

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



Illinois Action for Children  
Research Department  
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## Regional Reports: Cook County and Southwestern Illinois

Over the five-year period from 2011 through 2016, the state and federal governments introduced policies and investments designed to increase the supply and quality of child care and early education.<sup>1</sup> This report summarizes three policy research briefs that detail the different ways that child care markets responded to these new policy incentives in two Illinois regions.

Local economic conditions explain much of the differences in the regional market responses. During 2011-2016, both regions were recovering at different speeds from the deep, nationwide 2008 recession. While Cook County was recovering more slowly than the nation as a whole, it still experienced a steady growth in population, employment, and income that Southwestern Illinois did not. Since those factors — growing population, employment and income — generally drive child care markets and give child care programs the optimism to build their capacity and provide higher-quality care, Cook County providers were able to respond more positively to new federal and state policy incentives with new supply of high-quality child care than were Southwestern Illinois providers who faced less stable economic conditions.<sup>2</sup>

## Cook County

From 2011 to 2016, Cook County saw some notable gains in child care for children under age six and for infants in particular. The supply of quality-designated child care for subsidy-eligible children under age six increased by 11,953 slots, or 63 percent. (Quality-designated slots are slots in programs that are accredited or quality-rated.) Similarly, quality-designated slots for infants also grew during this period, primarily in child care centers. Cook County centers nearly doubled the number of quality-designated infant slots over the five-year period, raising the percentage of all infant center slots that were quality-designated from 30 percent to 44 percent.

In Cook County, the supply of quality-designated child care slots for children under six and infant slots grew significantly faster in communities with higher concentrations of subsidy-eligible children (children with low-income working parents) than in communities with a lower presence of subsidy-eligible children. Since the Illinois quality incentives were tied to the child care subsidy, this suggests that providers in areas with more subsidy-eligible children were responding to incentives to increase their offering of high-quality child care. These supply-side incentives seemed to be effective because Cook County

enjoyed enough economic stability to give providers confidence that demand for their child care services would grow even in areas with concentrations of low incomes.

While growing the supply of quality-designated child care was a considerable success, there were limits. Supply in 2016 remained well under the level needed to meet potential needs in Cook County: providers had only enough quality-designated child care slots to serve 27 percent of subsidy-eligible children. A second concern is that 92 percent of the growth in quality-designated, subsidy-accepting slots from 2011-2016 occurred in child care centers, not in homes which many parents use. The rollout of ExceleRate Illinois for licensed child care homes did not take place until 2015, so we would have expected a slow start there. This poor performance in child care homes, however, is also consistent with a concerning national trend of declining numbers of child care home-based providers.

A third limitation of policy success is infant care affordability. As the number of quality-designated infant care slots for subsidy-eligible children improved throughout Cook County, and at higher rates in areas of higher concentrated need, child care assistance

<sup>1</sup>For details on the policies, see the full report, David Alexander and Marcia Stoll, "Has Access to Quality Child Care for Children Under 6 Increased for Low-Income Families? The Illinois Record, 2011 – 2016," first in a series from Illinois Action for Children for the Illinois-New York Child Care Research Partnership, (2019).

<sup>2</sup>See the report cited in note 1 for a more detailed comparison of the two regional economies, 2011- 2016.

payments to providers of infant care were not high enough to cover the price of the majority of infant slots. This means that subsidized parents could not afford to enroll their infants in many of the new slots. In 2016, only 16 percent of infant care slots in Cook County were quality-designated and affordable. This is an improvement from 2011, but quality-designated child care will remain inaccessible to thousands of low-income families if assistance payments do not cover the cost of care in higher-cost areas.

Finally, the supply of quality-designated child care during non-standard hours is important for half of the

## Southwestern Illinois

The second regional study site, which we call “Southwestern Illinois,” is a group of seven heterogeneous counties that includes the city of East St. Louis and the relatively urban St. Clair and Madison counties, along with the more rural Bond, Clinton, Monroe, Randolph, and Washington counties. This region saw much slower, and in some communities undetectable, economic recovery during the study period. Population and employment actually declined from 2011 to 2016 in Southwestern Illinois, while median income ranged from a decline in one county to a sharp gain of 11.2 percent in another.

Despite its less stable economy, Southwestern Illinois had positive news. From 2011 to 2016, the supply of quality-designated child care slots for subsidy-eligible children under age six in Southwestern Illinois increased by 3,220 slots, a 192 percent gain. This large increase is primarily an indication of how low the supply of quality-designated child care was in the beginning year of 2011. Second, the share of infant care slots that were quality-designated in Southwestern Illinois grew from 18 percent in 2011, to 55 percent in 2016. As a region, compared to Cook County, Southwestern Illinois had faster growth in quality infant and child care slots and covered more need in terms of available quality-designated slots relative to the number of subsidy-eligible children. This may be attributable to the rates that the subsidy program paid to providers. Compared to Cook County, in Southwestern Illinois subsidy payments to providers were significant enough to make more infant slots in the region affordable to subsidized parents. In 2011, just 15 percent of infant slots were both affordable and quality designated, and by 2016, it was almost half.

families who receive the child care subsidy and work nonstandard hours. During 2011-2016, programs with a quality designation and operating in the early morning or evening hours increased only slightly in Cook County, and remain far below potential need. The policy changes during this period did not specifically address an expansion of programs' operating schedules, and program schedules remain a key barrier to accessibility for many Illinois families.

While these were significant gains in the supply of quality-designated child and infant care slots, it was the higher-income communities of Southwestern Illinois — which had lower concentrations of subsidy-eligible children — that saw most of the growth, rather than the lower-income communities with higher concentrations of subsidy eligible children. This suggests that lower-income families could not use many of the new slots. It also suggests that the economic conditions in lower-income communities were not stable enough to encourage their providers to invest as much in quality supply, even with the policy incentives intended to encourage them to do so.

Also, as was the case in Cook County, the vast majority of the growth in quality-designated infant and child care slots in Southwestern Illinois over this period occurred in child care centers, and very little occurred in licensed homes, which many parents use. From 2011-2016, centers had 99 percent of the growth in quality-designated, subsidy-accepting slots in the region.

The region also saw improvements in the number of quality-designated centers offering care during non-standard hours, mainly in the early morning. The share of centers in the region that opened before 7 a.m. and quality-designated grew from 15 percent to 44 percent during the five-year period, and the percentage open before 6:30 a.m. with a quality-designation grew from nine percent to 26 percent. However, very few subsidy-accepting programs in Southwestern Illinois with a quality designation operated at 7 p.m. or later.