Mothers’ Work and Child Care

In “Mothers’ Work and Child Care,” Julia B. Isaacs, director of the Division of Data and Technical Analysis of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Planning, describes the strengths and weaknesses of the child care data in the main national surveys. Isaacs also examines the main data sources that HHS uses to measure the availability and quality of child care for low-income families: the Current Population Survey (CPS); the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP); the National Household Education Survey (NHES); the National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF); state administrative data collected by the federal government that include aggregate numbers of children receiving subsidies as well as some of the characteristics of those subsidies, such as type of provider and age of child; and state studies of those who have left the welfare rolls (leaver studies).

This essay discusses the availability of data to address policy questions about child care for low-income families. Specifically, I attempt to answer the question: How can existing surveys, studies, and other data be used to measure the availability and quality of child care for low-income families? I discuss several sources of data, briefly describing what each source tells us and outlining its strengths and weaknesses. Included in this review are national population-based survey data; federal and state administrative data; state survey data, specifically from studies of families leaving welfare (“leaver studies”); and, very briefly, special child care studies.

National Surveys

It is common for child care policymakers to complain about the lack of good data on child care. As bad as the situation may be, it was worse before the arrival of the Julia B. Isaacs directs research and analyzes human services policies at the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. As director of the Data and Technical Analysis Division in ASPE’s Human Services Policy office, she has a particular interest in the collection and analysis of data related to welfare, child care, and other programs serving low-income populations.
Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which has added considerably to our knowledge of child care. Much of what we know about child care utilization patterns and costs comes from SIPP data. The SIPP will continue to be an important source of information on child care in the future, along with the related Survey of Program Dynamics, which follows a subset of SIPP families for a longer period to study welfare reform longitudinally and which includes questions about child care arrangements.

Another important national population-based survey for the study of child care is the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS does not actually provide much direct information about child care arrangements. It does, however, provide considerable information on the labor force participation and income of parents. Those data are important for answering questions about the number of children with working parents and the income of those parents, providing some indication of the potential need for child care and child care subsidies.

A third useful national survey, the National Household Education Survey (NHES), may not be as well-known among welfare reform researchers. Conducted annually by the Department of Education, the NHES includes an Early Childhood Program Participation component in certain years. For example, the 2001 NHES provides useful information about child care arrangements for children under age six and not in kindergarten, including details about the language of the provider, care for sick children, and the distance between the care and the home and job—data not found in the other national surveys. A separate component of the 2001 NHES provides similar information on before- and after-school arrangements for children in kindergarten through eighth grade. One drawback of the NHES for studying child care for low-income children is that the NHES does not collect detailed income information. The survey does, however, try to collect enough income information to determine who is above or below the poverty line.

Other national surveys with relevance for child care policymakers include the National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF) and the child development supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). Both studies collected data on child care arrangements in 1997, and the NSAF also collected data on arrangements in 1999 and 2002. Finally, I should at least mention the 1990 National Child Care Survey and the related Profile of Child Care Settings as good household and provider surveys, respectively, although the data from those surveys are now quite dated.

To answer the question of what the national survey data tell us, I will briefly highlight three sets of findings: average child care costs, particularly for low-income families; the importance of both informal and formal child care arrangements; and estimates of the need for child care and child care subsidies.