

# Has Access to Quality Child Care for Children under 6 Increased for Low Income Illinois Families? 2011 – 2016



Illinois Action for Children  
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## Key Findings

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**On the whole, during the period from 2011-2016, access to quality-designated child care (care that is accredited or quality rated) improved for low-income, working families in both Cook County and Southwestern Illinois.**

- From 2011 to 2016, Cook County gained 11,953 quality-designated child care slots available to subsidy-eligible children under age six (a 63 percent increase), while Southwestern Illinois gained 3,220 slots (a 192 percent increase).
- The percentage of infant center slots that were quality-designated rose from 30 percent to 44 percent between 2011 and 2016 in Cook County, and from 18 percent to 55 percent in Southwestern Illinois.
- In Cook County, growth in quality-designated slots occurred in communities with greater need, with 59 percent of the new slots occurring in census tracts with above-average concentrations of subsidy-eligible children.
- Proximity to quality care also improved in Cook County. The average distance that subsidy families lived from their nearest quality-designated child care center decreased from 0.86 miles in 2011 to 0.59 miles in 2016 – a 31 percent decline and a substantial improvement in geographical access.

**However, in other respects quality incentive policies had limited impact.**

- Despite increases in the supply of quality-designated child care in both regions, the number of quality-designated child care slots relative to the number of subsidy-eligible children was just 27 percent in Cook County and 36 percent in Southwestern Illinois, as of 2016.
- In Southwestern Illinois, only one-third of the new quality-designated child care supply occurred in high-need communities, i.e. census tracts with above-average concentrations of subsidy-eligible children.
- Although Cook County increased its supply of quality-designated infant care, only 16 percent of its infant care slots were *both* quality-designated and affordable for subsidy-eligible families in 2016.
- Licensed home care saw little growth in quality-designated slots. As of 2016, only 11 percent of licensed home slots in Cook County and 5 percent in Southwestern Illinois were quality designated.
- Quality-designated care available before 6:30 a.m. remained very limited. The percentage of programs that were open before 6:30 a.m. and quality designated increased from 4 percent to 9 percent in Cook County and from 3 percent to 10 percent in Southwestern Illinois.
- Similarly, programs offering quality-designated evening care (at 7 p.m. or later) grew to only 6 percent by 2016 in Cook County and to only 4 percent in Southwestern Illinois. In Cook County, the average distance to a quality-designated program open at 7 p.m. or later was three miles in 2016, about five times farther than the nearest quality-designated program with standard hours.

# Policy Implications

- Stabilize child care demand. Policies that encourage providers to expand the supply of high-quality child care slots are most effective in communities with strong demand for child care services. Strong demand gives child care providers confidence to expand their capacity and their quality. In regions experiencing prolonged economic hardship, such as parts of Southwestern Illinois from 2011 to 2016, the demand for child care is too weak to inspire providers' confidence. Policies to stabilize or even raise the demand for quality child care in such communities are important supports for policies to increase the supply of high-quality child care. Demand policies include expanding eligibility for the subsidy program to more families and using subsidy contracts that give providers predictable revenues.
- Increase the supply of quality licensed home care. Most of the improvements in each region took place in child care centers, rather than in child care homes. While more research should undoubtedly be conducted on how to best accomplish it, it is clear that supporting an increase in the supply of high-quality licensed child care homes will lead to greater access and choice for families across Illinois, particularly in rural parts of the state.
- Address affordability in high cost-of-care areas. While subsidy rates were high enough to cover the cost of the vast majority of infant care slots in Southwestern Illinois, in the high-cost Cook County area, only 16 percent of infant care slots were quality-designated and affordable in 2016. Policymakers can ensure that a greater portion of quality infant slots are affordable — even in high cost areas — by tying reimbursement rates to the cost of providing care within a specific community. This will help ensure that increases in the supply of quality child care options are actually accessible for low-income families.
- Create incentives for high-quality child care to be provided during non-standard hours. The lack of child care programs open during non-standard hours continues to limit access to quality child care for significant numbers of subsidy-eligible families. Policymakers could improve the supply of quality-designated child care available during non-standard hours by providing quality incentives such as subsidy add-ons and grant funding to programs offering extended-hour child care.