Social and Economic Factors Associated with Parents' Decisions About After-School Child Care: An Exploratory Study in a Medium-Sized Community

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ABSTRACT: This exploratory study examined social and economic factors associated with the after-school child care decisions of parents (n = 41) of elementary school children in a medium-sized community. Self-care (latchkey), family day care, and center arrangements were represented in the sample. Differences in type of arrangement were found to be related to marital status, city vs. rural residence, parental preferences for characteristics of after-school arrangements, and child's gender, age, and arrangement preferences. There were no differences across arrangement types regarding the perceived safety, informal resources, and age of the neighborhood. Cost was not a significant variable, although lower-income parents showed greater sensitivity to costs of after-school care. Directions for future research are discussed.

Increasingly working parents are confronted with a major decision about the care of their school-age child after school hours. Rapidly growing numbers of American households no longer have an adult who is at home during daytime nonschool hours. Most research regarding after-school child care has focused on self-care (or latchkey) arrangements, with particular interest in the effects on children, (e.g., Rodman, Pratto, & Nelson, 1985; Steinberg, 1986). Little research attention has been given to factors which contribute to parents’ decisions about after-school child care.

Several dimensions of the neighborhood in which families live may influence parents' child care arrangements. The length of time most residents have lived in a neighborhood has been found to be a major factor in urban parents' searches for preschool child care. In established areas compared to transient neighborhoods, parents used informal...
network ties to a greater extent in searching for care (Eisenstadt & Powell, 1983). Neighborhood safety also may be a significant influence. Studies of urban inner-city children have found self-care children to have lower academic achievement (Woods, 1972) and more fears and nightmares (Long & Long, 1983) than children under adult supervision after school. However, Galambos and Garbarino (1983) found no school achievement or social development differences between self-care and supervised children in a rural community. More needs to be known about the role of neighborhood resources (e.g., number of neighbors known) in parents' decisions about after-school child care. For instance, are self-care arrangements more prevalent in certain types of neighborhoods (e.g., perceived "safe" or where residents have lived for long periods of time)?

Little is known about parents' perceptions of child needs and maturity levels in relation to the child care decision. While there is some literature to suggest that parents' selection of self-care is accompanied by concern and ambivalence (Long & Long, 1983), there also are data which indicate some parents see possible benefits for their child, including increased independence and the acquisition of new survival skills (Kuchak, Murphy, Altman, Brandis, Cosgrove, & Saavedra, 1985). Do parents using self-care perceive their children to be more mature than parents using other forms of nonfamilial child care after school?

A neglected aspect of much research on parents' use of child care is explicit treatment of the economic calculus involved. In the case of after-school child care, the cost element is especially relevant because self-care is a no- or low-cost alternative to more formal arrangements. While Moore (1980) found parental values to be a stronger influence on child care decisions than economic factors, proponents of formal after-school programs often argue for reducing economic barriers to program use (Farel, 1984). Empirical data are needed on the extent to which cost is a major factor in parents' decisions to use self-care or a supervised situation.

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to identify social and economic factors associated with parents' choice about after-school child care. Three types of after-school child care were considered: self-care; nonfamilial sitter; and center-based program. The research considered several predictor variables in each of the following areas: neighborhood context; child characteristics and preferences; and economic costs. The study, then, was multidisciplinary. An aim was to generate empirically-based suggestions of variables for further research. Some attention also was given to parents' search processes, including the economic aspects of the search.