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Child Care Subsidies among New TCA Families: Baseline Utilization Rates & Outcomes

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Child care can contribute to the odds that women heading single-parent families can successfully enter and remain in the workforce. However, child care costs consume almost 30% of monthly incomes for poor working mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This is nearly five times the percentage paid by families well above the poverty threshold (Smith and Gozjolko, 2010).

There is widespread need for affordable child care in the TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) caseload because, with few exceptions, adults in single-parent households with children must participate in work activities as a condition of benefit receipt. Moreover, clients must often begin job search, work readiness, or other work-oriented activities at the time of or shortly after their initial receipt of TANF. Nearly half of states, to illustrate, require job search at the time of application and about 80% require immediate involvement in work (Ha & Ybarra, 2013). In all states TANF clients are subject to benefit reduction or cessation, if they do not comply.

Child care subsidies were a key component of the mid-1990s shift to a work-oriented welfare system, intended to support the overall goal of promoting self-sufficiency through work (Ha & Ybarra, 2013; Gish, 2008). Federal funding for child care subsidies has increased substantially through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) and, temporarily, through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). Many states have also used state, TANF, or other social services funds for child care. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2010) notes that, in inflation-adjusted dollars, federal and state child care expenditures were $7.2 billion and $10.9 billion in federal fiscal year (FFY) 1998 and FFY2008, respectively.

Despite its seemingly obvious necessity as a work support for low-income single mothers, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008) reported that more than eight million children were eligible for child care subsidies, but only 29% (40% of poor children) received child care subsidies. More recently, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2010) reported that, after remaining relatively stable for many years, there was roughly a 10% decline in the number of children receiving child care subsidies.

Lee et al. (2004) examined the use of child care subsidies among new TANF families in three states, including Maryland. While subsidy use was found to be low in all three states, Maryland's rate was lower by about 10 percentage points—only 24% of eligible families used a child care subsidy. This finding is concerning for Maryland families that are attempting to become self-sufficient. Lee et al. focused their research on families new to TANF between 1997 and 1999 and followed them for three years through 2002. This current paper extends the analysis of subsidy use among new TANF families in Maryland.

Specifically, this report looks at the use and non-use of child care subsidies by a cohort of female-headed, single-parent families with at least one child under the age of 13. These families were newly-approved for TCA (Temporary Cash Assistance, Maryland's TANF program) between January 2003 and December 2004 and were both employed and became subsidy-eligible at some point before April 2006.

In a time of continued budgetary pressure, uncertainty about TANF reauthorization, inflexible federal work participation rules, and a still recovering economy, study findings provide additional baseline information about the use and effects of an important work support among TCA recipient families. This information could be of programmatic value going forward, if the recent application trend—a 60% increase in new[1] families that applied for TCA—continues (Nicoli, Born, & Williamson, forthcoming).

Subsidized child care, not surprisingly, is positively associated with employment and earnings outcomes for parents. Generally, studies have found a strong correlation between steady employment and child care, and in fact, low-income women receiving subsidies were more likely to be employed than to be unemployed (Anderson & Levine, 1999; Blank, 2007; Edin & Lein, 1997; Lengyel & Campbell, 2002). Furthermore, current and former welfare recipients with child care subsidies had increased work time and earnings (Danziger, Ananat, & Browning, 2004; Meyers et al., 2002).

A Philadelphia study concluded that child care subsidies not only allow women to enter the labor force, but also make it easier for low-wage mothers to comply with employer demands for additional work hours or different shifts and earn additional wages, while helping them juggle work and family commitments (Press, Fagan & Laughlin, 2006). Although study methodologies and populations have varied, as have the magnitude of the associations and effects found, the research literature generally supports the conclusion that families who use subsidies have better work and poverty outcomes than those who do not (Forry & Anderson, 2006; Hartmann, Spalter-Roth, & Sills, 2003).

In this context, it is perplexing that child care subsidy use among TANF recipients and leavers has been and remains low, and well below the utilization rates of other important social programs (Witte & Queralt, 2002). Low child care subsidy use has persisted for many years and across single-state, multi-state, and national studies, despite numerous methodological differences (see, for example, Lee et al., 2004; Ha, 2009; Witte & Queralt, 2002; Ovwigho et al., 2006). Across the range of studies, utilization rates typically are less than one-third and never exceed more than 50% (Shlay, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2010).

Given Maryland's low take-up rate of child care subsidies found by Lee et al., a key objective of the present research is to extend the empirical knowledge of child care subsidy use. In particular we want to see how many families become eligible for the subsidy and, among eligible families, how many take part. We also profile the two groups to see if there are any significant differences between users and non-users in welfare use, employment and earnings outcomes, and/or case and client demographics. This type of baseline information should be useful in planning for both the cash assistance and child care programs, particularly if, as expected, study results show better employment outcomes among child care subsidy users, but less than optimal rates of subsidy use among eligible families.

[1] A new family is operationally defined as one that had not applied for TCA in Maryland in the past 10 years.

METHODS

Sample

The sample consists of 11,346 families that applied for and were approved to receive TCA in Maryland between January 2003 and December 2004 and had not received TCA within the previous year. Cases were limited to those headed by a single, female adult recipient and included at least one child under the age of 13. No child-only or two-parent cases are included.

Data Sources

Study findings are based on data from two administrative data systems maintained by the State of Maryland. Individual and case-level demographic characteristics and program utilization data were obtained from the Client Automated Resources and Eligibility System (CARES) and Maryland Unemployment Insurance employment wage data were obtained from the Maryland Automated Benefits System (MABS).

In April 2006, however, management of the child care subsidy program moved from the Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) division of Family Investment Administration (FIA) to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). As a result, our data on child care subsidy use extends only through March 2006. Therefore, follow-up periods on child care subsidy use vary by date of TCA approval. We have between 5 and 12 quarters of subsidy data. Appendix A provides the status of available follow-up data.

Data Analysis

This study of child care subsidy use among TCA-eligible families aims to provide the characteristics of families that do or do not use the subsidy and their subsequent employment and cash assistance patterns. We provide univariate analyses to describe these families and their outcomes. Additionally, chi-square and ANOVA are used to test for meaningful differences.

FINDINGS

The first question of interest is how many of our sample TCA families became eligible for subsidized child care between the time of TCA application approval and the end of the study period. The large majority of cases did become eligible. Of the 11,346 cases in our sample, 80.2% (n=9,098) were eligible for the subsidy at some point between TCA application approval and the first quarter of 2006 (January to March 2006).

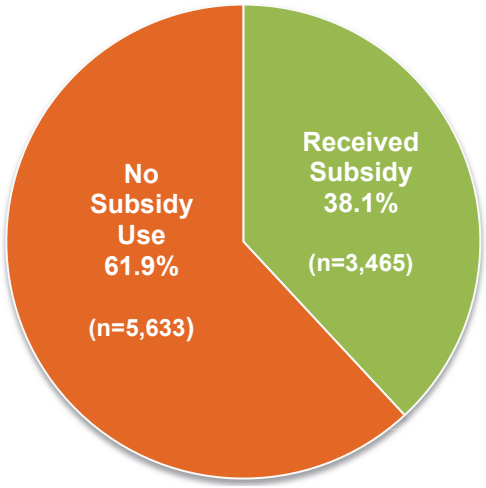
It must be noted, however, that this estimate of new TCA cases qualified for subsidized child care is a conservative one. This is because of the deliberately restrictive manner in which we defined eligibility, on a quarter-by-quarter basis. To be considered eligible: (1) the adult had to be working in the quarter in a Maryland job covered by the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program; (2) the youngest child in the household in that quarter had to be under the age of 13; and (3) the adult's total quarterly earnings had to be below the child care subsidy income eligibility level by family size.

This definition leads to a conservative estimate because some adults may have been working in a non-UI covered job or have been employed outside Maryland. The more important limiting factor though is that we restricted our definition to adults who were working in unsubsidized jobs. In reality, TCA clients who are engaged in a work activity are also eligible for subsidized child care. Therefore, it is probably not a stretch to say that virtually all newly-certified, single-parent, female-headed TCA families are or quickly become eligible for subsidized child care.

The second key question is the extent to which families eligible for child care subsidies actually use them. Of the 9,098 families who were subsidy-eligible, three in five (61.9%) did not use the subsidy during our study period, while roughly two in five (38.1%) did, as displayed in Figure 1, below.

The rate of subsidy use found here has increased by 14 percentage points since the Lee et al. study (38% vs. 24%). The current finding is more in line with the rate of use in the other states from the same study (34%). Additionally, this rate is nearly identical to the rate (39%) that Ha (2009) found in a study of Wisconsin TANF entrants that also relied on administrative data. The reason for the increase in subsidy use is beyond the scope of this project, but certainly suggests that there was improvement in a short period of time.

Figure 1: Child Care Subsidy Receipt



Casehead and Case Characteristics

All eligible cases in our study sample share important characteristics. They are single-parent families headed by women; have at least one child under 13 years of age in the assistance unit; were approved for TCA between January 2003 and December 2004 and thus, by definition, are poor; and were working in a job covered by the UI system.

As shown in Table 2, the general profile for the subsidy-eligible sample is an African-American woman in her mid- to late 20s who has finished high school and has two children, the youngest of whom is a little more than 2½ years old. About two-fifths of the families lived in Baltimore City, while three-fifths resided in one of the 23 counties.[2]

There are some statistically significant differences between those who received a child care subsidy and those who did not. Subsidy users tended to be younger and to have younger children. They were more likely to have finished high school and less likely to live in Baltimore City.

Specifically, subsidy users were more likely to be between the ages of 20 and 25 (42.4% vs. 31.7%) and less likely to be 36 or older (9.5% vs. 18.3%). Seven in ten (70.2%) subsidy users had at least a high school diploma compared to 63.0% of those who did not take-up the subsidy, and subsidy users were significantly less likely to live in Baltimore City than were non-users (32.2% vs. 42.6%). Lastly, the youngest child of those utilizing the subsidy was nearly two years younger, on average, than the youngest child where there was no subsidy use during the study period (2.5 years vs. 4.4 years).

These findings suggest that among employed, newly-certified TCA recipients in Maryland, in the mid-2000s, it was younger women with younger children who resided outside Baltimore City that were most likely to take advantage of subsidized child care. Our findings are again consistent with those from a similar Wisconsin study which found that subsidy users tended to be younger with younger children and had at least finished high school (Ha, 2009).

[2] This profile differs from that of the total active caseload in 2003 (Hetling, Saunders, & Born, 2005), because we focus here on new TCA entrants with no TCA receipt in the past year and exclude child-only and two-parent cases. Not surprisingly, our cases have younger payees with younger children; they are less likely to live in Baltimore City.

Table 1. Casehead and Case Characteristics

	Received Child Care Subsidy (n=3,465)		No Subsidy Use (n=5,633)		Total Eligible Cases (n=9,098)	
Casehead Race/Ethnicity						
Caucasian	21.2%	(713)	22.9%	(1,252)	22.3%	(1,965)
African American	76.2%	(2,569)	74.9%	(4,092)	75.4%	(6,661)
Other	2.6%	(88)	2.1%	(116)	2.3%	(204)
Casehead's Age* ** (in critical study quarter)						
Under 20	13.2%	(455)	12.7%	(710)	12.9%	(1,165)
20-25	42.4%	(1,465)	31.7%	(1,776)	35.8%	(3,241)
26-30	23.3%	(806)	20.5%	(1,150)	21.6%	(1,956)
31-35	11.7%	(404)	16.8%	(943)	14.9%	(1,347)
36 & older	9.5%	(329)	18.3%	(1,025)	14.9%	(1,354)
Mean [Median]***	26.48	[25.13]	28.57	[27.23]	27.77	[26.29]
Casehead Education Level* **						
Finished grade 12	70.2%	(2,099)	63.0%	(3,011)	65.8%	(5,110)
Residence* **						
Baltimore City	32.2%	(1,116)	42.6%	(2,401)	38.7%	(3,517)
Number of Children in Household* **						
Mean [Median]***	1.99	[2]	1.90	[2]	1.94	[2]
Age of Youngest Child in Household* ** (in the critical study quarter)						
Mean [Median]***	2.53	[1.87]	4.40	[3.57]	2.69	[2.64]

Note: Due to missing data for some variables, counts may not sum to the actual sample size.
Based on sample criteria, all caseheads are female. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

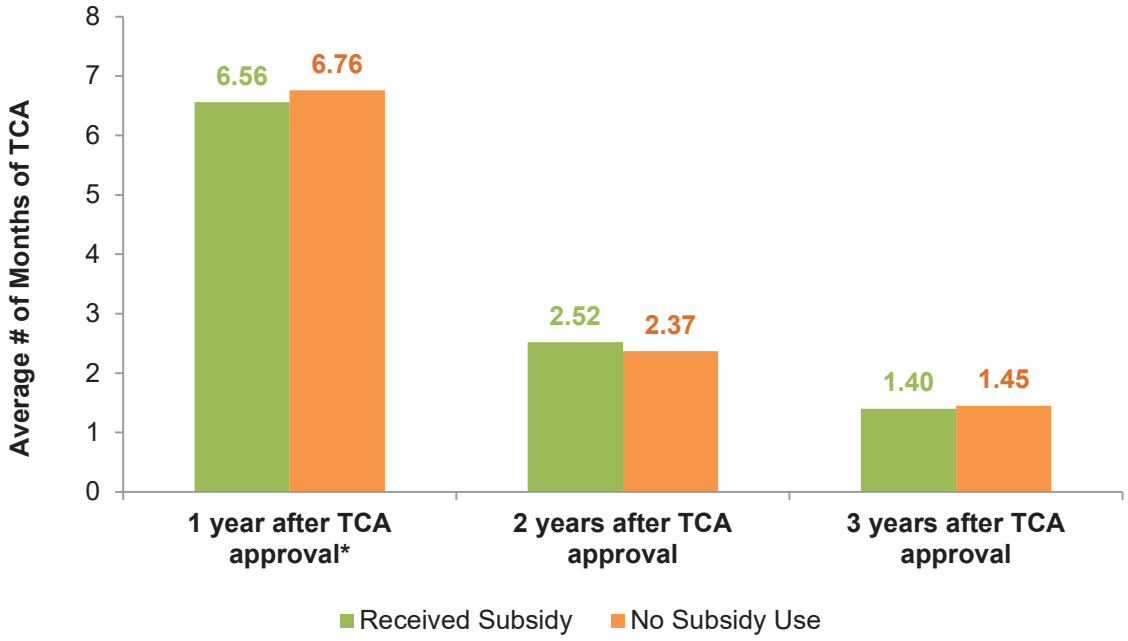
TCA Receipt

The receipt of a child care subsidy may provide a casehead with a portion of work supports necessary to become self-sufficient. Therefore, we might expect to see those that received a child care subsidy to use less TCA. This is not the case, although neither group had extensive welfare use. As shown in Figure 2, there is no difference in the average number of months of TCA receipt in the three years after these cases were approved for TCA. In the first year after TCA approval, both those that received a subsidy and those that did not use the subsidy had TCA receipt in just over 6 of the 12 months, on average. Both groups received an average of just over two months of TCA in the second year and only one month in the third year. Based on another analysis, in fact, we find that three-quarters of all newly-certified TCA families had no cash assistance receipt at all in the third post-certification year, regardless of their use or non-use of the child care subsidy. Two-fifths had no TCA receipt in the second year either.

Clearly, the women in our study sample had minimal receipt of TCA during the three years after coming onto assistance and had welfare spells that were quite short. This is consistent with findings from our other work, which, since welfare reform, have consistently documented shorter stays on welfare among Maryland recipient families (see, for example, Ovwigho, Born, Ruck & Tracy, 2003; Nicoli, Logan & Born, 2012).

Our study selection criteria may also affect these findings. That is, by definition, all sample cases are headed by single mothers who had not received TCA in the previous year. In fact, upon further examination, we find that three-fourths (73.5%) had no TCA receipt in the previous five years as well. Among those with prior assistance use, average TCA receipt was only 3.2 months in the previous 60 months. Although these women demonstrated some level of need by their mere application for TCA, and their need was confirmed by the approval of their application, it seems that they are likely to have very short spells of TCA receipt regardless of the child care subsidy.

Figure 2. Average Number of Months of TCA Receipt after TCA Application Approval



*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Employment and Earnings

The receipt of the child care subsidy does not seem to be correlated with the number of months of TCA benefit receipt in our sample of newly-certified TCA families. The ultimate intention of subsidized child care, however, is to help families transition from welfare to work and to help working families remain off assistance. Thus, in this section we look at employment participation and earnings of the cases in our sample.

Table 3 presents employment and earnings in the two years and one year prior to the TCA application which brought cases into our study sample. It also presents findings about employment and earnings in the first, second, and third years after the TCA application. These findings are presented by whether or not the case used the subsidy.

The first finding is that there were no differences in work effort or average earnings in the pre-TCA period. The large majority of clients who used subsidized child care (82.6%) and those who did not (83.9%) worked in a Maryland UI-covered job in the two years before receiving TCA. Average quarterly earnings of those who worked were also nearly identical ($3,155 vs. $3,202). The same was true with regard to the year immediately before the TCA application was filed. Three of every four

clients in both groups worked and average quarterly earnings were roughly $3,100.

Statistically significant differences are found in all three post-certification years. The differences are as one might expect: clients who used subsidized child care are more likely to work and, although the absolute dollar amounts are not very large, their average quarterly earnings are higher. More specifically, Table 3 shows that, in each of the three years after TCA approval, there was about a 10 percentage point difference in employment between women who received subsidized child care and women who did not. In the first year, to illustrate, 86.0% of the former group worked, compared to 76.2% of the non-user group. Furthermore, those who received the child care subsidy earned $175 more, on average, than those who did not receive the subsidy ($2,799 vs. $2,624).

An obvious limitation of this analysis is that it does not take into account the timing of the employment relative to the use of the child care subsidy.3 Ideally, we would see employment participation and earnings both increase after subsidy use, however Table 3 does not delineate when the subsidy was used, only that it was used at some point in the follow-up period. The next two analyses partially address this limitation by looking only at cases that became eligible for the subsidy within the first year after TCA certification, then looking at their subsequent employment and earnings outcomes by subsidy use. Findings are presented in Figures 3 and 4, following the discussion.

[3] Another limitation is that we do not look at the length of subsidy use. Although beyond the scope of this report, utilization patterns should be reviewed to determine if subsidy use occurs in short spells resulting in cycling on and off the program. This cycling could have implications for returns to cash assistance.

Table 3: Employment Participation and Earnings

	Received Child Care Subsidy (n=3,465)		No Subsidy Use (n=5,633)	
2 years before TCA Approval				
% Working	82.6%	(2,863)	83.9%	(4,725)
Mean Quarterly Earnings [Median]	$3,155	[$2,701]	$3,202	[$2,628]
1 year before TCA Approval				
% Working	74.9%	(2,597)	74.9%	(4,217)
Mean Quarterly Earnings [Median]	$3,080	[$2,598]	$3,117	[$2,514]
1 year after TCA Approval				
% Working***	86.0%	(2,980)	76.2%	(4,293)
Mean Quarterly Earnings [Median]***	$2,799	[$2,364]	$2,624	[$2,070]
2 years after TCA Approval				
% Working***	87.6%	(3,035)	78.1%	(4,399)
Mean Quarterly Earnings [Median]***	$3,622	[$3,210]	$3,361	[$2,804]
3 years after TCA Approval				
% Working***	84.3%	(2,920)	74.4%	(4,192)
Mean Quarterly Earnings [Median]**	$4,014	[$3,639]	$3,818	[$3,273]

Note: Counts may not sum to actual sample size because of missing data for some variables. Valid percentages are reported. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Employment and Earnings after Subsidy Use

Of our sample, 7,835 cases were eligible for a child care subsidy within the first year of their TCA certification. This represents most (86.1%) of the eligible cases in this sample. Among those who became eligible during the first year after TCA application approval, one-third (34.2%) received a child care subsidy during that year, while about two-thirds (65.8%) did not.

Figure 3 shows the employment rates of subsidy users and non-users in the second and third years after TCA certification and subsidy eligibility. Results are as one might expect: women using subsidized child care are more likely to be employed than are eligible women who do not use the subsidy. In fact, employment participation is higher in every quarter for those that received the child care subsidy.

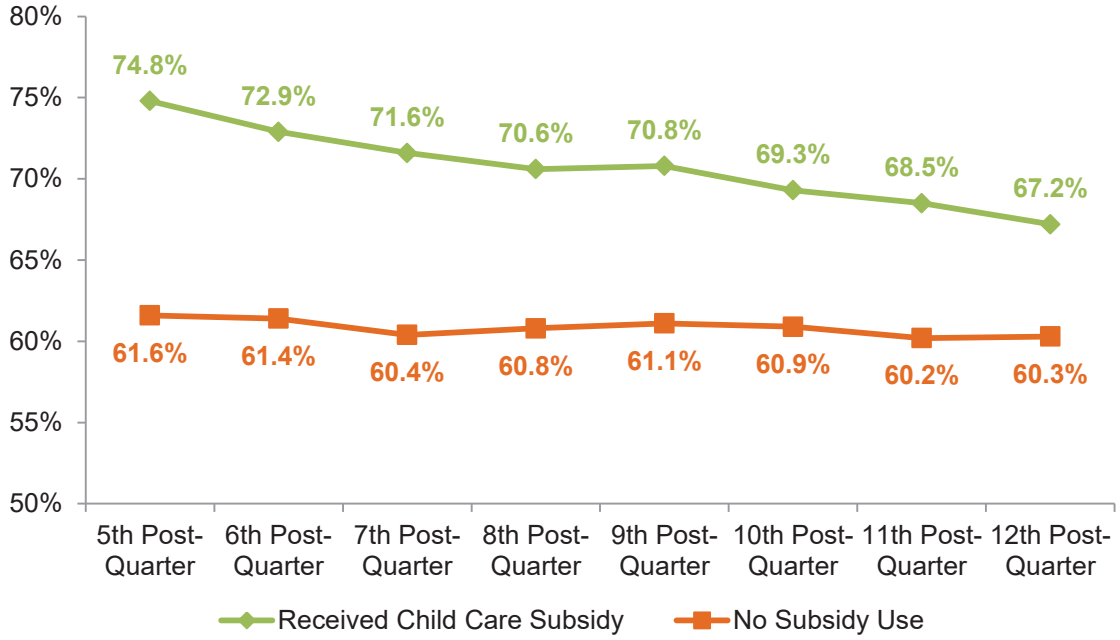
Although employment rates among subsidy users declined over time (from 74.8% to 67.2%), their lowest rate (67.2%) is six percentage points higher than the highest rate observed among women who did not use a child care subsidy (61.6%). Moreover, as Figure 3 also shows, the employment rate among non-users is essentially flat over time, never varying by more than more than 1.4 percentage points.

Figure 4 illustrates that the same general pattern holds with regard to average quarterly earnings. They are higher in each quarter for women who had taken up the child care subsidy within the first year after TCA application approval, and most of the differences between the two groups are statistically significant.

Unlike employment, however, which remained relatively flat among subsidy non-users, there is a steady, upward earnings progression for non-users as well as for users across the follow-up period. As shown in Figure 4, the largest difference in earnings was in the 6th quarter after TCA approval where subsidy users averaged $325 more than non-users ($4,267 vs. $3,942). While these differences may be practically small, they are statistically significant differences (except in the 9th and 11th quarters after TCA approval).

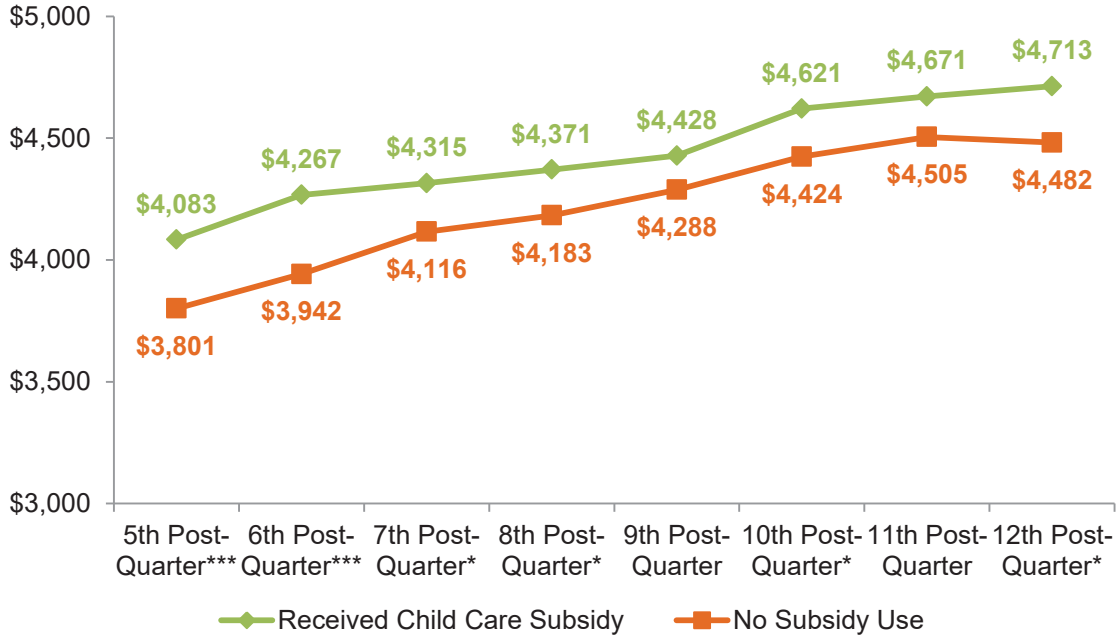
It is beyond the scope of this preliminary descriptive study to tease out the perhaps complex causal link behind these employment and earnings figures. For example, as Ha (2009) correctly notes, mothers who remain employed tend to keep subsidies, so women with subsidies may show higher earnings because of increased wage rates due to employment longevity, not because of the subsidy per se. On the other hand, child care subsidies contribute to employment stability resulting in those increased earnings. Even as relatively crude indicators, however, study findings confirm that, for low-income women on TCA, access to and use of subsidized care is associated with more employment and higher earnings.

Figure 3. Quarterly Employment Participation after TCA Approval and Subsidy Eligibility***



Note: Includes only cases that became eligible for the subsidy within one year of their TCA application approval. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Figure 4. Average Quarterly Earnings after TCA Approval and Subsidy Eligibility



Note: Earnings figures are only for those working in the quarters from Figure 3. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

CONCLUSIONS

Child care costs can consume a significant portion of any family's income, especially for low-income single parent families including those who receive or have recently received TCA. Child care need among TCA families is widespread because almost all adults in single-parent TCA cases must participate in work activities. To support families in their transitions from welfare to work, subsidized child care is available through The Child Care and Development Fund and other funding streams. Despite this, relatively few current and former TCA families participate in the child care subsidy program.

An earlier study of Maryland found that 24% of eligible, new TCA families (1997-1999) used subsidized child care. Our findings indicate a higher take-up rate (38%) among newly-certified TCA families (2003-2004), a rate more consistent with other state and national studies of child care subsidy use. Still, a 38% take-up rate seems low given the number of work-mandatory single-parent TCA families and work participation requirements the state must meet.

The apparent underutilization of this key work support is perplexing because we find, as have others, that TCA adults with child care subsidies have better employment and earnings outcomes than subsidy non-users. Child care is also known to make a substantial impact on parents' abilities to maintain consistent employment and reduce their need for government support.

There are two lines of thought about why child care subsidy use rates are much lower than for most other social programs. One is that parents prefer care provided by family, friends, and neighbors (Sonenstein, Gates, Schmidt, & Bolshun, 2002). Other eligible families may choose different options such as Head Start (Witte & Queralt, 2002). The other theme is that 'hassles' in applying for, accessing, and maintaining subsidies discourage their use. For example, in a synthesis of several studies, researchers found that families face multiple barriers to accessing benefits for which they qualify. These include reporting requirements, inconsistencies and a lack of coordination with other programs, the need to take time off from work for redeterminations, and inadvertent terminations due to temporary changes in circumstances (Adams, Snyder, & Banghart, 2008).

Whatever the reasons for persistently low rates of child care subsidy utilization by current and former TCA families, FIA's need to know more about the characteristics of those who do and do not participate is real and of growing importance. Recent years have seen a 60% increase in the number of new families applying for TCA, including a sizable jump in the number of single-parent, work-mandatory families with children, almost all of whom would be eligible for the subsidy. Then, too, child care disruptions can cause job loss and returns to TCA by those who have left welfare for work.

It would seem prudent for FIA to consider how it might be able to work more closely with MSDE to increase subsidy use by current and former TCA families. A useful starting point would be person- and case-level matching between the administrative databases CARES and CCATS, because only this type of data can provide the fundamental empirical baseline information needed to develop action plans to increase subsidy use. It would behoove FIA to have valid, reliable data, to illustrate, about such things as the profiles of TCA families that do and do not use subsidies, the timing, length, and number of subsidy spells, if and how child care use/non-use is correlated with TCA exits, employment and earnings, and if child care disruptions are associated with welfare recidivism. With this type of information in hand, it should be possible to help more TCA families avail themselves of this key work support and, in so doing, improve outcomes both for individual families and for the TCA program.

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APPENDIX A: AVAILABLE CHILD CARE SUBSIDY DATA BY QUARTER

Critical Study Date	Data Availability by Quarter												Total Qtrs of Available Data
	2003-2 (n=1,342)	2003-3 (n=2,768)	2003-4 (n=4,218)	2004-1 (n=5,290)	2004-2 (n=6,310)	2004-3 (n=7,390)	2004-4 (n=8,517)	2005-1 (n=9,098)	2005-2 (n=9,098)	2005-3 (n=9,098)	2005-4 (n=9,098)	2006-1 (n=9,098)	
1/1/2003 to 3/1/2003 (n=1,342)	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	12
4/1/2003 to 6/1/2003 (n=1,426)		☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	11
7/1/2003 to 9/1/2003 (n=1,450)			☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	10
10/1/2003 to 12/1/2003 (n=1,072)				☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	9
1/1/2004 to 3/1/2004 (n=1,020)					☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	8
4/1/2004 to 6/1/2004 (n=1,080)						☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	7
7/1/2004 to 9/1/2004 (n=1,127)							☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	6
10/1/2004 to 12/1/2004 (n=581)								☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	5

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