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Editors and reporters: The complete policy brief is available here:  
http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/documents/ChildCare_final.pdf

DURHAM, N.H. -- Rural preschoolers of employed mothers are more likely than their urban peers to be cared for by informal non-related providers like in-home babysitters, neighbors, or friends, a new policy brief from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire finds. Further, the policy brief, “Rural Families Choose Home-Based Child Care for their Preschool-Age Children,” suggests that while those living in rural areas pay less for child care, they may have fewer child care choices, with center-based care being the least commonly available option.

“The child care choices rural families make are important in light of recent research that finds rural children lagging behind urban children in letter recognition or beginning sounds recognition when entering kindergarten,” says report author Kristin Smith, family demographer at the Carsey Institute. “Research suggests that home-based care arrangements often lack the stimulating learning and play materials found in centers and focus less on education. Children’s exposure to formal early care and education settings has been found to be associated with better cognitive skills.”

Use of relatives (including grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or cousins) and organized care (such as day care centers, federal Head Start programs, preschool, or kindergarten) is similar for rural and urban preschoolers with employed mothers. More than one-third of preschoolers of employed mothers in both rural and urban areas are cared for by relatives, and about one-third use organized care. Roughly one-quarter of preschoolers in either group are cared for by a parent while the mother is working.

The use of informal non-related caregivers is higher in rural areas than urban ones; 25 percent of rural preschoolers with employed mothers use informal non-related care versus 20 percent of urban preschoolers.

Rural families pay less for child care than their urban counterparts. They are less likely to pay
for care by relatives (16 percent of employed mothers in rural areas pay for relative care, compared to 23 percent of those in urban areas). Among those who do pay for child care, employed mothers in rural areas pay an average of $67 per week for child care, significantly less than the average of $98 per week that urban employed mothers pay.

“Rural families choose home-based child care in the form of relatives or informal non-related child care providers to care for their preschoolers more often than organized care facilities. This may reflect a preference to have family members, friends or neighbors care for children or it may be the result of a shortage of child care options in rural communities,” says Smith. “If rural families are choosing home-based child care because it is less costly or more accessible than organized care facilities, then rural communities may need more affordable and expanded access to formal early childhood programs.” The brief also suggests more training for relatives and informal non-related care-givers to help promote child development and stimulate early learning.

“Assuring that rural preschoolers’ early learning experiences prepare them for future school success should be a strong focus of state and federal policy,” the brief concludes.