

Issue BRIEF

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Developing an Equity-Focused Policy Research Agenda for Low-Income Families with Young Children

Research shows that the earliest years of life are a critical period of human development. Young children's earliest relationships and experiences have a strong influence on brain development and future health and well-being. Young children's foundational relationships and experiences occur in the context of families and communities. Yet, low-income families—especially families of color and rural families—often do not have access to the basic necessities and resources to foster the nurturing experiences and stimulating environments that young children need to thrive. What is needed are policies that support low-income families to provide stimulating and nurturing environments to promote children's healthy physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development and their future success in school and life.

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"Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthier. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care."
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Braveman et al., 2017¹
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PROMOTING RESEARCH ON HIGH-VALUE, HIGH-IMPACT POLICY CHANGES WITH RWJF

As part of its efforts to create a Culture of Health in the United States, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) seeks to identify and promote high-value, high-impact policy changes that can help low-income families support the healthy development of their young children ages birth to 5. As a step toward better understanding these policies, RWJF worked with Mathematica Policy Research to develop a policy research agenda. The goal of this agenda is to generate evidence to guide decision making about policy changes that can better support low-income families with young children.

Working with Mathematica, the RWJF decided to focus on three policy areas as key supports for low-income families with young children:

- Access to Early Care and Education (ECE)
- Income supports
- Nutrition supports

In each policy area, Mathematica reviewed the literature and developed a policy-focused research agenda designed to fill gaps in the following areas: (1) understanding disparities in access and participation by income, geographic location, and race/ethnicity, (2) identifying and assessing innovations to reduce disparities, and for ECE (3) identifying and testing strategies to scale up effective programs. By applying a **health equity** lens to documenting and addressing disparities in families' access to these supports, the agenda recognizes that access to these supports is often unequal, and seeks to generate evidence on innovations that increase equity. The agenda prioritizes research that can produce actionable findings in a short time.

This brief summarizes the proposed research agenda and presents crosscutting research questions about how ECE access and income and nutrition supports intersect.

ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Most families with young children need access to ECE to support children's development and par-

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Example ECE access questions:

- How do state subsidy policies influence disparities in access to ECE?
 - Can state-level coordination of diverse ECE financing mechanisms decrease disparities?
 - What lessons have we learned from state and local pre-K expansions about how to scale up programs, as well as barriers to scaling?
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Example income supports questions:

- How have differences in state TANF policies related to work requirements, incentives, exemptions, and sanctions affected access and participation overall and for key sub-groups?
 - What lessons have been learned from state efforts to restructure EITC payments? What payment structures would best meet beneficiaries' needs?
 - What lessons can be learned from state and local efforts to integrate two-generation approaches in TANF programs? What conditions would be necessary to scale and finance these programs?
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ents' ability to work or attend school. Within the current system, however, many families struggle with program access because they cannot afford ECE or live in areas that lack services. Families from some racial and ethnic groups are also less likely to access ECE. Addressing these access barriers will require research on a diverse set of policies and programs because funding for ECE comes from a variety of federal, state, and local funding sources, including Head Start/Early Head Start, state and district pre-K programs, the Child Care and Development Fund child care subsidies, the child and dependent care tax credit, and parent copayments.

It is challenging to analyze disparities in ECE access because there is no national database of participation across programs and funding sources, and few states have early learning data systems. To address this, the research agenda proposes research that uses current national and state data to document disparities. Existing disparities suggest that the current supply of ECE is insufficient to meet the needs of families. Therefore, the research agenda suggests case studies of state policies and innovations to increase supply (such as increasing subsidy reimbursement rates or co-location of services that provide business supports), and rapid cycle evaluations to examine whether these innovations increase supply and reduce disparities. Finally, because cost is a substantial barrier to achieving equity in access to ECE; the research agenda proposes research to learn lessons from state pre-k expansions about the best ways to finance and scale ECE.

INCOME SUPPORTS

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Income support programs provide important financial benefits for low-income families in the form of tax credits and cash transfer programs. Federal and state tax credits provide low-income families with increased financial resources delivered through tax refunds. The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is the largest of these credit programs. Cash transfer programs, primarily Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), also provide income supports to eligible low-income families. Eligibility requirements and program structure influence low-income families' access and participation levels and create geographic and racial/ ethnic disparities.

More research is needed to document the types and magnitude of disparities in access to income supports. To address this, the agenda proposes research to simulate changes to EITC eligibility requirements, as well as implementing state EITCs. In

addition, comparative case studies of states, focusing on states with more and less restrictive TANF rules related to exemptions from work requirements, time limits, and behavioral requirements, could provide important insights into disparities in accessing and participating in TANF. Research is also needed to glean lessons from states and localities' experimenting with their TANF programs and other income support policies. For example, states have proposed and implemented innovations in tax credit policy and transfer programs, such as increasing awareness of the EITC, changing EITC payment schedules, providing incentives to TANF participants to improve compliance and move families off benefits, and offering services for children alongside TANF. In addition, two local areas are providing universal basic income projects that provide unconditional cash assistance to low-income families, meaning recipients are not subject to work requirements or other rules. Potential research could include case studies to better understand states and localities' experiences implementing innovative income support policies, learn about barriers to implementation, and provide insights for other jurisdictions considering similar strategies for designing and implementing income support policies.

NUTRITION SUPPORTS

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Nutrition supports aim to improve both food security (a family's access to an adequate amount of food at all times) and nutrition (the nutritional quality of food that a family consumes). A substantial body of research documents nutritional disparities for children from low-income households and racial and ethnic minority children. Children in these groups are at higher risk for food insecurity and are less likely to eat healthy foods, such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Several federal nutrition programs serve low-income families with young children and have the potential to help address these disparities. They include (1) the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); (2) the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and (3) the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

More research is needed to fully understand the dynamics of low-income families' participation in the range of nutrition supports available to them. Existing studies and program monitoring data provide useful findings about participation and coverage in SNAP and WIC, including information on disparities. However, important gaps in knowledge remain about families' participation in these supports and possible disparities in

Example nutrition supports questions:

- What proportion of young children from low-income households receive CACFP meals? Do disparities in participation exist?
- What are the reasons for nonparticipation among WIC-eligible women and lower participation rates after children reach age 1? Do reasons differ by family characteristics?
- What interventions based on behavioral economics (for example, issuing benefits more frequently or allowing participants to preorder foods) can improve nutrition outcomes for SNAP participants with young children?

access, including how families combine multiple sources of nutrition support to meet their needs. To address these questions, researchers could analyze state and federal administrative data and data from existing surveys. Qualitative research to understand the reasons for nonparticipation and food security dynamics in different types of low-income families could include interviews with parents and caregivers, administrators from state and local nutrition programs, and child care providers. Innovative policies might enhance the effectiveness of nutrition supports for young children and their families; for example, adjusting the value of SNAP benefits to account for geographic differences in food costs, subsidizing healthy food purchases, or issuing benefits more frequently to encourage the purchase of healthy perishable foods. Innovative interventions may also help address disparities in participation and outcomes; for example, increasing the accessibility of WIC through mobile WIC clinics, and conducting targeted outreach to child care providers to encourage participation in CACFP. Potential research to examine these options could include modeling the effects of policy changes, rapid-cycle evaluations of promising interventions, and qualitative research to explore families' and providers' experiences with innovative program strategies.

CROSSCUTTING RESEARCH AGENDA

In separate briefs, we outline more research questions about ECE, income supports, and nutrition supports. However, these areas also overlap. Research to examine the intersection of these three areas could address the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of families that access multiple supports, such as child care subsidies, TANF, and SNAP?
- What are the characteristics of low-income families that do not receive supports? For example, families that do not receive TANF or child care subsidies but whose income is too low to receive the EITC or child and dependent care tax credits?
- What are the characteristics of communities with limited access to supports? For example, do child care deserts overlap with food deserts?

- Does caseworker discretion in TANF affect disparities in access to child care subsidies?
- How do subsidy, licensing, and eligibility policies for family-based child care affect children's access to nutrition services?
- How are states strengthening the safety net, for example, by implementing state EITCs, pre-K programs, and supports for healthy eating among low-income families?
- How does state and local implementation of supports for low-income families contribute to disparities in access or outcomes?
- To what extent do states with generous TANF policies, such as exemptions for parents, have generous child care subsidy policies?
- How do ECE, income supports, and nutrition supports reinforce one another to help families meet their needs? How can different programs work together to efficiently and effectively support families?

This brief was created by Mathematica Policy Research through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to develop a policy research agenda to support low-income children and families. Three other briefs present policy research agendas for [access to ECE](#), [income supports](#), and [nutrition supports](#). For more information about this brief, contact Diane Paulsell, Senior Researcher, Mathematica Policy Research, (609) 275-2297; DPaulsell@mathematica-mpr.com

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¹ Braveman, P., Arkin, E., Orleans, T., Proctor, D., & Plough, A. (2017). *What Is Health Equity? And What Difference Does a Definition Make?* Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

