



Report  
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# Child Care for Young Parents: A Missing Key to Intergenerational Upward Mobility in the District

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This report centers the voices of young parents to increase utilization of child care subsidies in the District of Columbia.



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## The Challenge: A Lack of Intergenerational Upward Mobility

Close to one in four<sup>1</sup> children live in poverty in the District of Columbia, with rates as high as 38% in Wards 7 and 8 with predominantly Black residents. And while child poverty has declined<sup>2</sup> a bit – 29% in 2012 to 23% in 2021– persistent disparities exist in key areas. In 2020<sup>3</sup>, the median income for Black households was about one-third the median income for white households; unemployment among white residents was 2.6% but 13.8% among Black residents; and college degree attainment was 90% among white adults compared to 29% among Black adults and 48% among Latinx adults. Across the US, mobility<sup>4</sup> (the chance a child will earn more than their parents) has declined from 90% in 1940 to 50% more recently, and the chances of a child moving from the bottom fifth of the income distribution to the top fifth is one of the lowest in the developed world at only 7.5%.

## The Opportunity: Ensure Young Parents Can Access Quality Child Care

**The District has taken bold steps to address this challenge of child poverty and the lack of upward mobility.**

These measures include provision of universal pre-Kindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds; passage of legislation to expand affordable or no-cost early learning and child care to zero- to three-year-olds; major investments in affordable housing; one of the highest minimum wages in the country; millions in new paid training and job placement grants; and, more recently, a monthly basic income for low-income families as well as baby bonds legislation to create a trust fund for low-income children.

**Still, there is more that can and must be done.**

One group of residents – those who become parents as teens – pose both a challenge and an opportunity to reduce child poverty and increase mobility. Children born to teen parents are more likely to live in poverty<sup>5</sup>. This is due in part to cyclic causality where teen parents are already more likely to be low-income<sup>6</sup> before having children. Then, having a child may impede<sup>7</sup> their ability to complete high school or college, which then impairs their ability to secure family-sustaining wages. This ultimately leaves their children in poverty and at greater risk of early parenthood again, continuing the cycle of poverty and poor health.



**One group of residents – those who become parents as teens – pose both a challenge and an opportunity to reduce child poverty and increase mobility.**

However, these challenges often overshadow an immense opportunity: Engaging young parents at this pivotal moment in their lives can change the trajectory of their future and the lives of their children too. Recent research by Wittenberg<sup>8</sup> et. al, shows that, “In many cases, teen mothers describe pregnancy and motherhood as opportunities for important positive changes in their lives ... [and] that some teen mothers improve their lives because of pregnancy and motherhood.” This research also highlights that the experience of being responsible for a baby can inspire teens to organize and improve their lives.

**Young parents are a deeply motivated population who, with the right wraparound support, are ready to break the cycle and move from poverty to prosperity.**

This is where policy makers must come in.

**One key intervention that could help young parents and their children succeed and end these cycles of poverty and poor health is access to affordable, high-quality child care.**

Access to quality child care will enable young parents to finish high school, attend college, complete job training, or secure employment – all keys to building a better life for themselves and their children. In addition to helping young parents, early education<sup>9</sup> and care is a critical good in and of itself for infants and toddlers whose brains grow fastest in the first three years of life and for whom nurturing relationships, early learning, and good health and nutrition lay the foundation for future success.

**The District is leading the nation in investments in quality childcare.**

From passing ground-breaking legislation intended to expand vouchers that ensure no family in DC pays more than 10% of their income on child care, to increasing pay for early childhood educators to rates on par with K-12 teachers, to investing millions in the Access to Quality Child Care Grant<sup>10</sup> program to increase the supply of child care slots, to the Mayor’s recent announcement to increase eligibility<sup>11</sup> for subsidies from 250 percent of federal poverty guidelines to 300 percent, the District’s efforts are impressive.

**However, there appears to be a gap between those who are eligible and those who actually receive subsidies.**

In 2019, prior to disruptions due to the pandemic, there were 5,173<sup>12</sup> infants and toddlers receiving child care subsidies. However, according to the DC CFO, an estimated 11,406<sup>13</sup> children were eligible to participate.

**55% of infants and toddlers who were eligible for subsidies were not receiving them.**

More research needs to be done to understand the gap between those who are eligible for child care support and those who access it; some reasons may be family members caring for a child or the parent choosing to be a full-time caregiver. Still, because child care is such a critical support, particularly for young parents to finish school and secure employment with family-sustaining wages, DC NEXT! wanted to understand why more young parents were not taking advantage of child care subsidies.

**DC NEXT!’s Approach to Solution Driving: Centering Young Parent Voices**

The DC Network for Expectant and Parenting Teens ([DC NEXT!](#)) is a federally funded collective impact innovation network aimed at improving the health and well-being of expectant and parenting teens in the District. With over two dozen partners across DC— all serving young parents—and a team of young parents serving as advisors to DC NEXT!, child care consistently surfaces as an unmet need.

**DC NEXT! wanted to speak directly with young parents and those supporting them to understand their lived experience navigating the child care system.**

DC NEXT! wanted to uncover why more low-income parents are not taking full advantage of child care subsidy vouchers<sup>14</sup>, and why those who are, were reporting challenges.

As part of DC NEXT!, Howard University together with the DC Primary Care Association (DCPCA), organized a design team. They used human-centered design and journey mapping to understand the experience of young parents accessing child care. The design team conducted 31 deep-dive interviews with 21 young parents (ages 17 – 25) and 10 providers assisting young parents in accessing support services, including child care. The young parents interviewed were majority Black (66%) and Hispanic (19%), and largely live in wards 7 (33%) and 8 (28%).

## Initial Findings

The design team uncovered six initial findings. Outlined below are descriptions of each, but at a high level, several stand out.

**First, young parents are deeply motivated to finish school and find employment, and they see child care as a key tool to achieve their goals.**

- *“What motivated me to get childcare for her was a lot of people were saying ‘oh because you’re having a baby you’re not going to be able to finish school .... you’re not going to do anything with your life.’ So I wanted to prove to everybody that I can finish school, and prove to my daughter that I can finish school while being pregnant and being an example for her.” -Young Parent*

**However, a number of interviewees reported not knowing about vouchers.**

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***“A lot of people don’t know how to get a voucher or how to start looking for child care.”***

**-Young Parent**

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**Additionally, many young parents reported not trusting child care providers.**

- *“You see a lot of stuff about daycare centers and your kids, so it makes you scared to send your child with someone else.” -Young Parent*

**While some may assume young parents would be willing to place their children with any provider, we found that young parents spend a lot of time searching for quality, affordable providers and are clear about what quality means to them.**

- *“You don’t just want to put your child in any center, so you have to do your research.” -Young Parent*

**Unfortunately, many parents reported difficulty finding care providers who met their standards and accepted vouchers.**

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***“The child care that I wanted, I couldn’t have. I really wanted them to go to the one that had more learning things and activities they can do .... It was just so expensive. I was just like ... hopefully by next year, they can accept vouchers. They put me on a waitlist. That would have been \$1300 per month. I can’t afford that and rent and a car.”***

**-Young Parent**

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**One of the biggest barriers to accessing care highlighted by parents interviewed is the confusing, overwhelming, and not-customer-service-oriented application process.**

- *“It was too much .... The process of getting a voucher during the time I was in school ... it’s not an easy process.” -Young Parent*
- *“I’ve had youth who have turned 21 and had to get the voucher on their own and say, ‘I don’t understand this.’ They just felt like the process, the website, and what documents they were missing ... that process is challenging. They’ll say ‘I didn’t understand, they didn’t say what I needed.’” - Social Worker*

**Young parents and staff supporting them reported the voucher application process requiring an overwhelming amount of paperwork; multiple, in-person trips; long processing times, sometimes for months; and sometimes a lack of empathy and customer service from staff, ultimately discouraging young parents from seeking support.**

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***“The turnaround time, the people reviewing the applications need to be faster. This is people’s lives. They need this. That teen mom is being affected by this or using some subpar person to watch their child. We don’t need to make it extremely hard.”***

**- Social Worker**

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One young mom visited the DHS three times, and on the third time she said, **“Then they wanted more documents on [my daughter’s] dad about child support. I just basically gave up.”**

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- “If I was just going to turn something in [to the DHS office], I would be there an hour or two. But if I had to go in and talk to somebody ... I was there all day and was going to miss school altogether.” –Young Parent
- “It was a lot of paperwork. I was only like 18 so I didn’t have anything under my name, so I had to bring my mom’s paperwork and her ID ....It was just a lot of paperwork that I didn’t have .... It took at least six months.” –Young Parent
- “I feel like a lot of the workers, they aren’t very helpful or considerate. A lot of times when I call, I have to try to get in touch with somebody. They are really really rude. They talk to you like you don’t know anything. Like you are stupid. Speaking to anyone from DHS is always really difficult. If you don’t call by 8:30 or 9 am you will be on hold all day. You have to call as soon as they are open, it’s very inconvenient.” –Young Parent

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**“The biggest crisis children are facing is untrained professionals .... We’ll look at a young girl who did not fill out her application. But if she’s at home and she’s taking care of her siblings, and her mother’s an addict and her father’s an addict .... [They’re] calling her lazy and unmotivated. So now she won’t come in because [they’re] looking at her and calling her lazy. Number two is disrespectful, lack of training or understanding of staff.”**

**– New Heights Coordinator**

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**Additionally, young parents and support staff reported difficulty accessing child care on nights and weekends when many young parents must work, resulting in forced resignations and firings.**

- “At night there’s really no one to watch them. For my Nando’s job, I had to work from 5 pm to 10 or 11 pm at night. Daycares don’t run that late ... I got a job at night, but I ended up getting fired because I would always call out because I didn’t have anybody to watch my kids. So that got hard.” –Young Parent

**Finally, work and school requirements to receive vouchers were reported as burdensome and confusing, with some young parents highlighting the catch-22 of needing child care in order to find employment, but being required to have employment in order to qualify for child care.**

- “After I gave birth to my second .... They told me that I didn’t qualify [for a child care voucher]. I needed a job, but I couldn’t get a job because I didn’t have day care ... You have 30 days from when you get the voucher to get a job.” –Young Parent

## **Recommendations for Consideration**

This report concludes with six recommendations for consideration, including fully funding the Birth-to-Three for All DC Act to ensure sufficient, quality, affordable child care slots; implementing a targeted advertising campaign to increase awareness of vouchers among those in need; ensuring the District’s child care quality initiative includes what young families define as quality; increasing the availability of child care offered at alternative hours for shift workers; eliminating or at least modifying the work and school requirements; and critically, funding and launching a human-centered design process to reform the child care voucher and application process to ensure it is short, mobile-friendly, and delivered with compassion.

## **Opportunity for Collaboration**

DC NEXT!, led by the Howard and DCPCA design team, invites key policy makers who have the power to address these challenges to a shared table with young parents and the providers supporting them to work together to improve the child care application process. Together, we can ensure young parents are able to quickly and conveniently access the quality, affordable child care they and their children need to end generational cycles of poverty and thrive.

# Initial Findings

## Awareness Phase

**1. Young parents are motivated to finish school and find employment, and see child care as a key tool.**

- a. Child care is key to completing high school, continuing education, job training, and employment.
- b. Child care vouchers cover a cost young parents could not afford.

**2. Some young parents don't know about child care vouchers.**

## Research and Selection Phase

**3. Quality and affordability matter: young parents are dedicated to finding quality and affordable child care.**

- a. Many young parents don't trust child care providers.
- b. Selection criteria most important to young parents includes: proximity, affordability and availability of voucher slots, quality of staff and services, safety of neighborhood (specifically gun violence).
- c. Young parents highlighted key qualities as: daily photos, children show affection for teachers, feeling listened to and respected, children meet developmental milestones, provision of supports such as food and diapers.
- d. Young parents and providers report a lack of high-quality slots that accept vouchers.

## Delivery Phase

**4. The voucher application process is not user-friendly: Every young parent interviewed needed assistance navigating the child care system and applying for vouchers.**

- a. Young fathers felt particularly cut off from needed help.
- b. Interviewees highlighted specific challenges to the voucher application process including:
  - Long wait times at DHS office.
  - Needing to visit DHS office multiple times.
  - Long processing times from two weeks to several months.
  - Excessive paperwork.
  - A lack of empathy and customer service from some social service staff.
- c. Young parents who applied for vouchers through Level II providers (can process vouchers) and with New Heights assistance, report a better experience.
- d. Level II providers and New Heights staff still face challenges such as gathering needed supporting documents and lengthy applications.

**5. The hours provided by child care providers often do not align with work schedules of young workers. Several young parents had to resign or were fired.**

**6. The criteria around work and school requirements are confusing and burdensome.**

- a. The requirements to work, attend college, or certify job search 20 hours per week is burdensome and confusing.
- b. Infants and toddlers of young parents should be allowed to attend subsidized child care regardless of their parents' school or work status.

## Recommendations for Consideration

- 1 | Fully fund the Birth-to-Three for All DC Act.
- 2 | Increase awareness of child care vouchers through a targeted advertising campaign including social media channels.
- 3 | Ensure Capitol Quality (DC's child care quality scoring system) aligns with young family definition of quality.
- 4 | Fund and launch a dedicated human-centered design process that directly engages with consumers to reform the child care voucher and application process, including:
  - a. Expedite certification of more Level II child care providers who can process vouchers and applications on-site.
  - b. Eliminate the need to physically go to the DHS office to apply for a voucher.
  - c. Make the voucher application available online, mobile friendly, and including smart logic and auto-fill.
  - d. Implement customer satisfaction survey to create feedback loop from young parents to service providers.
  - e. Incorporate trauma-informed care and ongoing anti-bias, youth-centered trainings for all government and child care providers.
  - f. Reduce the amount of paperwork required; simplify forms.
  - g. Increase data-sharing between high schools, medical providers, and child care providers to expedite access to child care.
  - h. Increase resources for New Heights and other programs to ensure sufficient support staff to help teen parents access child care.
- 5 | Increase availability of child care offered at alternative hours for shift workers.
- 6 | Eliminate or modify the requirement that parents attend school or work to receive a voucher.
  - a. Loosen requirements to "verify" job search with government agencies and ensure young parents can access child care while job hunting.

## Author's Note

An advance copy of this report was shared with OSSE and DHS. OSSE shared that they are taking several steps toward adopting some of the recommendations in the report, including:

- Working to improve communications with parents about vouchers and how to access them;
- Developing an online application process; and
- Reviewing policy guides in order to streamline and improve the application process.

We are encouraged by these initial steps and stand ready to bring young parents and frontline support staff together with OSSE and DHS to ensure their planned actions align with the needs of those most in need of vouchers. We also look forward to continuing to engage OSSE and DHS as partners to advance the other recommendations in this report, given the urgency of the need to ensure parents have access to the child care they need to thrive.

Additionally, since the writing of this report, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) proposed a number of rule changes to the Child

Care and Development Fund that may help create more space for some of this report's recommendations. Proposed rule changes include expanding non traditional hours and making the enrollment and re-enrollment process easier and available online.

We strongly support these updates and encourage readers of this report to contact the Under 3 DC Coalition to learn more about the proposed rule changes and how to show support for these changes.

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- 14** The terms subsidy and voucher are often used interchangeably, and while government agencies and child care providers often refer to subsidies, parents and community members often use the term voucher<sup>7</sup>.