

Exploring a Market Failure: The 2023 Mississippi Child Care Teacher Wages Survey

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INTRODUCTION

United States workers rely on accessible, affordable child care.

The United States is experiencing a child care crisis, and workers are finding it difficult to maintain and seek employment due to child care shortages. The Bipartisan Policy Center (2021) reports that even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the supply of child care did not meet demand. Thirty-two percent of working parents with young children lacked access to child care nationally, and the gap was even wider (35%) in rural areas.¹

This gap impacts parents' ability to work. In 2021, 45% of parents living in rural areas reported that they or their spouse provided care for their child in the home. Eighty-six percent of non-working rural parents reported that child care responsibilities impacted their work status.¹

Child care affordability is another work barrier for families. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services determined that child care is unaffordable if it exceeds 7% of a household's income. According to the U.S. Census, in 2021, families nationwide spent between 5.1% and 12.9% of their household incomes on child care. Families with lower incomes spent a higher percentage of their household income, and Black families paid a higher percentage (8.9%) compared to White families (6.6%).²

Child care accessibility and affordability depend on an adequate child care workforce.

In February of this year, the Center for American Progress reported that the child care workforce lost 90,000 workers from February 2020 to July 2022. This exodus from child care was exacerbated by the pandemic, but poverty wages and difficult working conditions for child care teachers have been longstanding problems.³

Ninety-eight percent of all other occupations pay higher wages than child care. Child care educators are less likely to have health insurance, have higher student debt than the national average, and experience high levels of food insecurity.⁴ When many retail and fast-food jobs pay more than child care, it can be very difficult for child care providers to keep classrooms open or to even stay in business.³ Rural areas are

especially dependent on family child care providers, which have been declining in number over time.⁵ This decrease in family providers is reportedly due to low wages, few benefits, and long hours.

Current child care workforce conditions represent a costly market failure.

Few investments return the dividends that are found in early childhood. Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman (2012) demonstrated that investments in children ages zero to five can yield returns of 7% to 13%, with the highest gains seen among low-income children attending high-quality child care programs.⁶ The first three years of life are the most formative for brain development and represent a one-time opportunity to cultivate neural connections that can later impact use of special education services, lifelong medical costs, social behaviors, and workforce participation.⁷

Working parents are dependent on having access to high-quality, affordable child care to cultivate these early childhood gains that are so important to lifelong outcomes. However, neither the majority of child care owners nor the majority of parents can afford the true cost of child care. Therefore, many child care providers operate at razor thin margins, or even at a deficit, and child care educators are offered wages that are not commensurate with the level of responsibility and education that is required. This disconnect between wages earned by, and the burden placed on, child care educators accounts for workforce shortfalls and a lack of access to child care for working families.³

The fundamental market failure of child care is costly. ReadyNation (2023) reports that the lack of infant and toddler care in the U.S. is costing \$122B annually in lost productivity and revenue,⁸ and the Bipartisan Policy Center (2021) reports that rural communities are more impacted by this economic loss than urban ones.¹

Mississippi needs a robust child care workforce to support working families.

With 26% of young children (from birth to age five) living in poverty,⁹ Mississippi workers and employers have much to gain from access to high-quality, affordable child care. In the short term, parents can maintain and seek employment and educational opportunities, keeping the Mississippi economy robust. In the long term, employers benefit from a better prepared workforce. The state of Mississippi and its taxpayers also benefit from savings in remedial and special education, as well as overall better health and occupational outcomes for residents.⁶

Currently in Mississippi, however, emergency pandemic funding to stabilize child care will be depleted in September 2024. Once these funds are exhausted, almost 2,300 children are expected to lose care, and 375 child care programs are expected to close.¹⁰ Mississippi already has a higher rate of job openings than the national average. According to the Southeast Information Office of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Regional Commissioner, the job openings rate in Mississippi was 6.4% in July 2023 and 6.8% in the previous month. The job openings rate nationally was 5.3% in July and 5.5% in June 2023.¹¹



CURRENT STUDY

An important step in determining ways to recruit and retain an adequate child care workforce is understanding the status and needs of the existing workforce. To this end, a Wages Working Group emerged as part of the Forum for the Future, a Mississippi-based early childhood consortium with backbone support from the Mississippi Early Learning Alliance. This group consists of child care providers, university faculty and staff, members of the business community, and other early childhood stakeholders. Its goal is to research the early childhood workforce and to take actions, in concert with others, to address the child care crisis in Mississippi.

Currently, the number and characteristics of Mississippi child care educators are unknown. The Mississippi Department of Human Services and the Mississippi State Department of Health are implementing updated online systems for capturing more information about the child care workforce in the future. To fill in the current gaps in knowledge and provide information for child care policy discussions in the wake of the child care crisis, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the current wages of child care teachers in Mississippi?
2. How do they differ by job title, facility type, level of education, geography?
3. What are the current qualifications of child care teachers in Mississippi, including education, languages spoken, and teaching credentials?
4. What are the current working conditions of child care teachers, including hours worked, number of jobs held, benefits offered, care of children with special needs, and dependence on assistance programs?
5. How stable is the workforce (i.e., what is the percentage of workforce actively seeking alternate employment)?
6. How much of an increase in wages is needed to stabilize the workforce?
7. In what form do teachers prefer an increase in pay (wage increase vs lump sum/bonus), and is a wage increase more valuable than total monthly income?
8. How much of an increase in wages is needed to incentivize teachers to obtain their next highest credentials/degrees?
9. How much of an increase in wages is needed to reduce child care teachers' reliance on assistance programs?
10. What is the demographic makeup of the child care workforce?



METHODS

Child Care Provider Engagement in Survey Creation

A draft survey instrument was reviewed twice and piloted by child care members of the Forum for the Future Wages Working Group, and recommended changes were incorporated. These changes related to the sensitivity of the questions about wages and benefits, as well as wording recommendations.

Recruitment

Survey participants were recruited through a list of licensed providers obtained via the online Mississippi State Department of Health Child Care Provider Search portal. An email was sent to all licensed providers with an explanation of the survey, a link to the survey, and a link to a print-out that contained instructions and a QR code for the survey that could be posted in child care facilities. Directors were requested to share the survey link or QR code with all teachers. The listserv contained 1,463 licensed center email addresses, 43 of which bounced back, and 212 of which were duplicates, indicating the same owner/director for more than one facility. The total number of up-to-date, unique email addresses was 1,251. Follow-up reminder emails were issued while the survey was open.


Leadership from both Head Start in Mississippi and the Mississippi Nurturing Homes Initiative circulated the survey request to Head Start and family home-based providers, respectively. The survey was also promoted via the social media accounts of state-level early care and education stakeholders, including Shared Services.

Virtual Child Care Provider Meetings

Three public virtual meetings were held by Forum for the Future working group chairs, consortium backbone members, and the data collection team as the survey was being distributed to answer any questions from the child care provider community about the survey and/or the data collection process. The public meetings were promoted through the same channels as the survey.

Data Collection

The 2023 Mississippi Child Care Teacher Wages Survey was administered through a Qualtrics survey template. Respondents accessed the survey via a nonidentifying



hyperlink or QR code. The survey was conducted between the dates of July 18, 2023, and August 9, 2023, with an additional 48-hour window for respondents to finish after that date. Survey data were downloaded, and the analyses began on August 11, 2023. There was a total of 764 nonduplicated, completed survey responses. Additional filtering was then applied to exclude respondents with a nonprimary teaching role (i.e., non-teaching directors, cooking staff, bus drivers). This reduced the final number of respondents for inclusion in the analysis to 661.

Analyses

Several variables were cleaned prior to the analysis. Gender was presented as an open-ended question on the survey, and text data were converted to standard Female/Male/Other categories for the analysis. Race, which allowed multiple selections, was collapsed to individual categories for single responses, and a multi-racial category for those selecting more than one race. Ethnicity was included in the question; therefore, those responding as Hispanic were not placed into a racial category but remained in the category of Hispanic. For the variable of job title, the “other” option was carefully reviewed by researchers to determine teaching status. Most of the “other” respondents were determined not to be in a primary teaching role, which informed the data filtering mentioned in the previous paragraph. Wages were processed into a continuous variable of hourly dollar amount. Respondents could select multiple ways to answer this question, such as hourly or salaried. For those who were salaried, their reported hours per week were used to create their hourly wage per hours worked.

Analyses were performed in the R programming language for all frequencies, descriptives, crosstabulations, and categorical means estimates. The libraries “ggplot2” and “usmap” were used to map response counts geographically at the county level. Tables of all analyses were exported to Excel, so the team of researchers could review all aggregated survey data and produce visualizations for this report.

Child Care Provider Member Checking

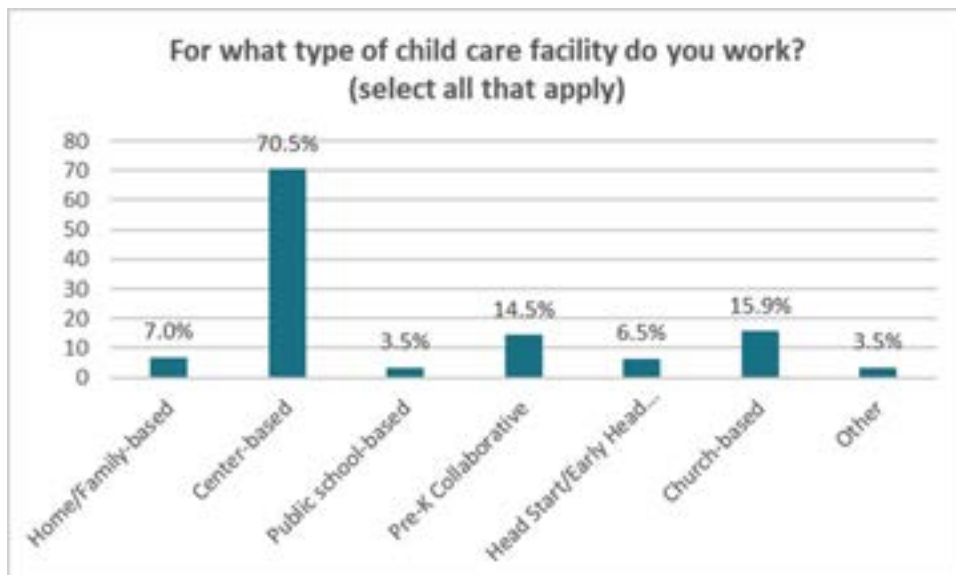
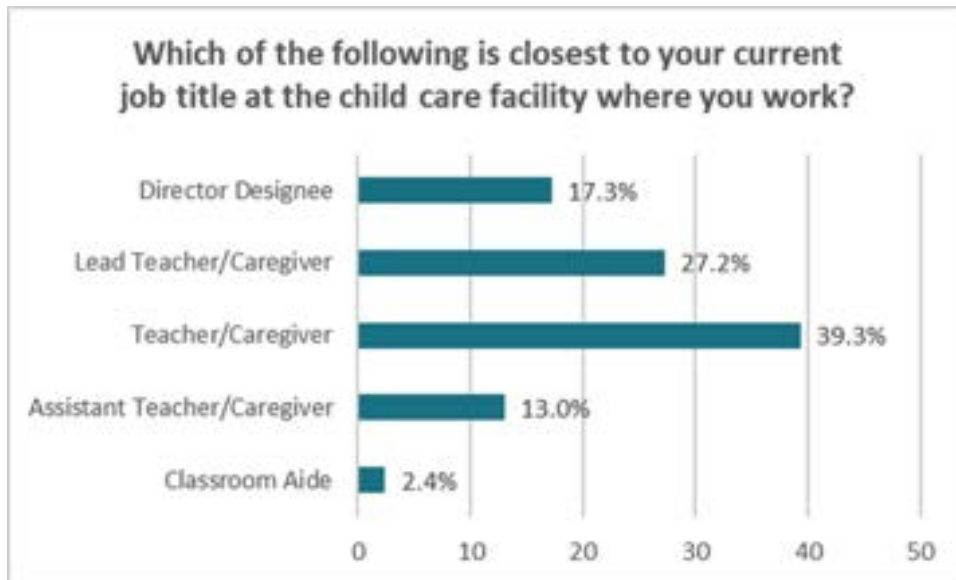
Prior to release, survey results were vetted with child care members of the Forum for the Future Wages Working Group, as well as another group of providers, who were previously convened to generate recommendations for a new child care quality system in Mississippi. Both groups confirmed researcher interpretations of survey data. The survey was also sent to the full Mississippi child care provider community via the former recruitment channels with researcher contact information for comments.



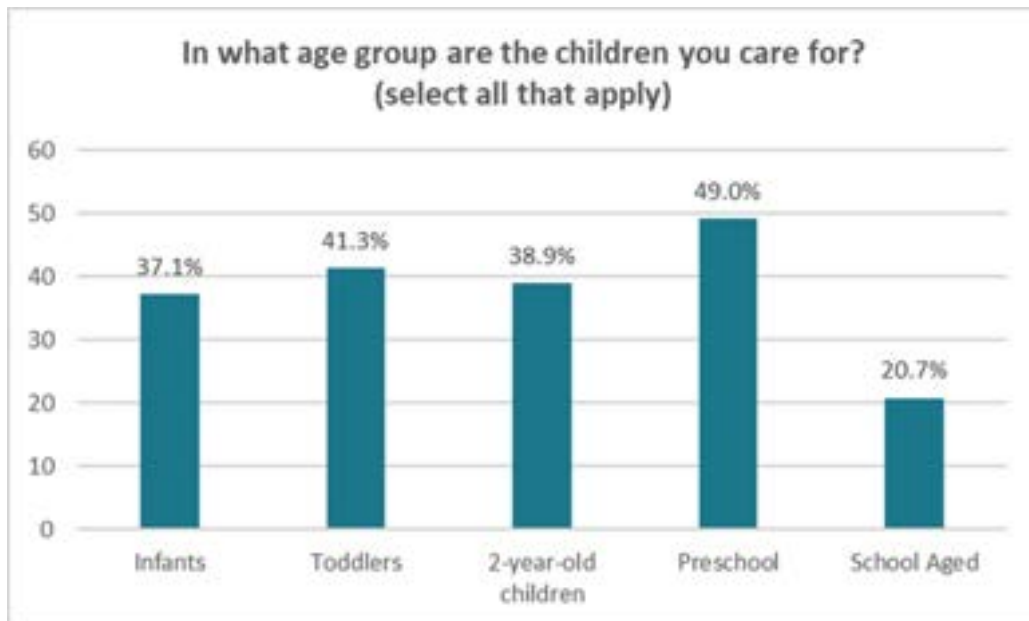
FINDINGS

Sample Characteristics

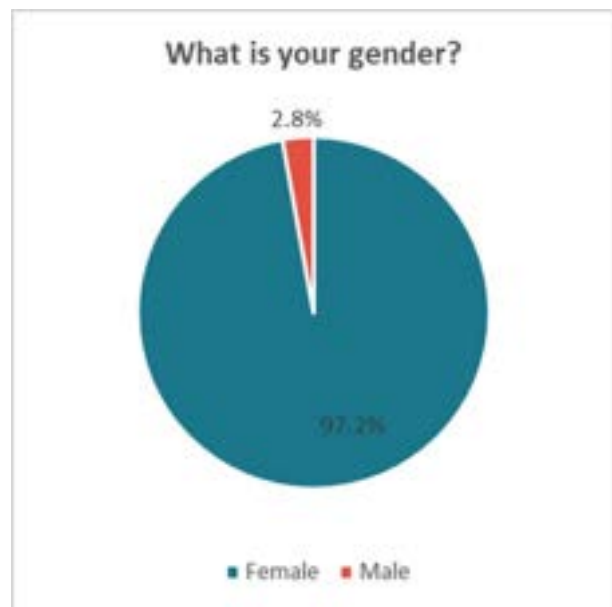
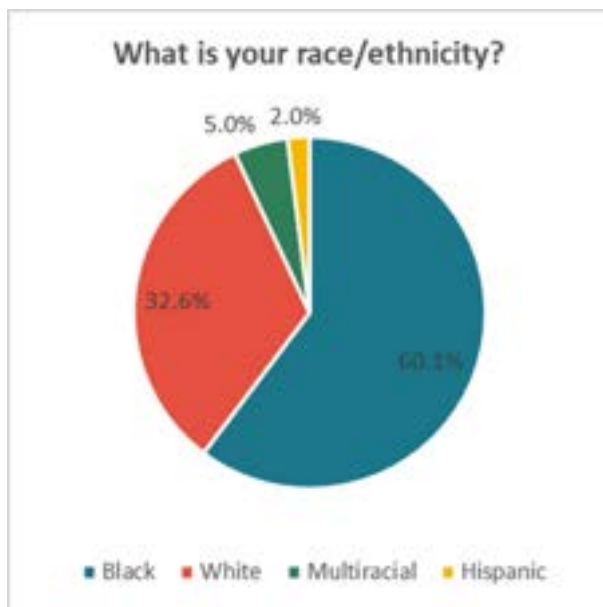
The most common job title respondents reported having was Teacher/Caregiver followed by Lead Teacher/Caregiver, with 39% and 27% respectively. Director Designee and Assistant Teacher were the third and fourth most common with 17% and 13%, respectively. Two percent reported having the title of Classroom Aide.



Nearly half (49%) of respondents stated they serve preschool-aged children, closely followed by toddlers at 41%.

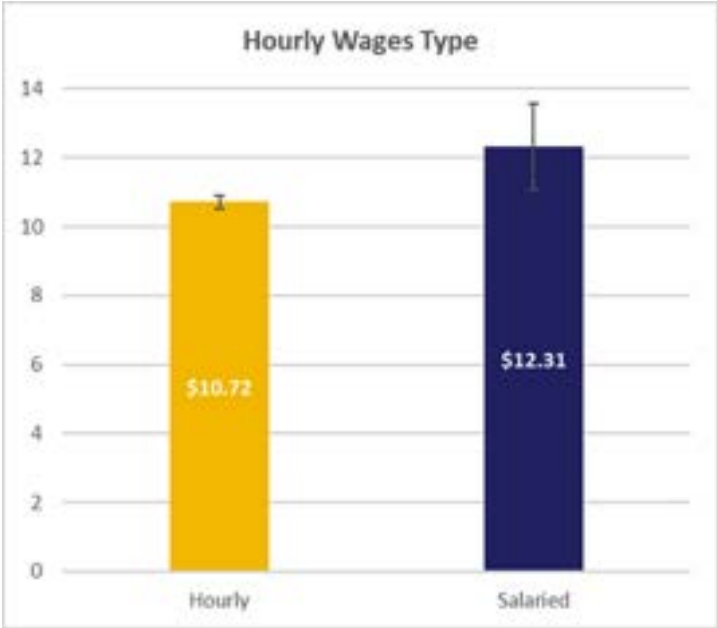


Teachers were asked about their age, race and ethnicity, reporting an average age of 39. Sixty percent of respondents identified as Black, 33% identified as White, 5% identified as Multiracial, and 2% identified as Hispanic. Just 3% of respondents were male, while 97% were female. Teachers who completed the survey worked in 65 of Mississippi's 82 counties.



Mississippi Child Care Teacher Wages and Benefits

Eighty-six percent of teachers reported they were paid hourly, and 63% reported they were paid bi-weekly. The average wage of all respondents who reported income from their child care job was \$10.93. Salaried teachers earned significantly more than teachers paid by the hour. Salaried employees (n = 83) reported earning \$12.31 per hour, and hourly employees (n = 528) reported earning \$10.72 per hour.



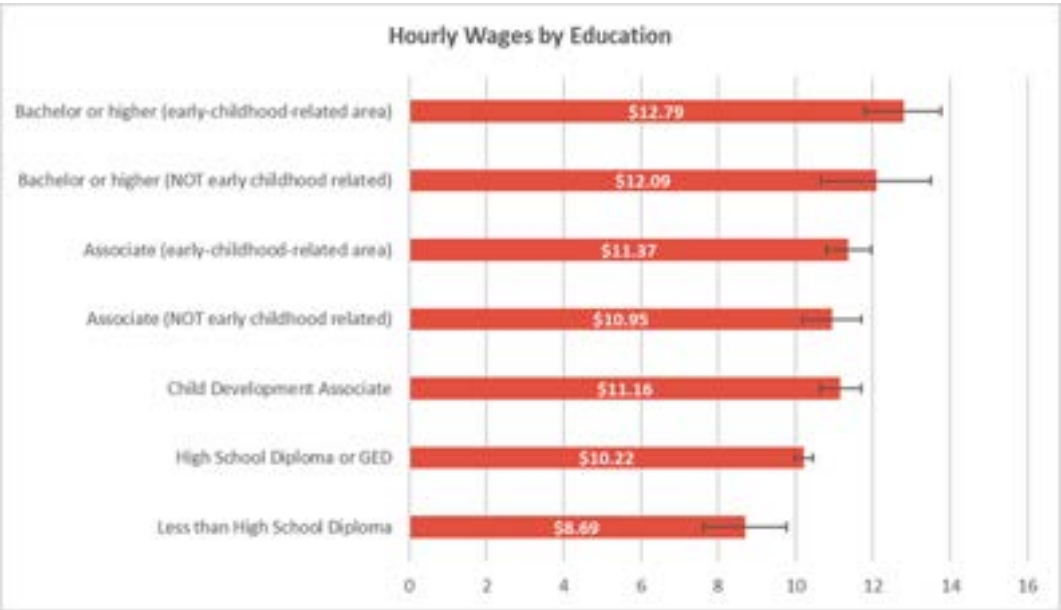
Respondents shared their job titles and hourly wages. Director Designees (n = 105) were the highest earning with \$11.96 an hour. Classroom Aides (n = 12) were the lowest paid employees, earning \$10.20 an hour. Teacher/Caregivers (n = 241) reported an average hourly wage of \$10.43 an hour. Director Designees and Lead Teachers earned significantly more than Teachers and Assistant Teachers.



Defining “Urban” as a county that contains an urban core population of 50,000 or greater, seven counties (Desoto, Hinds, Madison, Rankin, Forest, Harrison, and Jackson) in Mississippi meet the criteria.¹² Based on the survey results, respondents from these counties defined as “Urban” (n = 223) reported earning \$11.39 an hour. Non-urban counties were further divided into “Rural” and “Delta” (i.e., rural counties located in the traditional Delta region of Mississippi).¹³ Rural counties (n = 251) had an average hourly wage of \$11.23 and Delta counties (n = 125) had an average hourly wage of \$9.66. The Delta region earned significantly less than non-Delta regions.



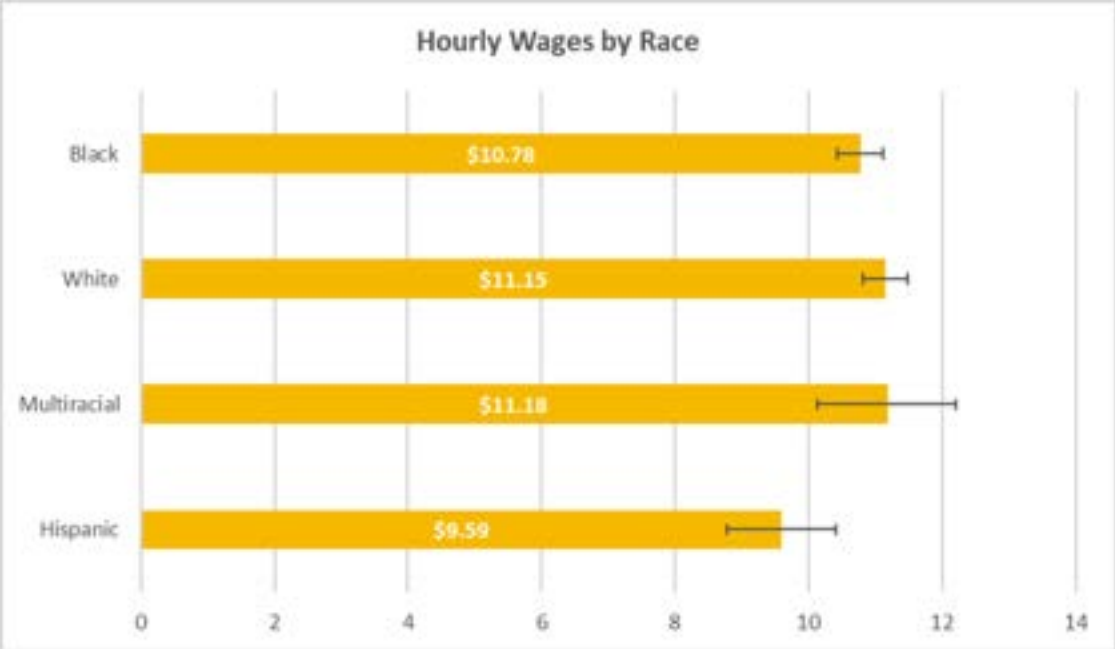
Higher levels of education were significantly associated with higher hourly wages. Respondents with a Child Development Associate (n = 88) or other nationally recognized credential earned \$11.16 an hour, on average. The majority of child care teachers, respondents with a high school diploma (n = 278), earned an average of \$10.22, whereas respondents having less than a high school diploma (n = 13) earned \$8.69 on average.



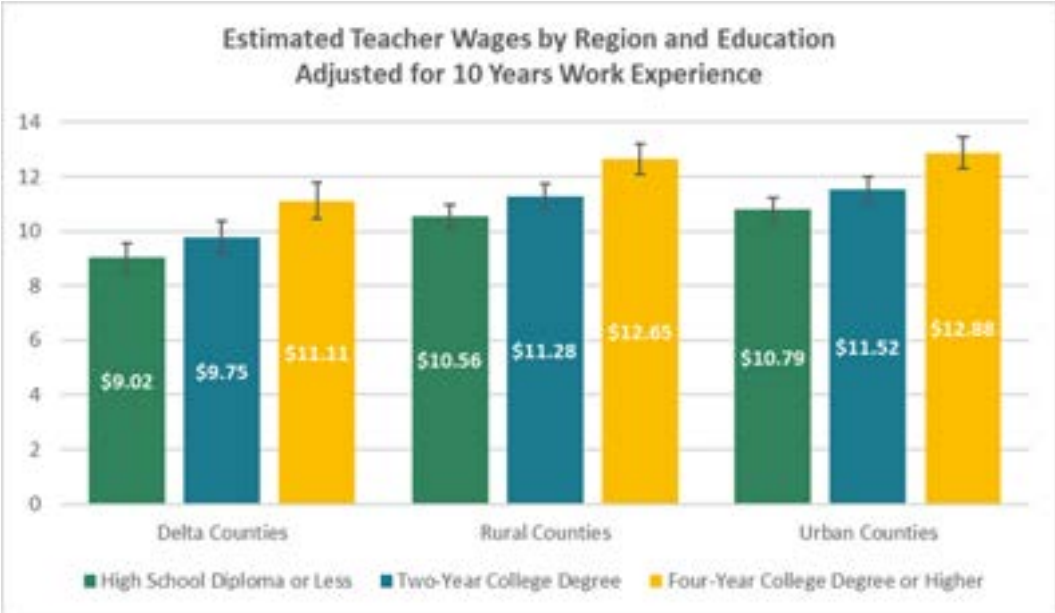
When classified by age groups cared for, average hourly wages ranged from \$10.24 to 11.71. Those who reported caring for all age groups (n = 63) earned \$10.35 an hour. Those who reported caring for at least two age groups (n = 164) earned \$10.82 an hour. Those who reported caring for only 2-year-olds (n = 146) earned \$11.71 an hour. Those who reported caring for only infants (n = 71) earned \$10.45 an hour. No significant differences were detected across these groups.



Differences by reported racial and ethnic group show that White respondents (n = 209) earned \$11.15 an hour (95% CI [10.82, 11.49]) compared to Black respondents (n = 353) who earned \$10.78 an hour (95% CI [10.43, 11.12]). Due to small response numbers for Multiracial (n = 28) and Hispanic (n = 12) groups, hourly earnings for these groups should be interpreted with caution. Multiracial respondents reportedly earned \$11.18 an hour, and Hispanic respondents earned \$9.59 an hour. No significant differences were detected across these groups.



Teacher wages were estimated using education, three geographic regions, and average years of work experience. The following chart shows these estimates across the nine groups, adjusted for 10 years of work experience. Providers in the Delta region received significantly lower wages than those in the non-Delta regions, while levels of education differed significantly within each region. The group with the lowest wages were those working in the Delta with a high school diploma at \$9.02 an hour, while the those with the highest were working in an urban county with a four-year college degree at \$12.88 an hour.



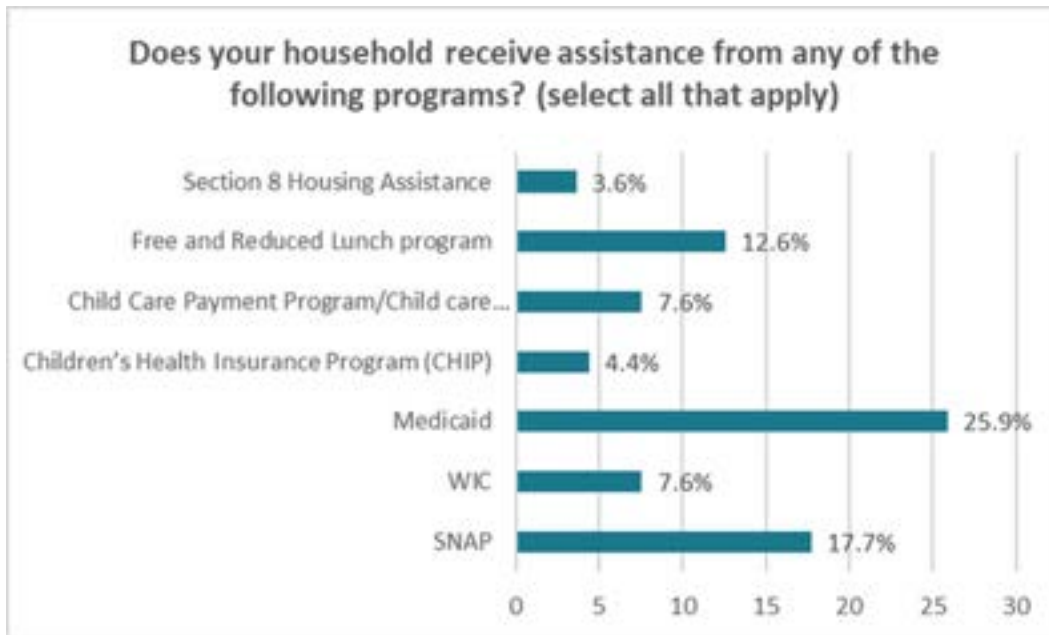
Due to very small response counts within non-Center-based facilities, several facility types were combined, so that hourly wages could be estimated. Home/Family-based (n = 26) providers received the lowest hourly wages at \$9.47, whereas Head Start, Public School, and/or Collaboratives (n = 116) providers received the highest. Church-based (n = 79) and Center-based (n = 351) providers' hourly wages were \$10.39 and \$11.16, respectively. Head Start, Public School, and/or Collaboratives earned significantly more than Church or Home/Family-based.



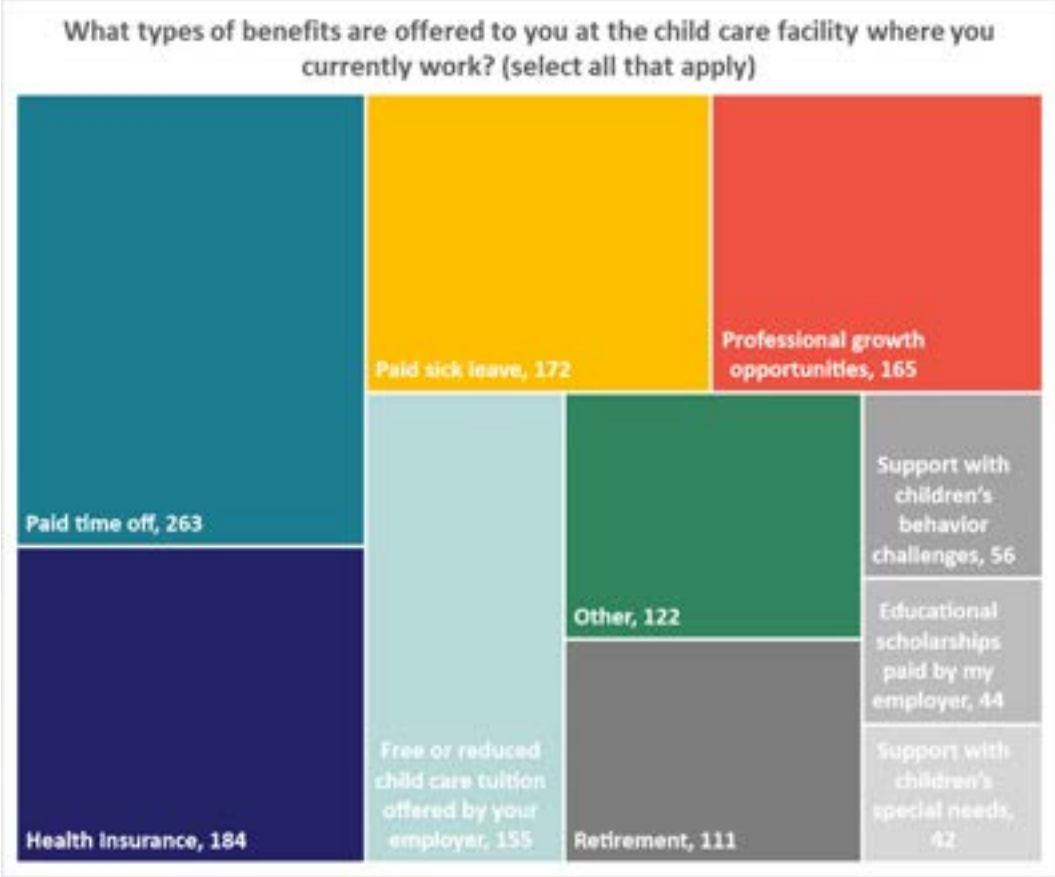
When asked what household assistance they receive, slightly more than a quarter (26%) of teachers indicated that they receive Medicaid benefits, followed by Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP) (18%) benefits and the Free and Reduced Lunch program (13%) benefits. On this survey question, respondents could select all the programs that were applicable. The results show that at least 36% of all survey respondents receive one type of assistance program or more.

Participants were asked how much of an increase in pay they would need to cover their expenses without any assistance programs. This information was then compared to the information regarding the assistance programs that participants received, and a model was developed to parse out the amount each program would contribute individually given the complex number of combinations respondents reported. SNAP recipients reported an average additional need of \$504 per month (\$2.91/hr). Medicaid recipients reported an average additional need of \$596 per month (\$3.44/hr). Free/Reduced Lunch Program recipients reported an average additional need of \$280 per month (\$1.61/hr). Hypothetically, if a respondent received all three of these major programs, they would need a monthly income increase of \$1,380 (\$7.96/hr) to replace all assistance funding with employment income.

The estimates reported on this survey for SNAP, Medicaid, and Free and Reduced Lunch, on a per program benefit basis, align closely with publicly available data. Nevertheless, it is difficult to gauge what the “average” respondent would need for their household since household information was not requested on the survey due to the sensitivity of the information.

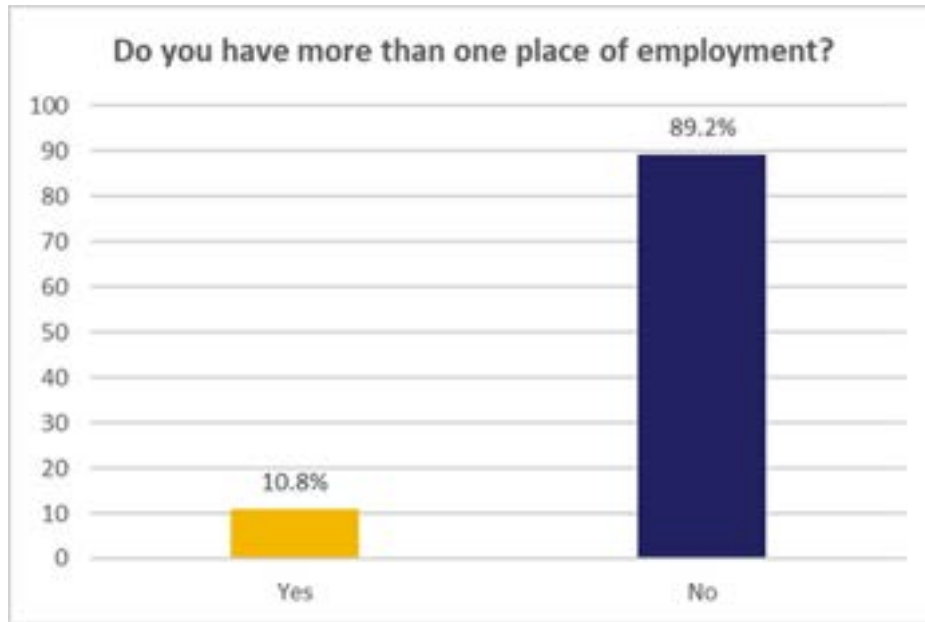


Teachers, including those working for Head Start and public schools, were asked which benefits were offered at their child care facility. Forty percent of respondents selected paid time off, followed by health insurance (28%), paid sick leave (26%), and professional growth opportunities (25%). Twelve percent of respondents did not select any option.

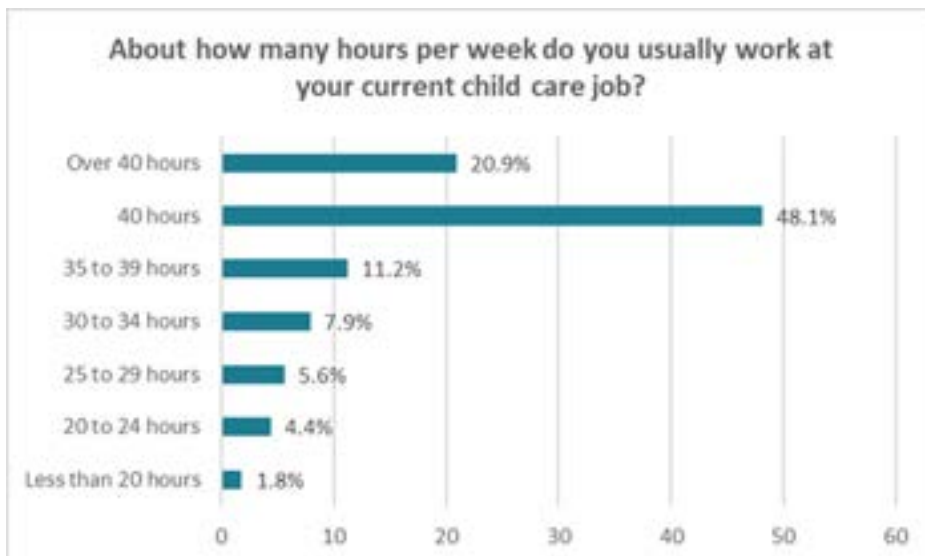


Mississippi Child Care Teacher Working Conditions

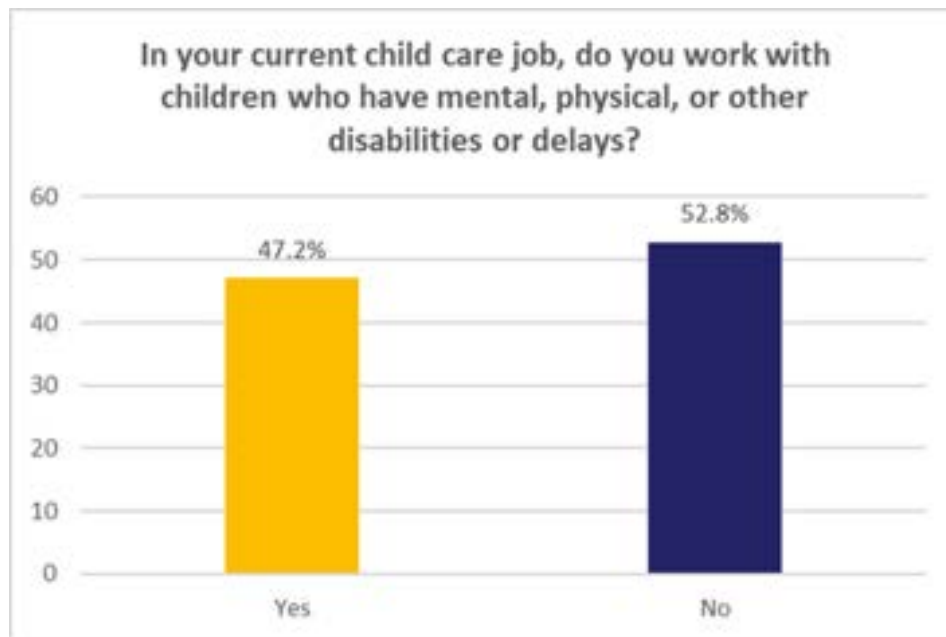
When asked if they had more than one place of employment, the majority (89%) of respondents answered “No,” whereas 11% responded “Yes.” Of those responding that they had more than one job, 85% (n = 60) reported that they only worked at one child care facility, while 15% (n = 11) of respondents were employed at multiple facilities. Of those who worked at multiple child care facilities, 91% (n = 10) stated they primarily worked at one center, and all reported having the same job title across places of employment.



When asked how many hours they usually work per week, nearly half (48%) of child care teachers reported working 40 hours, and an additional 21% reported working more than 40 hours weekly. However, the respondents stated that they would ideally like to work, on average, 38 hours per week. When comparing hours worked by job title, nearly 80% of respondents who were lead teachers or director designees worked 40 hours or more per week, compared to assistant teachers (58%) and teachers/caregivers (64%). When respondents were asked what additional hours they typically work, the most common response (27%) was evenings.



Just under half (47%) of teachers reported they worked with children who have mental, physical, or other disabilities or delays. The average reported number of children having a mental, physical, or other disability or delay in these teachers' care was three. The majority of teachers (83%) stated their classroom is usually full.

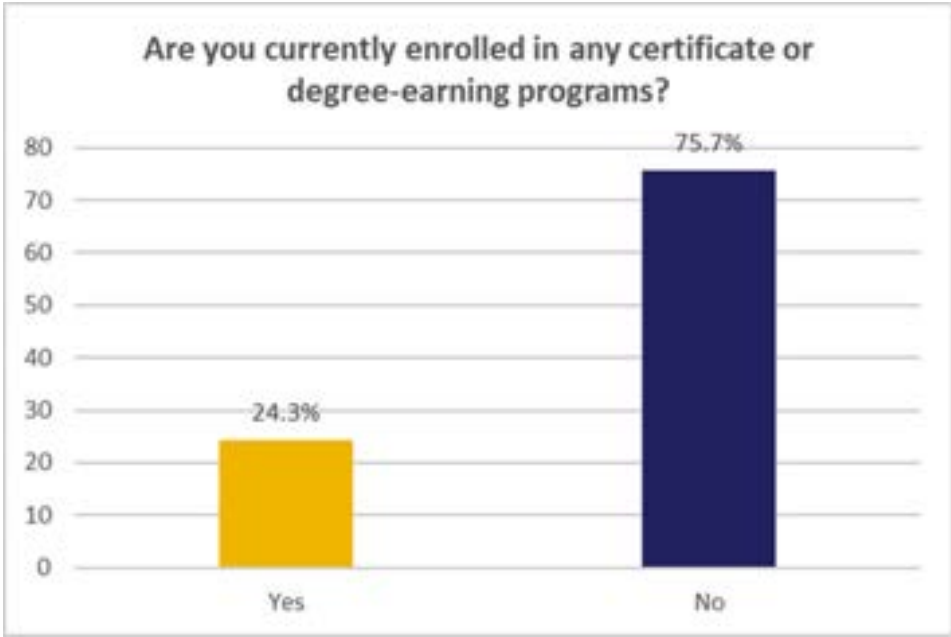


Mississippi Child Care Teacher Qualifications

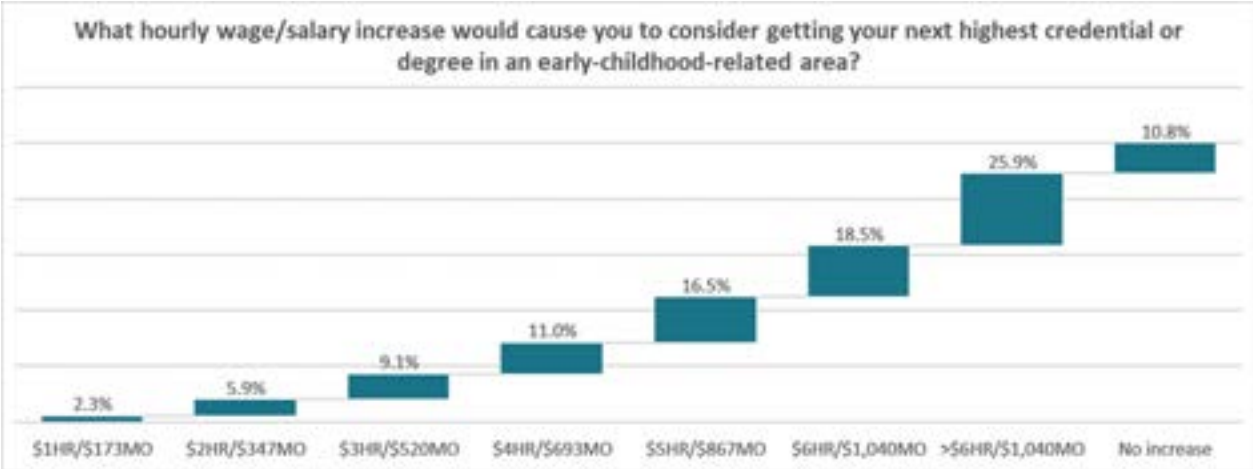
Regarding their highest completed level of training/education, 20% of teachers reported having a bachelor's degree or higher, and 17.5% reported having an associate degree. Another 15% reported having a Child Development Associate or other nationally recognized credential, while nearly half of respondents reported having a high school diploma/GED or less (47.5%). On average, respondents reported that they had worked in a child-care-related field for 10 years and at their current job for an average of six years.



Nearly a quarter (24%) of teachers reported being enrolled in a certificate or degree-earning program at the time of the survey. Eleven percent of respondents reported being licensed to teach in public schools in Mississippi or another state. Eight percent of responding child care teachers reported they speak a language other than English. Of these, 16% (n = 8) stated they spoke a non-English language with the children in their care or their families.

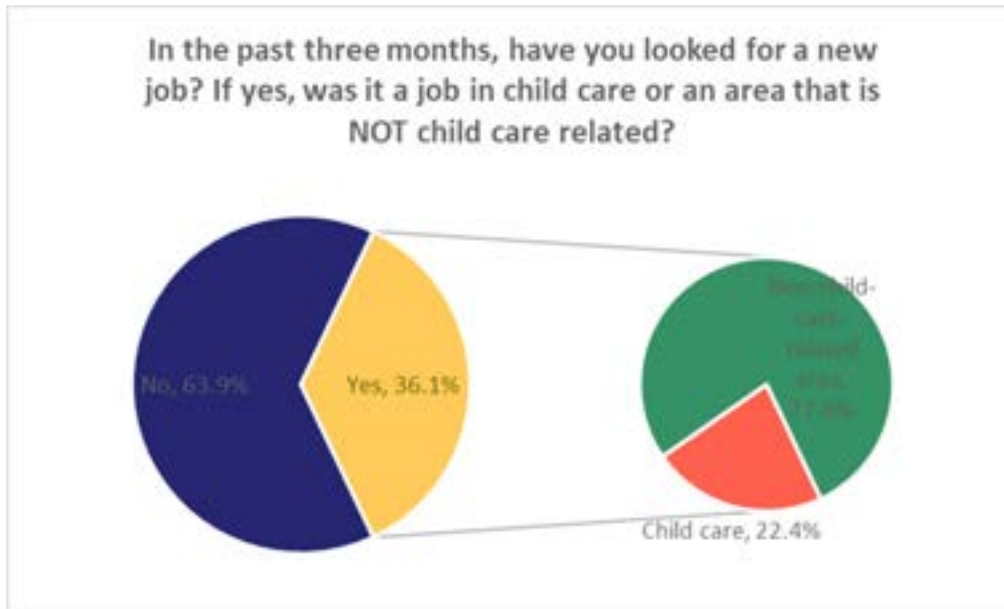


Participants were asked what hourly wage/salary increase would cause them to consider getting their next highest credential or degree in an early-childhood-related area. A cumulative 45% of teachers responded they would consider getting their next highest credential or degree for \$5.00 more per hour. It would take \$6.00 per hour or more for 44% of respondents to consider this, and 11% of respondents said that no wage/salary increase would cause them to consider getting their next highest credential or degree.

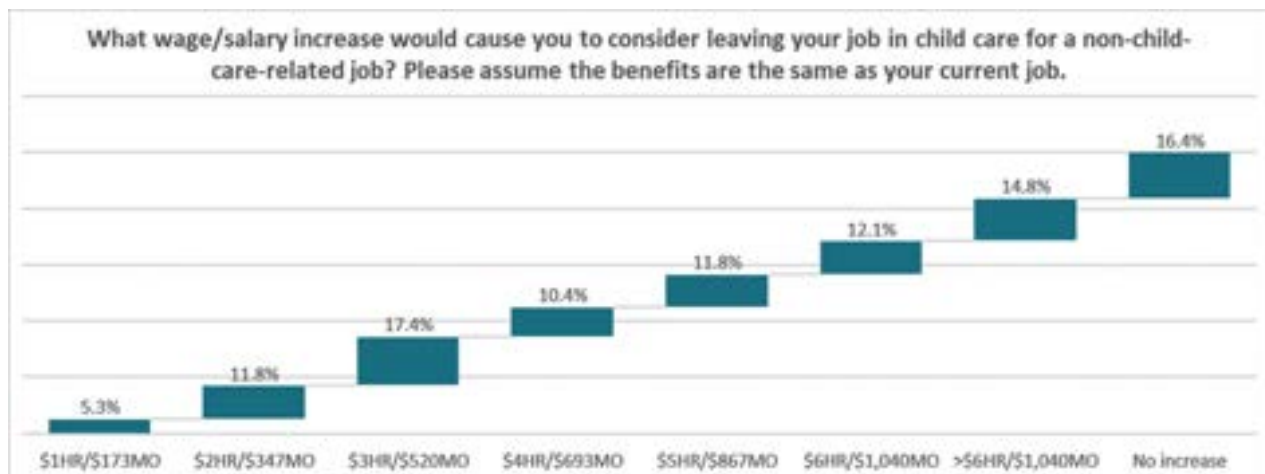


Mississippi Child Care Workforce Stability: Status and Needs

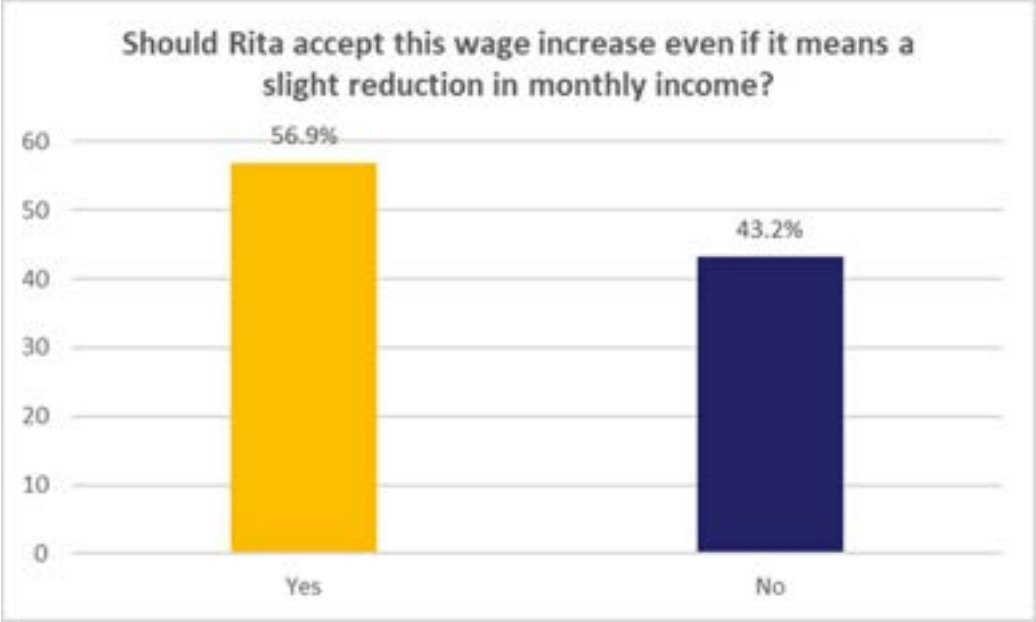
Child care teachers were asked about recent job searches. Over one-third (36%) stated they had looked for a new job within the last three months. Of those respondents, 78% (n = 180) searched for non-child-care-related jobs, and 22% (n = 52) searched within the child care field.



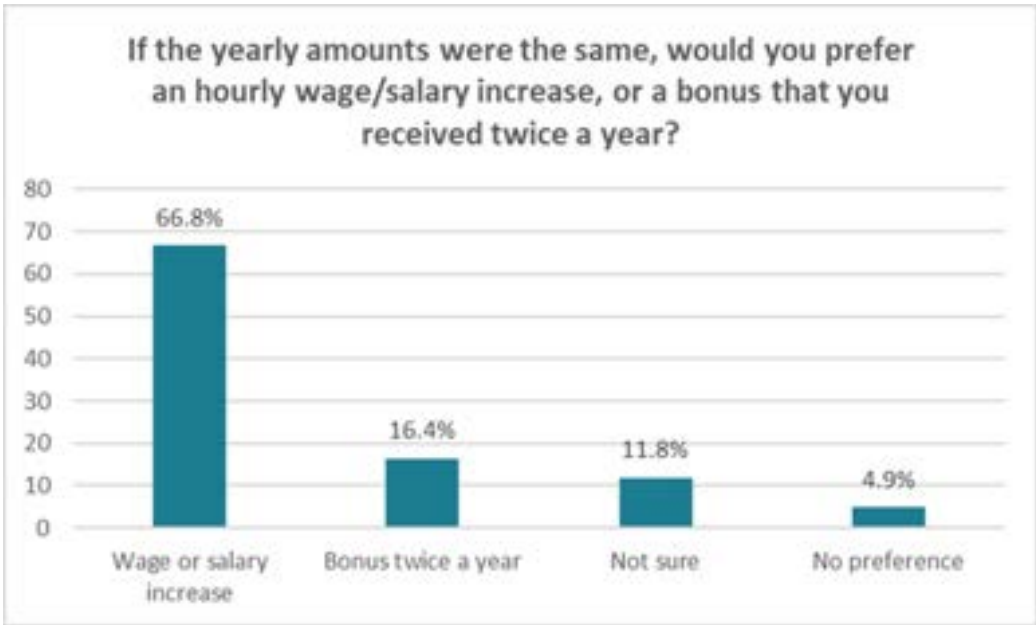
Assuming the benefits would be the same, a cumulative 17% of respondents answered that they would only consider leaving their current job for a non-child-care-related job if they were to receive an additional \$2.00 per hour. A cumulative 35% said they would leave for \$3.00 more per hour, and a cumulative 57% said they would leave for \$5.00 more per hour. Twenty-seven percent reported it would take an increase of \$6.00 or more per hour for them to consider leaving the profession, and 16% percent reported there is no wage/salary increase that would cause them to leave the profession.



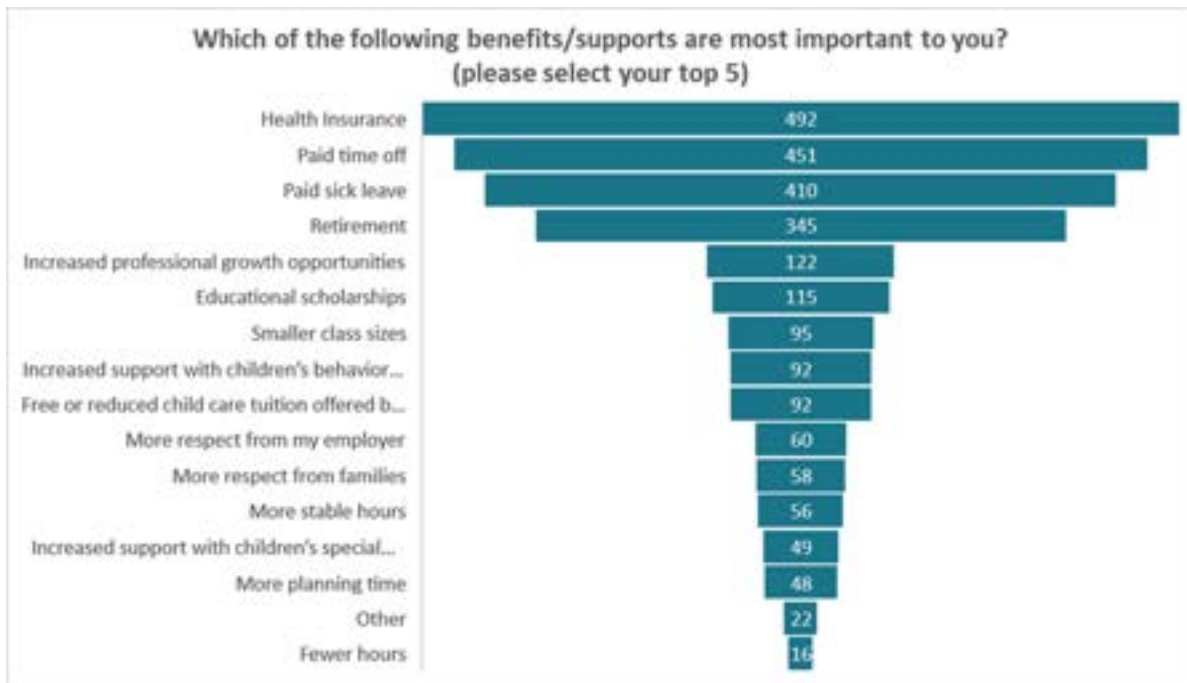
Participants were presented with a scenario in which a wage increase would cause a loss of benefits from assistance programs. In the scenario provided, Rita worked in child care. She was offered an hourly wage increase of \$5.00 per hour, which would give her \$867 more per month. However, Rita learned that accepting this pay increase would cause her to lose eligibility for several assistance programs, with benefits totaling \$1,000 per month. Fifty-seven percent of respondents stated that Rita should accept the wage increase even if it meant a slight reduction in monthly income. Forty-three percent of respondents stated that Rita should not accept the wage increase.



When asked whether they would prefer a wage/salary increase or receiving a bonus twice a year, 67% of teachers opted for a wage/salary increase, while 16% chose a bonus twice a year. Of those reporting they would prefer a bonus, 43% (n = 45) said they would still prefer a bonus twice a year even if it meant receiving slightly less money than the wage/salary increase.



When asked what benefit(s) are the most important to them, the top five responses by teachers were health insurance (74%), paid time off (68%), paid sick leave (62%), retirement (52%), and increased professional growth opportunities (18%).





DISCUSSION

Responding child care teachers are overworked and underprepared.

Child care teachers responding to this survey were most commonly female and working in a center-based facility. Just under 70% reported working 40 hours or more per week. Almost half (47%) worked with children who have mental, physical, or other disability or delays. Close to half (48%) did not have training beyond high school. Respondents worked primarily for center-based facilities (71%), though church-based, home/family-based, and publicly funded (i.e., Head Start, public-school-based, state-funded) facilities were represented as well. Sixty percent of respondents were Black; 97% were female.

Current child care teacher pay in Mississippi is below “survival wages.”

Child care teachers reported an average hourly wage of \$10.93, but earnings varied by several factors. Wages varied by job title, with teachers having director designee status earning \$11.96/hr, on average, compared to assistant teachers who earned a reported \$10.22/hr on average. Teachers working in the Mississippi Delta, known for its difficult economic conditions, earned significantly less per hour than other geographic areas at \$9.66. Teacher education and credentials impacted wages, with those holding a bachelor’s degree or higher in an early-childhood-related area earning, on average, \$12.79/hr compared to those with a high school diploma who reportedly earned \$10.22/hr. Finally, teachers working in home/family-based programs earned less (\$9.47/hr on average) than those working in center- or public-based care.

The recently released 2021 ALICE report notes that survival wages in Mississippi for a single adult are \$12.28 per hour.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, over a third of respondents reported receipt of public assistance to cover basic needs. The most commonly used programs were Medicaid, SNAP, and Free and Reduced Lunch. Comparatively, pre-k teachers working for the Mississippi Department of Education start at \$19.95/hr with zero years’ experience and receive state benefits, though a bachelor’s degree is required.

The Mississippi child care workforce is not stable.

Over one-third (36%) of respondents stated they had looked for a new job within the last three months. Of the respondents actively searching for a new job, 78% (n = 180)

searched for non-child-care-related jobs, and 22% (n = 52) searched within the child care field. A cumulative 57% of respondents answered that they would consider leaving their current job for a non-child-care-related job for an additional \$5.00/hr.

Higher wages and benefits are needed to stabilize the Mississippi child care workforce, incentivize educational advancement, and retain teachers who obtain training through the new Mississippi Quality Support System. Respondents demonstrated a preference for wage increases over bonuses and use of public assistance.

The Mississippi Department of Human Services has been developing, and will soon release, a new Quality Support System of professional development to improve child care teacher knowledge of developmental health promotion. However, without adequate wages to retain qualified staff, child care teachers may continue to seek alternate, less stressful jobs that pay more. Based on the findings of this survey, an additional \$5.00/hr could prevent 57% of respondents from considering a job change, and 45% reported that this amount would incentivize additional training.

In terms of how pay increases should be structured, respondents preferred a wage increase to receiving semi-annual bonuses for the same amount. And when asked if a child care teacher should opt for a \$5.00/hr wage increase even if it meant an overall loss of almost \$150/month in public assistance, many respondents said the teacher should accept the wage increase. Additionally, respondents state that the most important benefits they can receive are health insurance, paid time off, paid sick leave, and retirement.

CONCLUSION

Child care teachers carry a heavy burden for our nation and for Mississippi. They are asked to support families by providing care for children so parents can work, and they are asked to prepare our next generation of workers to support our economy. Given that the quality of experiences in the first three years of life lay the foundation for a person's lifelong well-being, success, and eventual contribution to society, early childhood education is one of the most important job fields in terms of the health and wealth of our nation and state.

However, there is a market failure nationwide—and in our state—around child care. Early educators are paid poverty wages, and it is not possible for parents to pay the amount truly required to provide high-quality care for young children. Nevertheless, businesses and the state have a strong interest in ensuring a strong workforce.

Mississippi is in a unique position to address its workforce needs while supporting children and working families in the state. The Mississippi Department of Human Services will soon implement a new child care Quality Support System that will provide professional development and training to child care teachers across Mississippi. By identifying solutions to the child care crisis in Mississippi, businesses

and the Mississippi legislature, along with the early childhood community, can build on this momentum and ensure the child care workforce is stable and thriving.



LIMITATIONS

The current study was limited by a lack of child care teacher contact information for survey recruitment, as well as a lack of a known universe of child care teachers in the state, including total numbers and characteristics. These limitations led to a reliance on child care directors of licensed centers as the primary distribution method. Furthermore, sample size and response bias cannot be determined.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Leadership, backbone support, and data team members of the Forum for the Future Wages Working Group, along with state-level early care and education partners and providers, plan to take steps to engage Mississippi decisionmakers and the business community in a discussion around the child care market failure and the implications for the state's workforce. These plans include the following:

- Distributing the findings to state-level early care and education stakeholders, including the Mississippi State Early Childhood Advisory Council, and requesting feedback
- Holding breakfast meetings across the state with business leaders and legislators to share results and identify champions for workforce solutions
- Participating in technical assistance provided by the National Early Care and Education Workforce Center with the Mississippi Department of Human Services and other stakeholders to develop child care salary scales and to explore other states' actions to address to the nationwide child care market failure
- Engaging the full Forum for the Future working group in cultivating coalition of supporters and supporting solution development
- Conducting, in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Human Services and Prenatal-to Five Fiscal Strategies, a robust child care costs study as a part of the 2024 Mississippi Market Rate Study
- Requesting a legislative hearing regarding the child care workforce during the 2024 legislative session
- Calling for a Task Force to study and propose solutions to the Mississippi child care workforce crisis



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