



center for BEST PRACTICES



EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH BRIEF: A National Survey of Low-Income Parents of Young Kids

BACKGROUND

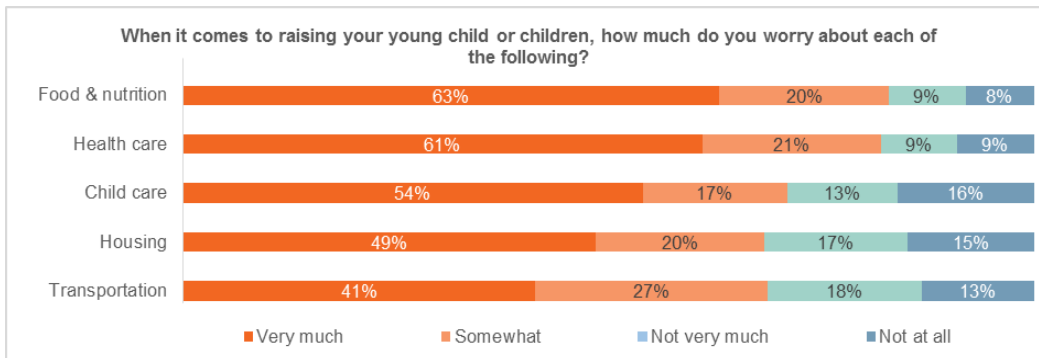
Early childhood is a critical period of growth and development. Access to adequate food and nutrition in early childhood is essential and can have long-lasting implications on health and well-being. Share Our Strength partnered with APCO Insight to conduct a national survey among low-income families less than 185% of the poverty income ratio who have children five years old and younger (pre-K). Between December 2016 and January 2017, a total of 1,000 parents and caregivers participated in the survey.ⁱ The survey asked parents and caregivers about their experiences caring for and feeding their young children, as well as sources of support. This brief summarizes the survey's key findings on experiences with hunger, participation in programs and key supports, food preparation and shopping practices, and child care arrangements and preferences.

KEY FINDINGS

- Food and nutrition is a top concern for parents with young children. Parents face serious challenges in feeding their families.
- Parents turn to a variety of programs to help them care for their young children. SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid are the most valued programs and provide a first line of defense for families.
- Doctors are important sources of support, advice and information for parents with young children.
- Parents engage in positive meal preparation and grocery shopping practices but still face barriers to healthy eating such as time, cost, and fear of food waste.
- Parents are not relying on formal child care arrangements for their children and many prefer to care for children at home. However, a substantial share would prefer formal child care if cost were not a barrier.

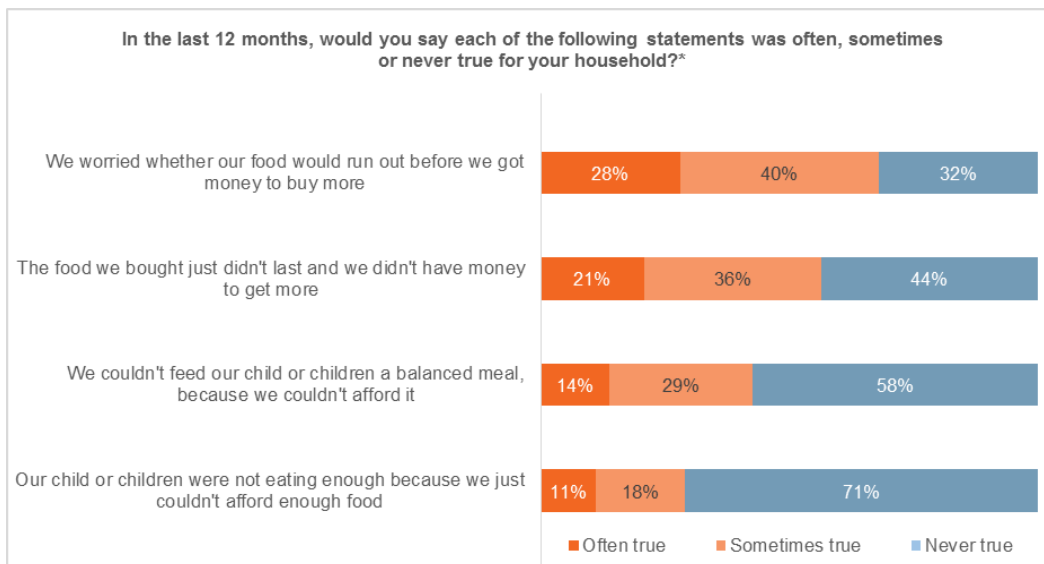
Families with Young Kids Face Food Concerns and Vulnerability

For low-income families with young children, concerns about basic needs are central to everyday life. A large majority report worrying about food and nutrition, health care, child care, housing and transportation, in that order. Food and nutrition is a top concern for more than eight in ten low-income families surveyed.

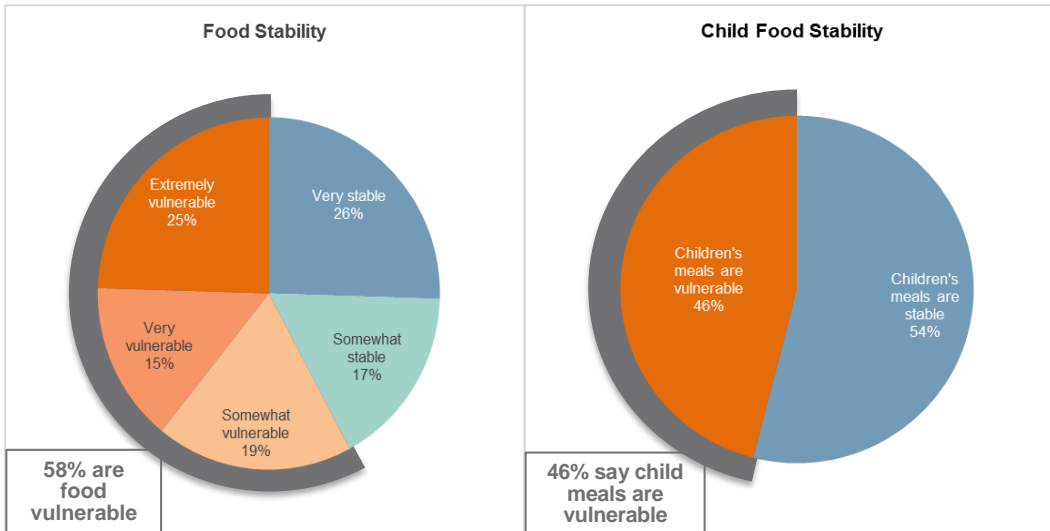


When asked about specific incidents in the past twelve months, low-income parents with young children acknowledged facing serious food challenges.

- More than two in three (68%) worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more. More than half (56%) did not have the money to buy more food before running out of food.
- An alarming number of parents report food challenges involving their children, including 42 percent who were not able to feed their child a balanced meal. Nearly one in three (29%) even said their child was not eating enough.

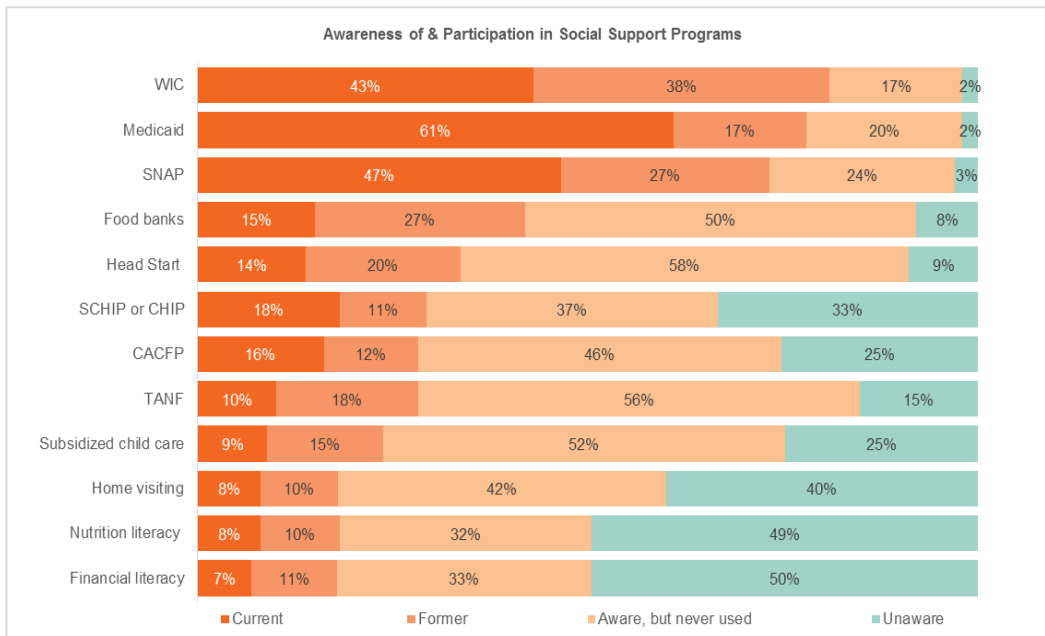


Based on the food challenge scenarios, families were categorized as food vulnerable or stable. More than half of families (58%) were food vulnerable, facing more than one food challenge in the past year. Nearly half (46%) indicate children were vulnerable as well, experiencing at least one food challenge specific to children.



Parents Rely on a Variety of Programs to Support Their Families’ Nutrition and Health

To help make ends meet, families with young children surveyed cobble together support from programs. Ninety-five percent have current or past experience with at least one program. Most continue to use programs today—82 percent currently participate in at least one or more program. Medicaid, WIC and SNAP are the most widely-used programs—81 percent have current or previous experience with WIC; 78 percent have experience with Medicaid; and 73 percent have experience with SNAP.



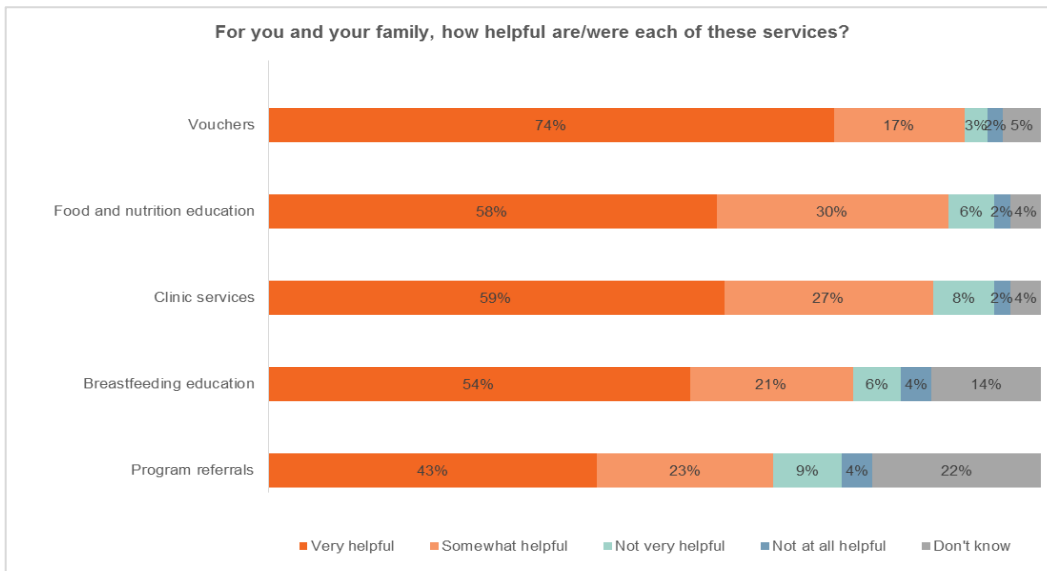
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Parents consider SNAP to be the most valuable program in helping care for young children. Still, six in ten SNAP participants feel it does not provide enough benefits to cover food costs. To help cover their basic needs, one in

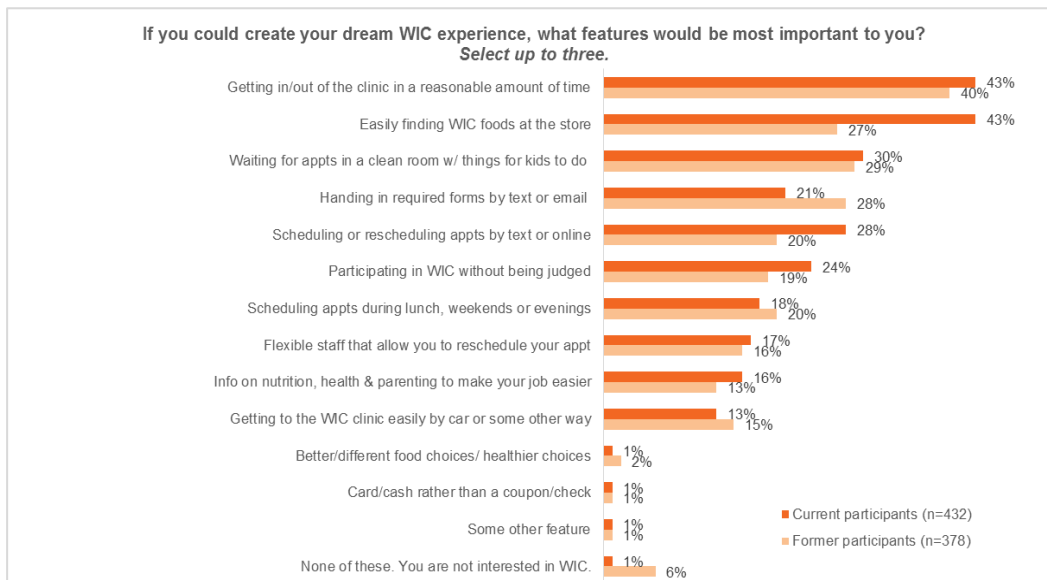
five current SNAP participants also turn to food banks. Four in five current SNAP participants use Medicaid to help cover health expenses that might otherwise eat into their food budgets.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

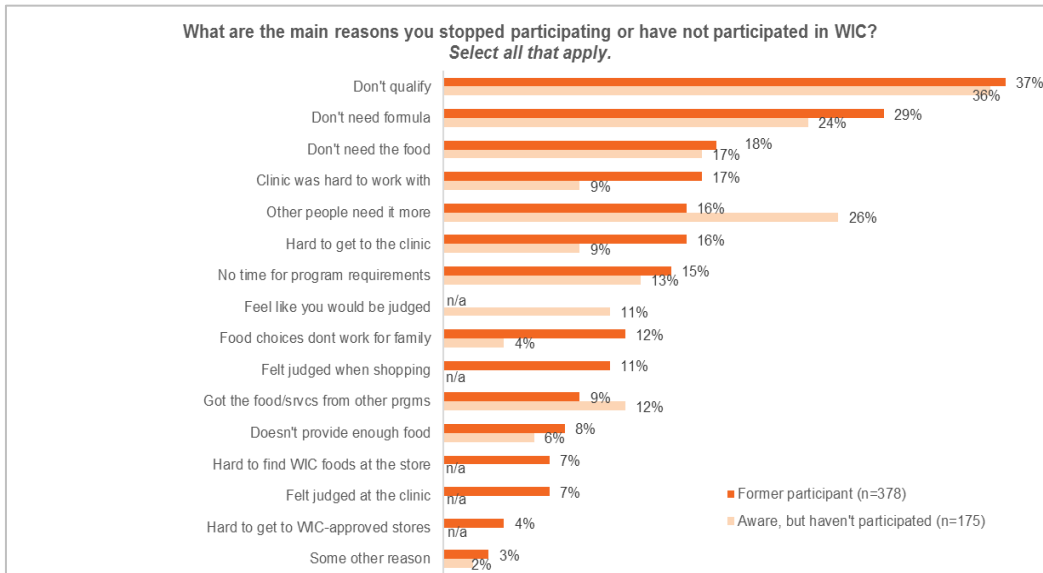
Families also considered WIC to be among the most valuable nutrition programs. WIC parents rate all program services as helpful, with food vouchers at the top of the list.



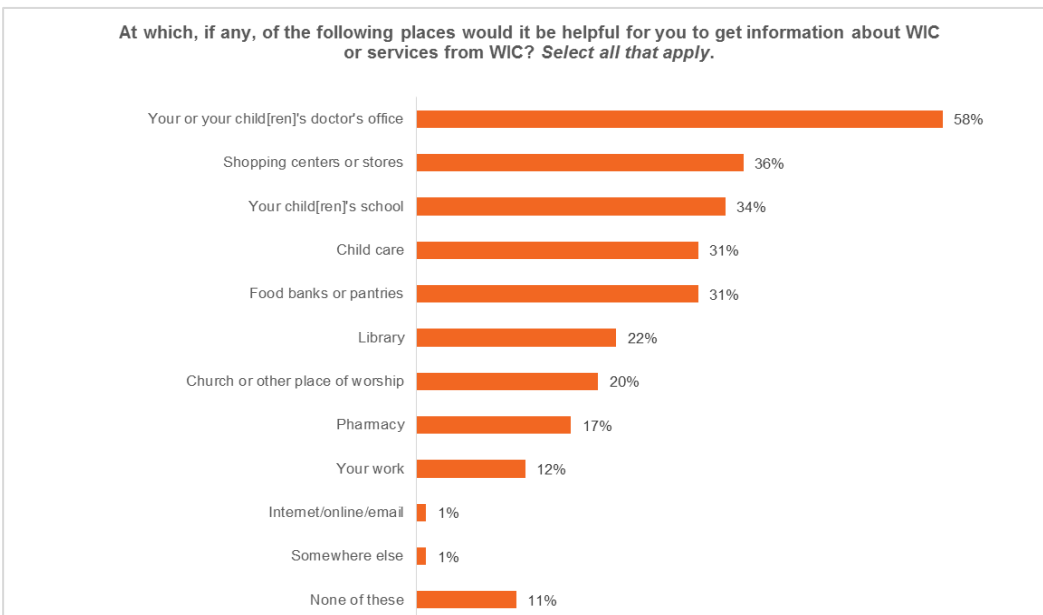
Parents were asked about WIC features that would make the program experience even better. Parents felt that streamlined clinic visits, easier identification of WIC foods, and the ability to complete the program requirements online or via text would optimize the WIC experience. Many state and local agencies are using apps and other technology to improve the WIC shopping experience, some agencies allow participants to complete program requirements online, and others are making progress towards this goal.



Unlike SNAP or Medicaid, a nearly equal share of parents say they currently participate in WIC versus those who formerly participated (43% versus 38%, respectively). The most common reason that parents stop participating in WIC (or never participate at all) is a belief they don't qualify, even though they reported a current income that would have at least met the federal WIC income eligibility requirements. Across the country, WIC staff and advocates are working to ensure that all eligible women, infants, and children who would benefit from the program are participating. For example, the National WIC Awareness and Retention Campaign is using advertising, branding, and messaging to increase WIC enrollment, improve perceptions of WIC, and retain moms and children in the program longer.

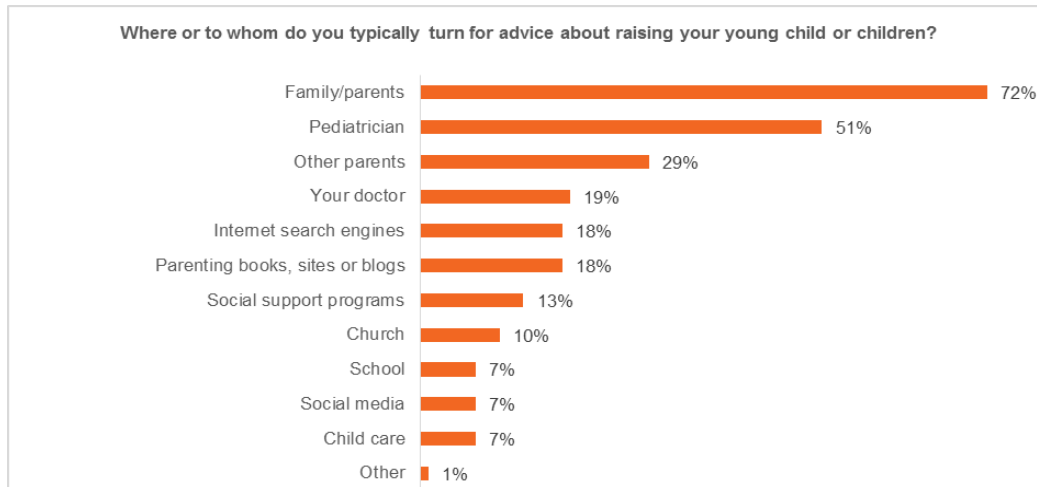


More than one in two parents (58%) would be interested in receiving information about WIC services from their family's doctors, which could assist with efforts to promote the program.



Parents Turn to Family and Doctors for Advice

Doctors are a go-to source for advice about raising children, although parents most often say they turn to their own family for advice about raising their kids.



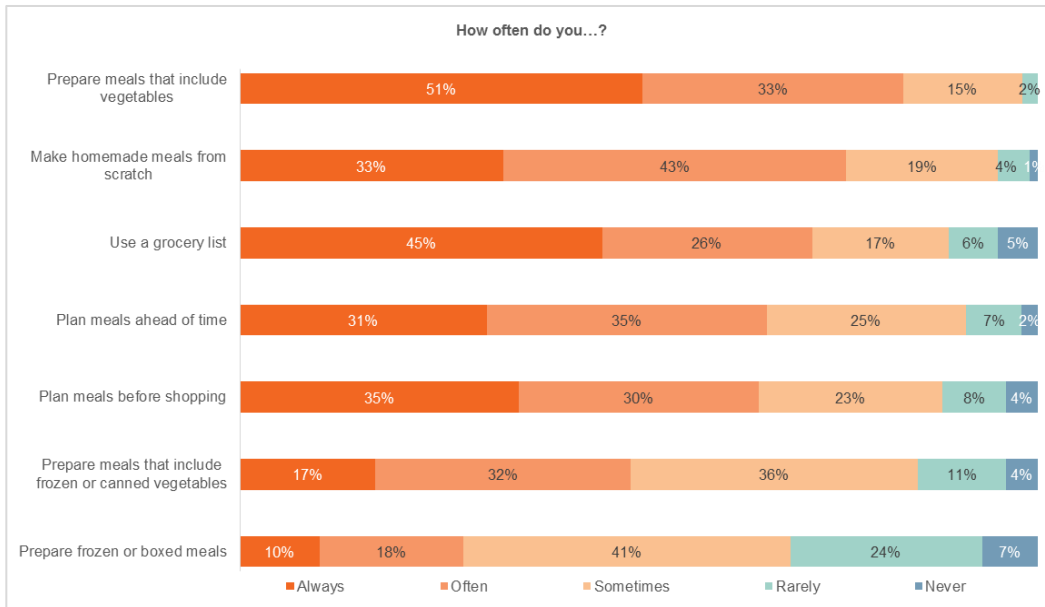
In recent years, there has been increasing acknowledgment that doctors have an important role to play in addressing social determinants that impact health, including hunger. Recognizing this, in 2015, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement recommending that all pediatricians screen for food insecurity.

Our survey found that doctors are asking families about hunger and sharing information about nutrition support programs. Many parents say their doctors provide guidance on food and nutrition, share information on programs, and ask them whether they are eating enough. Still, between 10 and 17 percent would like this information, but are not currently getting it.

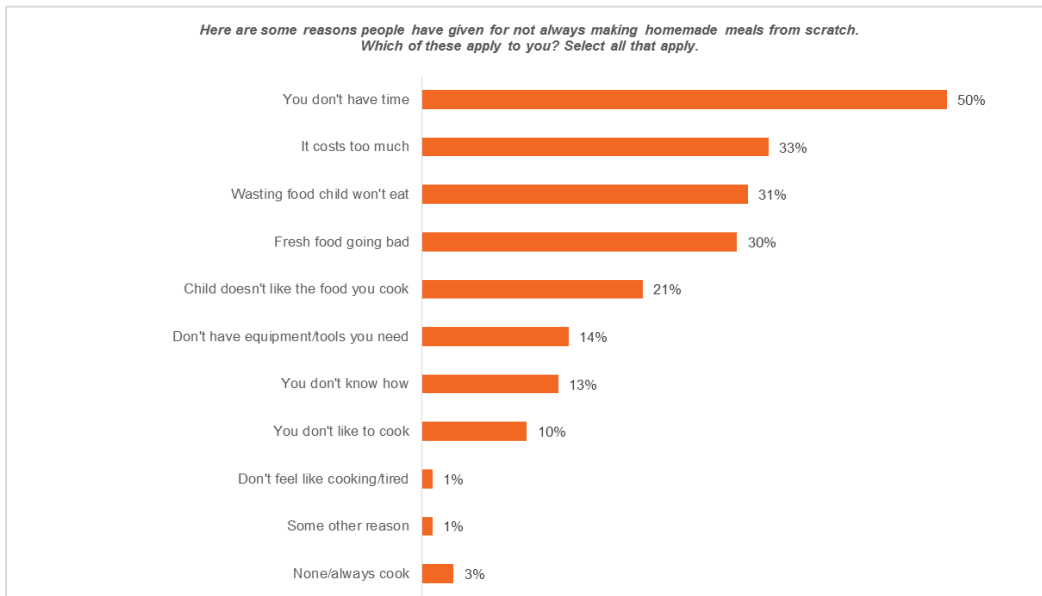
Food Preparation and Shopping

Parents reported practicing behaviors to help provide healthy and budget-friendly meals for their families. The evidence suggests that those who regularly engage in positive behaviors are also more likely to be very confident their children are getting enough healthy food.

Even with a majority practicing positive behaviors, there is room for improvement, as more than a third (35%) of parents report they do not regularly plan their meals before shopping. Moreover, 28 percent regularly rely on boxed or frozen meals and nearly one in five (17%) do not regularly include vegetables in meals.



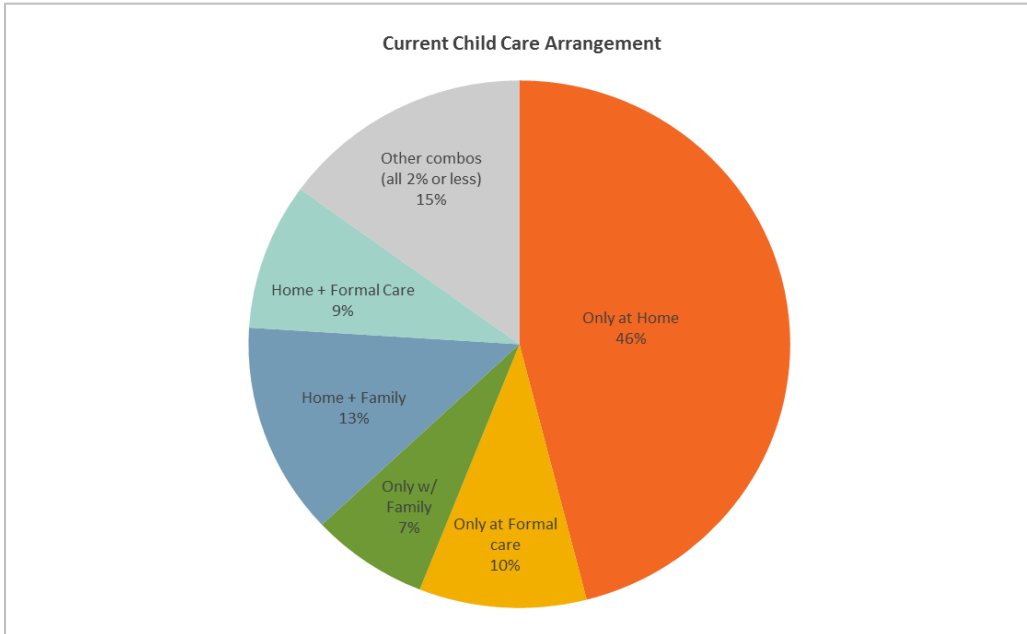
While many make homemade meals, families still face obstacles to cooking from scratch. Time is the biggest constraint, followed by cost and fear of food waste.



Young Kids Primarily in the Care of Parents and Other Family Members

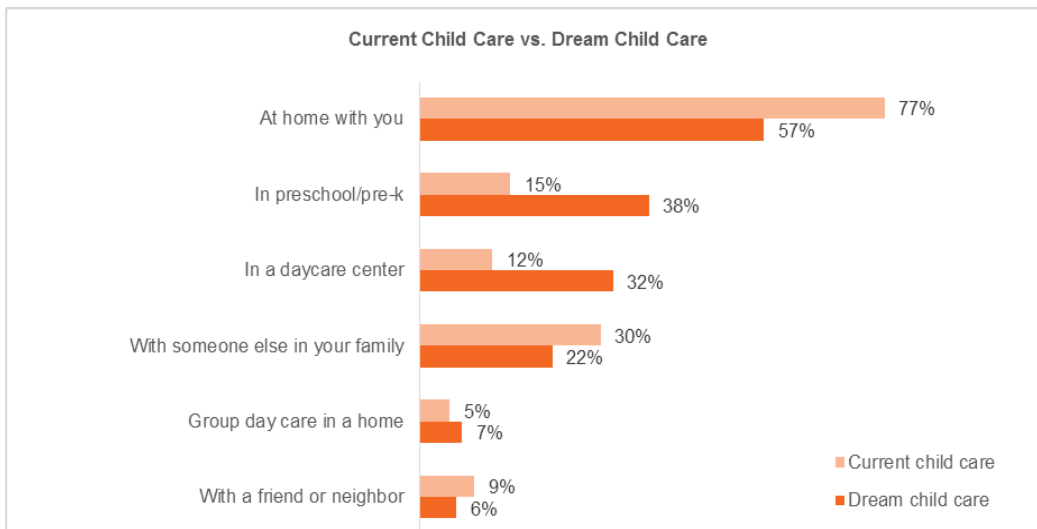
The most common child care arrangement for three in four parents is staying at home with their children. Nearly half of stay-at-home parents say it is their only form of child care, but a substantial number do so in combination with another arrangement, usually leaving their child with a family member. Even parents working full-time are

most likely to use at-home child care, but leave their children with another family member when they are unable to be at home themselves.



In total, nine in ten families use informal child care arrangements, such as children staying at home with them, with another family member, or with a friend/neighbor.

Few families, just over one in four, are using formal child care arrangements such as preschool, day care centers or group day care in a home. If cost weren't a factor, fewer parents would choose staying at home and more would be interested in preschool and day care centers. One in two parents who don't currently use any formal care options say they would like to do so. Still, staying at home remains the most popular child care arrangement.



CONCLUSIONS

Hunger is a serious issue among low-income families with young children. Many parents say feeding their families over the last year has been challenging. Families cobble together support from various programs to help make ends meet. By and large, SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid are the most valued and widely used support programs. It is critical to protect and strengthen these programs, which serve as the first line of defense for families. Strengthening these programs includes increasing SNAP benefits, protecting and supporting programs that provide nutrition education to low-income families, and ensuring that eligible women, infants, and children participate in WIC and stay in the program longer. There are also opportunities to improve data systems at the state level to ensure children and families are enrolled in all of the important programs for which they are eligible.

Parents turn to doctors and pediatricians for care, advice, and information. Doctors can be further engaged in educating parents on important nutrition topics and providing information on support programs. Moreover, family members also have an important role in influencing the well-being of young children.

Parents engage in positive meal preparation and grocery shopping practices but still face barriers to healthy eating. Food skills education can teach families how to make low-cost, time-efficient meals that minimize food waste. Awareness and availability of food skills education could be increased by leveraging programs like Medicaid, WIC and SNAP or other established systems that serve low-income parents.

Young children are primarily staying in informal care, at home with their parents or with family members. To best support these children, it is important to provide nutrition assistance that will improve the home food environment, through programs like SNAP, WIC and food skills education programs that show parents and caregivers how to stretch food budgets to provide healthy at-home meals. While many parents want to stay at home with their children, it is also important to increase access to affordable preschool and day care centers for parents who are interested in formal care but can't afford it.

ⁱ 600 online and 400 by telephone