



MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

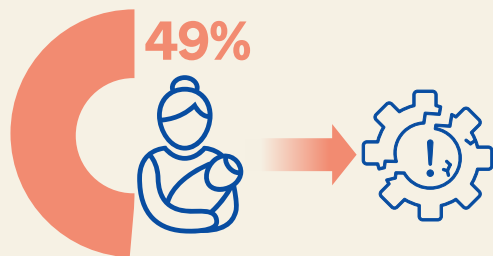
Spotlight on:
**CHILD CARE-RELATED
WORK DISRUPTION**
in the Early Childhood
Poverty Tracker

September 2024



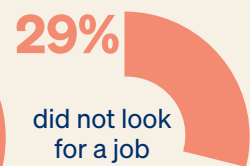
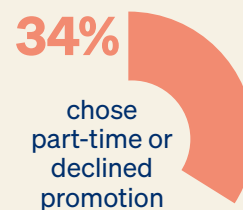
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KEY POINTS

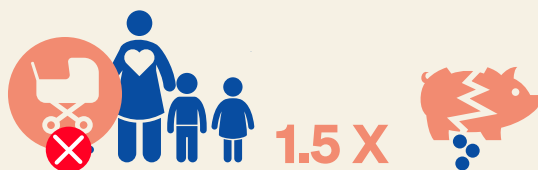


→ In 2022, **nearly half (49%)** of mothers in the labor force reported experiencing disruptions in their work lives over the previous 12 months because of child care issues such as problems accessing or affording reliable child care.

→ At that time, **29%** of mothers in the labor force reported losing or changing jobs, **34%** reported choosing part-time over full-time work or declining a promotion, and **29%** said they did not look for a job because of child care issues such as problems accessing or affording reliable child care.



→ **A year later**, mothers whose work was disrupted by child care issues were **less likely to be employed**, **less likely to work full-time**, and **less likely to work steadily**.



→ Families in which the mother faced child care-related work disruptions were **1.5 times** more likely than other families to experience material hardships a year later.

→ **Child care-related work disruptions were more common in lower-income families**, with **53%** of mothers living below 200% of the poverty line reporting these challenges

INTRODUCTION

Finding accessible and affordable child care is a challenge for many working parents in New York City, given the limited supply of early childhood education and out-of-school care as well as the high cost of such care.¹ Yet even if parents have found an affordable care provider, child care issues can still disrupt their work lives, for instance if a child is sick and must stay home, a child care program closes for summers or holidays, or a parent's work or higher education schedule is unpredictable or extends into evenings and weekends. Child care issues can have significant effects on parents' employment, especially for mothers, who are more likely to fill in the gap by staying at home when child care is unavailable.²

Drawing on Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT) surveys between 2021 to 2023, this report describes how child care issues affect mothers' work and families' economic well-being. This report puts a spotlight on the difficulties that parents face juggling child care and work. We address the following questions:

- How often do mothers face work disruption due to child care issues such as problems accessing or affording reliable child care?
- How prevalent are child care-related work disruptions across income groups?
- What are the implications of child care-related work disruptions for subsequent employment and economic well-being?

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, the ECPT followed a representative sample of families with young children in New York City, 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 used 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. After the baseline survey, parents were 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. For more detail about the methods used in the ECPT, and for a profile of the sample, see our baseline report.³

¹ 5BORO Institute, "Investing in Families and Our Future." Citizens Committee for Children, "From Birth to Age 12: The (Un)Affordability of Child Care and Out-of-School Care in New York City." Early Childhood Poverty Tracker, "Child care affordability, accessibility, and the costs of disruption."

² Schochet, "The Child Care Crisis is Keeping Women out of the Workforce." Poverty Tracker, "Portrait of Disadvantage Among Women in New York City in 2022."

³ Early Childhood Poverty Tracker, "The Youngest New Yorkers: The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker."

About this report

This report draws on ECPT surveys fielded between 2021 and 2023. Information on mother’s employment and family income was collected in surveys fielded in 2021 and 2023, and questions about how child care issues affected parents’ work lives were asked in a survey fielded in 2022, when most children enrolled in the study were ages 5-8. (To simplify, we refer to surveys by their initial field dates; most respondents complete their surveys within a few months of those initial launch dates, although fieldwork may continue into the following year.) Parents were asked whether they had experienced each of the following over the previous 12 months due to child care issues: “had to quit a job,” “had to turn down a job, change jobs, or take a leave,” “was let go or fired,” “had to go from full-time to part-time work,” “was unable to go from part-time to full-time work,” “refused a promotion,” and “decided not to look for a job.” These questions were adapted from previous studies of this topic.⁴

To understand the implications of child care disruptions, this report compared the employment outcomes and material hardship in 2023 for mothers who had experienced child care-related work disruptions in 2022 and those who had not, adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics including parent age, race and ethnicity, education level, foreign-born status, presence of spouse or partner, number of children under age 5 in the household, and 2021 poverty level (measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure), and New York City residence. We also adjusted for employment and material hardship status in 2021. Analyses in this report include only mothers in the labor force (working or looking for work). Figures either exclude families living outside New York City or adjust statistically for New York City residence.

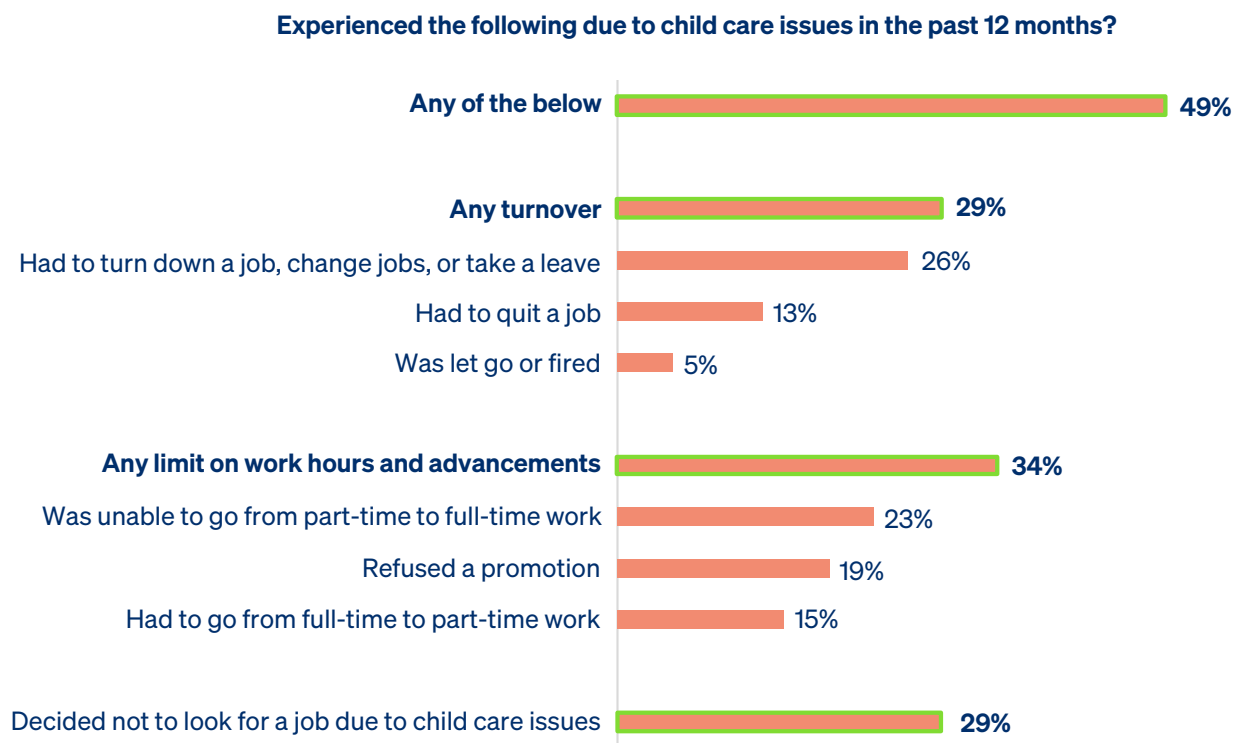
Child care-related work disruptions among ECPT mothers

Child care disruptions are a major challenge for ECPT working mothers. Among mothers in the labor force with young school-age children in New York City, about 29% of them experienced turnover because of child care issues. This included mothers who had to either turn down a job, change jobs, or take a leave (26%), had to quit a job (13%), or had been fired (5%). In addition, 34% of working mothers chose part-time over full-time work or declined a promotion due to child care issues; 23% could not go from part-time to full-time work, 15% went from full-time to part-time, and 19% refused a promotion. Lastly 29% of mothers decided not to look for a job because of child care problems. Overall, nearly half — 49% of mothers — faced at least one challenge in their work due to child care issues.

⁴ Davis, Bustamante, Bronfin, and Candal Rahim, “Losing Ground: How Child Care Impacts Louisiana’s Workforce Productivity and the State Economy.” Talbert, Bustamante, Thompson, and Williams, “Counting Our Losses: The Hidden Cost to Marylanders of an Inadequate Child Care System.”

Figure 1

Percentage of working mothers whose work was negatively affected by child care issues



Source: Early Childhood Poverty Tracker survey conducted in 2022-23. The figures include mothers who were living in New York City and were in the labor force at the time of the survey. The figures were weighted statistically to represent families with children born in New York City in 2017. N= 546.

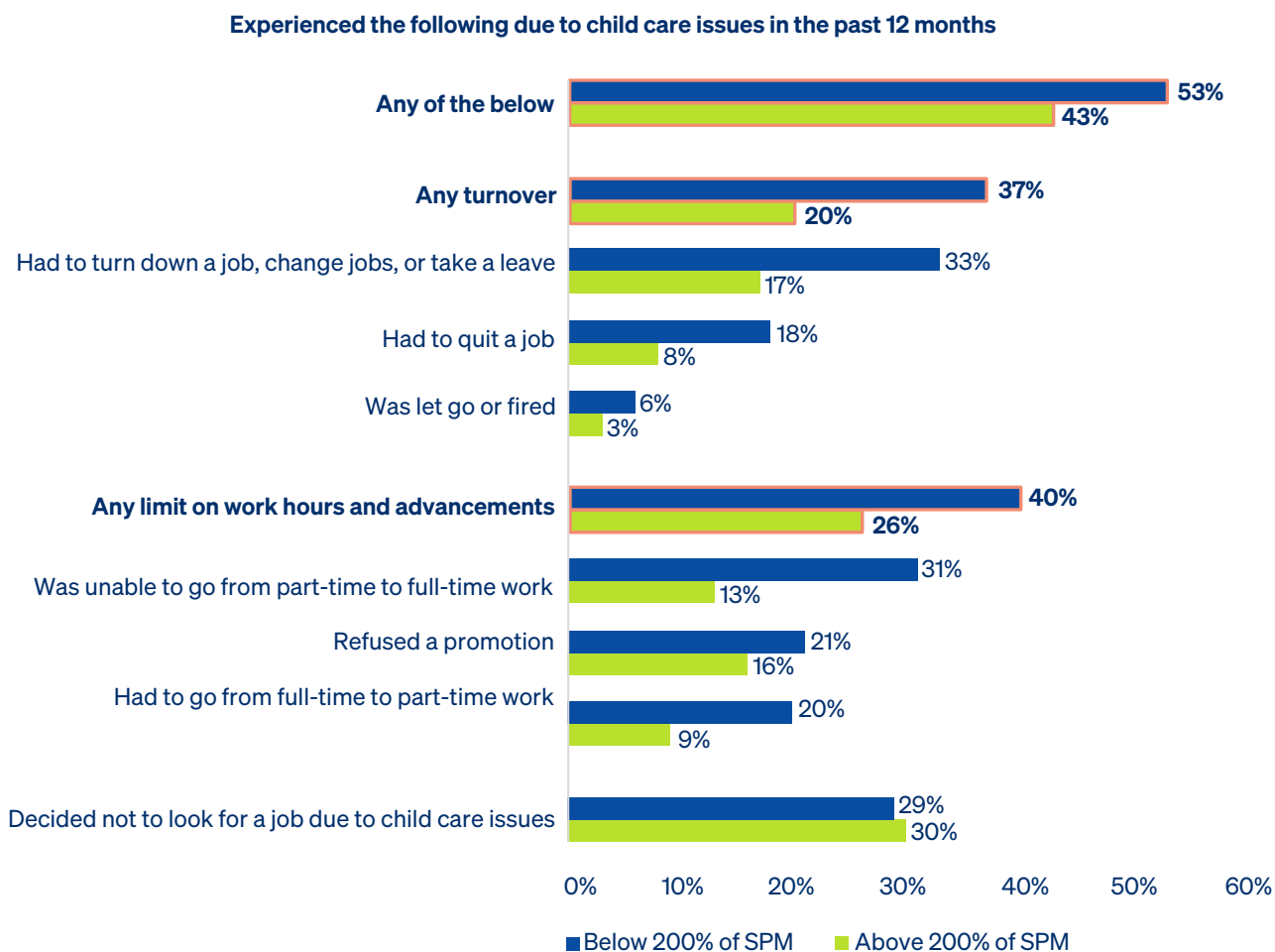
Child care-related work disruptions by income

While child care is a challenge for parents across the income spectrum, managing these challenges may be more difficult for lower-income parents. Families with fewer resources are less able to hire a babysitter to provide supplementary care, or pay for afterschool or summer camp to cover times when school or child care programs are not available.

Among ECPT mothers in the labor force, 53% of those in lower-income families (below 200% of the SPM poverty line) experienced at least one type of child care-related work disruption, compared with 43% in higher-income families. Notably, turnover due to child care issues was almost twice as common among lower-income families (37%) as in higher-income families (20%). There was also a noticeable difference in the share of mothers experiencing limits in work hours and job advancements. Two-fifths of mothers in lower-income families (40%) had to limit their time and opportunity at work due to child care issues compared with a quarter (26%) of mothers in higher-income families. About 30% of mothers in both income groups decided not to look for a job due to child care issues.

Figure 2

Percentage of working mothers whose work was negatively affected by child care issues, by income



Source: Early Childhood Poverty Tracker survey fielded in 2022. The figures include mothers who were living in New York City and were in the labor force at the time of the survey. The figures were weighted statistically to represent families with children born in New York City in 2017. N= 541.

Note: Poverty levels are defined using the supplemental poverty measurement (SPM) from the annual survey administered in 2021.

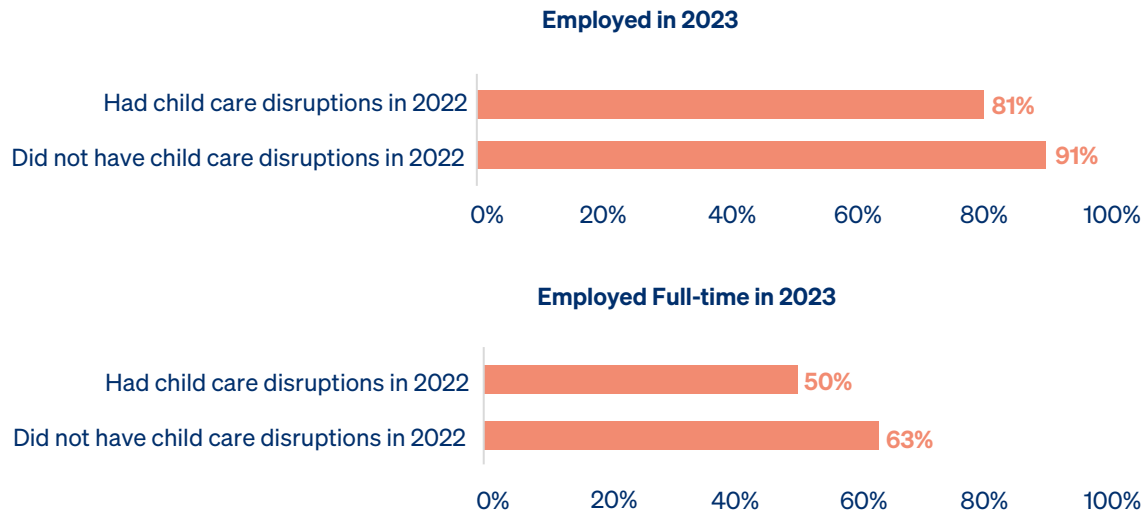
Child care disruptions and mothers' future employment

After surveying parents about child care disruptions and work in 2022, the ECPT followed up with the same parents a year later and asked about mothers' employment. Even after adjusting statistically for education, number of children, and other characteristics, mothers whose work had been disrupted by child care issues fared worse economically than those who did not experience these disruptions.⁵ Mothers who had child care-related work disruptions in 2022 were 10 percentage points less likely to be employed than those who had not experienced disruptions (81% vs 91%), and 13 percentage points less likely to work full-time (50% vs 63%).

⁵ The gaps were wider before adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics: mothers who faced child care-related work disruptions were less likely to be employed a year later than mothers who did not face these disruptions (78% vs 91%), and were less likely to work full-time (42% vs 67%).

Figure 3

Percentage of mothers in employment and full-time employment in 2023, by child care disruption in 2022 (adjusted for other characteristics and employment and full-time employment status in 2021)



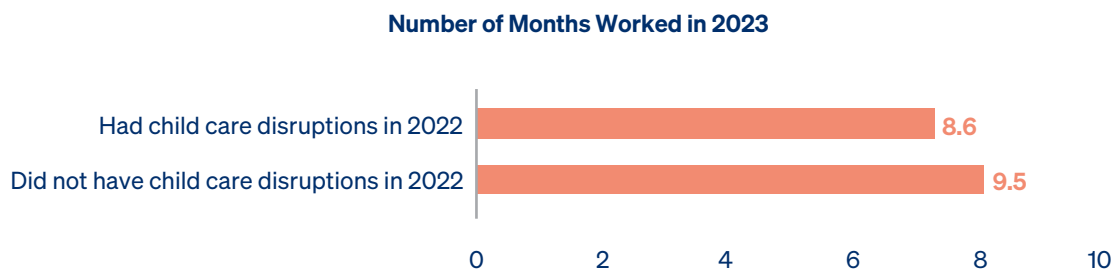
Source: Early Childhood Poverty Tracker surveys conducted in 2021-23. N=578.

Note: Estimates were adjusted for multiple sociodemographic characteristics, including parent race and ethnicity, parent education level, foreign born status, presence of spouse or partner, parent age, number of children under age 5 in the household, SPM poverty level in 2021, and New York City residence. Estimates were also adjusted for the family's outcome status in 36-month follow-up survey—one year before when the child care disruption experience was surveyed in 44-month follow-up survey.

In addition, mothers who faced child care-related work disruptions worked fewer months over the next year (8.1 months vs 9.7 months). Figure 4 shows the gap in mothers' months worked after accounting for the differences in other characteristics. We found that those mothers who had child-care related work disruptions worked about one month less compared to those with similar characteristics but who did not have such disruptions (8.6 months vs 9.5 months).

Figure 4

Mothers' months worked in the subsequent year, by child care disruption in 2022 (adjusted for other characteristics and months worked in 2021)



Note: See the notes for Figure 3 for the details of the sample and methods for calculating the estimates.

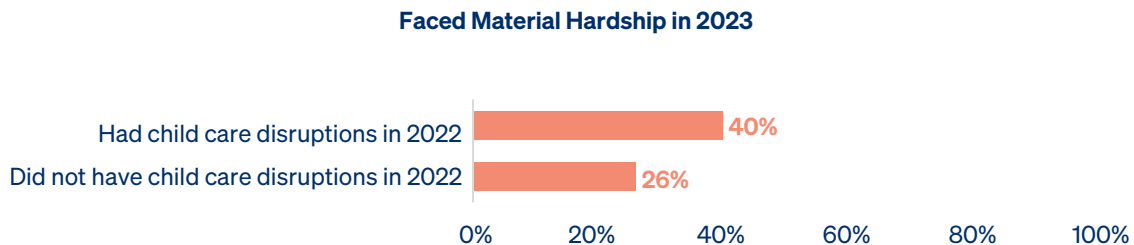
Child care disruptions and material hardship

By reducing mothers' employment or work hours, child care disruptions can also lower family income and lead to material hardship. The ECPT measured material hardship across five domains, including food insecurity, housing hardship, bill hardship (unable to pay bills), financial hardship (running out of money), and medical hardship (unmet medical needs). Families who faced at least one type of hardship over the past 12 months were defined as experiencing material hardship.

Families with mothers who faced child care-related work disruptions were more likely to struggle to meet their basic needs over the following year than families with mothers who did not experience disruptions. Figure 5 shows that, even when comparing between families with similar characteristics, those in which the mother faced work disruptions due to child care issues were 1.5 times as likely as other families to face material hardship in the next 12 months.⁶

Figure 5

Percentage of families facing material hardship in the subsequent year, by experience of child care disruption in 2022 (adjusted for other characteristics and material hardship in 2021)



Note: See the notes for Figure 3 for the details of the sample and methods for calculating the estimates.

⁶ The difference was larger before adjustment for sociodemographic characteristics: 46% of mothers who faced child care-related work disruptions faced material hardship in the next 12 months, compared with 21% of those who did not face child care-related work disruptions.

CONCLUSION

For working parents with young children, affordable, accessible, and stable child care provides a necessary foundation for employment and economic well-being. Among New York City mothers surveyed in 2022-23 in the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker, nearly half (49%) faced disruption to their work life caused by child care issues. Mothers in lower-income families were more likely to experience these work disruptions due to child care issues.

These disruptions to mothers' working lives had economic consequences: at the next survey, women who faced these challenges were less likely to be working and less likely to be employed full-time, and worked fewer months over the next year. Moreover, their families were 1.5 times more likely to experience material hardship such as food insecurity or unmet medical need. These problems may be compounded over time, as child care-related work disruptions reduce a family's income and make it even harder for parents to afford child care.

This ECPT report assessed the short-term effects of difficulties with child care. However, as other researchers have written, insufficient child care can have a longer-term impact on economic stability for women and their families. When women are unable to remain in the labor force, work full-time if they choose, and take advantage of opportunities for training and advancement, the result can be diminished earnings across their lifetimes, resulting in reduced economic security in retirement. Access to child care also benefits children, by promoting educational and social development and also by reducing poverty and hardship among families.⁷ The widespread experience of child care-related work disruptions — and the economic consequences of these disruptions — speak to the need for an enhanced child care system to support the work aspirations of mothers, well-being of families, and the local economy.

In recent years, New York State has made important progress towards enhancing its child care system including by increasing the income eligibility threshold for the Child Care Assistance Program to 85% of the state median income (\$108,000 for a family of 4), capping co-pays for families at 1%, and investing \$7 billion over 4 years to stabilize a system sent into crisis by the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, New York City has deployed an ambitious plan to expand access for families in need, improve quality of care, support child care providers, and streamline delivery across the five boroughs.⁸ However, child care remains unaffordable for many and even those who are eligible for assistance still face barriers in accessing quality and reliable child care, as this report has shown.

⁷ Hartley, Robert Paul, Ajay Chaudry, Melissa Boteach, Estelle Mitchell, and Kathryn Menefee. "A Lifetime's Worth of Benefits." *High-quality early education can reduce achievement gaps between lower-income and higher-income children*; see for instance Kearney and Harris, eds., *Policies to Address Poverty in America*; First Five Years Fund, "High-Quality Early Learning & Care: Understanding the Proven Benefits & Need for Investment."

⁸ Office of the Mayor, "Accessible, Equitable, High-quality, Affordable: A Blueprint for Child Care and Early Childhood Education in New York City."

To better meet the needs of families, lawmakers could:

1. Remove the minimum earnings requirement for subsidized care. State law requires parents to make at least minimum wage to be eligible for child care assistance. For many parents who work part-time, as gig workers, or even earn less than the minimum wage due to wage theft, access to child care is critical to ensuring they can remain in the workforce.
2. Decouple authorized hours of care from work hours. Under current state regulation, families can only access child care assistance for their exact hours of work. This does not account for commute time and limits access for parents who have inconsistent, unpredictable, or rotating work schedules.
3. Streamline and simplify the application process. The state's child care application, which the city is required to use, can be burdensome, lengthy, and often confusing for families to complete. Families must provide documentation such as utility bills, multiple pay stubs, and various tax forms to prove their income, hours of work, and reason for needing care. To reduce processing time and simplify the documentation burden, families should be able to submit information once to multiple benefits programs using a multi-program application. Additionally, decoupling authorized care from exact hours of work would simplify the application process.

More broadly, steps to expand high-quality and affordable child care options will make it easier for New York City's parents to balance their work lives and family needs. Such policies might include supporting workforce development and providing a living wage for the child care workforce, improving outreach to families about child care programs and subsidy options, and reducing administrative burden for both center-based and home-based child care providers.⁹

⁹ Robin Hood, The Century Foundation, and Next100, "From Crisis to Opportunity"; 5BORO Institute. "Investing in Families and Our Future: A Policy Roadmap to Address NYC Child Care Needs Now."

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