What to Consider when Conducting Home-Based Child Care Research

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This resource is intended to guide researchers and evaluators about the aspects of home-based child care (HBCC) that are distinct from other child care and early education (CCEE) settings. Understanding some of the unique aspects of provider and setting characteristics as well as the regulatory and policy contexts in which HBCC providers offer care and education can inform research questions, design, sampling, and data collection. Researchers, evaluators, and data collectors may use this resource to guide their understanding of the HBCC sector and its many distinctions when designing research agendas, generating research and policy-relevant research questions, and focusing on specific areas to address the needs of the sector.

The HBCC sector, like the broader CCEE sector, includes a range of providers with varied individual-level characteristics, such as demographics (e.g., age, education), prior knowledge and experience, motivations, and economic circumstances. Some characteristics of individuals, such as relationship to children in care, may be unique in HBCC settings, for instance a provider may be related to all children in care. The HBCC sector also includes settings with characteristics that may be unique to the HBCC sector, such as residential locations and spaces, small numbers of children in care, and the presence of school-age children as well as characteristics that may be like other CCEE settings, such as mixed-age groups of children in care.

HBCC settings may be subject to CCEE system and program regulations, requirements, and standards at the local, state, or federal level. For example, HBCC providers who receive state subsidy payments may be subject to federal monitoring and health and safety requirements through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). HBCC providers may or may not be subject to local or state licensing, certification, or registration requirements. Licensed HBCC providers, who may be referred to as (FCC) providers, may also opt into programs that have standards that apply to HBCC settings, such as state PreK programs or the federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs that have extensive performance standards. Some HBCC individual and setting characteristics may determine which regulatory systems and requirements apply. For example, an HBCC provider caring for only one unrelated child may not be subject to state licensing requirements in some states.

Distinct Characteristics of HBCC Providers and Settings

Understanding the distinct characteristics of individual HBCC providers and HBCC settings is important in developing a research or evaluation design and a sample that includes HBCC. Below describes questions and considerations regarding distinct aspects of HBCC providers and settings, including children in care, provider characteristics, setting characteristics, regulatory context, and funding and support. These questions and considerations may inform research and evaluation efforts to design relevant research questions and inquiries regarding the HBCC sector.

Regulatory status

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

- » Is the HBCC setting licensed, registered, or certified to offer child care?
- » How long has the HBCC setting been licensed?
- » Is the HBCC setting considered license-exempt?
- » What terminology is used by states and providers to refer to HBCC?
- » What terminology is used by HBCC providers to refer to themselves within the HBCC sector?

Considerations & examples

- A family, friend, or neighbor (FFN) provider in one state may be required to have a license to care for one or more unrelated children, while this same FFN provider in another state might be exempt from licensing.
- Some HBCC providers, such as FFN providers, may not see themselves as formal child care providers or may not have engaged with the formal child care system, instead viewing themselves as a friend or relative providing care to people they know.

Distinct Aspects and Experiences of HBCC Providers and Settings to Consider, *continued*

Related roles

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

- » Is the HBCC provider a parent caring for their own young children in addition to unrelated children?
- » Is the HBCC provider a foster care parent to one or more children in addition to providing child care to other children?
- » Is the HBCC provider an informal kinship caregiver for one or more children (i.e., providing care for a child outside a formal child care arrangement) in addition to providing child care to other children?
- » Does the HBCC provider homeschool their own children in addition to providing child care for other children?

Considerations & examples

- The related roles of HBCC providers are understudied and largely absent from policy discussions about HBCC. Little is known about the prevalence of HBCC providers who also offer foster care.

Location of HBCC

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

- » Is HBCC offered in the provider's home?
- » Is HBCC offered in the child's home?
- » Do the provider and child(ren) in care live in the same household?
- » What are state or local regulations related to the location of the HBCC?

Considerations & examples

- Care in a child's home may be exempt from child care licensing but may be eligible for subsidy receipt and required to meet subsidy regulations.

Geographic and community context

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research

- » In what type of geographic area is the HBCC (urban, rural, suburban)?
- » What assets are available for children and families in the community of the HBCC (e.g., parks, safe neighborhoods, libraries)?
- » Does the provider have internet access in the community?
- » What are the provider's preferred languages?
- » What are the preferred languages spoken by families in the provider's community?
- » Does the provider have transportation available to attend training or meetings?

Considerations & examples

- Some HBCC providers may face challenges when resources are only available online, when transportation is required for in-person training, or when materials and training are not available in their preferred languages.[1]

Distinct Aspects and Experiences of HBCC Providers and Settings to Consider, *continued*

Social support

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» What kinds of support does the HBCC provider have? Who are the people they rely on in their household or community?

Considerations & examples

- Many HBCC providers may benefit from peer support and other opportunities to share and learn from other HBCC providers.[2]

Economic assets

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» Is the HBCC provider a homeowner?

» Is the HBCC provider a renter?

» Does the HBCC provider hold a non-child care job in addition to caring for children?

Considerations & examples

- Some localities have zoning regulations that may inhibit HBCC from operating in residential properties.
- Some localities may have local homeowners' associations that restrict the provision of HBCC.

Number of children in care and adult-child ratios

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» How many children does the HBCC setting provide child care for?

» How many adults are offering child care in the HBCC setting?

» Is there an assistant who helps care for children? Is the assistant related to the HBCC provider?

» What are state/territory child care licensing requirements for the number of children in care (e.g., group size) and adult–child ratios allowed in HBCC settings?

Considerations & examples

- Some states license large-and small-group HBCC settings, although definitions of large and small vary across states.
- Some states require licensing if one nonrelative child is cared for in HBCC; other states have a higher threshold for number of children allowed before licensing is required. States vary in adult–child ratio requirements for large-group HBCC.

Ages of children in care and age composition

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

- » What are the ages of children in the HBCC setting?
- » Are there school-age children in before-and after-school care? Are there preschool-age children who attend other CCEE arrangements either within the same day or over the course of a week?
- » Does the HBCC setting include mixed ages of children?
- » For licensed HBCC providers, what are state/territory child care licensing definitions for ages of children? For example, are toddlers defined by mobility or age?
- » Do subsidy policies allow all ages of children, including school-age?

Considerations & examples

- Many HBCC settings include children across age groups from infants through school-age.
- The maximum number of children allowed and the adult–child ratios in care may be based on the age of the youngest child in care.

HBCC settings that care for children with special needs

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

- » Does the HBCC setting care for children eligible for early intervention services (e.g., developmental delay)?
- » Does the child have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)? Do any school-age children in HBCC have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?
- » Does the HBCC setting offer special health care services to address children's needs?
- » What are state/territory child care licensing requirements for licensed HBCC settings caring for children with special needs?
- » What types of support are available for FFN, license-exempt, or unlicensed HBCC providers who care for children with special needs?
- » Do subsidy policies include higher reimbursement rates for HBCC providers who offer care for children with special needs?

Considerations & examples

- Some states, such as Michigan, may have specific regulations related to caring for children with special needs.
- Some states, such as California, may allow flexibility in adjusting CCDF subsidy rates for providers who care for children with special needs.[3]

Provider-child prior relationship

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» Which of the following relationships does the provider have with children in care?
- Grandparent
- Aunt or uncle
- Cousin
- Other relative
- Fictive kin (individuals who are not related by blood or marriage but are considered family because of a close personal or emotional bond with a child or family)
- Nonrelative but prior relationship (e.g., friend, neighbor)
- Nonrelative, no prior relationship

» Is the arrangement only relatives? Only grandfamilies? A mix of relatives and nonrelatives?

» What are state/territory child care licensing requirements related to a provider's prior relationship to children in HBCC?

» What are state/territory child care subsidy policies related to a provider's prior relationship to children in HBCC?

Considerations & examples

- Some states/territories exempt HBCC providers-often referred to as FFN providers-who only care for relatives from licensing requirements.
- Some state child care subsidy programs may exempt relatives from certain requirements as allowed by CCDF rules.[4]
- State licensing does not consider prior relationships when the provider and children in care are not related (e.g., friends and neighbors).
- Some state child care subsidy programs may have different levels of requirements for nonrelative HBCC providers who care for children in the child's home (e.g., FFN providers or nannies).

Hours of care

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» What hours/days of care are offered?

» Does a child stay with a provider for several days in a row if needed (e.g., extended kinship care)?

» How many continuous hours of care are offered? What are the hours of care offered?

» Does the HBCC setting offer nontraditional hours of care (overnights, weekends, early mornings, evenings)?

» Does the HBCC setting offer sick care?

» Does the HBCC setting offer drop-in care or care that is needed by parents without a lot of advance notice?

» What are state/territory child care licensing and subsidy policies for hours of care offered in HBCC settings?

Considerations & examples

- Some states/territories exempt HBCC providers who only care for children for fewer than five hours per week.
- Some states/territories have additional licensing standards for HBCC that offers nontraditional-hours child care.

Participation in CCEE programs

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» Does the HBCC provider deliver Early Head Start/Head Start?

» Does the HBCC provider deliver publicly funded PreK or preschool?

» Does the HBCC provider participate in a food program such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)?

Considerations & examples

- Head Start and Early Head Start have a family child care option that some grant recipients implement.
- Some state and city public PreK programs allow licensed FCC providers to deliver PreK.[5]
- Many states allow licensed HBCC programs to participate in CACFP, which provides reimbursement for nutritious meals and snacks for children in child care settings. Only eight states allow license-exempt HBCC providers to participate in CACFP.[6]

Participation in quality improvement initiatives and CCEE support

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» Does the HBCC provider participate in the state's quality improvement initiatives (e.g., Quality Improvement System [QIS], Quality Rating and Improvement System [QRIS])?

» Does the HBCC provider participate in professional development or other relevant training?

» Is the HBCC provider affiliated with a network or other support organization?

» Is the HBCC provider affiliated with a peer support or family child care association?

» Does the HBCC provider have access to health support for children, such as early intervention or early childhood mental health consultation support?

Considerations & examples

- Most states include licensed HBCC in their QIS or QRIS; fewer states allow license-exempt HBCC to participate. States also vary on whether subsidy participation is tied to QIS or QRIS.[7,8]
- HBCC networks may be present in a local community or state and may offer different kinds of support for licensed, license-exempt, and unlicensed HBCC providers, including peer support, training and home visits, materials and financial support, and help navigating CCEE systems.[9]

Experience with local regulations

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» Is the HBCC required to meet zoning, homeowners' association, fire department, or small business regulations?

Considerations & examples

- The Small Business Administration may support some HBCC providers who are small-business owners through financial and business assistance and loans.[10]

Funding sources

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» Does the HBCC provider receive funding from any of the following:

- State child care subsidy program
- Reimbursements from CACFP
- Public PreK
- Head Start/Early Head Start
- Private pay

» Does the HBCC provider engage in bartering of support or other informal payment exchanges with families?

» What are state/territory child care licensing requirements for payment status of HBCC?

» What are state/territory child care requirements for receiving child care subsidy reimbursements?

» What terms do states use for HBCC providers who accept subsidy payments (e.g., certified, registered)?

» Do states include HBCC eligibility in administration of the CACFP?

» Do states only include licensed HBCC?

Considerations & examples

- Relative HBCC providers may be allowed to receive child care subsidies in some states if they meet some CCDF regulations, and in other states they may not be eligible to receive subsidies.[11]
- Most states extend CACFP eligibility to licensed HBCC, but only eight states extend CACFP eligibility to license-exempt HBCC providers.[12]

Access to community resources

Questions to guide study & evaluation design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, & reporting research with HBCC

» Does the HBCC provider participate in community resources/activities (e.g., local library programming)?

» Does the HBCC provider have a relationship with local preschool or center-based programs or elementary schools?

Considerations & examples

- HBCC providers may use community spaces, such as local libraries, as extensions of their caregiving.[13]

Endnotes

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[11] Dwyer & Adams (2024).

[12] Adams et al. (2023).

[13] Bromer, J., Porter, T., Jones, C., Ragonese-Barnes, M., & Orland, J. (2021). *Quality in home-based child care: A review of selected literature* (OPRE Report No. 2021–136). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/HBCCSQ_LiteratureReview_2021-Remediated.pdf; Bromer, J., Ragonese-Barnes, M., & Miguel, J. (2025). *Quality in family, friend, and neighbor care: Findings from the home-based child care practices and experiences study.* Unpublished.

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