



Examining Center-Based Child Care in the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education

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National Institute for Early Education Research

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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 for 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 the future within our diverse state.



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INTRODUCTION

This data brief describes center-based early childhood education (ECE) in New Jersey using the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE). Conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the survey provides a baseline of child care availability and use in NJ which can be compared to subsequent years and the national landscape. Our primary analyses restrict the NSECE data to ECE centers in NJ (including private center-based care, public preschool, and Head Start) to address the following questions and explore how the findings vary by provider type:

1. What schedules does center-based ECE offer?
2. What is the enrollment capacity of ECE centers overall and by children's age?
3. What are ECE centers' reported revenue sources including subsidy participation rates?
4. To what extent do ECE centers participate in and support quality improvement efforts?
5. How do funding sources relate to enrollment for infant/toddlers and for preschoolers?

Additionally, estimates of the NJ center-based ECE are compared to national estimates throughout this brief.

▲ Key Highlights

- NJ center-based ECE implements schedules comparable to the national NSECE sample.
- NJ centers report fewer opportunities for quality improvement for their staff compared to the national sample, including lower rates of engagement with other schools to share resources and a lower percentage of centers providing funding or paid time off to participate in professional development for staff.
- The NJ sample is limited in size overall and includes few state pre-K programs, which does not reflect the state's ECE landscape and limits generalizability of findings.
- Future NJ state-specific samples of licensed center-based child care should be collected to comprehensively capture the state's child care landscape.

DATA

The 2019 [NSECE](#) includes four nationally representative surveys of households, home-based early care and education (ECE) providers, center-based ECE providers, and the center-based ECE workforce. Collectively, this set of surveys provides comprehensive data on the 2019 supply and demand for ECE by examining how families' needs and preferences align with the services offered by child care providers across the United States.¹ The present brief utilizes data from the survey of center-based ECE providers.

The 2019 NSECE national estimates of center-based providers represent a total of 121,000 centers and 592,000 classrooms (Datta et al., 2021).² Approximately 38% of centers reported serving only ages 3 through 5 years nationally, 2% serving only infants and toddlers, and approximately 58% of programs reported serving both.³ This includes 194,000 classrooms (33%) for children under three years old, 288,000 classrooms (49%) for three- to five-year-old children, and the remaining 47,400 classrooms (8%) serving both age groups.⁴ These estimates are based on data from approximately 6,900 sampled providers identified using state and national administrative lists of child care licensing, Head Start programs records, and public pre-K programs.

Within the national sample, the New Jersey data represent approximately 3,600 centers based on a sample of 200 providers. Approximately 21% of center-based providers in New Jersey reported only serving preschool-aged children, 5% reported only serving infants and toddlers, and 74% reported serving infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children, which differs from the national percentages above. A recent analysis of over 1,300 licensed center-based child care providers in New Jersey between 2023 and 2024 reports that 97% of centers enrolled preschool-age children and 68% enrolled infant- and toddler-age children.⁵

¹ For additional information regarding the sample design and for specific content of each NSECE survey: <https://www.childandfamilydataarchive.org/cfda/pages/cfda/nsece.html>. The center-based survey yielded a sample of 6,917 completed interviews. All New Jersey analyses required restricted data access and prior approvals by the NSECE Project Team.

² Datta, A.R., Gebhardt, Z., & Zapata-Gietl, C. (2021) Center-based Early Care and Education Providers in 2012 and 2019: Counts and Characteristics. OPRE Report No. 2021-222, Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/opre/project/national-survey-early-care-and-education-2019-2017-2022>

³ The remaining centers (2%) reported serving only school-age children.

⁴ The remaining classrooms (10%) were not classified due to incomplete information or reported enrollment of only school-age children.

⁵ Stephens et al. (2025) Licensed Center-Based Child Care Providers in New Jersey: Characteristics and Enrollment. <https://nieer.org/rutgers-child-care-research-collaborative>

RESULTS

▲ Schedules

Center-based ECE operating schedules in New Jersey matched those across the United States in terms of average total hours of service offered per day, with an average of approximately nine hours. Table 1 reports the average number of hours per day, and percent of programs with non-traditional hours. For non-traditional hours, we considered the following categories: operating during the weekend, operating for more than 9 hours, and more than 11 hours during a week day. In NJ and nationally, very few centers offered weekend services (5% in NJ and 3.5% nationally). A larger share of centers operated extended hours during a week day: 64% of NJ centers operated 9 or more hours and 45% operated 11 or more hours. In comparison, nationally, 67% of centers operated 9 or more hours and 44% 11 or more hours.

TABLE 1. Schedules for center-based child care providers

	New Jersey	National
Average total hours per day	8.97 (.38)	9.06 (.09)
% of programs open during the weekend	4.94 (.04)	3.48 (.00)
% of programs with non-traditional hours (9+ hours)	64.4 (.06)	67.2 (.01)
% of programs with non-traditional hours (11+ hours)	45.3 (.04)	43.6 (.01)

Source: Author calculations based on NSECE 2019 restricted data. The mean average hours and standard errors for NJ and nationally are presented in row one and the percentage of programs featuring the non-traditional hours with linearized standard errors in parentheses are presented in subsequent rows.

▲ Enrollment and ECE Center Size

On average, ECE centers in New Jersey served 56 children ages 0 to 5 years, which is comparable to the national average of 57 children. The averages for center-based enrollment were also similar for infants, one-year-olds, and two-year-olds, as shown in Table 2. The average number enrolled per center increased with age with two exceptions: enrollment of five years old was low because most 5-year-olds are in kindergarten, and enrollment per site of 3-year-olds in NJ was higher than enrollment of 4-year-olds. New Jersey centers reported on average, 21 three-year-olds per center while the national average was 17 three-year-olds per center. The opposite pattern was seen for four-year-olds where, on average, child care centers in NJ enrolled 17.5 four-year-olds compared to 19.5 nationally. The higher average enrollment per center of 3- than 4-year-olds in NJ may be driven by higher enrollment of 4-year-olds in state pre-k in public schools (with a class size limited to 15).

TABLE 2. Average number of children enrolled in child care providers by age group

	New Jersey	National
Infant	3.19	3.44
One year olds	5.11	5.59
Two year olds	7.88	8.06
Three year olds	20.9	17.18
Four year olds	17.5	19.52

Five year olds	1.43	2.84
Total Enrollment	55.9	56.6

Source: Author calculations based on NSECE 2019 restricted data. NSECE L2 restricted data must adhere to disclosure guidelines including a maximum of three significant digits.

▲ Revenues and Subsidy Participation

We also assessed the national and NJ percentages of children enrolled in center-based programs funded by state pre-K and child care subsidies. Enrollment of children using child care subsidies was similar between the New Jersey and national samples for both infants and toddlers, as well as for preschool aged children. However, only an average of 10.8% of children in the program were funded with state pre-K compared to 16.7% nationally. While this finding is somewhat surprising given that NJ enrolls a higher percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds than the national average, this might be due to the limited sample from the NJ's state pre-k program (and the elementary school sites that deliver the program) captured by the NSECE.

Table 3 also reports the confidence intervals (CIs) for the national sample to assess whether the national estimates allow interpretations that are relevant for NJ. The NJ estimates for state pre-k and child care programs for the age group ages 3-5 are both outside of the CIs estimated for the national sample. This difference suggests the need for state-specific sampling for New Jersey to accurately understand the state's enrollment patterns by funding source.

TABLE 3. Average percentage of children by state pre-K and child care subsidy

% of children in program funded by:	New Jersey Mean %	National Mean %	National Lower CI	National Upper CI
State pre-K	10.8	16.7	14.5	18.9
Child care subsidy programs: Age 0 to 3	14.1	14.8	13.0	16.5
Child care subsidy programs: Age 3 to 5	15.4	13.5	11.9	15.2

Source: Author calculations based on NSECE 2019 restricted data.

▲ Quality Improvement Supports

The NSECE asked about three different types of supports related to quality improvement in child care centers: (1) relationships between centers and other schools or providers for resources and professional development, (2) providing staff with paid time off to get courses or training, and (3) providing staff with funding to take courses or training. Across these three limited measures, center-based ECE in New Jersey reported fewer opportunities for staff, including lower rates of engagement with other schools to share resources (54% vs. 62% nationally) and fewer centers provided paid time off (29% vs. 43% nationally) or funding (47% vs. 57% nationally) for staff to engage in professional development activities (see Table 3). However, NJ programs have access to other supports when they participate in Grow New Jersey Kids

(the state’s quality rating and improvement system) and regional resource hubs which were not captured in this limited set on which programs were asked about.

TABLE 4. Supports to Staff for Quality Improvement

% of Providers	New Jersey	National
With relationships with other schools for resources and professional development	53.5	62.2
That provide staff with paid time off to take college courses or off-site training	29.4	43.1
That provide staff with funding to take college courses or off-site training	46.9	56.7

Source: Author calculations based on NSECE 2019 restricted data.

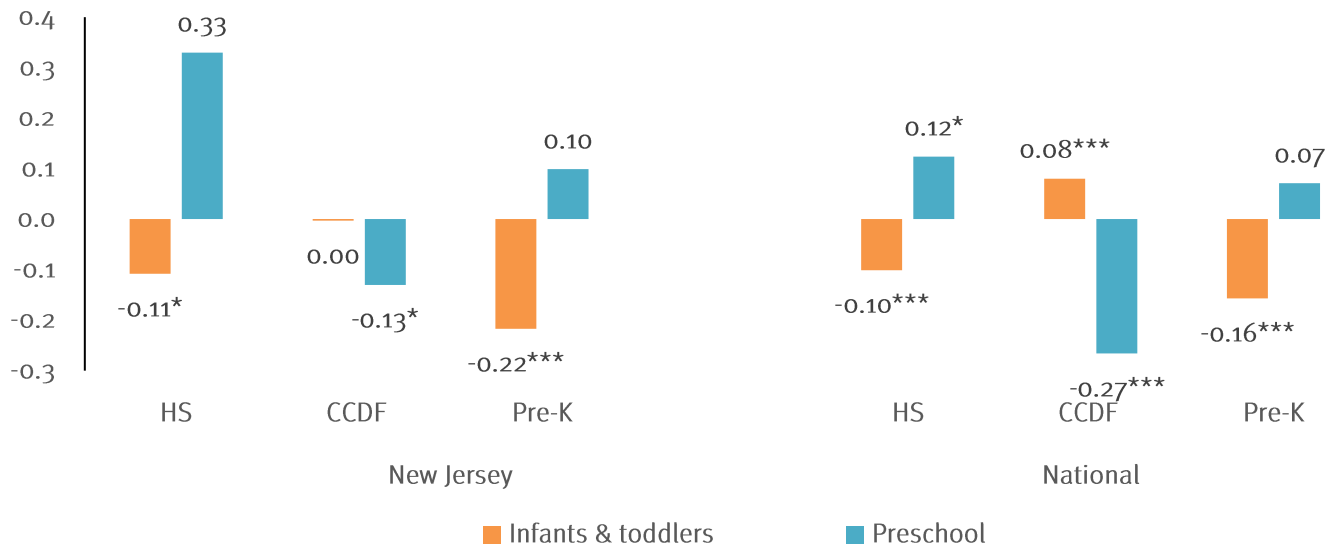
▲ ECE Enrollment by Program Type

We examined enrollment patterns across three types of center-based ECE programs: Early Head Start/Head Start, programs that accept CCDF, and state-funded pre-K. To categorize centers by funding, we use the percentage of children enrolled by funding type. For example, the percentage of children, aged zero to three years old, enrolled in the center funded through child care subsidies. Importantly, these are not mutually exclusive categories: programs using funding from a combination of sources or all three would be included in each category. We estimate the association between total enrollment for infants/toddlers and for preschoolers as predicted by the percentage of children funded by each funding source in each center.⁶ The results reveal differing patterns between the funding sources and children’s total enrollment by age groups.

Figure 1 illustrates how a higher percentage of children funded by each funding source predicts enrollment of each specific age group. We find that in NJ, receiving Head Start or state Pre-K funding was associated with higher enrollment of preschoolers, while receiving CCDF funding was associated with higher enrollment of infants and toddlers. This pattern largely paralleled the national one with slight differences in magnitude. In essence, additional funding for Head Start and State Pre-K in any given program increases the total number of pre-k children a program enrolls, and additional funding for CCDF increases the total number of infant/toddler children a program enrolls. These trends likely emerge due to the tapestry of funding sources in early childhood, and points to how these differing funding sources have more effectively focused on serving specific age groups.

⁶ We use the percentage of children funded by each funding source in any given program as the indicator of the degree to which the program depends on each funding type. We regress using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) the percent of children in each age group funded through preschool, Head Start, and child care subsidies on preschool and infant/toddler total enrollment. We apply the appropriate survey weights and repeat these analyses for the national and New Jersey subsample. Survey weights used include CB9_METH_WEIGHT, CB9_METH_VSTRATUMPU, and CB9_METH_VPSUPU, as specified by NSECE guidance.

FIGURE 1. Associations between enrollment and program funding type by age group



Note. Y-axis represents regression coefficients. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

NEW JERSEY ANALYSES USING NSECE

We are limited by sample size restrictions in the NJ-specific NSECE data and are only able to provide descriptive analyses by the three funding sources above. Likewise, we are unable to describe centers by other demographics given the sample restrictions as other center-based provider subtypes had small sample sizes.⁷

It is important to note that the timing of the NSECE survey, in 2019, limits extrapolations to the present status of the child care system but provides a baseline of the ECE landscape just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pending 2024 NSECE data will provide updated information about how the ECE landscape has recovered and changed since then. However, the upcoming NJ NSECE sample may face the same limitation of a small sample size that will limit analyses and generalizability.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present data brief compares center-based ECE in New Jersey in 2019 to national patterns. The analyses reveal substantial similarities across schedules, enrollment, and participation in CCDF subsidies. At large, it appears that guidance and policies on ECE supply across the United States could

⁷ For example, level-2 NSECE restricted data estimates must be suppressed if they are based on unweighted counts of 50 or less for the center-based data file, all estimates should have a maximum of three significant digits, unweighted estimates must be rounded to the nearest 20, and users must provide evidence that each estimate includes a minimum of three counties.

be relevant for New Jersey's context. However, the samples differed in enrollment patterns by age and in relation to the provision of program improvement activities.

Given the association between funding source and enrollments by age, policies for Head Start and NJ state pre-K programs have potential to influence the experiences of three-to-five-year-old children in NJ with policies affecting CCDF policies more likely to impact the experiences of infants and toddlers. In addition, the NJ data reveals a gap in available workforce supports among those addressed by the NSECE survey. Greater attention towards quality improvement efforts that support the ECE workforce, like establishing partnerships with other programs and schools to share resources, providing paid time off, or providing funding to attend off-site trainings, would strengthen New Jersey's ECE system.

Given the sample limitations, this work highlights the importance of state-driven surveys and state-specific data collection efforts to comprehensively understand NJ's ECE programs in the absence of national samples with robust state samples easily accessible to and used by states. This is particularly important for policy questions on enrollment patterns and participation in distinct types of ECE programs. NIEER's concurrent work provides key insight to understand the supply and demand of ECE in NJ. For example, licensed center-based child care providers in NJ primarily serve preschool-age children, with 2 out of 3 providers also serving children under 3 years old. Centers were enrolled at 73% of their total reported capacity, on average, with 45% of centers reporting enrollment under 75% of their total capacity (Stephens et al., 2025).

An important suggestion of this brief is to further investigate the role of specific funding streams and types of ECE programs as policy levers or platforms to impact the ECE experiences and development of specific age groups of children (Figure 1). If this finding is substantiated by future work, continuity of workforce supports and resources would reach all children through increased alignment across ECE funding sources. In turn, NJ may then consider aligning policies and efforts across systems (with differing funding sources) that serve children 0-5 in its efforts to improve child care quality.

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ABOUT NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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