POVERTY TRACKER

CENTER ON POVERTY & SOCIAL POLICY
at Columbia University

Columbia | CPRC
Columbia Population Research Center

ROBIN HOOD

MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

SPOTLIGHT ON

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

Participation in New York City's 3-K for All Program —
Evidence from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker 2017-2021

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KEY FINDINGS:

In 2017, New York City expanded its pre-K programming to include 3-K for All, which aims to provide every three-year-old child in the city with free, full-day pre-K. This report examines interest, application, and enrollment trends trends from 2017 to 2021, and finds:
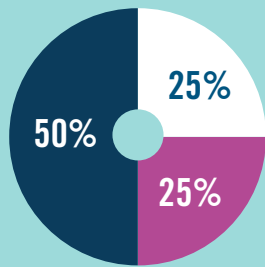
In the pool of eligible parents, **50%** planned to apply, **25%** were unsure, and **25%** did not plan to apply.

50%
25%
25%

■ PLANNED TO APPLY
□ WERE UNSURE
■ DID NOT PLAN TO APPLY

Although half of parents planned to apply to 3-K, only **ONE-THIRD** ended up applying.

Ultimately, only **18%** of parents with eligible children enrolled in a 3-K program.

Of those families who enrolled, **18%** were higher-income families, **15%** were families living below the poverty line, and **22%** percent were low-income.

The gap between program application and enrollment varied for families from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. We find only a **three-percentage point** difference between the rates of application and subsequent enrollment for children from white families, but a **16-percentage point** difference for children from Black families, and a **22-percentage point** difference for children from Latino families.

While researching 3-K programs, nearly three out of four parents (**72%**) used the New York City Department of Education (DOE) website, making it the most widely used resource. Far fewer parents (**34%**) used the online 3-K program Quality Snapshots.

NYC DOE

72%

Location and perceived quality of the 3-K programs mattered the most to parents.

The in-person application process was used at above-average rates and families living below poverty and Latino families thought applying in-person was relatively easy. The in-person application system may be an aspect of 3-K for All that is worth preserving and investing more resources into.

For the program to enjoy full participation, outreach is necessary as almost half of those who didn't apply (**44%**) were unaware of their child's eligibility.

For parents who chose not to enroll, **15%** reported that they preferred another program and **12%** reported that the available 3-K programs were too far away or inconveniently located.

All parents who enrolled in 3-K used some form of group care (center or home-based child care). In comparison, just over half of families who didn't enroll in 3-K used center or home-based child care. None of the families with a child in 3-K relied solely on parent care, whereas **21%** of parents who did not enroll in 3-K used only parent care.

The program helps parents save money on child care. Parents who enrolled their child in 3-K spent about **$450 less** on child care per month than parents who didn't enroll (**$322 vs. $771** per month on average).

ENROLLED PARENTS SPENT **$450** LESS ON CHILD CARE PER MONTH

INTRODUCTION

Universal pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs — state-funded early childhood care and education programs that provide free preschool to children for one to two years before kindergarten — have dramatically expanded across the United States over the past two decades. This expansion follows years of research showing that high quality preschool participation can reduce income-based school readiness gaps[1] and promote children's cognitive and language development.[2] Children who participate in preschool for two years instead of one (for example, starting at age three) also show larger gains in their academic achievement scores.[3]

However, not all families who live in areas with universal pre-K participate in these programs. Across the states that provide universal programs, about 71% of families enroll their children, on average.[4] The fact that enrollment is not 100% suggests that families with the opportunity to participate in free preschool may still use other arrangements, including private programs, informal family care, or parent care. Although some families choose not to enroll in pre-K out of preference, research has found that a sizeable percentage of families who want to enroll their children in pre-K are unable to enroll due to inequities in access.[5]

New York City is a leader in the national universal pre-K effort with its citywide Pre-K for All (PKA) program. The program launched in 2014 and quickly grew to offer free, full-day pre-K to all four-year-old children in 2015. New York City's universal pre-K programming expanded further in 2017 with 3-K for All, which aims to provide every three-year-old child in the city with free, full-day pre-K. 3-K for All is a groundbreaking effort in the universal pre-K movement; few states or districts provide free preschool for children younger than four. Proposals such as President Biden's American Families Plan aim to provide universal pre-K for three- and four-year-old children, making New York City a model for this nationwide expansion.

This report draws on five years of data (from 2017 to 2021) collected from a representative sample of New York City families with young children surveyed by the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT). In this report, we examine families' experiences with the 3-K for All program search, application, and enrollment process during the three academic years that began in fall 2018, 2019, and 2020. We focus on the following questions:

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[1] Chaudry et al. (2021); Yoshikawa et al. (2016).
[2] Gormley et al. (2005).
[3] Arteaga et al. (2014); Yoshikawa et al. (2016).
[4] Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018).
[5] Shapiro et al. (2019); Whitehurst and Klein (2015).

■ How many families planned to apply, applied, and enrolled during the three academic years?

■ How did planning to apply, application, and enrollment in 3-K for All differ by family poverty level and parents' race and ethnicity?

■ What were families' experiences of the application and enrollment processes and did these experiences differ by family poverty level and parents' race and ethnicity?

■ What other kinds of child care did families use and did the use of other child care options differ between those who enrolled in 3-K for All and those who did not?

About the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT), a collaboration between Robin Hood and Columbia University, is a longitudinal study of New York City families with young children. Launched in 2017 when the children were between the ages of 0 and 3, this study follows a representative sample of families with young children in New York City, using repeated surveys to provide a detailed description of the challenges and resources that shape the development of children during the critical early years of life. The ECPT study uses repeated surveys with the same parents to understand how families' circumstances change as their children grow and develop. The baseline survey included 1,576 parents, each of whom reported on a "focal child" who was 0-35 months old in June 2017 or was born in the subsequent year. Since the baseline survey, parents have been surveyed several times per year about the focal child's health and development, enrollment in school or child care, and family circumstances including economic conditions, health, and well-being. The figures presented in this report exclude families who have moved out of New York City and are weighted statistically to be representative of children born in and living in New York City. The report draws on the baseline through 32-month follow-up surveys (fielded from 2017 to 2021). For more detail about the methods used in the ECPT study, and for a profile of our sample, see our baseline report.[6]

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[6] *Neckerman, Brooks-Gunn, Doran, Kennedy, Maury, Waldfogel, and Wimer (2019).*

About this report

The report draws on 10 ECPT surveys collected from the baseline through 32-month follow-up surveys. Survey items were released to eligible parents based on their child's birth year eligibility for 3-K and the time of year that the survey was fielded. Parents received survey items about their interest in applying for 3-K beginning in the fall before the year their child was eligible to enroll through the early spring of the enrollment year, their application to 3-K from the spring through the fall of the enrollment year, and enrollment in 3-K from the fall of the eligible year until the spring of the following year. For example, parents of children born in 2016 were eligible to apply to 3-K for the 2019-2020 academic year (see Appendix Table A1 for more information on birth year eligibility). The parents in this example received survey items about 1) their interest in applying from the fall of 2018 until early spring 2019; 2) their application experiences from spring 2019 until early fall 2019; and 3) their enrollment experiences from fall 2019 until spring 2020.

Throughout this report we consider differences in families' experiences of and participation in the 3-K for All program by the family's **poverty** level and the parent's **race and ethnicity**.

Poverty. Poverty is measured using the supplemental poverty measure (SPM), an improved measure of poverty developed by the Census Bureau which accounts for cash income and benefits, non-cash benefits such as SNAP (food stamps) and housing subsidies, medical and work expenses, taxes and tax credits, and differences in cost of living. This report considers families living in poverty (below 100% of the poverty line), those who are low-income (between 100-200% of the poverty line), and those who are higher-income (above 200% of the poverty line).

Race and ethnicity. The patterns of inequality documented in this report are powerfully shaped by systemic racism, which impedes opportunity for families in many ways — in schools and the labor market, in housing and community resources, and in access to wealth. The ECPT sample reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of New York City — the full sample of parents is 43% Latino, 28% white, 18% Black, 6% Asian, and 5% of other or multiple races.

In this report, we refer to Black non-Latino and white non-Latino New Yorkers as Black and white New Yorkers, respectively. In addition, when we say, "New Yorkers," we are referring to adults in New York City. Asian American parents and parents of "other" races are included in the full sample, but due to sample size limitations, we are unable to provide separate estimates for Asian American parents in this report.

3-K FOR ALL

The New York City 3-K for All program, an extension of PKA for three-year-old children, was first introduced to New York City in 2017, with a district-by-district rollout plan. During the 2017-2018 school year, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) launched 3-K for All with 30 programs in two school districts with availability for a total of 1,500 three-year-old students. With each subsequent year, the program expanded to include more districts and enrollment capacity. By the 2020-2021 school year (the last year our data covers), the program was offered in half of school districts and had 25,000 three-year-old children enrolled. This represented about 25% of all three-year-olds in New York City.

3-K for All classrooms are located in schools (public, charter, and private), community-based organizations (e.g., child care centers, Head Start programs), and home-based Family Child Care programs.[7,8] Despite the mixture of settings and funding sources, all 3-K for All programs provide the same DOE-approved play-based curriculum and care providers receive ongoing professional learning and coaching to support program quality.[9]

Table 1 displays the rollout schedule for the annual 3-K application and enrollment according to the child's birth year. To be eligible for 3-K for All, the child must reside in New York City and turn 3 years old during the calendar year they will begin 3-K. For example, a child born in 2016 was eligible to apply for the 2019-2020 school year. Our repeated surveys allowed us to collect information for each family's plans to apply for 3-K in the year before the actual enrollment year, based on the child's birth year.

Table 1

Annual 3-K expansion

ACADEMIC YEAR	ELIGIBLE BIRTH YEAR	3-K CAPACITY	APPROXIMATE PERCENTAGE OF NYC 3-YEAR-OLDS	NUMBER OF DISTRICTS OFFERING 3-K (%)
2017–2018	2014	1,500	1.5%	2 (6.25%)
2018–2019	2015	5,000	5%	6 (18.75%)
2019–2020	2016	13,000	13%	12 (37.50%)
2020–2021	2017	25,000	25%	16 (50%)
2021–2022	2018	40,000	40%	32 (100%)

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[7] *Advocates for Children of New York (2022); Reid et al. (2019).*

[8] *Unlike Pre-K for All, 3-K for All settings include home-based programs that the city calls Family Child Care. This refers to programs that offer 3-K in a home setting by a licensed, qualified child care provider, often in a mixed-age groups with children from birth to age three.*

[9] *New York City Department of Education (2022); Westat (2017).*

Overall Participation in 3-K for All

In this report, we define participation in 3-K as a three-step process: planning to apply, applying, and enrolling in a program if the family received an offer to enroll.

Planning to Apply

Parents with children whose birth year would make them eligible to enroll in 3-K for the upcoming academic year were surveyed about their interest in applying to a program. **Over all three years of our survey, half of parents planned to apply to 3-K, about one in four were undecided, and one in four did not plan to apply** (Figure 1). In other words, three out of every four parents with eligible children in New York City expressed interest in applying to the program — and when we look at the rates of interest in applying year to year, about the same percentage of parents planned to apply each year. Importantly, during the first few years of the program there were far fewer available seats than potentially interested families. This suggests that prospective 3-K applicants were undeterred by the limited capacity and optimistic about the opportunity to apply.

Application

Once 3-K applications were made available to families with eligible children, parents reported on whether they applied. **About one out of three parents applied to the 3-K for All program.** However, the share of parents who applied varied each year. By 2020, over one out of every three parents applied, likely reflecting the program's expansion.

Enrollment

Over the three years, about 18% of parents with eligible children enrolled in a 3-K program.[10] When examining enrollment trends by academic year (Figure 1), the percentage of enrolled families was notably higher in 2019 and 2020 than in 2018, primarily due to the city's increase in program capacity.

Figure 1

Annual 3-K planning, application, and enrollment rates
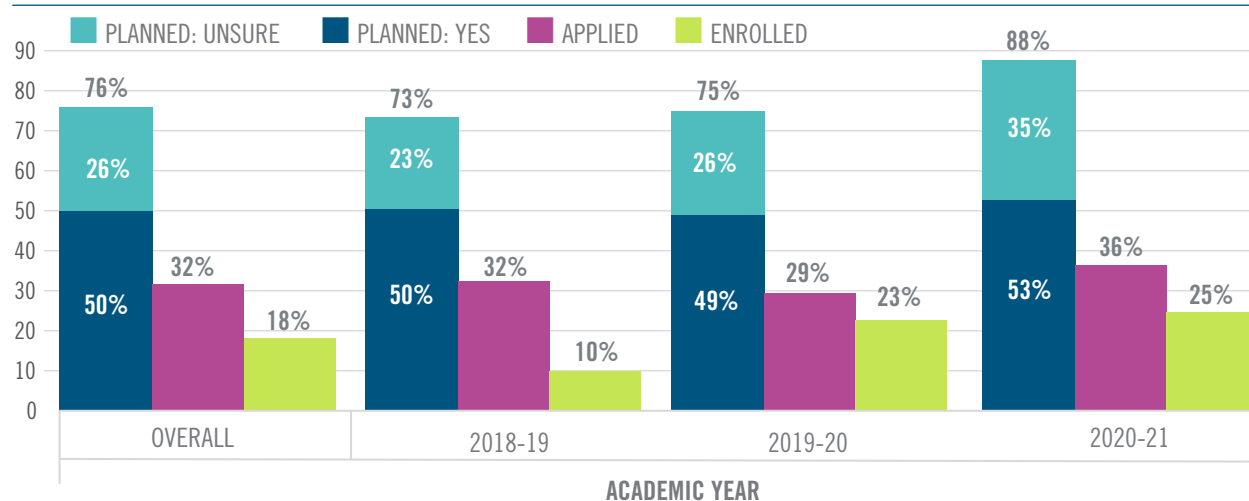
Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2017 to 2021, overall N=946-1031.
Note: Sample sizes vary by year and survey topic. See appendix table A2 for within-year sample sizes.

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[10] The enrollment rates presented here appear higher than expected based on the rollout reported in Table 1 due to two reasons: 1) The ECPT study over-sampled families living in lower-income neighborhoods, and these households were more likely to live in districts to first provide 3-K; 2) We made every effort to match the parents' reported 3-K site with the New York City DOE's list of official 3-K programs. However, it is likely that parents overreported their participation in 3-K for All because their 3-year-old child is in a child care program, but the parent is unsure about the program's affiliation with 3-K for All.

Because one of the goals of the 3-K for All program was to make access to high quality pre-K more equitable, the rollout plans prioritized availability in the highest-need districts.[11] Next, we examine whether participation varied by family poverty level and race and ethnic group membership. Due to small survey sample sizes for some subgroups of families, the remainder of this report focuses on 3-K participation across all three academic years, rather than within each year. 3-K participation rates by additional family and household characteristics, including parent immigrant status, household language, spouse/partner status, and residential borough, can be found in appendix table A3.

3-K participation by poverty level

Figure 2

3-K planning, application, and enrollment by poverty level
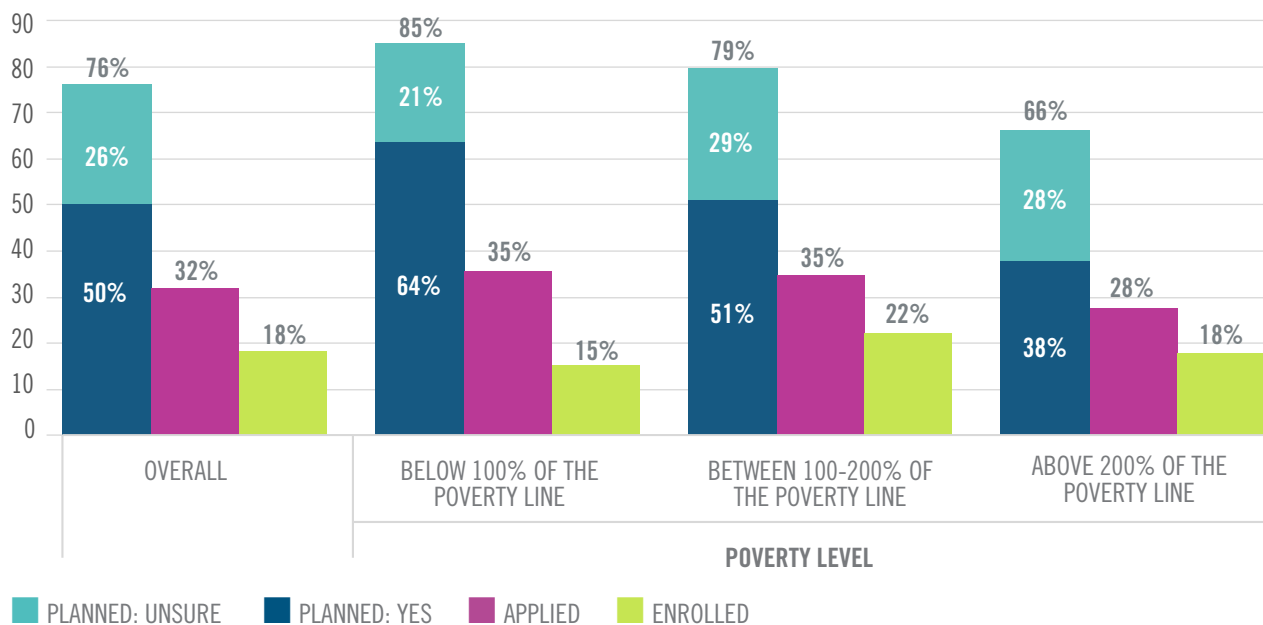
Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2017 to 2021, overall N=946-1031.

Families living in poverty (below 100% of the poverty line) had the highest rates of planning to apply (64%), but only 35% applied — the same application rate as low-income families (between 100-200% of the poverty line) (Figure 2). Families in poverty expressed the greatest interest in applying, but had the lowest rates of 3-K enrollment (15%).

Higher-income families (above 200% of the poverty line) had the lowest interest in application (38%) and also applied at the lowest rates (28%). Despite reporting relatively low interest in applying to 3-K, a greater percentage of higher-income families enrolled in 3-K (18%) than families in poverty. The relatively lower rates of interest and application found in the highest income families are likely because these families could afford private preschool arrangements and may have enrolled their children in private programs (or intended

[11] Veiga (2017).

to do so). Research typically finds that children from higher-income families participate in private preschools at higher rates than other families.[12]

In later sections, we explore parents' application experiences and parents' reasons for not applying, which provides us with additional information on why families in poverty — who had the greatest interest in applying and applied at higher than average rates — ultimately had the lowest rates of enrollment.

3-K participation by race and ethnicity

3-K planning, application, and enrollment by parent race and ethnicity

PARENT RACE AND ETHNICITY

■ PLANNED: UNSURE   ■ PLANNED: YES   ■ APPLIED   ■ ENROLLED
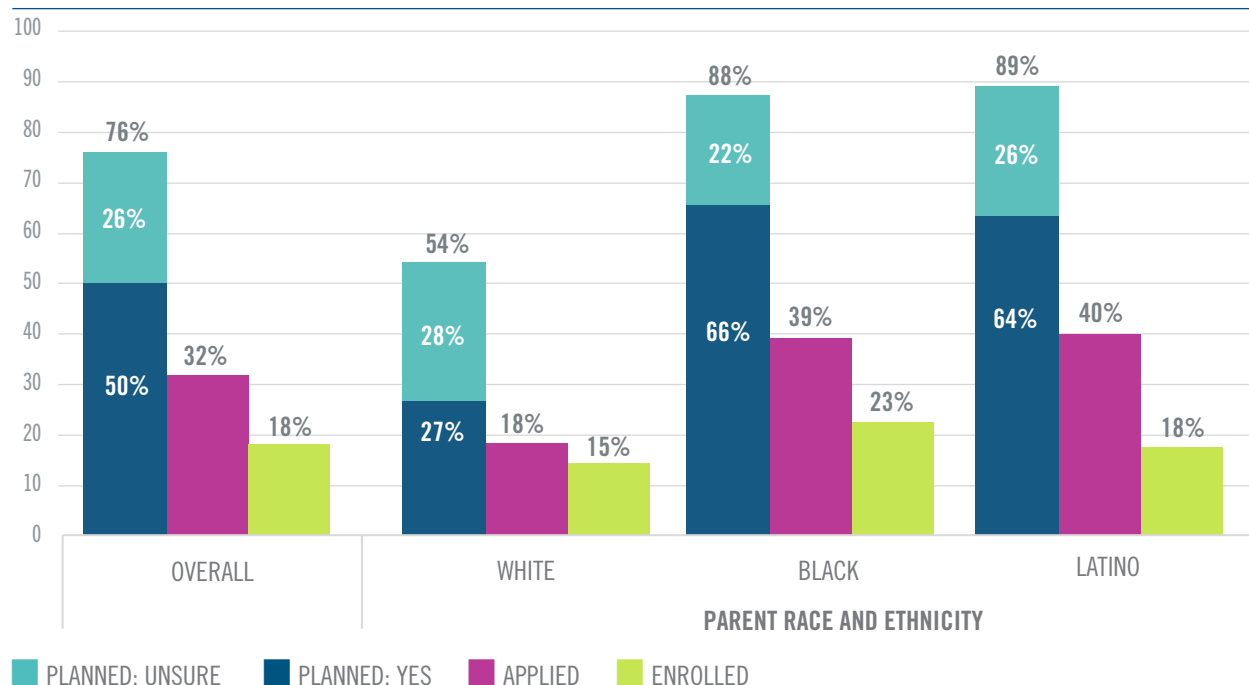
Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2017 to 2021, overall N=946-1031. Parents who identify as Asian American are included in the full sample, but due to sample size limitations, we are unable to provide separate estimates for Asian American parents in this report.

Figure 3 presents 3-K participation by parent race and ethnicity. We find that Black and Latino parents had much higher rates of interest and application than white parents. Whereas one out of four white parents planned to apply to 3-K, about two out of three Black and Latino parents planned to apply. Similarly, about 18% of white families applied to 3-K, whereas Black and Latino parents applied at over twice this rate (39% and 40%, respectively).

There were especially stark differences in the gap between 3-K application and enrollment rates by parents' race and ethnicity. We find only a three-percentage point difference between the rates of application and enrollment for children from white families, but a 16-percentage point difference for children from Black families, and a 22-percentage point difference for children from Latino families. Although we would expect

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[12] *Shapiro et al. (2019); Magnuson and Waldfogel (2016).*

that not everyone who applied to a 3-K program during the early years of the program's rollout would receive an enrollment offer, these differential drops in the rates of application and enrollment suggest that some part of the application process was experienced differently for families from different race and ethnicity groups.

Application Experiences

Although three out of four parents with age-eligible children either planned to apply to 3-K or were undecided, only one in three parents reported applying for the program. Parents had a variety of experiences during the application process, which broadly involved searching for and learning about different 3-K programs, ranking one or more programs, completing application paperwork, and waiting (potentially for several months) to hear if the child received an offer and/or was put on a waitlist. Program offers were dependent on parents' application choices, the number of available seats in each program, and the program's admission priorities. Admission priorities varied based on the type of 3-K program (e.g., district programs, pre-K centers, home-based programs) but typically prioritized children who live within the zone or district where the program is offered and children whose siblings already attend the school. Not all families who applied received an offer from a 3-K program and some families who received offers did not enroll their children.

In this section, we describe parents' application experiences, including how they gathered information about 3-K programs, why they chose certain programs over others, how they applied for 3-K, and the challenges they faced while applying.

Search process

A critical component of parents' 3-K application was researching programs to understand which ones might provide a good fit for the child's and family's needs and preferences. Parents had many resources at their disposal, so we asked parents who applied to 3-K about all the sources of information they used during the search process (Figure 4).

Online resources were an important source of information about 3-K programs. **Nearly three out of four parents used the New York City DOE website, making it the most widely used resource.** Just under half of parents reported reading social media or blog posts to learn about different programs. Over two out of five
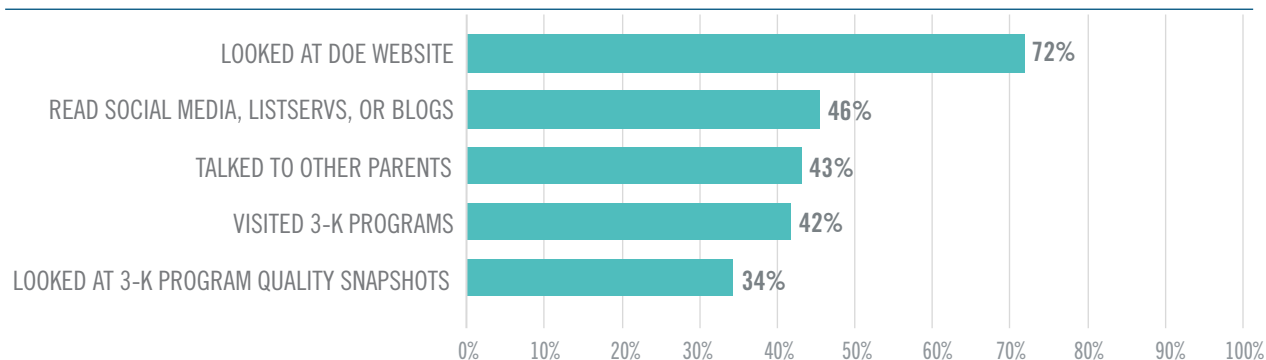
3-K program search activities

Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=275.
Note: Survey respondents could select one or more options.

parents acquired information about 3-K programs by talking to other parents and by visiting 3K programs. However, **only one in three parents used the online 3-K program Quality Snapshots,** a DOE website that compiles information about program quality metrics. This result indicates lower familiarity with or usage of quality metrics compared to anecdotal or personal evidence when parents search for 3-K programs. These trends in parents' search processes also reflect previous research findings that the features highlighted in many online child care quality resources differ from the aspects of child care that actually matter to parents.[13] We explore the key features of 3-K programs that parents prioritized in the next section.

Parents' sources of information by household poverty and race and ethnicity are presented in Table 2. Higher-income parents (above 200% of the poverty line) reported using each source of information at higher rates than lower-income parents. This trend could result from the higher levels of resources available to higher-income parents, including more time to conduct research, better access to information technology, and greater knowledge about educational systems.[14]

Additionally, we also find that parents of different race and ethnicity identities used different sources of information in their search process. White parents reported using each information source at the highest rates — in the case of talking to other parents, at nearly twice the rate of Black or Latino parents. Notably, Latino parents had the lowest rates of using online resources during their program search (relative to families of other race and ethnicity backgrounds). For example, Latino parents used social media, listservs, and blogs at less than half the rate (28%) of white parents (68%).

Taken together, **these differences in the range and prevalence of 3-K program search activities between parents in higher-income and lower-income households, and between white parents and Latino and Black parents, could have contributed to an information gap during the application process.**

Table 2

3-K program search activities by poverty level and parent race and ethnicity

	LOOKED AT THE DOE WEBSITE	READ SOCIAL MEDIA, LISTSERVS, OR BLOGS	TALKED TO OTHER PARENTS	VISITED 3-K PROGRAMS	LOOKED AT 3-K PROGRAM QUALITY SNAPSHOTS
Overall	**72%**	**46%**	**43%**	**42%**	**34%**
Poverty Level					
Below 100% of the poverty line	75%	36%	41%	35%	37%
Between 100-200% of the poverty line	65%	44%	37%	43%	29%
Above 200% of the poverty line	80%	56%	55%	46%	41%
Parent race and ethnicity					
White	69%	68%	69%	47%	41%
Black	76%	46%	35%	39%	39%
Latino	61%	28%	39%	44%	33%

Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=275.

Note: Survey respondents could select one or more options.

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[13] *Forry et al. (2013); Isner et al. (2011); Karoly et al. (2016).*
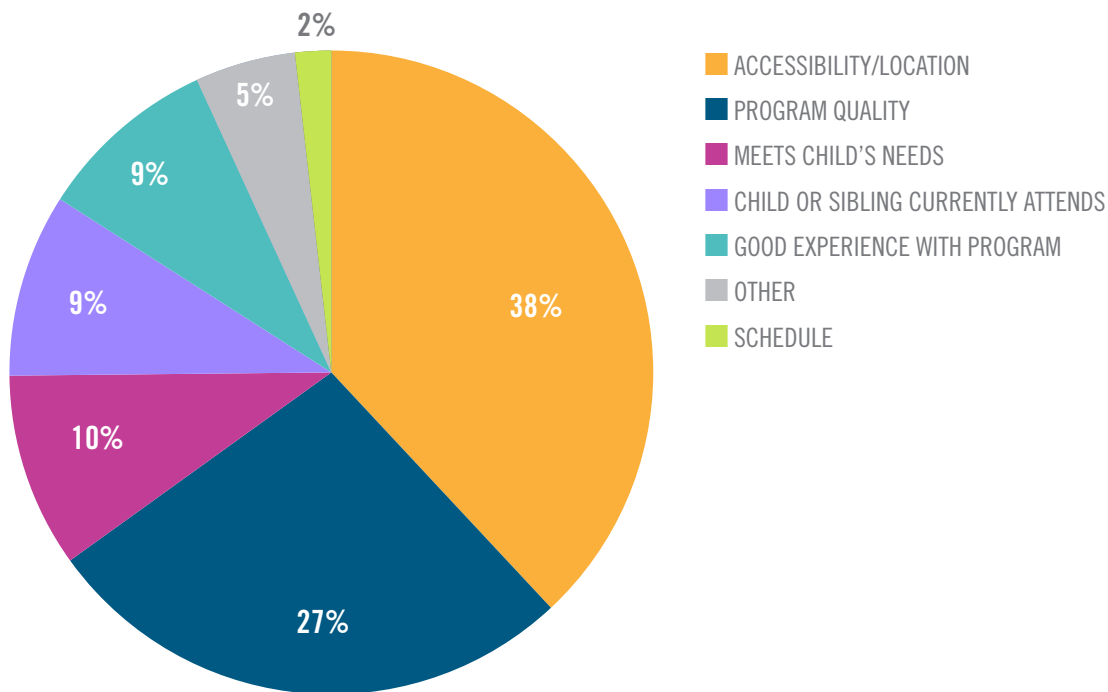[14] *Currie (2004); Lareau (2015).*

Key factors in program selection

We asked parents to describe in their own words their main reason for ranking a certain 3-K program first in their application. These reasons fell into one of nine broad categories: accessibility/location, good quality (e.g., program reputation, school ranking), meets the child's needs (e.g., dual language instruction, special needs accommodations), the child or siblings are already enrolled, prior experience or relationship with the program (e.g., friends with a teacher in the program), schedule (e.g., program offered extended day), and other.

The two most common response categories were program location and quality. Decades of early child care and education research have pointed out that the lack of high-quality, affordable, and conveniently-located programs can prevent families who are interested in child care from actually using child care.[15] Parents' descriptions of what they considered the most important features of a potential 3-K program reveal that program location and quality mattered most, even when it comes to free child care programs. However, it is important to note that parents defined "quality" broadly, as relatively few parents described program quality using the metrics defined by the DOE (such as those used in the Quality Snapshots) and instead noted details such as kind teachers, new facilities, or adequate play time.

Figure 5

Parents' primary reasons for program selection

Legend:
- ACCESSIBILITY/LOCATION
- PROGRAM QUALITY
- MEETS CHILD'S NEEDS
- CHILD OR SIBLING CURRENTLY ATTENDS
- GOOD EXPERIENCE WITH PROGRAM
- OTHER
- SCHEDULE

Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=229.

[15] Gordon and Chase-Lansdale (2001).

Application methods

On average, parents applied to 4 or 5 programs. During the years of our survey, parents could apply for 3-K either online, in person, or over the phone. Most (59%) parents applied online, 33% applied in person, and 8% applied over the phone (Figure 6).

There were differences in the application methods used based on household poverty and parents' race and ethnicity. Specifically, parents who lived below poverty had the lowest rates of applying online, with just under two out of five parents from households under the poverty line using the online application. In comparison, over three out of five parents who lived at or above poverty used the online application. Among parents living below poverty, the most commonly used method was in-person application.

Figure 6

3-K application method by poverty level
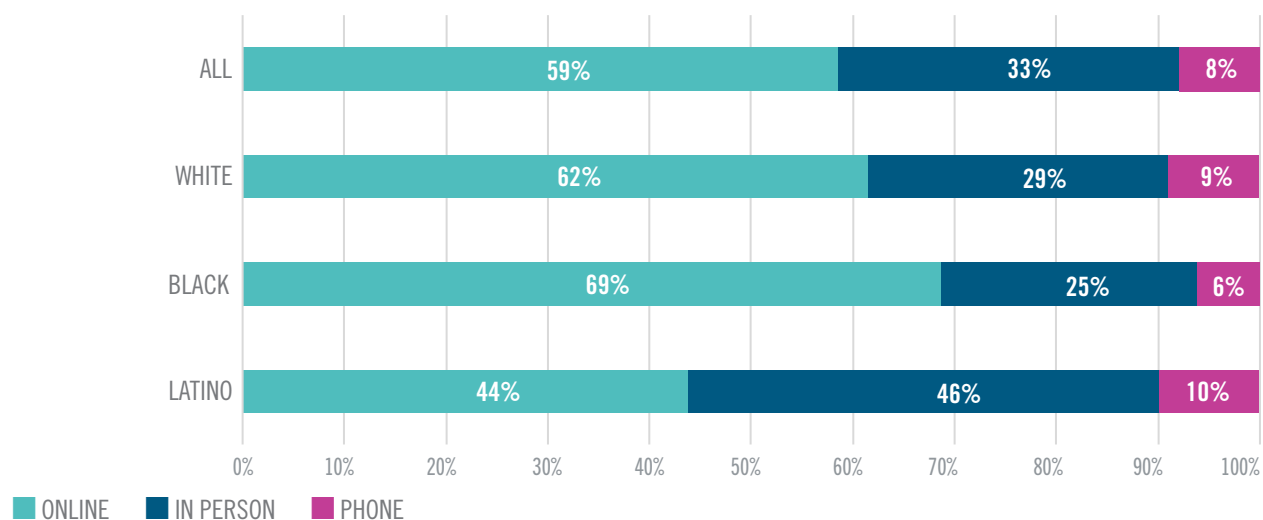

ONLINE   IN PERSON   PHONE
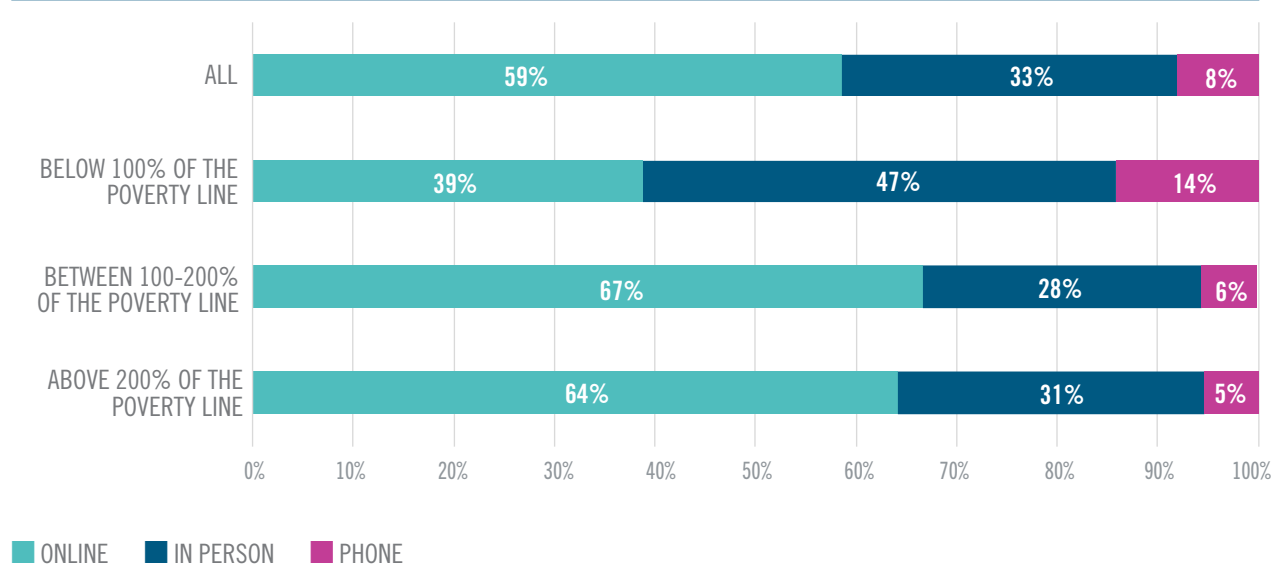
Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=259.

Turning to differences in application method by race and ethnicity (Figure 7), Latino parents had the highest rates of in-person application, with just under half applying in person. In contrast, 29% of white parents and 25% of Black parents applied in person. Additionally, Latino parents had the lowest rates of online application, with 44% of Latino parents applying online, compared to 62% of white parents and 69% of Black parents.

Figure 7

3-K application method by parent race and ethnicity

	ONLINE	IN PERSON	PHONE
ALL	59%	33%	8%
WHITE	62%	29%	9%
BLACK	69%	25%	6%
LATINO	44%	46%	10%

■ ONLINE ■ IN PERSON ■ PHONE

Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=271. Parents who identify as Asian American are included in the full sample, but due to sample size limitations, we are unable to provide separate estimates for Asian American parents in this report.

An examination of computer and internet access provides important context for these observed differences in both search activities (see Table 2 in previous section) and application method across income and racial/ethnic lines. Parents living below poverty were over twice as likely as parents at 200% of poverty or above (19% vs. 8%) to report inconsistent internet access (Table 3). Parents living below poverty also reported inconsistent computer access at three times the rate of parents at 200% of poverty or above (18% vs. 6%).

Additionally, we found that Latino parents reported the highest levels of inconsistent internet access (17% versus 12% for white parents and 11% for Black parents) or computers (16% versus 11% of white parents and Black parents).

Table 3

Computer and internet access by poverty level and race and ethnicity

	INCONSISTENT INTERNET ACCESS	INCONSISTENT COMPUTER ACCESS
Overall	**13%**	**12%**
Poverty Level		
Below 100% of the poverty line	19%	18%
Between 100-200% of the poverty line	15%	15%
Above 200% of the poverty line	8%	6%
Parent race and ethnicity		
White	12%	11%
Black	11%	11%
Latino	17%	16%

Source: Tabulations from ECPT fall 2020 and winter/spring 2021 surveys, N=896

Table 4

Application rates by computer and internet access

	APPLIED	DID NOT APPLY
Inconsistent Internet Access	38%	62%
Inconsistent Computer Access	39%	61%

Source: Tabulations from ECPT fall 2020 and winter/spring 2021 surveys, N=896

Although the 3-K application process was intended to be equally accessible regardless of the application method, families reported a range of difficulties completing the application based on the application method (see Figure 8). The most polarizing application method was over the phone, with 64% of parents rating it as "very easy" while 26% described it as "very difficult." Among the parents who applied online, 45% found it to be "very easy," while 7% found it "very difficult." Those who applied in person also reported a relatively smooth experience, with 57% of parents reporting that it was either "very easy" and 6% finding it "very difficult." Given the reported ease and the above-average use of the in-person application process by families living below poverty and Latino families, the in-person application system may be an aspect of 3-K for All that is worth preserving and investing more resources into.

Figure 8

3-K application difficulty by application method
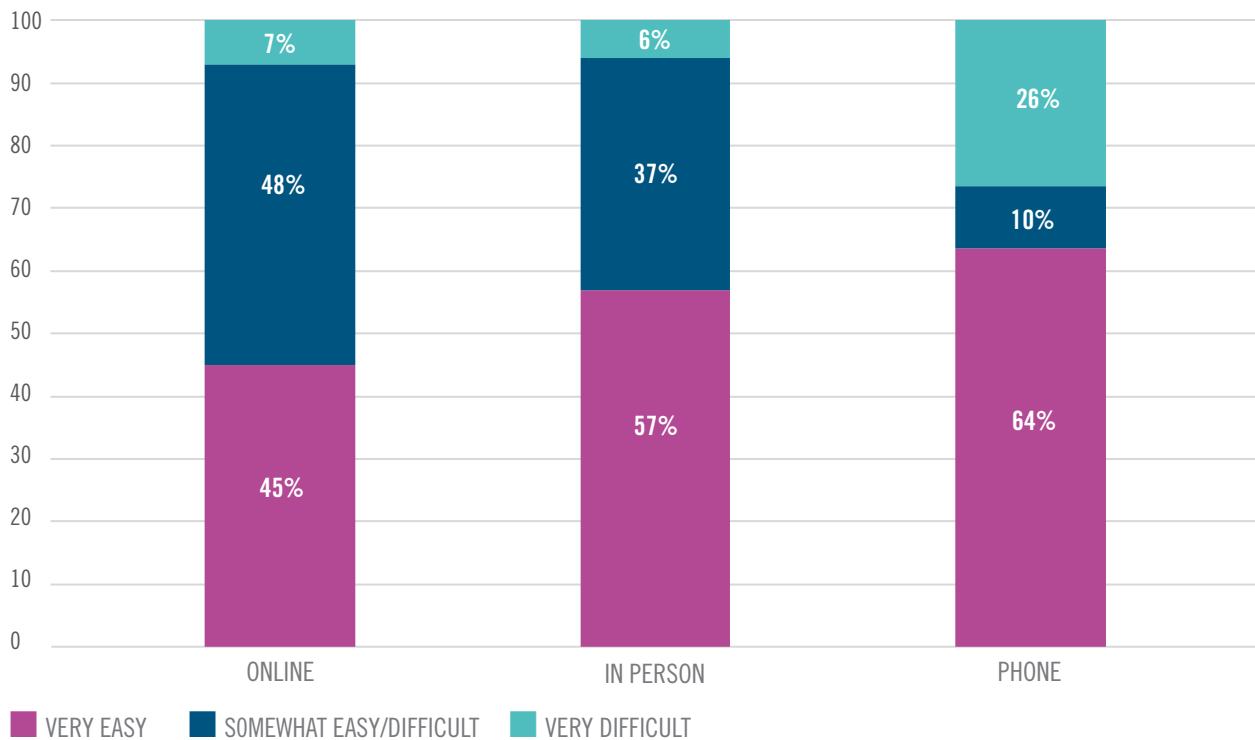
Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=268.

We now turn to parents' reasons for not applying to or enrolling in 3-K, which can help us better understand the potential barriers to participation and sources of misinformation.
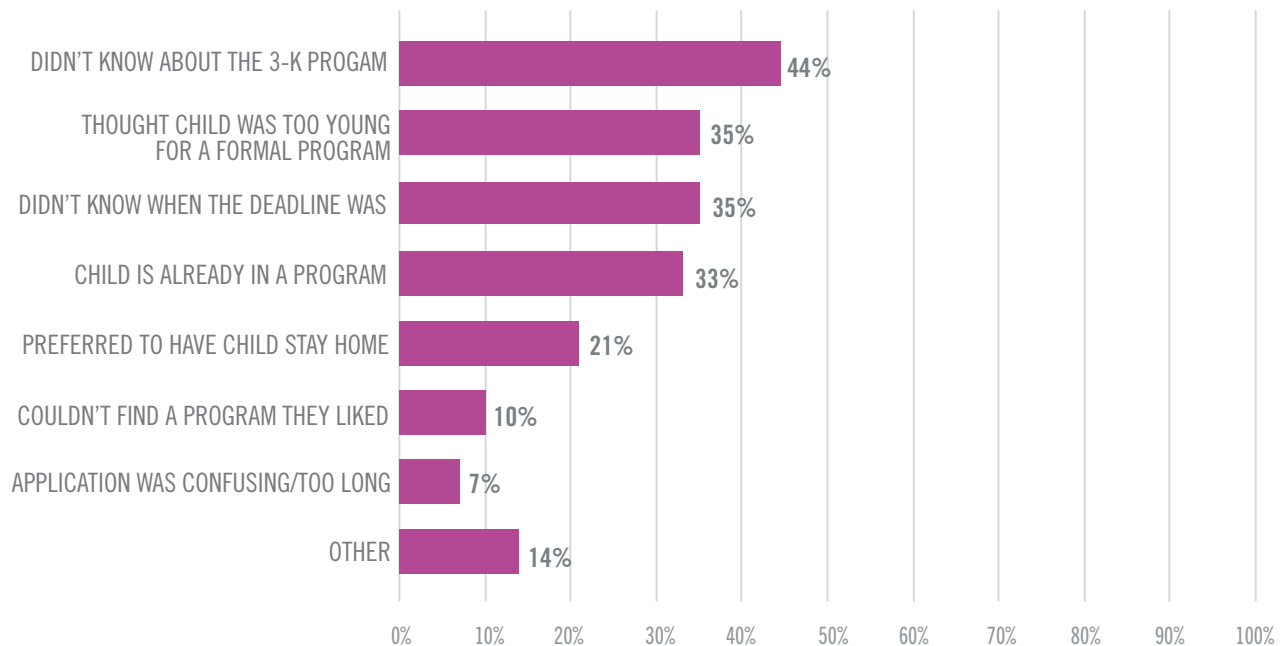
Parents Who Didn't Apply

We asked parents who didn't apply for 3-K to list one or more reasons why they did not apply. Just under half of these parents responded that 3-K was not available in their area.

For the remaining parents with 3-K offered in their area, the top reasons for not applying included: not knowing about New York City's 3-K for All program (44%), thinking that the child was too young for a formal child care program (36%), not knowing about the application deadline (35%), and because the child was already in a child care program (33%).

These results show that **a large proportion of parents were unaware of their child's eligibility for 3-K for All, thus missing out on the opportunity to apply**. The results also show the importance of promoting the benefits of early child care and education to alleviate parents' doubts about sending their 3-year-old children to out-of-home programs.

Reasons why parents didn't apply to 3-K

DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE 3-K PROGAM	44%
THOUGHT CHILD WAS TOO YOUNG FOR A FORMAL PROGRAM	35%
DIDN'T KNOW WHEN THE DEADLINE WAS	35%
CHILD IS ALREADY IN A PROGRAM	33%
PREFERRED TO HAVE CHILD STAY HOME	21%
COULDN'T FIND A PROGRAM THEY LIKED	10%
APPLICATION WAS CONFUSING/TOO LONG	7%
OTHER	14%

Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=320.
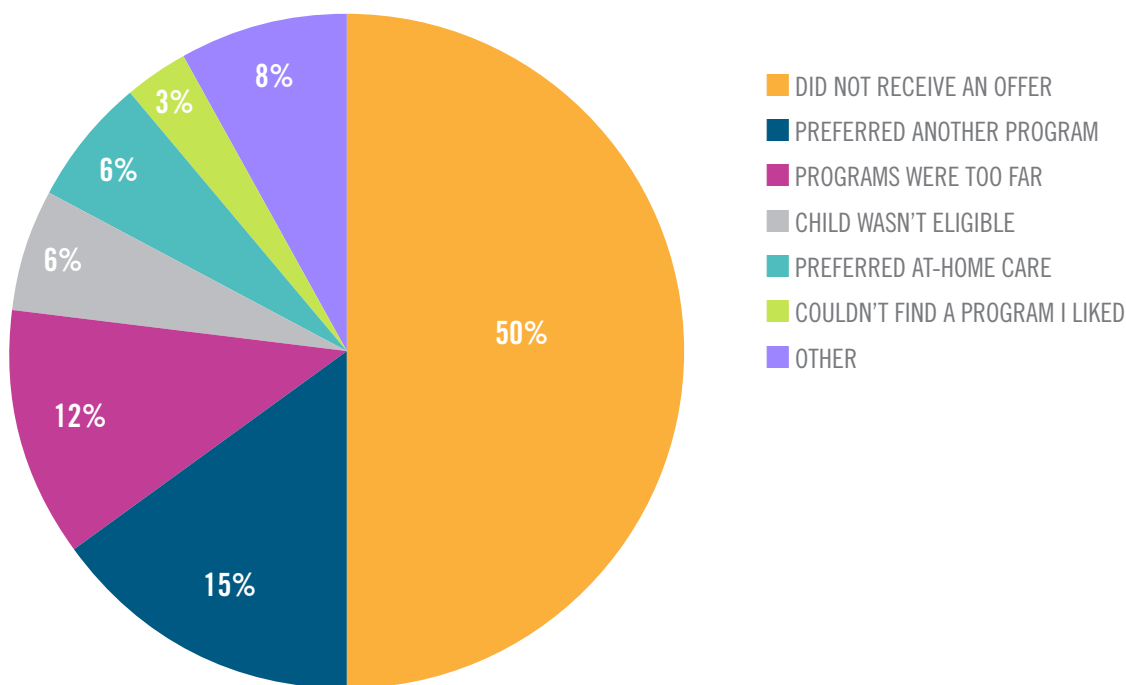*Note: Survey respondents could select one or more options.*

Non-enrollees

Among the parents who reported that they did not enroll their child in 3-K, half of them did not receive an offer of enrollment, as reflected in Figure 10. This included parents who reported never hearing back from the programs to which they applied and parents who were unable to move their children off enrollment waitlists due to programs reaching capacity. In addition, **15% of non-enrolling parents reported that they preferred another program and 12% reported that the available 3-K programs were too far away or inconveniently located.** These responses reveal that some parents who wanted to enroll their children in 3-K were unable to

due to the limited number of seats and/or excessive distance from the child's home, highlighting the demand for more 3-K sites to make the program a more accessible child care option.

Figure 10

Main reasons for not enrolling in 3-K

- DID NOT RECEIVE AN OFFER
- PREFERRED ANOTHER PROGRAM
- PROGRAMS WERE TOO FAR
- CHILD WASN'T ELIGIBLE
- PREFERRED AT-HOME CARE
- COULDN'T FIND A PROGRAM I LIKED
- OTHER

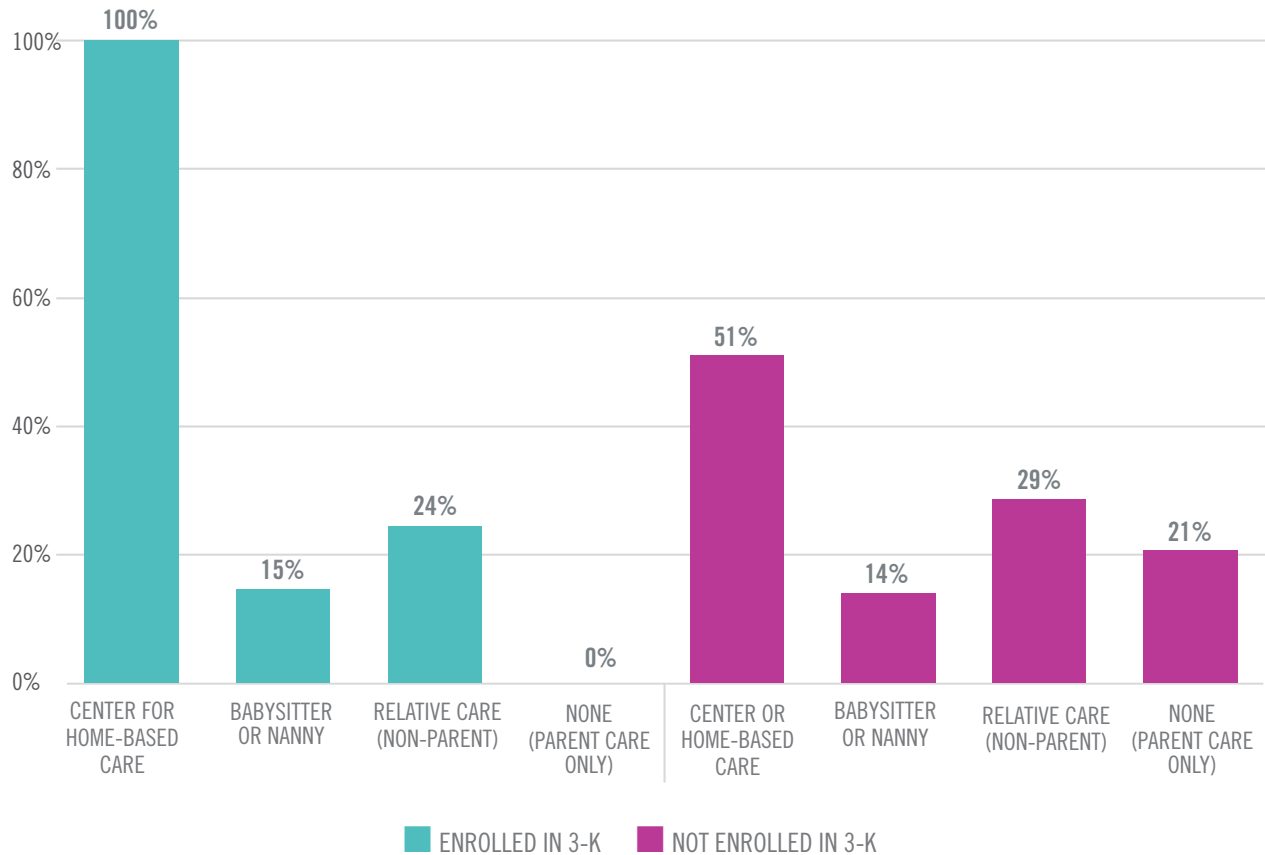*Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=406.*

Additional Sources of Child Care

Many families across the city rely on multiple forms of child care for their young children for several reasons including reducing child care expenses, filling in child care gaps, or needing care that overlaps with their work schedules. Although 3-K for All can meet the child care needs of many families, many parents will continue to use other sources of care in addition to 3-K. To understand the extent to which 3-K programs covered New York City families' child care needs during this time period, we compare the types of child care used by 3-K enrollees versus non-enrollees (Figure 11).

All parents who enrolled in 3-K, by definition, used some form of group care (center or home-based child care). In comparison, just over half of families who didn't enroll in 3-K used center or home-based child care. As expected, none of the families with a child in 3-K relied solely on parent care, whereas 21% of parents who did not enroll in 3-K used only parent care. Perhaps surprisingly, the differences between 3-K enrollees and non-enrollees in the proportion of those using a babysitter/nanny or relative care were minimal.

Figure 11

Sources of child care: Comparing families who enrolled in 3-K and families who did not enroll in 3-K.

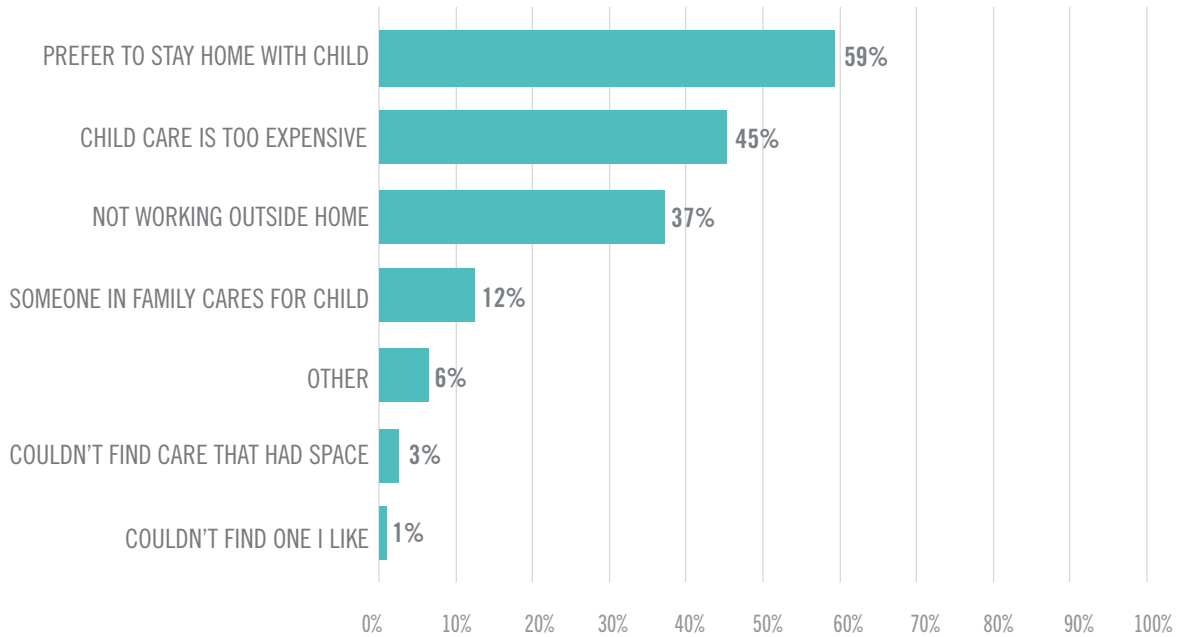Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=745.
Note: Survey respondents could select one or more options, unless they did not use child care (parent care only).

Despite the fact that many families who enrolled in 3-K continued to use informal care options at similar rates as non-enrollees, participation in 3-K for All reduced parents' overall child care costs. We compared the average monthly cost for child care (over all forms, excluding families who only use parent care) for the focal child between enrollees and non-enrollees and found that **parents who enrolled their child in 3-K spent about $450 less on child care per month than non-enrollees ($322 vs. $771 per month on average).**

We asked the parents who don't use any form of child care for their reasons why, and we found that over half of parents who did so preferred to stay at home with their child (Figure 12). Another 37% were not working outside the home, so they cared for their child themselves.

Figure 12

Parents' reasons for not using child care

Bar chart showing:
- PREFER TO STAY HOME WITH CHILD: 59%
- CHILD CARE IS TOO EXPENSIVE: 45%
- NOT WORKING OUTSIDE HOME: 37%
- SOMEONE IN FAMILY CARES FOR CHILD: 12%
- OTHER: 6%
- COULDN'T FIND CARE THAT HAD SPACE: 3%
- COULDN'T FIND ONE I LIKE: 1%

Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2021, N=95.
Note: Survey respondents could select one or more options.

However, just under half of these parents reported that child care was too expensive. Given the substantial child care savings experienced by parents who enrolled in 3-K, it is likely that these parents may have been unable to get a 3-K seat for their child, that programs were too far from their homes, or that they did not know about the program. We can reasonably expect that as 3-K for All continues to expand and becomes increasingly embedded in the lives of New Yorkers with young children, fewer parents in need of child care will cite cost as a barrier to access.

CONCLUSION

New York City's efforts to continue expanding and developing the 3-K for All program are particularly important now, following the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying decrease in the supply of affordable, high-quality child care options throughout the city.[16] As seen in our sample of parents with young children over the beginning years of the 3-K program rollout, parent interest in the program was high, especially among Black, Latino, and low-income families. In fact, interest in applying to 3-K far exceeded the supply of programs, even during the first few months of the pandemic in 2020.

The 3-K for All rollout provides us with important information about parents' preferences for their children's care and the barriers they may face in their efforts to access child care. Although most parents who applied reported few issues with the application process, a lack of internet/computer access may have been a barrier for some families. Additionally, some families were unaware of the 3-K for All program as a citywide effort, and only applied to one program rather than increasing their odds of receiving a seat by applying to several programs.

Even families who were able to complete an application didn't necessarily end up enrolling their children in 3-K. Many parents were unable to enroll because they didn't get an offer due to the limited supply of programs, while others reported that the program was too far away. Indeed, the location of the program was the most popular reason why parents ranked certain programs first in their applications. Increasing the supply of accessible 3-K programs will be critical to the impact of this effort.

Importantly, families who enrolled in a 3-K program had much lower child care costs than those who did not. Given our finding that families who lived below poverty planned to apply to 3-K at nearly twice the rate of higher-income families (those above 200% of poverty), the cost savings on child care could make a huge difference in the lives of families living in poverty.

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[16] *Raising New York (2020); Lee and Parolin (2021).*

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APPENDIX

Survey year and 3-K eligibility by child's birth year

		CHILD'S BIRTH YEAR		
		2015	2016	2017
SURVEY YEAR	2017	Planning to apply		
	2018	Application/Enrollment	Planning to apply	
	2019	Enrollment (cont.)	Application/Enrollment	Planning to apply
	2020		Enrollment (cont.)	Application/Enrollment
	2021			Enrollment (cont.)

Survey sample sizes by topic

	PLANNING	APPLICATION	ENROLLMENT
OVERALL	1031	946	1026
Academic year			
2018–19	473	475	459
2019–20	466	382	470
2020–21	92	89	97
Poverty level			
Below 100% of the poverty line	266	230	263
Between 100-200% of the poverty line	376	360	382
Above 200% of the poverty line	323	300	332
Parent race and ethnicity			
White	294	265	289
Black	189	173	185
Latino	439	407	436
Asian/Other	109	101	116

Source: ECPT survey responses from 2017 to 2021.

Participation in 3-K and family characteristics

	PLANNED	APPLIED	ENROLLED
OVERALL	50%	32%	18%
Poverty level			
Below 100% of the poverty line	63%	35%	15%
Between 100-200% of the poverty line	52%	35%	22%
Above 200% of the poverty line	38%	28%	18%
Parent race and ethnicity			
White	27%	18%	15%
Black	66%	39%	22%
Latino	64%	40%	18%
Parent foreign-born	59%	32%	17%
Household does not speak English	67%	33%	19%
Spouse/Partner in household	44%	30%	16%
Borough			
Manhattan	40%	33%	23%
Brooklyn	37%	26%	18%
Bronx	75%	44%	26%
Queens	52%	28%	8%
Staten Island	64%	56%	43%

Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2017 to 2021, overall N=946-1031.