



Choices in the Real World

The use of family, friend and neighbor child care by single Chicago mothers working nontraditional schedules



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Introduction

Working Americans who are poor or near-poor have been rising in number at least since the 1980s.¹ Most working Americans earn incomes that stagnated for decades, while costs have shot up for basic services such as housing and health care. More families than ever need two incomes to make ends meet. High unemployment and a record high number of single-parent households, however, have pushed families nearer to poverty or below.

Households headed by women in the labor force are particularly affected. More than a quarter live below the poverty level.² Perhaps a majority of these mothers work non-standard hours in the evenings, overnight or on weekends. Since large numbers of the *working poor* have young children, more children live in poverty across America than ever before in our history. Millions of children feel not only the crushing impact of poverty, but also separation from their single mothers being unavailable to them some evenings, nights and/or weekends and the potential stress of being placed in non-parental child care.

This research project sought out single, poor and near-poor mothers to tell us how they provide for their young children's care while they are working nontraditional schedules: what arrangements they rely on – both formal and informal – and how the choices they make impact their and their children's well-being.

Today's single mothers carry the full weight of parenting. They are both the primary breadwinner and sole caregiver for their family. Working to meet the family's financial needs often requires multiple jobs and takes mothers away from their children during critical periods of development, leaving mothers struggling to balance both roles.

Child care provides a critical support for working mothers, allowing them to work. We also know that child care providers serve as critical sources of information, resources and networking that otherwise isolated single mothers might not have access to but desperately need and can benefit from. However, when child care arrangements break down, perhaps because a provider is ill or at the last minute is called to another job, it can negatively affect both the mother's work life – her attendance, her employer's opinion of her – and her family. A mother's stress increases due to the potential rippling effect on her work life as well as on the social network she relies on to support and provide for her children.

Fragile families include those whose mothers work non-standard hours and thus face particular challenges in securing child care. They work during times when fewer child care options are available and they typically earn low incomes, meaning they have less money to bargain with when arranging child care. For these reasons, as well as others, most parents working non-standard hours turn to family, friends or neighbors (FFN) to care for their children.

In the summer of 2012, we interviewed fifty single mothers in Chicago who work non-standard work schedules where at least some of their work hours include evening, overnight, weekend or variable hours. We sought to gain a fuller understanding of how well their child care arrangements, particularly their use of FFN child

care, support the needs of their families. As part of this project, we then reviewed the findings and made policy recommendations to better support mothers working non-standard schedules.

Background: Non-standard Work Schedules

It is increasingly common for parents to work evening, overnight, weekend or variable hours, causing us to question whether terms such as "non-standard hours" and "nontraditional hours" still apply. Nationwide and in Illinois, approximately 41 percent of all parents with young children work evening, overnight or weekend hours. In Illinois we have estimated, based on federal data, that up to 67 percent of lower-earning single mothers work non-standard hours.³ Our 2010 survey of low-income parents (mostly single mothers) in Chicago found that 53 percent used child care during non-standard hours.⁴

Most occupations with large numbers of women working non-standard hours pay wages less than half of the typical family income – cashier, retail salesperson, restaurant workers, nursing and home health aides and building cleaners. Many of the fastest growing occupations in Illinois also have non-standard work hours and pay lower wages.⁵

Background: Family, Friend and Neighbor Care

Family, friend and neighbor (FFN) child care refers to relatives, friends or neighbors who provide child care in their own homes or in the child's home legally but without a child care license (i.e. license-exempt). FFN providers are often more flexible with regard to hours of care. They are more willing to offer care in the evenings, overnight and on the weekends. They are also flexible about pick-up times if the parent is held up at work or in traffic, and may be flexible in scheduling care for parents whose employer sets work schedules with little advance notice.



¹ U.S. Department of Labor U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics *A Profile of the Working Poor, 2010* (Report 1035) March 2012.

² *A Profile of the Working Poor, 2010*, Table 5 (see note 1) The exact percentage is 27.7.

³ *Working Later in Illinois: Work Schedules, Incomes and Parents' Access to Child Care, Illinois Action for Children*, 2006. http://www.actforchildren.org/content_assets/

MDP_ResearchPublications_PDFs_WorkScheds.pdf

⁴ This percentage is not strictly comparable to the preceding percentages because some of this child care was for mothers who attended college as well as work. (Illinois Action for Children unpublished survey of 247 parents.)

⁵ *Working Later in Illinois*, pp 8–10. Registered nurses and retail managers earn higher incomes while often working nonstandard schedules.

What makes FFN providers typically more flexible in these and other ways than are child care centers and licensed child care homes is that the FFN provider and the mother often have a personal relationship with each other that existed prior to the child care arrangement. This is, of course, particularly true of relative providers, such as grandparents, aunts /uncles or siblings. That said, most friends and neighbors have personal connections with the mother as well. They are more willing to meet parents' needs in a flexible way, even at some cost or inconvenience to themselves.

Many FFN providers will not charge for days the parent does not work and are thus more affordable for parents who work part-time and variable schedules. FFN providers are also more flexible with respect to payments – the amount they are paid, the timing of payments and even the mode of payments, since some providers accept in-kind food, laundering or housecleaning in exchange for care.

In addition, many parents trust their relatives, friends and neighbors more and prefer to place their children with a provider whom they know and who may even love the child.

By comparison, child care centers and licensed homes need to operate more on solid economic footing and less on personal ties. Since they need to cover their costs of doing business, their prices are often beyond the means of single working mothers. For example, in 2012 the average Chicago child care center charged \$8,217 annually to care for a 3-year old and \$11,162 to care for an infant.⁶ FFN providers are much more likely to charge a rate that the mother can afford.

Aside from their high cost of care, child care centers and licensed homes often have formal policies in place that discourage enrollment of families with nontraditional schedules. Many programs, for example, charge parents late fees by the minute or in five-minute increments if the parent is late picking up the child; require parents to pay for a full week of care regardless of whether the child attends for the full week; require that parents applying for the Child Care Assistance Program pay the full cost of care until their application is approved and some require parents to pay for any difference between what the program charges and what the Child Care Assistance Program reimburses, on top of the parent copayment assigned by the program.

Given these realities, many low-income working parents have a strong incentive to use FFN providers. It not only fits their work schedules, but it also supports economic, emotional and less tangible factors. A number of circumstances will incline mothers to use FFN child care. The lower a mother's wages are, the less regularly she works or is paid, the more likely an unexpected bill threatens her budget. Also, if she is isolated and uncomfortable with official programs, it is more likely that she will seek child care with a trusted family member, friend or neighbor.

FFN Child Care in Chicago

No data are available on the number or percentage of children in Chicago who receive FFN child care. Figures are only available for a small subset of children in lower-income families who receive Illinois Child Care Assistance. As recently as 2010, the majority of children in the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program were in FFN child care. More recently, this percentage has fallen, partly because new Illinois regulations discourage the use of FFN child care.⁷

In October 2012, 42 percent of Chicago children whose parents receive Illinois Child Care Assistance used FFN child care (20,617 children, almost all with single mothers). We assume that this is just a fraction of all Chicago children with FFN child care.

Policy Challenges to FFN Child Care

While FFN child care providers serve many parents with low incomes, particularly those whose schedules are nontraditional, we know little about the 'quality' of care children receive in these settings. Some educators and public officials are concerned that children in FFN settings may not be achieving the 'school readiness' they need in terms of their social, emotional and cognitive development. The critics believe that children in FFN child care do not receive the daily brain- and body-stimulating activities that children in more formal settings receive because the settings are not regulated or inspected, the providers are not required to meet any educational or training requirements and the child care providers are not easily included in most professional development opportunities available to the regulated provider workforce. For these reasons, some educators and public officials go so far as to recommend federal and state policies prohibiting the reimbursement of FFN providers for child care.

Regardless of the merits of these claims, it is clear that FFN child care meets a real need for our lowest-wage earners in Illinois and elsewhere. What, then, are the practices and policies needed to ensure working mothers receive the supports they need to engage in work activity while at the same time ensure children in FFN child care get what they need during the most critical period of social, emotional and cognitive development?

There is no easy answer.

If public policies limit public dollars from paying for FFN child care or makes that care illegal, mothers who work nontraditional schedules would have even fewer options than they have now. We predict that many would opt for illegal child care and follow their provider underground – staying with what they know and trust already. However, such a turn of events would further isolate FFN providers and the families they serve, and further limit a state's ability to engage the providers in any professional development opportunities that might improve the care they provide to our most at-risk children. For these reasons, Illinois Action for Children believes the best public policies will focus on improving FFN child care rather than making it ineligible for assistance or driving it underground. At Illinois Action for Children, we believe the best public policies reflect the realities of those we most hope to support.

⁶ Illinois Action for Children referral database. Data are for June 2012.

⁷ Effective in 2006, FFN providers are required to complete a registration process that involves submitting a state ID and a copy of the provider's social security card. Effective 2011, FFN providers who are not related to the children in their care must complete and pass a fingerprint-based criminal background check, as must all members of their household age 17 and over if care is in the provider's home.

Our Chicago Interviews

During the summer of 2012, Illinois Action for Children interviewed 50 Chicago mothers who work some type of nontraditional schedule. All of the mothers had children under the age of six and typically had between one and three children of child care age (under age 13). About half had teenage children as well, and some relied on these older children for child care. Most of the mothers were the sole adult in the household, though about one-fifth of those interviewed did live with another adult. Only three lived with the other parent of their child.

As is common among workers with non-standard hours, the mothers interviewed were low-wage earners. Most of the women we interviewed reported an annual income under \$23,000 and almost half reported incomes under \$15,000 – much lower than the median income of Chicago single-earner families, which is \$34,245.⁸ As a result, the mothers qualified for the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program to help with the cost of their child care and all but five of the mothers received this assistance.⁹

Half of the women interviewed had a high school education or less. Another fifth had achieved an associate's degree or higher. While several mothers have bachelor's degrees and one mother had a graduate degree, they were underemployed due to today's weak economy.

The mothers surveyed were predominantly African-American but included a small group of Latino and white mothers as well. We interviewed mothers about their work schedules, child care arrangements and the challenges they face in balancing their work, child care and family life. Inasmuch as this group of working women is often underrepresented in research, these interviews were particularly valuable. The following sections discuss what these interviews told us.

Employment and Work Schedules

The mothers' employment falls within four primary industries: retail, food service, health care and education/child care. Other industries represented were security, financial services and social services. The mothers hold positions that are typically low-paid, such as sales or customer service representatives, teacher assistants, office assistants, food servers or packers and certified nurse assistants. In one way these mothers might not be typical: only one mother worked more than one job.

The mothers were well-mixed between those working full-time (35 or more hours per week) and those working part-time, generally between 20-30 hours per week. Some describe that the number of hours they worked depended on their employers' need. One food service cashier, for example, reported being sent home early if business was slow. Other parents were on-call or may fill in for coworkers at the last minute, if needed. An airport worker said she may have to work mandatory overtime, if a flight was delayed. And, a certified nurse assistant said she got more hours, if she saw extra clients. All of these factors directly affected the child care options available to them.

Each of the mothers worked some type of nontraditional schedule. Over half worked at least some evenings or nights and half work weekends. Almost half work both evenings and weekends. More than two-thirds of the mothers had variable schedules, in which the days they worked or their start and end times varied from day to day or week to week. These variable schedules were as prevalent among the full-time workers as among the part-time workers.

As we will discuss in more detail, variable schedules can pose a special challenge for parents making child care arrangements, particularly when parents receive short notice of their work schedule. About one quarter of those mothers with variable schedules received less than a week's notice of their schedule. Some parents remarked that they get their schedule on Thursday or Friday for the next work week. Others reported getting a same-day notice of overtime or a request to fill in for a co-worker. However, the majority of the parents received at least a week's notice of their schedule, with some receiving their schedule on a monthly basis or at least two weeks in advance. Again, no data are available to tell us whether these proportions are typical of the larger population of single working mothers in Chicago.

It is fair to say, however, that some employees prefer and even choose non-standard schedules for family reasons. For example, a mother might prefer to work at night so that she can take care of her young children at home during the morning. Many families we interviewed were happy with their schedules. "I think overnights are the best shift," commented one mother. Another parent was more ambivalent. "It's hard because during the evening I can't have enough interaction with them [her children]. But on the weekend it isn't bad because I work early so they're still sleeping."

More parents than not expressed a desire to change their schedule. The most common preference was to work traditional weekday



⁸ 2011 American Community Survey 1-year estimate.

⁹ The women surveyed were recruited through Illinois Action for Children which administers the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) in Cook County. This explains the high participation rate in CCAP. This rate is not representative of the larger population of Chicago mothers working nonstandard hours.

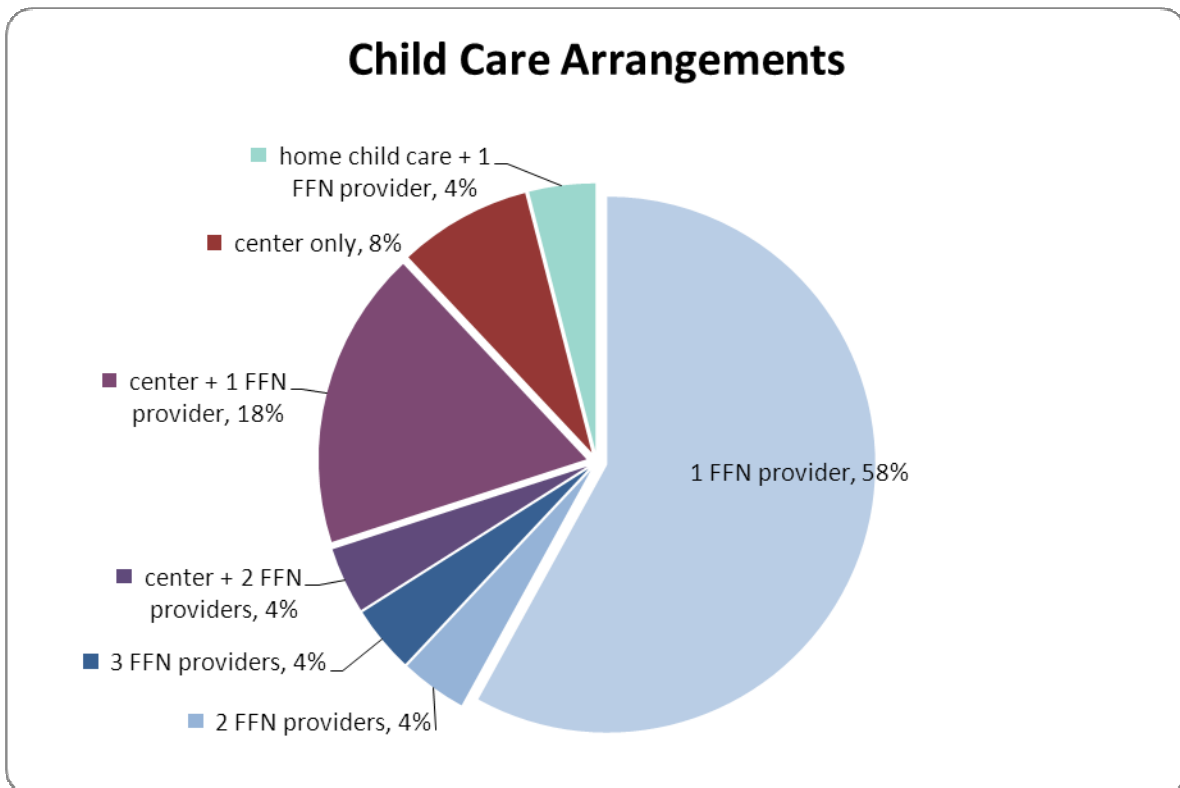
hours because it allowed them more time with their children and families. Some just wished for regular schedules. "I wish I could change it to one set morning shift. I wish I could have my schedule a month in advance and just work it." Some mothers working part-time wanted more hours, while some working longer hours wished it was financially possible to work fewer hours to free up time with their children. Some felt the commute was too long and preferred a job closer to home. Finally, one mother just wished for two days off in a row.

Child Care Arrangements

Because more formal child care options are scarce during evenings and weekends, we were not surprised to learn that virtually all the mothers use family, friends or neighbors for all or part of their child care arrangement, most commonly family members. Among the family child care providers, the child's grandparent was the most common arrangement, but children were also cared for by their older siblings, aunts and uncles and other extended family. Some parents who worked predominantly daytime schedules used center

care and supplemented it with care from a relative or friend to cover their evening or weekend shifts. Many of the mothers relied on a patchwork of individuals or centers to provide child care during their work hours. It was not uncommon for parents to use two or more child care providers. Out of all the mothers surveyed, only two said they regularly relied on the child's other parent to care for the child while they worked.

As mentioned, all but five mothers received Child Care Assistance, which helps them pay for all or part of their child care expenses. Six of the mothers receiving assistance also used a secondary provider who they did not pay – in all cases a relative. Among the five mothers who did not receive child care assistance, one was paying out of pocket while waiting on her approval for assistance, another reported always paying out of pocket while the remaining three did not pay their providers at all, as their providers were their mothers and/or an older child.



Benefits and Challenges of FFN Child Care Arrangements

Parent Satisfaction with Their Child Care Arrangement

The women we interviewed had various levels of satisfaction with their caregivers. Overall, most of the mothers using FFN child care were happy with their arrangement. They found it convenient, trusted their provider and felt they did a good job caring for their children. As one parent said, "It fits me and my kids perfect." Another parent shared this sentiment; her mother and oldest daughter watch her younger children in the children's own home while they are sleeping.

The mothers appeared satisfied with the quality of the FFN child care their children received. As one mother said about her neighbor: "She actually works with them and teaches them letters and stuff like that."

Parents appreciated how much their providers did for them and wished their providers could be paid more. One mother expressed, "I wish I could pay more. My mom does a lot, and helps out more. I don't feel that she is adequately compensated. If I have a little extra I try to give her more."¹⁰ Similarly, another parent said her provider "watches four children to feed them, help them with their homework and get them to bed" and feels he should be paid more.

While the majority of parents preferred to keep their current arrangement, some mothers identified things they would change about their care. The most common responses were that they wish their care was more affordable, their children had other kids they could socialize with and their centers or home child care settings were open longer hours, including weekends. As one mother put it: "If they had weekend or late night hours, I would feel like I hit the jackpot. It is so hard to find child care on the weekend or evenings."

Not all mothers were satisfied with their care arrangement. In fact, a substantial number - about 30 percent - said they would choose different child care, if they could. When asked what type of arrangement they preferred, some mothers wanted a more educational environment such as a child care center. A parent whose own mother cared for her one-year-old reported that she would prefer to use a center "because the kids are more into hands-on learning and they get to enjoy the experience more of being around kids. They are doing different kinds of activities, get them off the bottles, teach them to walk, potty train them and teach them to wash their hands." Another mother who relied on an FFN provider to care for her four-year-old said, "I would go for something more professional, a day care center, or a more serious baby sitter... They (a formal child care center) have more activities and more stuff for the kids than just sitting at home." The mothers who preferred centers were not using them because they were unaffordable or because the ones they knew of and trusted were too far away.

Other parents reported that they would prefer different child care arrangements to fit their hours better - wishing for a provider with extended hours, including weekends or that was open around the clock. "If the day cares were open 7 days a week. I wouldn't be restricted as to the type of job I could take," one mother commented. But the mothers with this preference did not know of any such programs. Some mothers expressed their desire for more consistent or reliable care, particularly on the weekends. Finally, a couple of parents of toddlers wished their mothers could care for their children but their mothers were not available.

Child Care Challenges Related to Working Non-standard Hours

The mothers expressed common challenges they faced related to child care and their non-standard work hours. Even parents satisfied with their care arrangement ran into difficulties at times.

Finding Care

Finding child care is a common challenge among all working parents, regardless of work hours, because parents have to weigh issues of affordability, convenience and quality and/or trust. Parents working non-standard hours are further challenged because of the limited number of child care programs that offer evening, weekend and variable-hour care. Forty percent of the women we spoke with said it was somewhat or very difficult to find child care. Below is a sampling of parent comments regarding their experience with finding care.

"I had to switch from the 3-11pm shift to the 7am-3pm shift because there was no one to pick him (her son) up from the bus and they were threatening me with DCFS."

"Basically finding child care was a big challenge because every child care center is 6am-6pm, and almost no one else would watch the children without me paying them up front (prior to CCAP reimbursement)."

"I had to switch to a different child care provider because day cares don't do evenings. I asked family members and friends to see who had the availability to do it. I went through the (referral) program to find child care in the evening and it wasn't helpful because they were only home day cares and they wanted the money up front until I got approved (by the Child Care Assistance Program) and I couldn't afford it."

"Since I work in the hospitals and the hours vary, I would have to look for a day care that has hours that vary as well."

"Every day care is not 24 hours. Sometimes I get out at 3am. And not every day care has transportation."

¹⁰ A previous survey of low income mothers found this desire to pay FFN providers more. FFN providers receive the lowest reimbursement rate among provider types paid through CCAP. As of July 2012 they receive \$15.08 per child per day for full-time care, which is defined as five or more hours a day. A provider caring for a child for five hours, then, receives \$3.02 per hour, and one caring for a child for 8 hours receives just \$1.89 per hour. Rates for licensed home providers are higher at \$23.19 to \$25.53 per full day (depending on the child's age), while licensed centers receive \$23.77 to \$33.53 per full day.

"If I didn't have her (a family friend) it would be difficult, because a lot of people in my family work and stuff. And the day cares charge a little more."

Many providers specifically mentioned the difficulty with finding care on the weekends. As one mother said, on weekends "people want to go out and relax and it's hard to find people."

Arranging Care for a Varying Schedule

Because the women work jobs with varying schedules, it can be a challenge to coordinate their changing work schedules with the schedules of their providers, who may also work or have other obligations. When we asked mothers what the challenges were of working nontraditional schedules, one parent replied, "Just the scheduling of it. Me and my provider work diligently to make sure my needs can fit her needs." Another parent agreed and said her challenge was "just going by someone else's schedule in case she has anything else she wants to do."

Half of the mothers interviewed said that finding last minute child care was somewhat or very challenging. Adequate time to arrange their child care schedule could reduce parent stress. The parents who received less than a week's notice of their work schedule, in particular, experienced problems arranging child care and had to turn to back up care more frequently, if it was available:

"It happens once a week I'll have problems. If my baby sitter is not available I would go to my sister and then my mom."

"It depends on the sitter's availability. Sometimes they'll switch my days from Thursday or Saturdays. Sometimes she (the sitter) has other obligations and then I would have to find someone else to watch her."

"Well sometimes I try to arrange ahead of time when I can find out. The people I ask are not usually reliable so I have to keep asking two days before that."

Having a Reliable Caregiver

Unlike parents using center care, parents using FFN child care face problems when one of their caregivers cancels on them at the last minute. In our group of parents, two thirds were fortunate not to have experienced this problem. Among the other third, however, parents said as often as once or twice a month their child care would fall through, and for a few mothers this occurred weekly. In these situations, parents turned to a family member, if one was available, or had to take off work themselves.

Parent comments, when we asked how often their providers canceled at the last minute:

"Once a week. Then I go to whoever's going to watch the kids, it could be my little brother, mom, spouse."

"At the last day care, prior to my current provider, my previous provider cancelled 13 times in three months. I had to call off work and I lost money. And I got a write up. It hinders the children

definitely. With my current provider it is their first day so I haven't had issues yet."

"It happens once a week, then if I can't find anyone then I have to take off and stay home."

"Maybe like twice a month, I usually have like my friend's mother to see if she's not doing anything or I have to call off."

"Just not having a consistent person, or I'm a have to miss work because no one wants to watch her today. Or I have to pray someone says yes. I would rather my child be with me, I don't want to throw her off on anyone. I only give her to people that I trust. I don't want to have to worry about her while I'm at work."

Affordability

Issues of child care affordability are not exclusive to parents working non-standard hours, but jobs where non-standard hours are common are typically more low-skilled and low-paid. Parents without a set number of hours do not know what their paychecks will look like from week to week, making it hard to plan with their money.

As mentioned, virtually all the mothers interviewed earn low enough incomes to participate in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). This means the state covers a portion of their child care costs and the parent is responsible for a portion as well. The parent's portion, or copayment, is based on their income and family size. Copayments in Illinois currently comprise on average 7 percent of a parent's income, and can reach as high as 10 percent, a sizable chunk of a family's income.¹¹ Among our fifty mothers, two thirds found paying for child care to be either somewhat or very challenging.

Among our mothers, all but five said they do pay at least one provider. Almost half, though, said they occasionally or frequently have difficulty making their child care payments, i.e. their copayments. It was more common for mothers using center care to have experienced difficulty paying for care, reflecting the perception that centers are less flexible with payments. One mother who had difficulty every month laments, "because I'm a single parent I have to pay all of the bills. If I miss a payment with the day care on the 30th then on the 1st I get late fees of \$10 the first day and \$20 after the 5th day."

While FFN providers typically accept the rate they receive from CCAP, many centers with rates higher than the CCAP reimbursement rate charge parents the difference. One mother who frequently had trouble making payments described the high cost: "There's a copayment aside from what Illinois Action for Children pays, plus the weekly center fees which is an additional \$120." An additional burden for families using center or even some licensed home care is that providers expect parents to pay for their care upfront until the CCAP approval is complete. This creates a barrier for parents to using more formal care types.

¹¹ Based on copayment amounts from July 2012.

As we expected, the parents who say their providers are flexible with payments are those using FFN child care:

"Because it's my mother, she works with me. It happens every couple of months."

"Just mostly by me being a little pressed for cash. I am a single mom caring for two boys. Things come up and I have been late in the past, and I'm blessed to have someone (her neighbor) who will work with me on that."

"It's been kind of hard lately, but she (her friend) has been working with me and been understanding."

"Sometimes it depends on what day I get paid on, or if I can pay it all at once. Sometimes I have to make payments." (providers are her mom, sister and friend)

Benefits Specific to FFN Child Care

Parents mentioned a few other benefits of FFN child care aside from flexibility with payments. Many child care centers and licensed home providers, as noted earlier, have somewhat strict rules concerning late drop-off or pick-up, and may even fine parents who are substantially late. FFN providers, on the other hand, are often said to be more flexible. About two in every five mothers we interviewed were delayed at work at least occasionally for meetings, an emergency or waiting for their replacement. None reported they had difficulty with their provider regarding this. In fact, some volunteered that their relative provider was indeed flexible.

Another issue faced by families using child care centers and licensed home providers is that they will not care for an ill child, for very good reasons. Consequently when a child is sick, working parents must find alternative care for the child or take the day off. This challenges every parent, but presents a special problem for lower-income parents who have fewer personal days, perhaps none at all, and so must lose income if they stay home. A mother might even risk dismissal if she stays home.

Though FFN providers overall are not as consistently available as centers are, when it comes to a child being sick they are a great resource for parents. Most mothers using FFN child care say their provider will watch their child regardless of whether the child is sick. The families using center care are most affected by a sick child, needing to find back up care or staying home with the child themselves.



Family Impact of Nontraditional Work

The quality of family life can be affected not only by how much time a mother spends away from her children but the time of day or day of the week she is away. For example, does a mother's schedule permit her to prepare and eat a pleasant meal with her children, read or play with her children or put them to bed? Research has found that "frequent family meal times can positively affect the cognitive development and academic achievement of youth from early childhood through the teen years." In particular "routines such as family meals may have a protective value related to the risks associated with single-parent families."¹²

Below we see that the mothers we interviewed feel a special conflict between balancing their non-standard work schedule with their responsibilities and hopes as parents. Here we begin by reviewing what a growing body of research has found on the impact that working nontraditional schedules may have on children and families.

Researchers point out the benefits of a mother working non-standard schedules. She has the opportunity to be with her young children instead of at work during the standard daytime hours. This can make child care far less expensive than might otherwise be on average – the equivalent of tuition at a state university in Illinois, or higher, for a young child in a child care center. If a father is present, moreover, he often has more contact with his children if the mother works non-standard hours.¹³

Non-standard schedules may produce negative impacts on children and families that overwhelm the positive impacts, especially for lower income families. One study found that non-standard work schedules increase a mother's stress and this in turn increases children's behavior problems.¹⁴ Some found problems particularly with girls externalizing behavior, while others found problems with risky behaviors among adolescent boys.¹⁵ Researchers have measured a negative cognitive impact on children, as well as increases in emotional tension, marital stress and family conflict.¹⁶ One negative physical health impact that some researchers measured in children is higher-than-normal weight gain, measured by Body Mass Index, particularly reaching a peak among fifth and sixth graders.¹⁷

Another potentially negative dimension of a nontraditional work schedule is the way mothers need to patch different child care providers together for their children. We reported that 42 percent of children have a patchwork of between 2 and 4 providers. Such complex arrangements make it more difficult for a young child to develop strong personal relationships with all the providers, as child development experts widely recommend. Arrangements of such complexity are also more likely to suffer breakdowns, if a provider gets sick or needs to be elsewhere, and as a result may increase maternal and child stress and economic hardship.

The mothers interviewed gave a rich variety of responses describing their experiences with juggling responsibilities as a parent while balancing the challenges of being the primary provider for the family. While not as sophisticated as the statistical research just reported, their experiences show how working nontraditional hours

can have ripple effects on the social and emotional wellbeing of mothers and children.

The mothers were divided in how they viewed the amount of time they spent with their children. Half reported that having enough time to spend with their children was not a challenge, but the other half felt it was somewhat or very challenging. When prompted by an open ended question about the impact of working nontraditional hours on their family life, the majority of mothers described negative experiences for themselves or their immediate or extended families.

One mother described the isolation that working on the weekends can have on her and her family, "Pretty much, you miss out on everything because you have to work. The weekends are the majority of time families do things...I guess you have to be thankful you just have a job." Other women expressed how their work hours impacted their ability to connect with friends, family or other parents.

"I'm not always able to do weekend activities. Like last weekend I was not able to attend a family function."

"Not having a social life."

"Nothing is really open when I get out of work."

"If she (her daughter) is in school, I may want to take her to the park anywhere during the weekends. I may have to miss birthday parties because I have to work and I get called in. The weekends are supposed to be free days but in my case they're not."

Some mothers described the loss of not being able to participate in daily activities in the home life of the family, such as not being able to have family dinner regularly with their children. For a number of mothers, it was especially difficult not helping children with homework. About one-third of the parents with school-age children expressly mentioned this.

"Not spending enough time with my kids, not being able to help them with their homework. Not being able to fix them hot meals that I would want them to have."

In working nontraditional hours, mothers can lose priceless moments that cannot be replaced, *"It takes a lot, you miss a lot. You don't get to teach the kids to practice their homework and ABCs. I have missed a few cheerleading competitions."*

In addition to having less time for daily activities with children, mothers also described the impact that being away from their children has on their relationship.

"That's the most time you have with them on the weekends and that cuts down the bonding time you have with your kids."

"I can't help my children with their homework, and by the time I get home they're already in bed and I missed the day with them."

"Not enough one on one time with my daughter. Weekends are supposed to be free time."

¹² Research cited in Fruh, Sharon M., Jayne A. Fulkerson, Madhuri S. Mulekar, Lee Ann J. Kendrick, Clista Clanton, "The Surprising Benefits of the Family Meal," *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, January 2011 7 (1) p.19-20.

¹³ Presser Harriet B. and Brian W. Ward, "Nonstandard work schedules over the life course: a first look," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 2011, p. 4.

¹⁴ Joshi, Pamela and Karen Bogen, "Nonstandard Schedules and Young Children's Behavioral Outcomes among Working Low-Income Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69 (February 2007): 139-156.

¹⁵ Joshi, p. 151 & 152, and Presser, p. 4.

¹⁶ See the review by Presser and Ward, p. 4.

¹⁷ Morrissey, Taryn W., Rachel E. Dunifon and Ariel Kalil, "Maternal Employment, Work Schedules, and Children's Body Mass Index" accessed from www.srcl.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_manu-script downloaded, 11/28/12. See also citations in Presser and Ward's review, p. 4.

Having limited positive interactions with a parent can affect the growth and development of the child. It is not unusual for a parent who works in the customer service field to experience a sense of emotional drain, exhaustion or high level of stress when returning home from a work shift. The mother often does not have the time to decompress from work before having to make the transition to being a parent.

A mother describes the physical and mental toll of working long hours on weekends and its impact on her parenting ability this way: "...when I get off on Saturday, I'm beat -- my energy level and attention span." Several mothers made similar comments discussing low energy levels when returning home after working nontraditional work hours. Sometimes it is also the child who is too tired for family time after the parent works late. "After I pick him up from child care, he is tired and just wants to eat and go to bed. I want him to play with me."

Any working mother can feel stress during their commute to pick up the child from a provider on time. If it is an evening or a weekend provider, however, the stress may be that much greater. A mother who works weekends said, "It's very hard trying to get back here on time so my grandma can go where she gotta go. She has to make other plans for herself."

While they often spoke of the time, physical and emotional energy lost as a result of working evenings or weekends as a loss for themselves, at least some see the child as the victim.

"Sometimes they need me for certain things and I'm not there."

"It's like I should have the time for him, and do what I need to do with him. That should be our time. If I could I would rather spend the whole day with him instead of just when I get home from work."

"Having to get up and get them prepared for the weekend. They want to sleep in but have to get up when I get up."

"Sometimes it's a bit hard to leave my child at night, because that's when she needs me more in the evening than in the day time."

"I would just rather be with them on the weekends, spend all my time with them and catch up with them. Just I be tired. Sometimes I just want to go to bed, sometimes they want to talk to me. Sometimes I wish I didn't have to work at all and just focus on them and that's it."

Who Supports Single Mothers?

This report focuses on the essential role the child care provider plays in supporting single working mothers and how the degree of support varies from family to family depending on issues such as the reliability, trust and affordability of care. But we also asked mothers to identify other sources of support in their lives to see who they might turn to in their effort to balance their financial and caregiving responsibilities.

Financially, almost all of the participating mothers relied on the Child Care Assistance Program to help pay for their child care. We didn't

ask specifically about their participation in other social programs, but the mothers were likely eligible for SNAP, Medicaid, TANF (in the case of lower-income parents) and earned income tax credits. We asked mothers who they turn to if they need emergency financial support. The majority of the mothers identified someone they could turn to, and primarily it was a family member. Most commonly it was a parent, but also cousins, aunts, uncles or siblings. Several mothers identified services as sources of financial support such as 311, local non-profit organizations or pay day loan businesses.

Some mothers, however, felt they had no one to rely on for financial support in an emergency. If mothers feel they do not have anyone to rely on for financial support they could suffer from high levels of stress and be vulnerable to predatory lenders, which can further compromise the family's economic stability and level of stress. Financial literacy programs could help mothers plan and anticipate financial disruptions and emergencies so as to minimize the overall impact on the family unit, although they are no panacea for families whose incomes are very low or unstable to begin with.

The caregiving aspect of parenting involves constant demands – physical, emotional and educational – that at times for a parent can be exhausting. For all parents, but single parents in particular, a network of support can assist mothers in their caregiver duties or provide the emotional support parents need to handle their stress. Parenting support includes help with understanding a child's growth and development, how to respond to child's behaviors and parenting advice.

We asked parents who they turn to for parenting and emotional support. Most mothers reported receiving parenting support and advice from their own parents or another relative. Other mothers turned to clergy or congregation members, their child care providers or even a community social service agency.

Emotional support is essential for a mother's mental and physical well-being and can impact her child, as well. One parent stated, "Just the long hours, I'm tired because I work on my feet for 8 or 9 hours straight. I'm kinda drained, you know?" Again, the majority of participants stated they would turn to family for emotional support. Most mothers identified parents as emotional supports, but also cited other relatives such as siblings, cousins or aunts as being sources of emotional support. Other mothers found emotional supports among their friends, neighbors and clergy or congregation members. Some reported they felt there was no one they could turn to for emotional support.

It was clear throughout this project that family is the primary support for working mothers. If a mother is unattached from her wider family, the development of close networks of friends through a parent group at a child care center, school, park district or church can serve as another resource for working parents to tap into. These supports are in many cases critical to the well-being of a mother and as a parent providing for her child to the best of her ability.

Policy Implications and Questions

The single mothers we interviewed were not homogenous in their family life, their jobs, their non-standard work schedules or occupations. Nor are they the same in the support they receive from their extended families. Nevertheless, as a group they are challenged by low incomes, low or modest educational attainment, after-hour and variable work schedules and balancing work and family life.

In this sense, the fifty mothers are a very small tip of a large iceberg. They share some situations and experiences with many other single mothers with low incomes and non-standard work and child care schedules.

Policy makers interested in helping parents stabilize their family life and economic security should understand that simply growing the economy may not be enough. Our interviews confirm that policy makers should expect that public policies need to meet the challenges that these mothers and others with similar situations and experiences face.

Increase Mothers' Options

Parents need choices. Every family is different and makes decisions based on their reality. To create public policies that ignore this is foolish. If we dictate what we think works for families through policy, we will further marginalize our most fragile families and miss the best opportunity we have to engage our youngest learners in meaningful activities.

Policy makers should explore ways to expand capacity in high quality child care centers and licensed homes during non-standard hours. As the interviews show, some parents might be induced to enroll their children in child care centers or licensed homes during non-standard hours of work if they are available.

Affordability is key to families choosing more regulated care settings. Currently, one of the top factors driving low-income families to use FFN child care is the cost of care in licensed centers and licensed family child care homes. States must invest in the affordability of care, while at the same time investing in the quality available to our youngest children whose parents work.

It might take years and large investments to discover and build the most appropriate forms of child care during non-standard hours, but the need for such care is not disappearing and neither will the social cost of failing to provide families with stable high quality care during non-standard hours.

Support FFN Child Care

Single mothers with low incomes and non-standard work schedules rely very much on informal family, friend and neighbor child care, particularly relative care, if it is available. They have both a strong economic motive, since other types of child care are expensive, and a logistical motive, as other types of child care are more scarce and less flexible than FFN child care during non-standard hours. If mothers are socially isolated or have issues trusting strangers as much as they trust family and friends, they also have a powerful emotional motive to prefer FFN child care for their children.

As long as the structure of the US economy sustains millions of low-wage service jobs with non-standard hours – in the retail, food services, health care, custodial and security industries – single mothers and other parents will continue to rely on FFN child care. Yet for reasons mentioned earlier, FFN child care has come under the public policy scrutiny for allegedly lacking educational or 'school-readiness' value.

Critics of FFN aim to deny public funding support to FFN child care, or at the very least starve these caregivers of the resources and supports that may improve its quality. Such recommendations would do more harm than good unless we first address the much larger public policy dilemma of low-wages, no benefits and non-standard work realities for our society's workers.

From our interviews with fifty single mothers, we identified the following recommendations.

- To address the scarcity of evening, overnight, weekend and variable hour care, the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) could increase its reimbursement for care during those hours for children of working parents. This should be available for all types of care.
 - To improve the quality of FFN child care, quality supports should be targeted and prioritized, including quality incentives such as paying a 'premium' for higher quality as measured by the state agency.
 - Because so many FFN child caregivers are related to the child, states should engage in 'Family Support' strategies to reach and educate the providers, as well as the children's families. Strategies might include home visiting programs for FFN providers, peer support groups and classes and reading and other enrichment programs for the children in FFN child care.
 - States should look to computer technology as a way to engage and train the FFN workforce and to create 'social networks' for otherwise isolated providers. Further, while screen time is not advised for very young children, appropriate interactive tools could be developed for FFN providers to use with the older children in their care.
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Support emergency child care

Most working parents have the need for back-up or emergency child care at some point in raising children. The need is especially acute during non-standard hours when parents have the greatest trouble finding care in the first place. Public policy could support the availability of emergency child care in several ways:

- For parents who participate in CCAP, an emergency care premium could supplement the normal CCAP reimbursement and encourage the offering of emergency care.
- Clearinghouses for emergency care and networks of emergency care providers could also be supported, perhaps through CCAP or special programs. Provider networks might be recruited to provide emergency care, especially with premium reimbursements.
- Parent networks that could share emergency providers, and even keep some on retainer
- Parent networks that could act as parent coops, where parents share emergency child care

Support homework

One of the concerns mothers raised most in interviews was not being able to work with their children on their homework. Policy makers could support more and better afterschool programs that are attractive to students and parents. Programs could support children with their homework, in addition to providing important physical and cultural activities. Of course, we recognize a much wider need for afterschool programs than just for children of single mothers who work non-standard hours.

Encourage parent-friendly employer practices

Policy makers could support a number of proposals that have been made regarding how employers could improve the way they schedule work shifts. With the aim of improving family life, for example, persuade or use tax policies to encourage employers to post work schedules farther in advance or even reduce the use of variable schedules.

Build social capital, supplement relative supports

The single mothers we interviewed indicated that, as a group, they are greatly dependent on relatives, notably their own parents, for child care, emotional, financial and parenting support. Not all single mothers have such supports, however, and those who have them may be vulnerable to sudden illness or death in their families.

Public policy could support efforts to increase parents' social capital. By *social capital* we mean those links mothers have with other mothers, individuals and organizations. Examples of such efforts include enhancing parent education programs, home visiting programs, parent peer groups and parent networks. To the extent that these are publicly funded, their design could be made more appropriate to single mothers' nontraditional work schedules.



Appendix. Research Method

A total of 50 single mothers participated in a 20 to 30 minute telephone interview to discuss their experiences as a low income working mother using child care during nontraditional hours. Since the mothers were not selected randomly, their interviews are not intended to represent the experiences of working mothers in Chicago, although it is possible that they do. Instead, we sought a rich discussion of the individual experiences and challenges facing low income mothers in need of nontraditional child care hours.

In order to be eligible for the survey the mother must have met the following criteria. She must:

- Work at least 20 hours a week
- Use evening or weekend child care at least once a week
- Have at least one child under the age of 6
- Be at least 19 years of age (to provide consent for participation in the interviews)

Staff at three Illinois Action for Children walk-in locations in Chicago identified eligible mothers and asked them to participate in the interview process. The Illinois Action for Children Research Department also reached out to local community based organizations that provide early intervention services or programming to children under the age of five.

Each participant was informed of their rights to confidentiality prior to survey participation and to opt out of the survey at any time.

Funding for this report was provided by
the Chicago Foundation for Women
and the Ms. Foundation for Women.

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