



An Introduction to the Family Survey and Focus Groups Brief Series: Findings from the Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment

April 2025 | Erin Bumgarner, Jessica Goldberg, and Michelle Thompson

For families with young children, finding high-quality, affordable child care that allows caregivers to work can be a daunting task—across the United States and at home in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment was launched in 2023 as part of the state’s [Preschool Development Grant](#) to unearth new information that could help address this challenge and support the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) in improving families’ access to high-quality early care and education.

To accomplish this goal, EEC contracted with [MEF Associates](#) and its partners at [Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research \(TIER\)](#) to conduct a statewide survey and focus groups with caregivers of children up to age 12. These activities were informed by the project’s *Needs Assessment and Evaluation Working Group*, which included family representatives and individuals from the birth through 5 (B-5) workforce. This group met monthly and provided valuable input on study goals, recruitment strategies, and interpretation of findings.

This document begins with an overview of the needs assessment (Section I), then describes each of the three briefs (Section II), and summarizes the methods used to conduct the survey and focus groups (Section III). More detailed findings are available in a series of standalone briefs that accompany this introduction:



**Introduction
to the Brief Series**



**Brief I: How and why
do caregivers search
for child care?**



**Brief II: How do
caregivers make
decisions about
child care?**



**Brief III: What do
families use for
child care?**



**Technical
Appendix with
Survey Tables**

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank several staff from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) for their thoughtful feedback and contributions to the project, including Arjun Shah, Amy Checkoway, Ashley White, and Jocelyn Bowne. We also appreciate the input from the *Needs Assessment and Evaluation Working Group* that included family representatives and individuals from the B-5 workforce. This group met monthly and provided valuable input on study design, execution, and interpretation of findings. NEW Group members included: Jesse Colgan, Carolyn Concepcion, Barbara Costa, Franchesca Dominique, Sabrina Felteau, Andrée Gonzalez, Dori Knope, Morgan Mann, Jannine Reyes, Sophie Rezendes, Chrissy Rivers, Becca Tumposky, Joy Umeh, Pam Wildnauer, and Amy Yatsunami. We also appreciate the support of other project team members, including staff who shaped the study design and collected data by driving and taking ferries to different corners of the state. These individuals include: Becca Heilman, Clare Kennedy, Dani Hansen, Helena Wippick, Jeremy Rosen, Nicole Huret, Nikita Singhal, Rebecca Fauth, and Shafiqua Little. Finally, we express deep gratitude to the families who participated in the project and allowed us to learn from their feedback and journeys.



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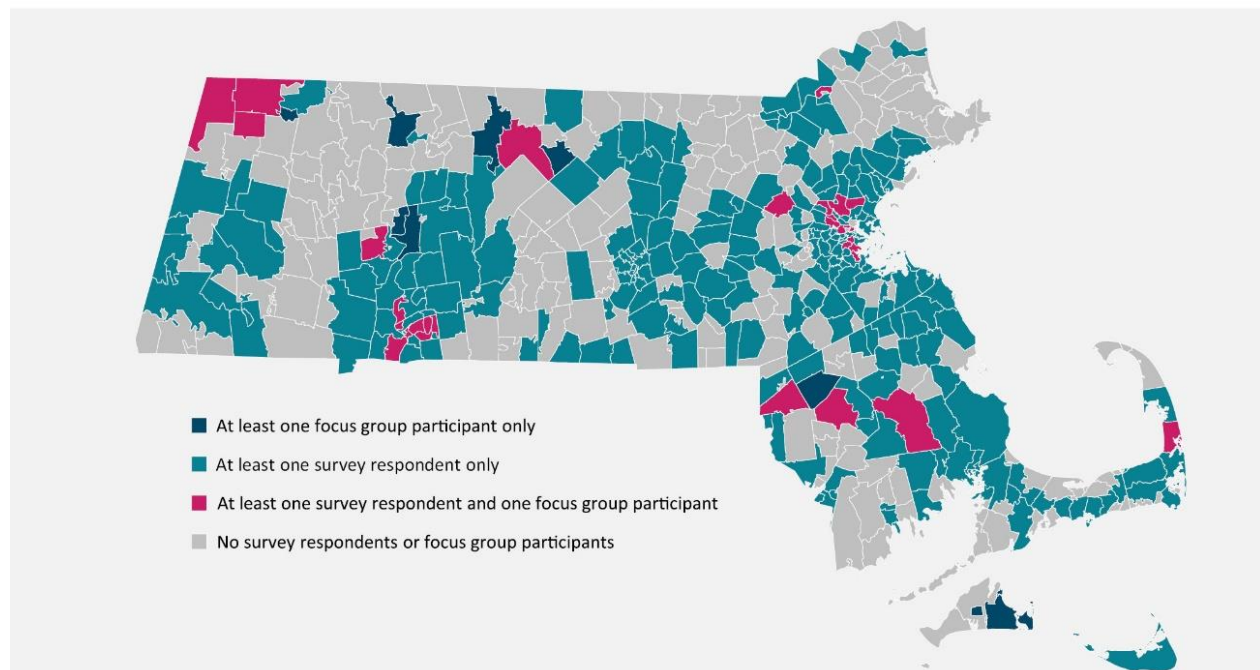
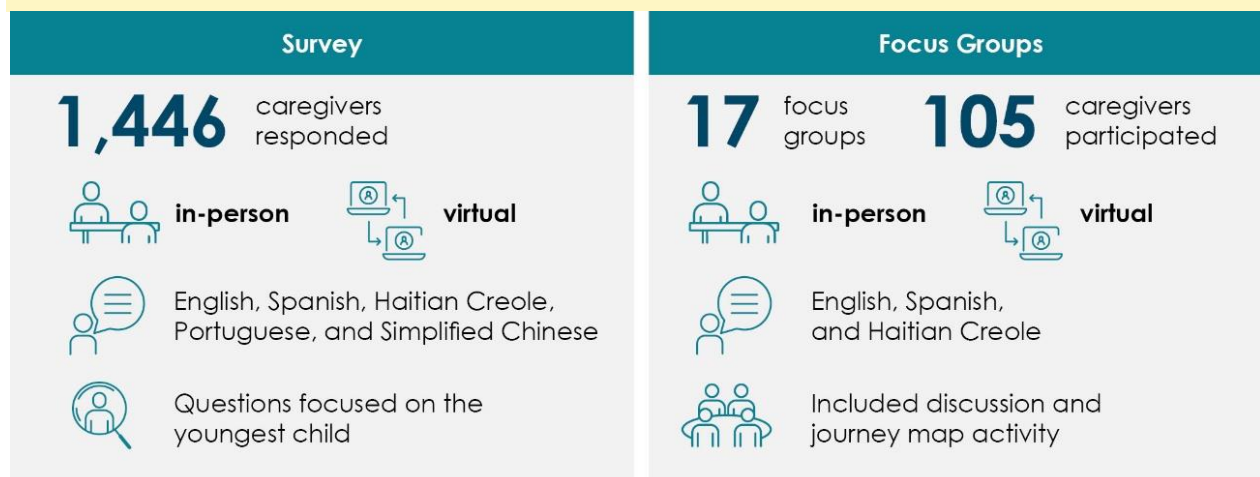
Section I: Needs Assessment Overview

The family needs assessment was designed to generate new information about how families access early childhood programs and services. The overarching goals of the family needs assessment were to better understand:

- The extent to which families access and use care and early education services,
- How and why families access and utilize care and early education services (or not),
- Caregiver experiences navigating the care and early education systems, including the extent to which there is variation in these experiences, and
- How the care and early education system can be more responsive to families.

To address these goals, the study team conducted a statewide family survey and focus groups (see Exhibit 1). The caregivers who participated in the family survey and focus groups were comparable in many ways to the overall Massachusetts composition (see Section III for more detail).

Exhibit 1. Family Needs Assessment Activities



Section II: Overview of Briefs

As noted above, the needs assessment findings are organized topically into three accompanying briefs:



Brief I: How and why do caregivers search for child care?



Brief II: How do caregivers make decisions about child care?



Brief III: What do families use for child care?

In this section we provide an overview of each brief and spotlight a few findings. This section is not intended to provide an executive summary. Instead, we encourage readers to visit each of the briefs to learn more about the findings for each topic area.



Brief I: How and why do caregivers search for child care?

Overview: This brief focuses on caregivers' experiences as they search for child care, drawing attention to the challenges they encounter along the way. It begins with an examination of why families search for child care. Then, it summarizes how families searched for care. Finally, it concludes by describing the outcomes of these searches.

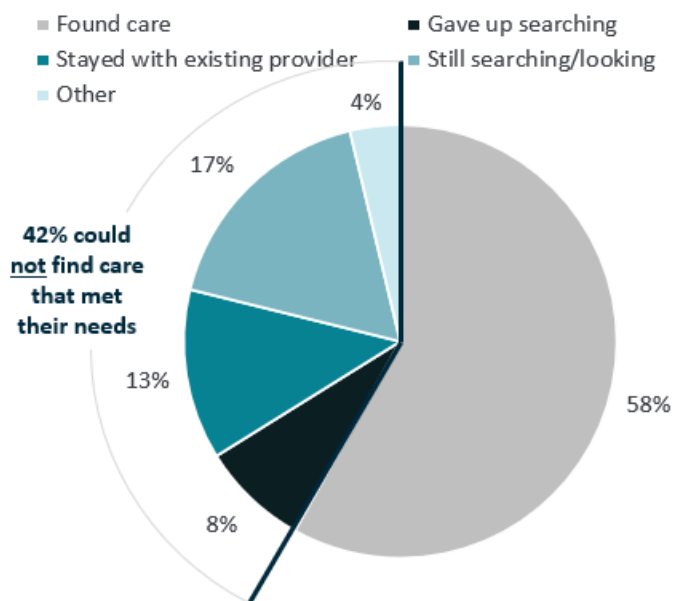
Finding Spotlight from the Brief: Brief I highlights findings such as Exhibit 2, which suggests that close to half of the caregivers who searched for child care **could not find care that met their needs**. Families who reported being financially secure reported more success finding care (72%) compared to families who were financially insecure (48%).

To better understand why families are unable to find care, please visit "[*Brief 1: How and why do caregivers search for child care?*](#)", where we describe:

- Circumstances that led families to search for care,
- Caregivers' experiences navigating a challenging search process, and
- Resources that caregivers used and wanted when searching for care.

Exhibit 2. Result of Caregivers' Search for Child Care

What was the result of your search for child care?



Notes: This exhibit presents findings from the family survey ($n=1,069$). Only those respondents who have previously searched for child care in the last 12 months were asked this question.



Brief II: How do caregivers make decisions about child care?

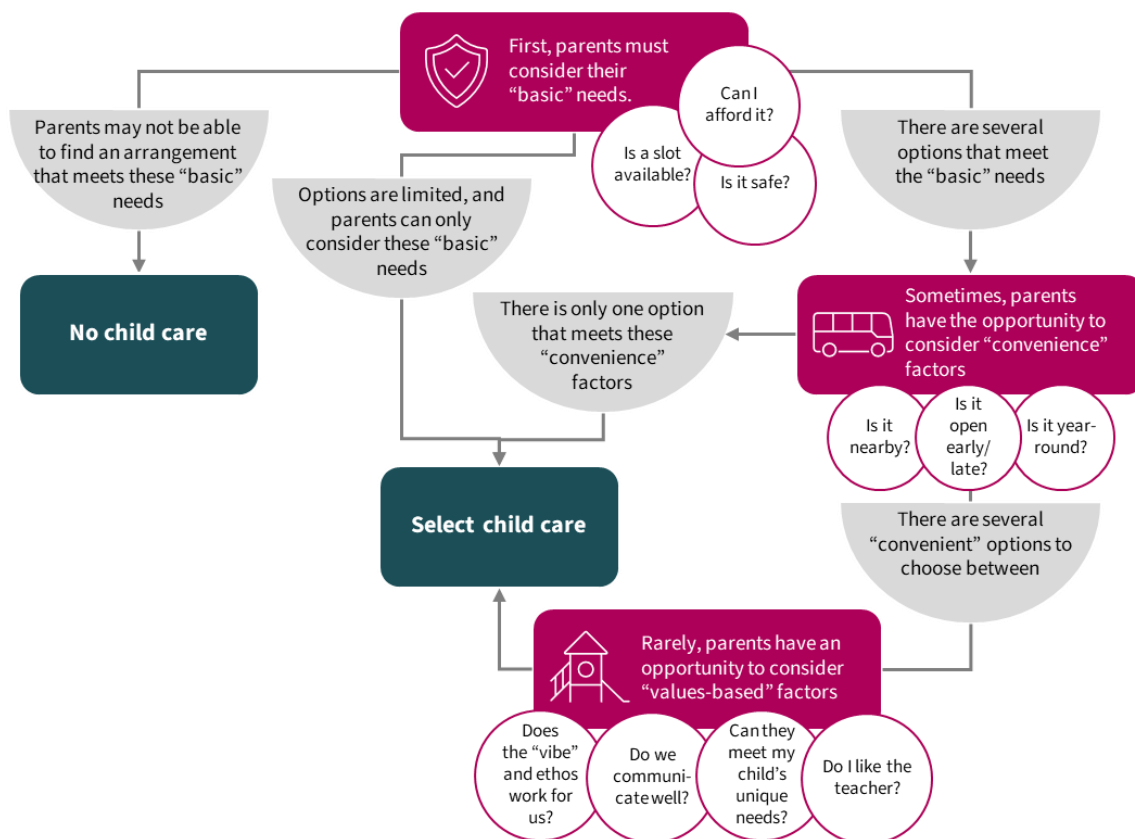
Overview: This brief explores how caregivers made decisions about child care and early education. The brief begins by exploring caregivers' priorities and how they weighed these priorities when selecting a child care arrangement. It then describes the types of child care that caregivers preferred to use.

Finding Spotlight from the Brief: Findings from the focus groups (see Exhibit 3) showed that caregivers typically considered basic needs first, such as affordability and safety. If they found an arrangement that met those needs, they would often consider convenience factors, such as the location of the arrangement. Only caregivers who were able to find multiple options would consider values-based factors, such as the communication style of the provider.

Though caregivers seemed to have clear ideas about the type and characteristics of child care they wanted for their family, many ultimately had to make compromises given the lack of options. Although caregivers consistently expressed a desire for safe, high quality, convenient care, very few families got to choose a child care arrangement based on these criteria given the limited availability and unaffordability of options.

To better understand how caregivers make decisions about child care, please visit ***"Brief II: How do caregivers make decisions about child care?"***. In this brief we elaborate on caregiver preferences for child care and provide insight into how caregivers weigh these preferences when making decisions about care.

Exhibit 3. Caregiver's Decision Tree When Selecting Child Care





Brief III: What do families use for child care?






Overview: This brief presents a snapshot of the child care arrangements that caregivers reported using. Then, it provides illustrative examples of how caregivers navigated early childhood programs and services, beginning at birth. Finally, it summarizes caregiver satisfaction with selected aspects of their care arrangements.

Finding Spotlight from the Brief: Focus group data illuminated the diverse experiences and challenges caregivers faced when finding and using child care. While each caregiver’s situation and child care journey was unique, our team was able to identify **five patterns—or “journey types”**—that reflect most participants’ stories. These journey types are summarized below in Exhibit 4.

To learn more about what families end up using for care, please visit “Brief III: What do families use for child care”. In this brief, we describe:

- The types of child care that families are using,
- Caregivers’ journeys navigating child care programs and services, and
- Caregiver satisfaction with their child care arrangements, including how child care impacts their ability to work and their preferences around which type of child care would best accommodate their needs.

Exhibit 4. How Most Caregivers Navigated Early Childhood Programs and Services (“Journey Types”)

Journey Type		Description
	Mostly seamless formal care	Caregivers were able to find sequential formal child care settings aligned with their needs.
	Cobbled-together care	Because caregivers could not find or could not afford the full-time formal child care they wanted, they had to “cobble together” multiple simultaneous child care arrangements over time, usually a combination of formal and informal.
	Primarily parent care (not by choice)	Caregivers could not find formal infant and toddler care and had to provide care themselves. Unlike the <i>cobbling together</i> group, who were blending formal and informal, these caregivers were ultimately opting to stay home until their child could get into public preschool or kindergarten.
	Primarily parent care (by choice)	While sometimes motivated by the same factors as the previous two types (e.g., could not access or afford child care), these caregivers chose to stay home with their children through infancy and toddlerhood, and were generally more satisfied with their situation.
	Primarily family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care	Caregivers used FFN care for the majority of their child’s early childhood.

Section III. Methodology

This section describes the approaches used to collect and analyze information for the Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment.

Needs Assessment and Evaluation Working Group

The family needs assessment was informed by the project's *Needs Assessment and Evaluation Working Group*, which included individuals from the early education and care workforce and family representatives. This group met monthly to reflect on various issues related to study design and implementation. This included input on the study goals, recruitment strategies, interpretation of findings, and more.

Family Survey Methodology

MEF led survey development in collaboration with EEC. The survey was developed to help address research questions such as:

- **To what extent are families accessing and using care and early education services?** To what extent are families able to access care and early education that is affordable, supports child development, and meets parents' needs with reasonable effort?
- **How and why do families access and utilize care and early education services (or not)?** What are families' primary sources of information about early education and care options? To what extent do families feel like they have information about the type of care they want and need? What factors are most important to families in an early education and care setting?
- **To what extent is there variation in access and utilization? Where are there gaps and potential inequities?** To what extent do family access, utilization, and preferences vary by family characteristics and geography? How can care and early education systems be more responsive to families? What factors hinder access?

Anticipating that many respondents would have multiple children, the survey questions asked respondents to focus on their youngest child.

Recruitment. We recruited parents and caregivers of children aged 12 or younger who live across Massachusetts from April to June 2024. Our goal was to reach a diverse set of families from all geographic regions of Massachusetts, including those who may be eligible for EEC services but not yet receiving them. With this in mind, the survey was available in five languages: English, Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Simplified Chinese.

To achieve our goal of reaching a diverse set of families, we emphasized recruiting families in-person for the survey. We hired eight data collectors to gather survey responses in-person throughout Massachusetts. Several were bilingual, speaking Spanish, Portuguese, and/or Haitian Creole. To be maximally inclusive, we targeted a wide range of locations for in-person recruitment. This included libraries, parks, and town events as well as programs/services like Head Start programs, Coordinated Family and Community Engagement programs (CFCEs), and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices. Data collectors provided tablets for people to complete the survey. For people who were unable to complete the survey in-person, data collectors offered a sign-up form to receive a survey link via email.

We also recruited families virtually. To do this, we worked with state administrators and programs (e.g., CFCEs), NEW Group members, and study team members who distributed the survey sign-up form on our behalf via email, newsletters, and flyers. Every respondent who completed the survey received a \$20 electronic gift card.

Final Sample. The final survey sample included 1,446 respondents (47% of these were collected in-person and 53% virtually). As shown in Exhibit 5, the survey sample was comparable to the overall state population in many ways. However, the focus group sample was more racially diverse than the overall state population, with a higher proportion of Hispanic/Latinx and Black caregivers and a lower proportion of white families. The sample also slightly overrepresented Western Massachusetts—but otherwise reflected the state’s regional distribution.

Exhibit 5. Comparison of Survey Respondents to the Massachusetts Population

Characteristic		MA Population	Survey
Education Level	High school degree or less	32%	26%
	Some college or associate’s degree	22%	29%
	Bachelor’s degree	25%	24%
	Advanced degree	21%	21%
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latinx	14%	29%
	Black	10%	16%
	White	68%	51%
	Asian	8%	8%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	<1%	1%
	Other	--	4%
Employment	Employed	75%	82%
Financial Security	Trouble paying for basic necessities	--	55%
	Applied for or received some form of means-tested benefit (e.g., cash, food, housing assistance)	--	51%
Geographic Region	MetroWest	34%	34%
	Metro Boston	11%	16%
	Southeast and Cape	20%	15%
	Central MA	12%	10%
	Northeast MA	12%	2%
	Western MA	12%	22%

Table Notes: Sources for Census Information: [Employment Status](#), [Race/Ethnicity](#), [Employment](#), and [Geographic region](#). Census estimates for “employment status” were available for adults 25 years and older, whereas our survey focused on caregivers aged 18 and older. Caregivers were eligible to take the survey if they lived in Massachusetts. To accommodate families experiencing housing instability, the survey asked respondents to enter a ZIP code where their child would attend childcare or school “if they stay in different locations.” Sample sizes ranged from 1,423 to 1,438 for the survey. Some characteristics were not available. This is indicated with “—” when applicable.

Analysis Approach. The team generated descriptive statistics for the full sample and for key subgroups of interest (see Exhibit 6 below). Given the exploratory nature of these analyses, the team only tested for statistical significance when making comparative statements about subgroups within the final briefs. For additional information about the subgroups, beyond what is covered in the briefs, please see the technical appendix that presents the full set of survey data tables.

Exhibit 6. Survey Subgroups and Definitions

Subgroup	Definition
Age	Parents and caregivers were eligible to take the survey if they had a child aged 12 or younger. The survey asked respondents: “How many children do you have in each of the following age ranges?” Respondents were instructed to focus on their “youngest child” throughout the survey. Age group categories for the subgroup analyses were defined as: 0–1 year, 2–3 years, 4–5 years, or 6–12 years.
Financial Stability	The survey asked respondents: “If you had an unexpected expense that cost you \$500, how confident are you that your household could come up with money to cover that expense within a month?” Their responses were used to create three subgroups: not financially secure (for caregivers who selected “not at all confident”), somewhat financially secure (for caregivers who selected “somewhat confident”), and financially secure (for caregivers who selected “very confident”).

Focus Group Methods

TIER conducted 17 focus groups with 105 caregivers of children eight years or younger who live in Massachusetts. In collaboration with EEC and the NEW Group, our team designed focus groups to address the following research questions:

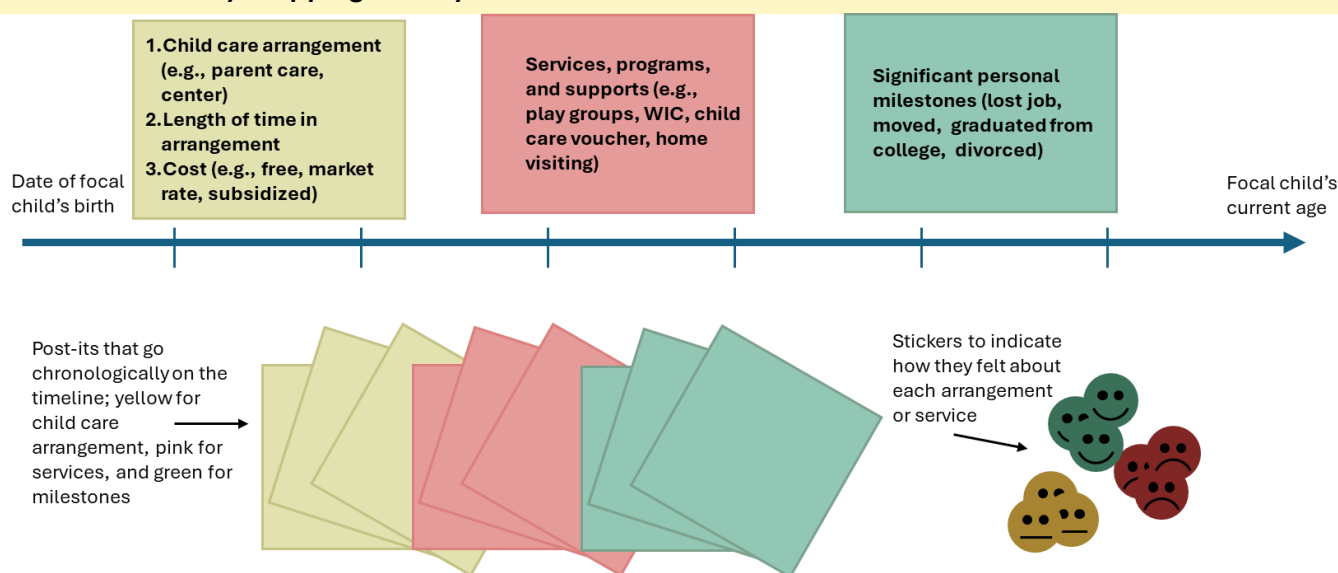
- **How and why do families access and utilize care and early education services (or not)?** What are families’ primary sources of information about early education and care options? To what extent do families feel like they have information about the type of care that they want and need? What factors are most important to families in an early education and care setting? How do families navigate programs? What are common initial touchpoints and transitions? What do families perceive as the main impacts of the care and early education programs in which they have been engaged—on their economic and educational trajectories and their children’s growth and development?
- **To what extent is there variation in access and utilization? Where are there gaps and potential inequities?** Why might access vary based on family characteristics? What do families see as some of the root causes of inequitable access?
- **How can care and early education systems be more responsive to families?** For families who are accessing services, what is working well and what would they like to be different? For families who are not accessing care and early education programs and services, what are the reasons for not doing so? What factors hinder access?

Recruitment. We recruited participants for the family focus groups in partnership with community-based early childhood organizations (e.g., home visiting programs, Family Centers, Coordinated Family and Community Engagement Centers [CFCEs]), state and local initiatives and associations (e.g., Young Children’s Council, Massachusetts Head Start Association), state and community contacts within the study team’s network (e.g., division leads at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, director of programs at the Children’s Trust of Massachusetts), and the NEW Group. These community partners supported TIER by helping to recruit families, supplying space for the in-person groups, and providing child care for participants.

Eligibility. Caregivers were eligible to participate in the focus groups if they were: (1) 18 years or older, (2) the caregiver to a child eight years or younger, (3) living in Massachusetts, and (4) able to participate in English, Spanish, or Haitian Creole.

Data Collection. On average, each 75–90-minute focus group included six people (range: 2–14). Two focus groups were conducted over Zoom, and the rest were held in person. All participants were provided with a \$100 gift card as a thank you. Each focus group comprised: (a) a brief demographic survey, (b) a journey mapping activity in which participants charted one of their children’s pathways through early childhood programs and services from birth to their current age (see Exhibit 7), and (c) discussion following a semi-structured topic guide. All focus groups were audio-recorded.

Exhibit 7. Journey Mapping Activity



Sample. Participants lived in all six Massachusetts regions, with particularly strong representation from the MetroWest, Southeast and Cape Cod, and Western regions. The majority (87%) identified as female. Over half (57%) identified racially as White, a quarter (27%) as Hispanic, and almost a fifth (18%) as Black. Almost half (45%) spoke a language in addition to English and two-thirds (65%) reported living in a two-parent home. A quarter (25%) were caring for a child with special medical or behavioral health care needs. Almost two-thirds (62%) received some type of means-tested benefit (e.g., MassHealth, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]). More than a quarter (29%) worked jobs that had unpredictable hours and/or required work on evenings or weekends.

As shown in Exhibit 8, the focus group sample was comparable to the overall state population in many ways. However, the focus group sample was more racially diverse than the overall state population, with a higher proportion of Hispanic/Latinx and Black caregivers and a lower proportion of white families. The sample also slightly overrepresented Western Massachusetts—but otherwise reflected the state’s regional distribution.

Exhibit 8. Comparison of Focus Group Respondents to the Massachusetts Population

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	Bachelor's degree	25%	20%
	Advanced degree	21%	30%
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latinx	14%	27%
	Black	10%	18%
	White	68%	57%
	Asian	8%	<5%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	<1%	<5%
	Other	--	0%
Employment	Employed	75%	--
Financial Security	Trouble paying for basic necessities	--	48%
	Applied for or received some form of means-tested benefit (e.g., cash, food, housing assistance)	--	62%
Geographic Region	MetroWest	34%	33%
	Metro Boston	11%	9%
	Southeast and Cape	20%	19%
	Central MA	12%	<5%
	Northeast MA	12%	9%
	Western MA	12%	29%

Table Notes: Sources for Census Information: [Employment Status](#), [Race/Ethnicity](#), [Employment](#), and [Geographic region](#). Sample sizes ranged from 94 to 103 for the focus groups. Some characteristics were not available. This is indicated with “—” when applicable.

Analysis. *Demographic Survey:* Data from the brief demographic survey completed during the focus groups were cleaned and tabulated in SPSS. Descriptive data were aggregated at the focus group level and used to detect differences in themes by key characteristics (e.g., average income level among focus group participants, focus group region). *Focus Groups:* All focus group audio-recordings were transcribed and, for focus groups conducted in Spanish or Haitian Creole, translated. Focus group transcripts were coded in NVivo 14; all coding was reviewed by a second member of the TIER team. *Journey Maps:* Of the 83 completed maps, 63 were clear enough to be formally coded and used in analysis. We used Excel and SPSS to clean and organize the data and run descriptive statistics to facilitate identification of patterns across child care arrangements. TIER discussed and solicited feedback on emerging findings with the NEW Group and EEC team throughout the analysis process.

To estimate the prevalence of each journey type in our sample (see Exhibit 4 above), we analyzed journey map and focus group data for a subset of participants who completed a journey map for a child aged 4.5 years or older ($n = 41$), selected because these journeys were long enough to categorize into a particular type. While we used strict parameters to assign each participant to a journey type, our understanding of these journey types is informed by the stories of all 105 focus group participants, who reflected on their experiences with more than just the target child for whom they completed their maps. These journey types provide a concise way of understanding key aspects of caregiver journeys through the early education and care system.

About this Project

The Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment was launched in 2023 as part of the state's [Preschool Development Grant](#). The needs assessment was conducted by MEF Associates and its partners at Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER). The overarching goal was to generate information that could support the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care in improving families' access to high-quality early care and education. The needs assessment was informed by an advisory group that included family representatives and individuals from the B-5 workforce. This group met monthly and provided valuable input on study design, execution, and interpretation of findings.

About this Series

This publication is part of a series that summarizes findings from the needs assessment. The series summarizes findings from a survey and set of focus groups that gathered input from Massachusetts-based caregivers with children up to age 12. This series includes several standalone products, including:



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