

Data Sources

The analyses presented in subsequent chapters use data from three main sources: (1) CACFP administrative data systems maintained by USDA; (2) an annual survey carried out by the Children's Foundation (CF) on licensed child care providers; and (3) a special survey of former CACFP providers being conducted as part of the Family Child Care Homes Legislative Changes Study. This chapter describes the three data sources.

USDA Administrative Data

Data on CACFP participation levels are captured on a standard reporting form, Form FCS-44 (see Appendix A). The state agency responsible for overseeing the CACFP files the form monthly, although some types of information are reported only quarterly or semi-annually. All of the data items used in the present analysis are reported quarterly.

Three types of information on CACFP participation are captured in the form: (1) the number of sponsors active in the program; (2) the number of active providers; and (3) the average daily number of children receiving CACFP meals from those providers. Parallel information is reported on child care centers and child care homes, but this report covers only the family child care homes.

Beginning in the third quarter of fiscal year 1997, as the new CACFP regulations were implemented, counts are reported separately for Tier 1 and three types of Tier 2 providers. The Tier 2 classifications are based on how many of the meals the provider serves are reimbursed at the higher Tier 1 rate (for children whose family incomes are less than 185 percent of the poverty line). Tier 2 providers serving only meals reimbursed at the higher rate are "Tier 2 high;" those for whom all meals are reimbursed at the lower rate are "Tier 2 low;" and those receiving reimbursement at both rates are "Tier 2 mixed."

The analysis uses CACFP participation data from fiscal year 1989 through 1998. Throughout this period, the administrative data series is complete and appears generally accurate. The 1997 revisions to the reporting form to separate out the tiers engendered some confusion and inaccuracies. Because accurate data for 1997-1998 are critical for the present analysis, USDA asked each state to review all of their 1997 and 1998 quarterly entries. About three fourths of the states submitted some corrections, usually minor ones. In addition, some remaining inconsistencies in the sponsor data required manual adjustments for several states.

State Licensing Data

Data on the number of licensed family child care homes came principally from The Children's Foundation (CF), a national organization that performs education, advocacy, and research on child care and related issues. Since the late 1970's, CF has released annual Family Child Care Licensing Studies, which report the results of an annual survey of state child care regulatory agencies. The survey, which is conducted every summer, collects data on the number of family child care homes and tracks state regulatory policies. The analysis

uses data on the number of licensed child care homes from the last 10 available CF studies, 1989 to 1998.

Although the child care licensing data are considered reasonably accurate, they have limitations that are important to bear in mind. Licensure data reflect the number of licensed homes only, not the total number of family child care homes. No data exist on the total number of family child care homes, which would include licensed homes, unlicensed homes that are exempt from state regulation, and unlicensed homes that are nonexempt and operating underground. It is known, however, that the ratio of licensed homes to the total number of homes differs from state to state. This results from the cross-state differences in child care regulations, as some states regulate most types and sizes of homes, and others leave most homes exempt from regulation. Finally, states' child care regulations change periodically, making time trends somewhat difficult to interpret even for an individual state.

Because of the importance of accuracy in the analysis of the 1997-1998 period, Abt Associates carried out supplementary research to verify the CF data and to learn the reasons for any large changes reported during the period. Child care regulatory offices were contacted in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Two methods were used: telephone and written verification requests.

Telephone verifications were conducted with 13 states in which the CF data showed large (greater than 10 percent) increases or decreases in regulated homes from 1997 to 1998. Another three states were telephone verified because they had the greatest number of homes, and their yearly fluctuations could affect national totals. Fifteen of the 16 states completed telephone verifications (one did not respond), which took place in December, 1998 and January, 1999.

Verification requests were mailed to the remaining 37 states. The state regulatory officials were asked to: (1) confirm the CF data on the number of homes for 1997 and 1998; and (2) discuss possible reasons for the changes in number of homes from 1997 to 1998. Of those states, 26 (70 percent) responded to confirm the data, and 13 offered reasons for changes between 1997 and 1998.

Some states did make modifications to the CF licensing data. Most of the changes were minor, reflecting data that had not been available at the time of the CF survey or, in a few cases, clarifications of exactly what information was desired.

Survey of Former CACFP Providers

As part of the Family Child Care Homes Legislative Changes Study, Abt Associates is currently conducting a survey of former CACFP family child care homes. The overall study involves surveys of CACFP sponsors, of current Tier 1 and Tier 2 providers, of former providers, and of families served by the current providers. All of these surveys are scheduled for completion during the summer of 1999, and their results will be the basis for the final report, scheduled for release in 2001. Although the survey of former providers is not yet

complete, its initial sample screening process yields data that are pertinent to the participation questions discussed here.

The sponsor, provider, former provider, and household surveys are based on linked, nationally representative samples. Sample construction involved probabilistic selection of states, sponsors within states, active and former providers within the sponsors, and households within the active providers.

The former providers survey has two phases. The first phase works with the full sample of just under 2,000 providers to find out their current situation, particularly, whether they are now providing child care and, if so, whether they are participating in the CACFP. The second phase focuses solely on providers who are now providing care but not participating in the CACFP. It collects information on their reasons for leaving the program, their current licensure status, and the number and characteristics of the meals they serve to children in their care.

Preliminary data from the first phase of the former provider survey are used in the section on CACFP leavers, p. 28. That phase is about half complete at this writing—that is, we know the current situation of somewhat more than half of the providers in the sample. Because the data are not complete, final figures may differ from those presented here. The numbers presented at this stage should be considered to provide only a general indication of the situations of the former providers rather than specific estimates.