

How did the Covid-19 Pandemic Impact Child Care use among Infants and Toddlers in New Jersey?

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September 2021

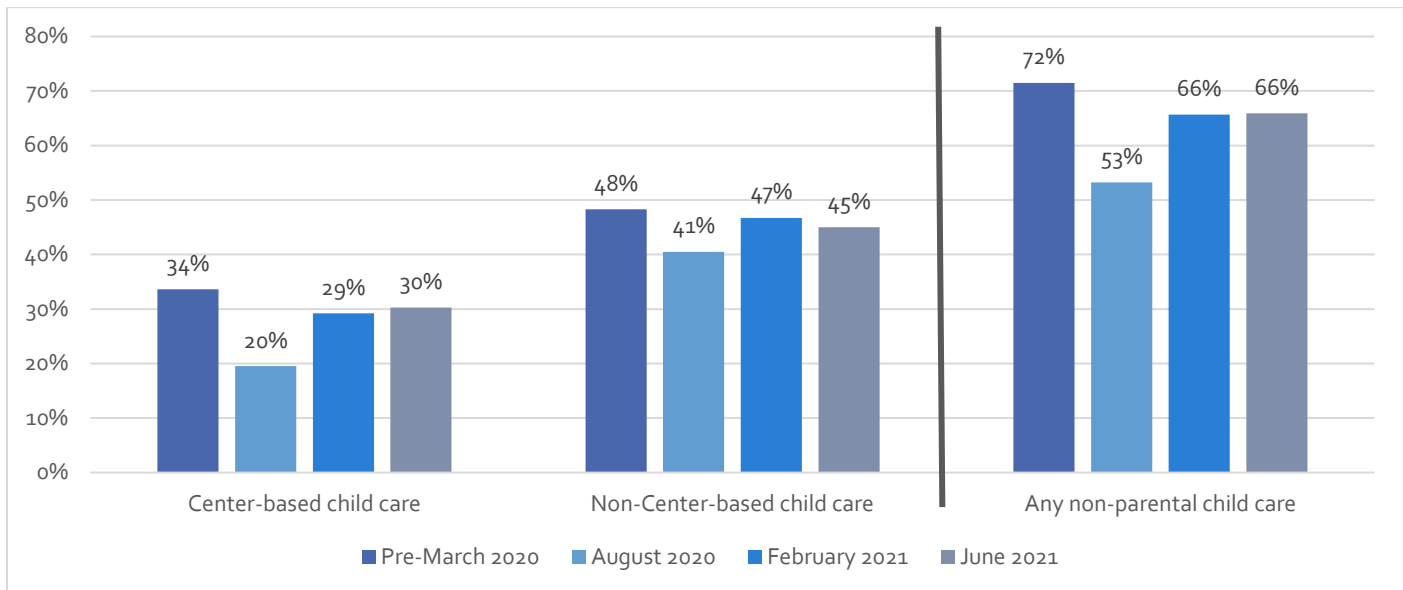
The Covid-19 pandemic upended the nation's child care system and New Jersey is no exception. Over the last year, the Infant and Toddler Policy Research Center at the National Institute for Early Education Research (ITC@NIEER) conducted three surveys of parents of infants and toddlers (children under age 3) about their use of (non-parental) child care.ⁱ The surveys were conducted in August 2020, February 2021, and June 2021 and were designed to represent New Jersey's population of parents of infants and toddlers. The August 2020 survey also asked about use of child care prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. This data snapshot summarizes findings from simple analyses and from more complex models used to estimate changes in the use of infant and toddler child care over time beginning prior to March 2020.

Almost back to normal

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, about 70% of infants and toddlers in New Jersey were in child care, which was higher than the national average.ⁱⁱ In August 2020, after child care had reopenedⁱⁱⁱ, only about half of infants and toddlers in the state were in child care, a decrease of 20 percentage points. By February 2021, use of child care for infants and toddlers had mostly rebounded: on average 66% of infants and toddlers were enrolled in some type of non-parental child care in February and June 2021. A logistic regression model controlling for child and family characteristics found that infants and toddlers were significantly less likely to be in child care in August 2020 than prior to the pandemic, but use of child care in February 2021 and June 2021 did not differ significantly from pre-pandemic levels.

However, as rates of use of non-parental child care returned to pre-pandemic levels, there was a shift in the type of child care used (See Figure 1)^{iv}. We used multinomial logistic regression to investigate changes in the type of child care used over time. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, an estimated 34% of infants and toddlers were in center-based care and 48% were in home-based care provided by a relative or non-relative. In August 2020, there was a larger decrease in the use of center-based child care (14 percentage points) than home-based child care (7 percentage points). By February 2021, use of home-based child care had returned to pre-pandemic levels but use of center-based child care by infants and toddlers remained 5 percentage points lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 1. Use of Non-Parental Child Care by Infants and Toddlers in New Jersey



Note: Pre-March 2020 N = 918; August 2020 N = 918; February 2021 N = 798; June 2021 N = 768.

But not for all

Behind the overall picture described above is substantial variation by age and family background. Changes in the use of child care by infants and toddler during the Covid-19 pandemic varied by age, race/ethnicity, and family structure. Although higher income and more highly educated parents tend to use more center-based infant-toddler care, changes in child care usage did not significantly differ by income or education level.

Child age. The biggest rebound in use of child care was for two-year-olds. Rates of child care use were similar across age groups in February 2021 but by June 2021, 71% of 2-year-olds compared to 66% of 1-year-olds and 63% of children under one year were in child care.

Among the youngest children (< 1 year olds), the rebound in use of child care by June 2021 was driven more by a return to home-based than center-based child care. In June 2021, use of center-based care for children under the age of 1 was lower than pre-Covid-19 but use of home-based care was higher. A similar pattern was seen for 2-year-olds.

Child race/ethnicity. Changes in use of any child care across the four time points did not differ by race/ethnicity. However, there were some significant differences in changes in the type of care used. Center-based child care for Asian infants and toddlers was significantly lower at all post-pandemic time points than pre-pandemic, compared to White infants and toddlers. Center-based child care for Black infants and toddlers fell more from pre-pandemic levels in February 2021 than for White infants and toddlers.

Hispanic infants and toddlers had significantly higher rates of home-based child care in February and June 2021 than prior to the pandemic compared to White infants and toddlers. Asian infants and toddlers, compared to White infants and toddlers, had significantly higher rates of home-based child care in June 2021 than prior to the pandemic.

Family structure. Although not statistically significant, descriptively there was a larger decline in the use of center-based care between before the Covid-19 pandemic and August 2020 for infants and toddlers in two-parent families (16 percentage points) than those in single-parent families (8 percentage points). This suggests the possibility that two-parent families made larger changes in their child care arrangements, perhaps because they had more flexibility.

Why Did Some Parents of Infants and Toddlers Not Use Child Care?

At each time point, we asked parents who did not use child care for their infants and toddlers to report their reasons. At all time points, the most common reason was that they did not need care because one or more parents did not work or had a job with hours that enabled them to provide child care themselves.

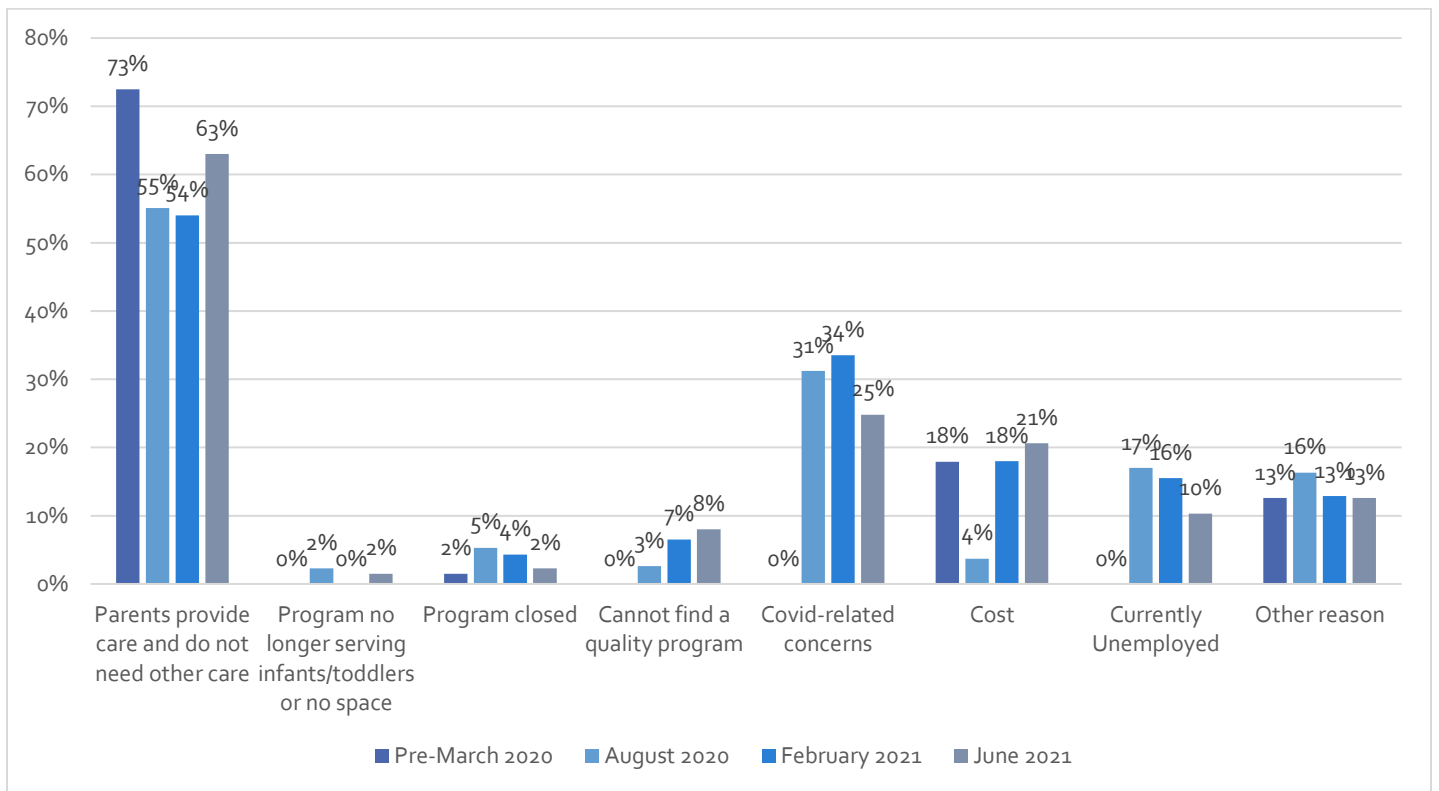
Beginning in August 2020, the second most common reason for not using child care was a Covid-19 health-related concern. About one-third of parents mentioned this reason in August 2020 and February 2021. By June 2021, only one-quarter of parents mentioned this reason.

At all time points other than August 2020, approximately 20 percent of parents not using child care (5 percent of all parents) reported that cost was a reason for not using child care. Future analyses of survey data will explore how much parents paid for child care for their infants and toddlers and if it changed after the pandemic.

Few parents reported that their child care program closed, was no longer serving infants or toddlers, or did not have space for their child. While these reasons were more common post- than pre-pandemic, they were much less frequent than Covid-19 concerns (See Figure 2).

It is noteworthy that the percent of parents reporting not being able to find quality care increased at each time point, though at the maximum this was eight percent of parents who did not use infant and toddler care (2 percent of all parents of infants and toddlers).

Figure 2. Reasons for Not Using Child Care for Infants and Toddlers in New Jersey Among Parents Not Using Child Care



Notes: Pre-March 2020 N = 918; August 2020 N = 918; February 2021 N = 798; June 2021 N = 768. Parents could select more than one response.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this report was provided by The Nicholson Foundation. The authors also wish to thank Rich Higginson at Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind Poll for his partnership in developing the surveys and for fielding the online surveys. The authors are solely responsible for content of this report.

About ITC@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. ITC@NIEER is a unit within NIEER focused on early care and education policies that influence the learning and development of infants and toddlers.

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Suggested Citation

Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Li, Z. (2021). *How did the Covid-19 Pandemic Impact Child Care use among Infants and Toddlers in New Jersey?* [Data Snapshot.] New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

ⁱ A different group of parents was sampled in each survey. Each survey was intended to be representative of parents of infants and toddlers in NJ.

ⁱⁱ Barnett, W.S. (2020). *What We Know About Infant and Toddler Care in New Jersey*. Data Snapshot. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

ⁱⁱⁱ Between mid-March and mid-June 2020, child care was closed in NJ with the exception of care for children of essential workers.

^{iv} Some children used more than one type of non-parental care.