020. Note that some occupational and industry categories are combined due to small sample sizes.

These data suggest that there are at least two very distinct groups of parents working nontraditional hours in New Jersey. In the first group are parents working for low wages in irregular shifts, often with precarious labor conditions. The second group includes parents working for much higher wages in demanding professional jobs. These two groups face very different needs and constraints when making choices about child care. Those parents who work for higher wages in more professional occupations may have the resources necessary to hire caregivers who are able to work during nonstandard hours. Lower-wage workers, on the other hand, may not have the resources to find care during their work hours.

▲ What types of child care do they use?

There is some evidence that parents who work nonstandard hours use a combination of formal and informal child care arrangements, depending on their personal and work characteristics. Married parents, or single parents who share child care responsibilities with a co-parent may employ a “tag team” approach, where one parent works standard hours and the other works nonstandard hours (Hattery, 2001). For these families, nonstandard schedules may not pose as much of a problem because they are able to provide all of the care themselves (Hepburn, 2018; Kimmel & Powell, 2006). For those in single parent households without a co-parent working standard hours, or in households with both parents working nonstandard hours, the choice of child care becomes more complex, with families making their child care decisions based on a number of factors, including work hours, availability of child care, cost of care, and transportation (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012).

Nationwide, only eight percent of child care centers are open during nonstandard hours (Adams et al., 2022). Given this, parents working nonstandard hours are less likely to use center-based care for all of their child care (Kim & Liu, 2021; Pilarz et al., 2019). These parents then must find alternative sources of child care, either in the formal market or by using some combination of formal and informal care. They often have to cobble together a patchwork of informal and formal care, combining center-based, home-based, babysitter, and sibling care in order to cover all of their work hours and needs (Boyd-Swan, 2019; Folk & Yi, 1994; Harknett et al., 2022; Henly & Lambert, 2005; Hepburn, 2018; Kim & Liu, 2021). Or, parents may use informal care arrangements with family members like grandparents or a sibling (Harknett et al., 2022).

Brady (2016) examined informal care in detail and found that mothers working nonstandard hours relied on informal care like family members or friends as a kind of scaffolding that allowed them to continue to go to work regularly, and potentially allowed them to work longer hours without needing to find additional formal care. These informal caregivers may transport children from one type of care to the next, or pick up multiple children from various care arrangements, allowing mothers to remain at work during those transitions. They may also be the crisis caregivers, who care for the children when formal care falls through. Finally, they may become transitional caregivers, providing support if a parent’s job changes or there is a period of unemployment and a parent needs care in order to look for a job. Arranging for informal care may be difficult and hectic and parents who choose informal care for the convenience or cost may find themselves without the quality of care that they would prefer (Henly & Lambert, 2005; Henly & Lyons, 2000).

▲ What kinds of issues arise?

Prior research indicates that the family and child outcomes of parents working nonstandard hours are complex and are related to sociodemographic characteristics as well as the type of nonstandard hours worked.

Job and income loss: Many parents working nonstandard hours are not only struggling to find child care services but are also struggling in their work performance and job searches due to limited child care arrangements (Bishop, 2023). These struggles may include difficulty arriving to work on time, difficulty performing tasks with no distractions, missing days of work, or missing part of a full shift, all of which put parents' careers at risk. Bishop (2023) estimates that the economic burden of infant-toddler care related issues is around \$3.6 billion in New Jersey and around \$122 billion across the US. This estimate includes the costs experienced not just by parents and their children, but employers and taxpayers as well. Bishop pinpoints three of the challenges facing parents when it comes to infant-toddler care. First, half of families in the US live in a child care desert. This means that there are not enough slots for families who need them. In New Jersey, that number is around 46% (Center for American Progress, 2019). Second, the cost of infant-toddler care is higher than for older children, making it difficult for families to afford this care. New Jersey is ranked 21st and 15th, respectively, when states are ranked by least affordability for infant and toddler center-based care. For single-parent families, infant care is 49.6% of the median income and toddler care is 47.7% of the median income. For married-parent families, infant care is 12.7% of the median income and toddler care is 12.2% of the median income (Child Care Aware of America, 2021). Finally, Bishop (2023) indicates that high turnover in the infant-toddler child care workforce may affect the quality of care given that high turnover leads to inconsistent or unstable care.

Parent and child wellbeing: Parents working jobs with nonstandard hours may experience increased fatigue, depression, and overall psychological distress: these issues are often exacerbated when parents experience a schedule change or have a shift canceled (Ananat & Gassman-Pines, 2021; Li et al., 2014).

Findings from research on child outcomes in families with parents working nonstandard hours are somewhat mixed. Parents report higher levels of parenting stress when they work nonstandard hours (Han & Hart, 2022; Hattery, 2001). Children whose parents work nonstandard hours also experience worse cognitive and behavioral outcomes, perhaps reflecting a combination of less time with parents and children reading or spending time together and less time spend in center-based educational care settings (Boyd-Swan, 2019; Connelly & Kimmel, 2011; Gassman-Pines, 2011; Han & Fox, 2011). As noted above, parents who work nonstandard hours are more likely to use multiple care arrangements, which are negatively associated with behavioral outcomes (Morrisey, 2009). However, some research indicates that parents who work nonstandard hours have greater knowledge of their adolescents' whereabouts, (Han & Fox, 2011). Parents who work shifts that start very late or overnight may still be available to supervise their children after school and eat dinner with them, and this might also be protective (Wight et al., 2008).

▲ What assistance is available?

At the federal level, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is the primary funding source for child care subsidies that work to assist low-income working families who are eligible (Administration for Children and Families, 2022). While this fund is meant to help low-income families to afford child care, some families with nonstandard work schedules may not use it nor even be aware of it.

For example, Rachidi (2016) found that unmarried mothers who worked nonstandard hours were less likely to use care centers, and were therefore less likely to use child care subsidies. In addition, Kim and Liu (2021) found that mothers who worked nonstandard hours were more likely to use multiple care arrangements, often outside of centers. Parents may find it difficult to use subsidies across multiple types of child care arrangements and in non-center-based care. Additionally, parents seeking such aid may not meet the eligibility requirements, especially when many programs require a minimum number of hours worked a week to be eligible (Enchautegui, Johnson, Gelatt, 2022). Parents working nonstandard hours tend to have fluctuating schedules—their schedule could have an excess of hours one week and a limited number of hours the next. Such realities make accessing subsidies a challenge.

At the state level, New Jersey’s CCDF Plan for fiscal years 2022–2024 includes some provisions for families with nonstandard work hours (New Jersey Department of Human Services, 2022). This document serves as New Jersey’s published intentions for the use of federal CCDF funds. In this state plan, New Jersey provided the strategies it would use to address the needs of different kinds of children, including those whose parents work nonstandard hours. New Jersey plans to use stabilization grants to help providers with costs and provide technical assistance to these providers to help them to access the grants. In addition, New Jersey plans to use the CCR&Rs to encourage providers to extend their hours.

▲ **What have we learned and what more do we need to know?**

Working nonstandard hours can have detrimental effects on parents’ mental health, but may have some advantages for children of certain age groups and for parents working certain types of schedules. Older children whose parents work nonstandard hours may have more access to their parents for homework help and during dinner, which may be protective if parents are able to provide more supervision after school until they leave for work. Younger children whose parents work nonstandard hours do face worse cognitive and behavioral outcomes.

Access to child care may be more difficult for parents who work nonstandard hours. Working nonstandard hours may make it harder for parents to access child care subsidies, especially if they are not using center-based care. Parents who work nonstandard hours also may have to cobble together multiple types of care, some of which may not be reliable or of high quality.

Analyses of census data provide a mixed picture of the demographics of those who work nonstandard hours. An Urban Institute report indicates that children whose parents work nonstandard hours are more likely to have parents who are low-income, have a high school education or less, to be Black or Latino, or to be single parents. However, our analysis of the American Time Use Survey indicates that parents who work some nonstandard hours are not much different from all New Jersey parents. Our analysis also indicates that in New Jersey, parents who work nonstandard hours may work in high-paying professional occupations as well as occupations that are lower-wage. These discrepancies may be the result of different datasets, but also different definitions of nonstandard hours. The ATUS

reports on one particular diary day and may therefore not be representative of the work hours of parents whose work hours change on a daily or weekly basis. In addition, the ATUS does not include days of the week worked, so we were not able to assess whether someone worked on the weekend, which is considered nonstandard even if it occurs between the hours of 7 AM and 6 PM.

Given that analysis of Census-based datasets have shown different results, it is important that research continues to collect information from families with parents who work nonstandard hours. With that in mind, the Center for Women and Work, as part of the Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative, plans to conduct focus groups with parents, with a goal of understanding how they make child care choices given their work hours and working conditions and how well these options are working for them. As part of this study, we also hope to talk with harder-to-reach populations of this group of parents, particularly those that are low-income and in precarious work with unpredictable or varying hours. Focus groups allow researchers to hear directly from community members and may give additional context that will help to reconcile some of the previous literature and our analysis of the ATUS. We also plan to conduct a larger survey with parents working nonstandard hours in order to assess their needs when it comes to child care. This larger survey will expand our reach beyond those parents who were part of the focus groups.

Using both the focus groups and the survey, the CWW aims to understand the child care needs of parents in New Jersey who work nonstandard hours. We aim to understand their current child care types and how those types might be different if they had more choices or a different set of choices. With this information, we will be better able to advise the state on what kinds of child care policies would best suit these families.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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