

Through an Equity Lens: Working with Data to Implement Change in Child Care



Imagine a child care system where young children from all backgrounds have access to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive programs. Imagine a system that provides consistent and affordable care options for all families. Imagine a system where child care providers are treated with respect and earn a fair wage. For over 50 years, child care advocates and researchers have been able to document how the current child care system is broken — fragmented, inequitable and unaffordable for most families. While there have been some achievements, including more rigorous standards for programs which have positively impacted quality, the effects of the pandemic stressed an already vulnerable system which will now need major supports to re-envision and rebuild.

Recently, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act injected \$39 billion for states to stabilize their child care systems. Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA) and other early childhood-focused organizations appreciate this much-needed funding, but more money will be needed to truly transform child care in the United States.

Child care is currently a hot topic in the media and among policymakers. For instance, the Biden administration has proposed a massive infrastructure funding bill that includes significant new funding for child care, including long-term funding. Other state, local and private funding initiatives may also become available as child care continues to remain a prominent issue. Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) lead agencies in states, territories and tribal areas can build upon existing needs assessments and implement equitable evaluation methods to prepare for future investment. They will then be prepared to ensure that money goes towards building a truly equitable, accessible and high-quality child care system in their state, territory

or tribal area.

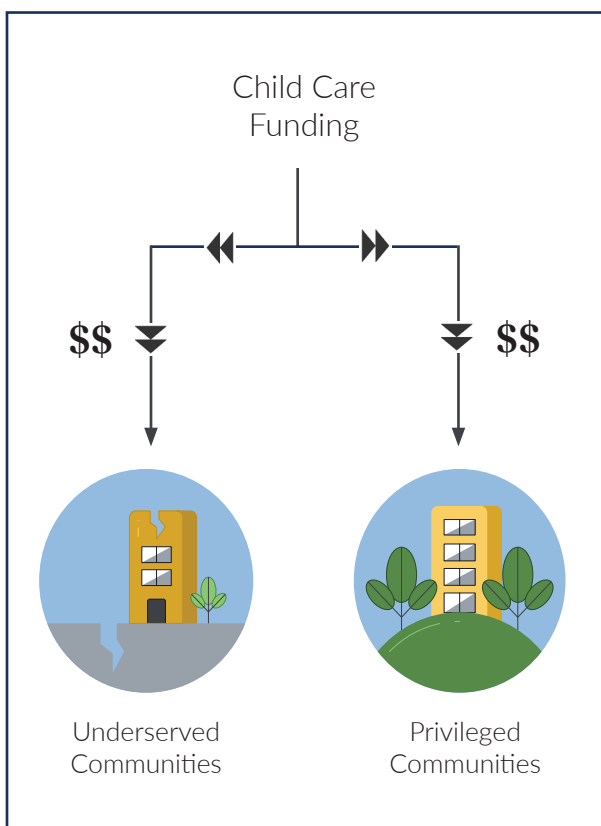
The purpose of this paper is to provide lead agencies and other child care stakeholders with suggestions on how to include equity in all data practices, from needs assessments to impact evaluations. By collecting the data you need now and forming relationships with a variety of diverse stakeholder groups, CCDF lead agencies can evaluate the impact of new investments from ARP and other relief measures, and better prepare for future investments.



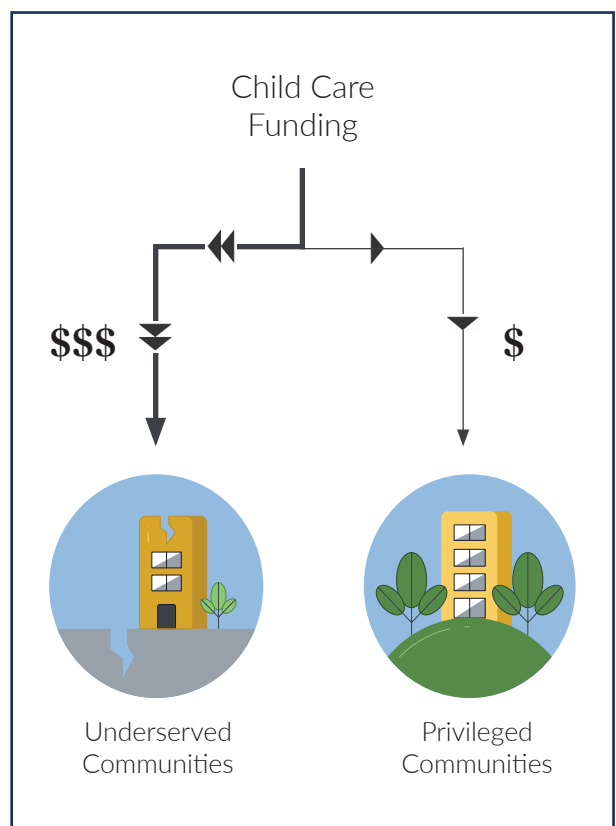
Equity vs. Equality

What is the difference between the terms "equity" and "equality"? It is important to understand the difference as we discuss the issue of equity in child care. Equality is the idea that everyone in a population receives the same things in the same quantities. As noted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, equality can only work if we all have the same starting point and identical needs. Equity involves providing different levels of assistance based on the needs of specific communities. Equity is a means of achieving equality.

Equality



Equity



How can we improve our national child care system?

Instead of being built through a thoughtfully planned framework, our national child care system was gradually built over decades in reaction to assumptions about available funding and societal perceptions. Pieces of systems that were implemented throughout the history of child care still exist and are layered around each other, with many gaps in services apparent across the country. On the other hand, what has also grown over the past 20 years is a focus on the quality of programs, more rigorous regulations and an acknowledgement of both the economic and child development factors that drive aspects of the child care system itself.

Child care is a key part of our economy that, from the beginning, has never received the full resources needed to create a strong, coordinated system. The child care system is not designed to accommodate the diverse needs of families. For example, scheduling, geographic and financial needs are all particularly important to families and are major considerations in choosing care.

As with any crisis, there is an opportunity to seize and push for change. CCAoA wants to restructure the child care system, with new funding to support this effort. Data-informed decision making is key. It is critical that lead agencies be deliberate in how they prioritize equity and data. Systems need to be designed to remedy imbalances. For instance, the number of programs available (supply) does not always meet the need (demand); there are not enough child care settings open during nonstandard hours (e.g., weekends and nights), when many parents work; and in some localities, there are too few high-quality programs. These issues influence families' ability to access care.



The Necessity of Community Voice



Communities and populations that will be impacted by decisions must have a seat at the table during all phases of the process: planning, data collection, distribution of funds and evaluation. One way that states can achieve this is through the [Community Voice Method](#). This model uses techniques such as stakeholder interviews and public meetings to engage community members about how to manage resources and plan initiatives.

There are many examples of CCDF lead agencies consulting with stakeholders from different communities and conducting needs assessments to inform CCDF state plans and Preschool Development Birth to Five grants. These efforts should continue and be expanded to all states, territories and tribal areas.

This process includes developing a plan to identify and solicit ideas from groups and communities that have experienced inequities because of race or ethnicity, disability status, income or location. Then, administra-

tors can identify community leaders to start the conversation about what is needed to increase access to quality child care and what success will look like. Members of these communities should also be given the chance to share their ideas through town halls, focus groups or remote means, and during periods of time that allow for maximum participation from parents and providers, including evening and weekend hours.

In addition to sharing ideas about what the child care systems in their communities need, stakeholders should also discuss what kind of data is needed to measure outcomes. Although the extra step of adding community voices to the process of funding distribution can be challenging and time-consuming, it is worthwhile because it has a direct impact on the integrity of the outcome. Communities that have experienced discrimination and inequities need to have their voices heard during these types of planning processes.



The Role of Data in Ensuring and Evaluating Equity

In the past two decades, technological advancements have made data collection easier and more affordable. However, it is difficult to find robust datasets that identify the child care needs of communities or give a thorough overview of the child care supply landscape. Data is siloed in different state agencies and private organizations, which makes it difficult to access and link across systems. Often, datasets are years old and do not reflect the current child care landscape. Without good data from a wide spectrum of sources that reflect entire communities, it is impossible for states to understand where funding should be targeted and evaluate the impact of funding distribution on communities. Equity must be a priority in all data tasks, and in this section we provide strategies on how to achieve this.

DATA COLLECTION

Let's start with data collection. This is a key step that impacts all other aspects of data usage and storytelling. If the data is collected only from portions of the communities involved, the story cannot be told inclusively. Some strategies for states to consider can be found on the next page.



Identifying populations/issues

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- » Which groups have historically been most affected by inequitable child care access and policies? Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies can be great resources to identify these groups, as they hear about these issues daily. Interview CCR&R staff who work in the communities of focus.
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- » Identify and analyze datasets that have been collected, especially during the pandemic. What are parents saying about child care? What do providers need? For example, [The Urban Institute](#) has a compilation of child care-related surveys that have been conducted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This resource provides users with an option to explore surveys that have been done in various states. CCAoA has worked with multiple states on mapping projects prior to and throughout the pandemic. Explore CCAoA's [state resource page](#). CCAoA also produces a set of [State Fact Sheets](#) annually, which can show how child care supply has changed over the years.
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- » Which types of programs have worked in the past? For example, a state may have piloted a program that showed promising results. This state could explore the feasibility of building out this program to scale.
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- » Has past research been done in your community from which you can glean information? For example, where were supply gaps prior to the pandemic? Do you have data on child care program and capacity losses? Which communities have been hardest hit by child care closures or lack of supply? What are the characteristics of child care providers who have closed their programs?
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- » If your state has datasets or funding to conduct data collection, consider working with academics or students in your community to do needs assessments, mapping and gap analyses.



Listening to family voices

- » Parents are the experts on what their family and children need. As states are reviewing data, they should also include parent voices from a wide variety of communities. Specifically, parents can explain the child care issues in their communities and what they believe is needed to make the system more equitable.
- » Lead agency administrators can engage parents through forums, focus groups and listening sessions offered in-person and through remote means, at times that encourage maximum parent involvement. Lead agencies should offer multiple opportunities for families to participate by scheduling these sessions at different times during the week and conducting sessions in the preferred languages spoken by families. This process will ensure that all voices are being heard as states determine how to spend their allocated funding in an equitable manner.
- » CCR&Rs speak to parents daily through child care referral requests, subsidy advice and other supports. Consider engaging CCR&Rs when attempting to understand the struggles that parents are facing. In particular, CCR&Rs can assist in documenting and sharing families' stories about child care referrals, subsidy advice and other supports so others can hear about their challenges and more accurately address the solu-





Listening to provider and educator voices

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- » Gathering information from child care providers can be difficult. States should consider the following factors when attempting to collect data that fully represents the population of child care providers in the state, territory or tribal area:
 - » Provider/educator type (licensed or unlicensed; center-based or home-based; formal or informal).
 - » Information about child care business owners (location, gender, race/ethnicity).
 - » Personal demographics of those who work in child care settings (race/ethnicity, age, languages spoken, place of birth).
 - » Program details (location, participation in subsidy programs, participation in quality rating improvement systems).
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- » To find and recruit representative samples of child care providers, think about engaging the following groups and organizations in your community:
 - » CCR&Rs.
 - » Community-based organizations, including those focused on immigrant and refugee issues.
 - » Social media groups targeted towards child care providers.
 - » Local community centers.
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- » In today's connected world, it is easy to assume that everyone has internet access and a computer or smartphone. However, this is not always the case. In addition to offering surveys, focus groups or data sharing sessions online, consider other ways to encourage participation. In some communities, a mail-in survey may make sense. In others, it may be best to have people participate in person.
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- » Child care providers frequently work during normal business hours. To encourage engagement, offer to conduct focus groups, interviews and data-sharing sessions during evenings and weekends. Choose a location that is accessible via public transportation. Consider offering a small meal or snack

ORGANIZING THE DATA

After collecting the data, it is important to organize it in a way that identifies child care inequities in communities across states. Here are some strategies that can support your efforts to prioritize equity in data findings.



Where possible, strive for data interoperability from different state agencies and organizations.

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- » CCAoA advocates for interoperability, especially regarding data. Interoperability is the characteristic of a product or system whose governance, data and interfaces enable other products or systems to access it, and vice versa. To achieve interoperability, all products and systems involved must have the same characteristics. This speaks to the “how” of digital technology relationships that enable collaboration on datasets and the exchange of information, knowledge and services so that all invested participants can advance and be successful.
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- » Many fields have benefited from interoperability to improve services, engage others effectively and reach out and communicate real-time information to stakeholders. For example, interoperability is used in the health care field to meet patient and service provider goals through the effective sharing of information. Specifically, a patient or health care provider has one access point where all information about patient history, treatments from a variety of providers, conditions and future health appointments from all providers and care plans are accessible.
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- » Interoperability brings the idea of human services to the next level, maximizing outcomes and reducing costs and human efforts along the way. Enabling data interoperability creates an environment of easier access to more data at the same time. Interoperability requires ensuring strong governance and using common standards and common interfaces. If you would like to learn more about data governance, common standards and common interfaces please see our [interoperability resource suite](#).



Develop a data strategy

- » A data strategy includes documentation about which data currently exists and where it is stored. It is also important to create a data stakeholder team that represents the demographic makeup of communities. In addition to data experts and state leaders, this team should include parent and community leaders who can ensure that all data reviews are being conducted through an equity lens. Once the team understands how child care data is collected and stored, they can offer insights into what next steps are needed and how to turn data into action.



Conduct a gap analysis

- » Once the datasets are collected, it is important to understand which groups and geographic areas are well represented and where there are gaps. Are all communities being represented by the data sources? A summary of available datasets and who is represented should be shared with parent and family stakeholders to get their input on who is missing from the data picture.
- » CCR&Rs are valuable sources of child care data and should be consulted when conducting these gap analyses.



Categorize the Data

- » Categorizing the data involves breaking it down, or disaggregating it, into detailed subgroups to better understand certain populations. For example, race and ethnicity can be broken down into multiple groups such as "Black or African American," "White", "Native American and Alaska Native." Other commonly disaggregated variables include: immigrant/refugee status, income and primary language spoken in the home.
- » How to categorize data by race and ethnicity will differ across states and communities. For example, two states are trying to understand the needs of Latinx populations. State A may find through Census data and listening sessions that it has large numbers of Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican families. When developing survey tools, these three populations may be offered as a choice rather than simply "Latinx." State B may have a completely different population of Latinx families, so State A's categories may not be a good fit. This example illustrates why it is so important for state leaders to understand who is living within their borders. These data can be obtained through listening sessions in local communities, analyzing U.S. Census data and speaking with community leaders from across the state.



SUMMARIZE FINDINGS AND SHARE WITH COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

It is also important to keep equity in the forefront when the data conclusions are presented. Whether you're presenting the results of a needs assessment or the findings of an evaluation, there are some additional considerations about how to keep equity front and center. Results and conclusions should be shared with stakeholders from every community impacted by and invested in child care. These include parents, educators, providers, community leaders and business leaders.



Make findings understandable and accessible

- » In addition to in-person presentations, the results should also be distributed in a variety of formats such as social media posts, press releases and presentations at community meetings. Findings should be presented in easy-to-understand language. Many families, providers and educators speak languages other than English. Have materials translated into these languages.
- » Consider the limits to your conclusions. For example, conclusions may be limited to a period of time or a specific event. Are details available about when the data should be collected again or when the data is no longer usable?
- » When reviewing the findings, consider whether there is evidence that the research was done using an equity lens. These criteria can guide your team:
 - » Do the conclusions break down the results into specific groups or communities by name?
 - » Is there evidence that the research team consulted with multiple stakeholders from a wide variety of backgrounds? For some states, this could mean engaging rural and tribal communities. In others, there may be a focus on families of color and low-income neighborhoods.
 - » Have these findings been shared with diverse communities across the state to get their feedback?

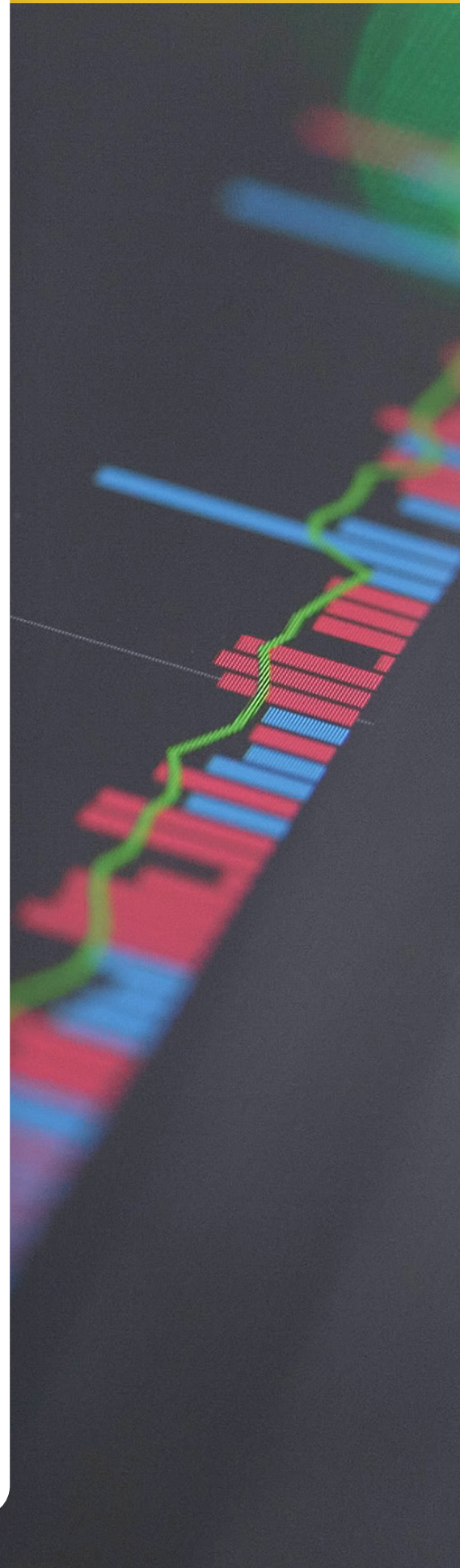
EVALUATING SUCCESS

Once results are presented to community members, these stakeholders can play an important role in recommending action steps that should be taken as a result of the research. Setting goals will help lead agencies determine if funding had an impact on the population of concern. Stakeholder engagement is a critical element of this activity.



Measures of Success

- » Typically, researchers and project managers have used the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-based) framework when setting goals. The Management Center added the letter 'I' for Inclusiveness and 'E' for Equitable, making it a [SMARTIE goal](#). Here is an example of a SMARTIE goal: Increase the number of family child care programs owned by underserved populations by 20%, with monthly updates to and input from community representatives. The SMARTIE goal framework can help lead agencies ensure that inclusiveness and equity are baked into all of their outcomes.
- » Consider these questions when defining goals.
 - » How will the summaries and conclusions impact change?
 - » What guidelines will be put into place to ensure recommended action items can be measured equitably? States may need to review their data collection methods to ensure that information such as demographics are being included when developing progress documents.





Regular stakeholder engagement

- » States could consider convening an advisory board made up of a cross-section of community members that can help set measures of success and monitor progress periodically.
- » For example, if the findings of a needs assessment indicate a need for child care during nonstandard hours in majority-Latinx neighborhoods, then Latinx families must play a role in articulating how this problem can be addressed.
- » Alternatively, if the findings suggest that a particular investment or strategy had a meaningful, positive impact in addressing a long-standing issue, such as meeting the nonstandard hours care for a majority-Latinx neighborhood, stakeholders can use it as a proof point to argue for additional targeted investment.





Conclusion

Using some or all of the strategies suggested above will increase the chances that CCDF lead agencies, CCR&Rs and child stakeholders can tell a more complete story that is diverse, real and representative of a community and the needs of all families in the community. By collecting data and engaging stakeholders on a regular basis, lead agencies will also be in a position to evaluate the impact of new programs or changes to existing policies.

References


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ABOUT CHILD CARE AWARE® OF AMERICA

Child Care Aware® of America is our nation's leading voice for child care. CCAoA works with state and local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) and other community partners to ensure that all families have access to quality, affordable child care. CCAoA leads projects that increase the quality and availability of child care, offers comprehensive training to child care professionals, undertakes research, and advocates for child care policies that improve the lives of children and families.

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