



# The COVID-19 Pandemic:

Its Impact on Access and Use  
of Child Care in North Dakota

Results from a Family Survey Conducted in October 2020

## Child Care in North Dakota

North Dakota's child-care industry plays a significant, vital role in the state's economy. It contributes to state revenues and job growth and enables thousands of parents to remain in the labor force and support their households. The importance of quality child care has become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the economic and societal disruptions have placed a significant burden on providers and families alike.

In 2019, North Dakota had the largest percentage of working adults in the nation (80%)<sup>1</sup> and the lowest unemployment rate among states (2.4%)<sup>2</sup>. In addition, approximately 75 percent of children ages birth through 13 lived in families where all the available parents were in the workforce; higher than the national average of 69 percent and the seventh largest percentage among states<sup>3</sup>. Ideally, licensed child care would meet 50 percent of the potential need in a healthy child care market, recognizing that not all working families choose to use licensed child care. Some families prefer to alter their schedules to care for their own child(ren), others utilize a network of family, friends, and neighbors, or enroll their child in Early Head Start/Head Start or other child care arrangements. Prior to the pandemic, licensed child care providers in the state had the capacity to care for 36 percent of children with working parents. It is also important to understand that in some cases, the available capacity may not always meet the needs of parents depending on where they live, the number and ages of their children, their work schedules, and affordability.

On March 13, 2020 Governor Doug Burgum declared a State of Emergency as part of North Dakota's initial COVID-19 response. Throughout the pandemic, many child care providers have been faced with multiple closures due to low child counts, fear of the virus, and positive COVID-19 cases impacting staff and children. Some have closed permanently.

In the month of October alone, 86 regulated child care programs had to close fully for a quarantine period of 3 to 24 days, impacting families in 29 counties throughout the state. Another 40 regulated programs had to close partially, shutting down one or more classrooms each.

In an effort to better understand the impact that these disruptions have had on families, Child Care Aware of North Dakota, in partnership with and on behalf of the state of North Dakota, surveyed families from around the state over a two week period in October 2020. The following information reflects the voices of 2,446 parents and caregivers with children from birth through age 12 in North Dakota – from every county in the state.



<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from North Dakota Compass, Workforce, Proportion of Adults Working, <http://bit.ly/2c0IWXu>

<sup>2</sup> Data obtained from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rates for States, <https://www.bls.gov/lau/lastrk19.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Data obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B23008 along with estimations using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, "U.S. Census Populations with Bridged Race Categories," [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/bridged\\_race.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/bridged_race.htm)

## KEY FINDINGS

- Disruptions in child care due to the pandemic have impacted parents' employment and work schedules.
- Families have experienced many types of child care disruptions.
- Reliance on unpaid family/friend care and multiple-care arrangements has increased during the pandemic.
- Parents are worried about their children's health, learning development, and the overall well-being of their family.



*"This has been very stressful as a parent. School closures, [distance] learning, quarantine because of close contacts, daycare closed because of close contacts, living in a small community where daycare options are limited to only one [facility], and scrambling to find childcare are things that us parents have had to face the past 7 plus months. Everyday we wake up not knowing what obstacles are going to be thrown at us.*

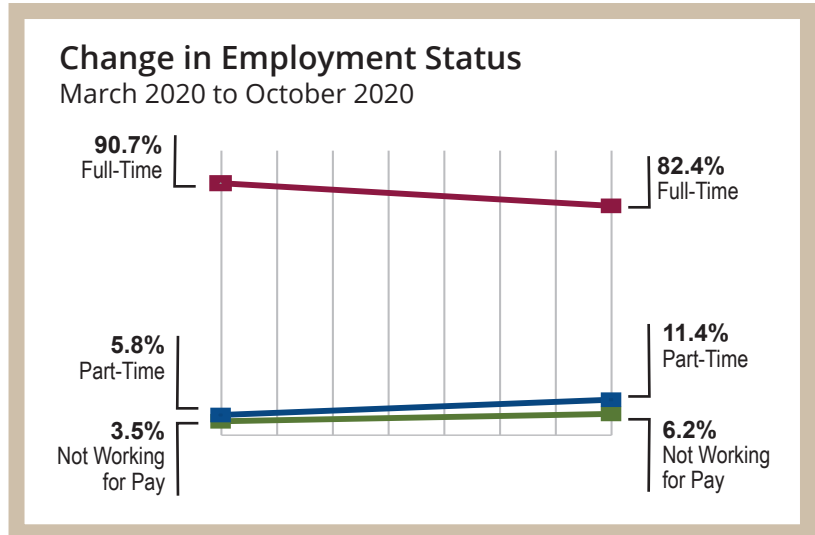
*As a parent I can see how my kid's mental health has changed for the worse. We try to go about 'as normal' as we can. But in reality there is nothing normal about the way we are living. My son said to me, 'mom you are lucky to grow up without COVID, because you got to do normal kid things'. That's the moment I knew the fear of this pandemic will forever be with him as he grows."*

- Mother with two young children and one school-age child

# Disruptions to Work and Child Care

## Employment Status

- Just prior to the pandemic, nearly all survey respondents were working; 91 percent were working full time and 6 percent were part time.
- When asked about the past month, fewer respondents reported working full time (82%) and 11 percent were working part time (nearly twice as many since before the pandemic).
- For the remaining respondents who did not work in the past month, the main reason cited was to take care of their children or family (64%). In addition, just over half indicated the reason was COVID-related (54%).

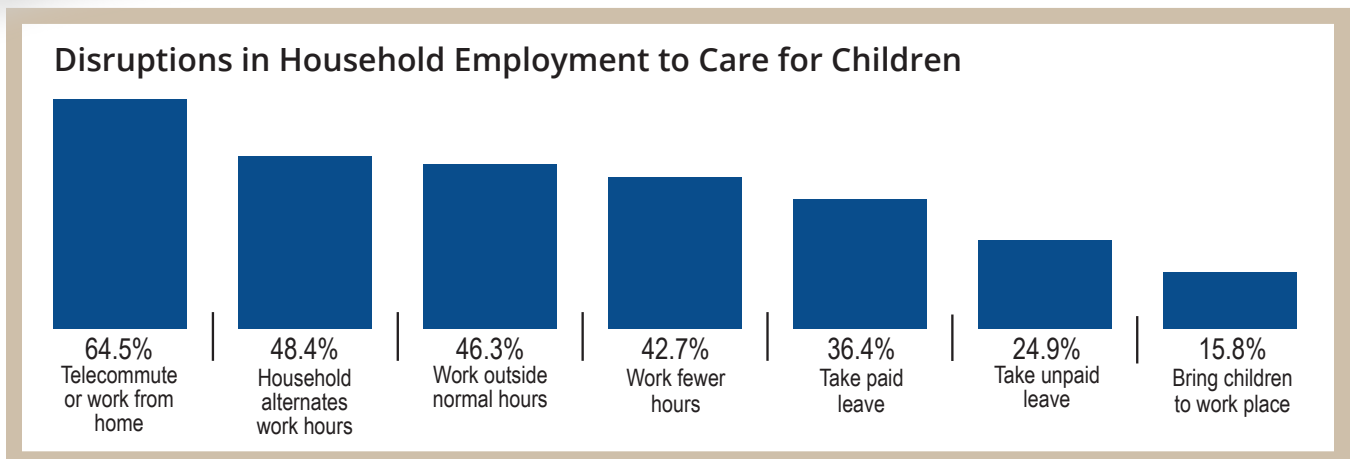


**FIGURE 1:** The employment status of respondents prior to the emergency declaration (3/13/20) and in October 2020. N=2,234.

## Modification of Work Location and Hours

- Nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that they or another parent/caregiver in their household have worked from home while caring for children at some point since March 13 (65%).
- Just less than half have modified their work schedules to care for their children by alternating work hours with someone in the household (48%), working outside of normal hours (46%), and working fewer hours (43%).
- Just over one-third of respondents indicated they or another parent/caregiver in the household have taken paid leave (36%) and 25 percent have used unpaid leave to care for their children.
- Nearly 1 in 5 respondents said they or another parent/caregiver brought their children to work with them (16%).

*Key Finding:  
Disruptions in child care due to the pandemic have impacted parents' employment and work schedules.*



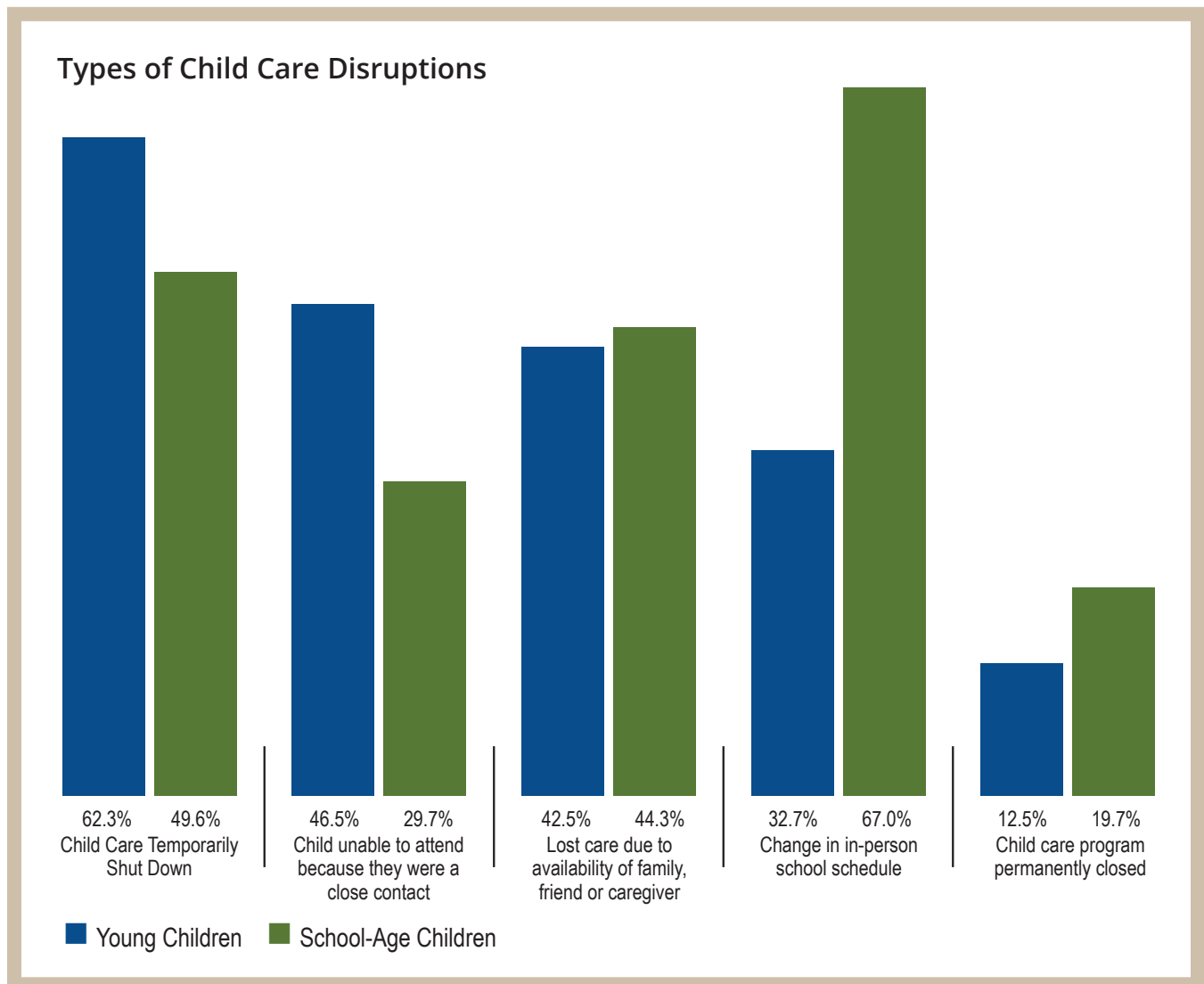
**FIGURE 2:** This figure shows whether respondents or another parent/caregiver in their household have experienced any of the items since March 13, 2020. N=2,244

## Types of Child Care Disruptions

- At least half of respondents experienced a temporary shutdown of their child care due to the pandemic (62% of respondents with young children and 50% of respondents with school-age children).
- Nearly half of respondents lost their child care arrangements due to friends and family not available to help (43% of respondents with young children and 44% of respondents with school-age children).
- A close contact situation prevented nearly half of respondents with young children (47%) and 30 percent of respondents with school-age children from sending their children to child care.
- For respondents with school-age children, two-thirds experienced changes in in-person school schedules (67%).

*Key Finding:  
Families have experienced many types of child care disruptions.*

For families who experienced a temporary shutdown of their child care or changes in family and friend schedules, the majority indicated that these disruptions happened more than once.



**FIGURE 3:** This figure shows the percentage of respondents that have experienced any of the various child care disruptions for their young and school-age children at least once since March 13, 2020.



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*“ [Our family includes] two full-time working parents (national guard, active orders / Federally employed nurse). As a whole family, we struggle to ensure adequate child care options are available, or forfeit our careers.”*

- Parent with two young children

## Most Survey Respondents are Essential Services Workers

Complicating the situation for many families is that 60 percent of respondents who were working in the past month identified working in at least one critical or essential area – jobs that can't be done from home, and jobs that are essential in our current crisis. Even more challenging is that nearly half of working respondents were health care workers, first responders, or involved in critical state government operations (47%).

When given the opportunity to identify an essential area not included in the three categories provided in the survey, education was most often cited by respondents.



*"My husband and I both work at a hospital. Our daycare has closed four times since March. When we don't have childcare, we don't work. When essential workers like us are needed the most, we are unable to fulfill our role."*

- Parent with two young children

**60%**  
of respondents who work in a paid position are employed in a critical or essential job category.

- Essential Services Worker - 47.2%  
(Health care worker, first responder, commercial transport, critical state government operations)
- Provides Access to Essential Services - 22.7%  
(food, water, gas, utilities, sanitation, child care)
- Critical Infrastructure Operations - 4.8%  
(communications, national guard, mobilization, military, transportation)



**FIGURE 4:** This figure shows the percentage of respondents working full or part time in the past month who indicated they work in each of these critical/essential areas. These data include multiple responses, as respondents could respond yes or no to each item.

# Child Care Arrangements

## Increased Reliance on Unpaid Care

When the state of emergency was declared for North Dakota on March 13, 2020, the majority of respondents caring for young children were using a facility-based child care center/preschool or a home-based child care program (80%). One in 10 were using unpaid care by parents, family, or friends (10%). However, when asked about care used in the past week, about 1 in 5 respondents were using unpaid care (22%) – twice as many as before the pandemic began.

While the types of child care arrangements are different for school-age children, respondents using unpaid care by parents, family, or friends grew from 35 percent before the pandemic to 52 percent in October 2020.

Key Finding:  
Reliance on unpaid family/friend care and multiple-care arrangements has increased during the pandemic.

## Preferred Child Care Arrangements

Overall, one-fifth of respondents indicated that their current child care arrangement for young children is not their preferred choice (20%) – and one-fourth say it is not their preferred choice for school-age children (26%). However, for the increasing number of families relying on unpaid care by parents, family, and friends, the percentages are higher.

Half of respondents currently using unpaid care for their young children and one-third of respondents using unpaid care for school-age children would prefer an alternative. The majority of these respondents would prefer to have their children in a facility or home-based child care program.

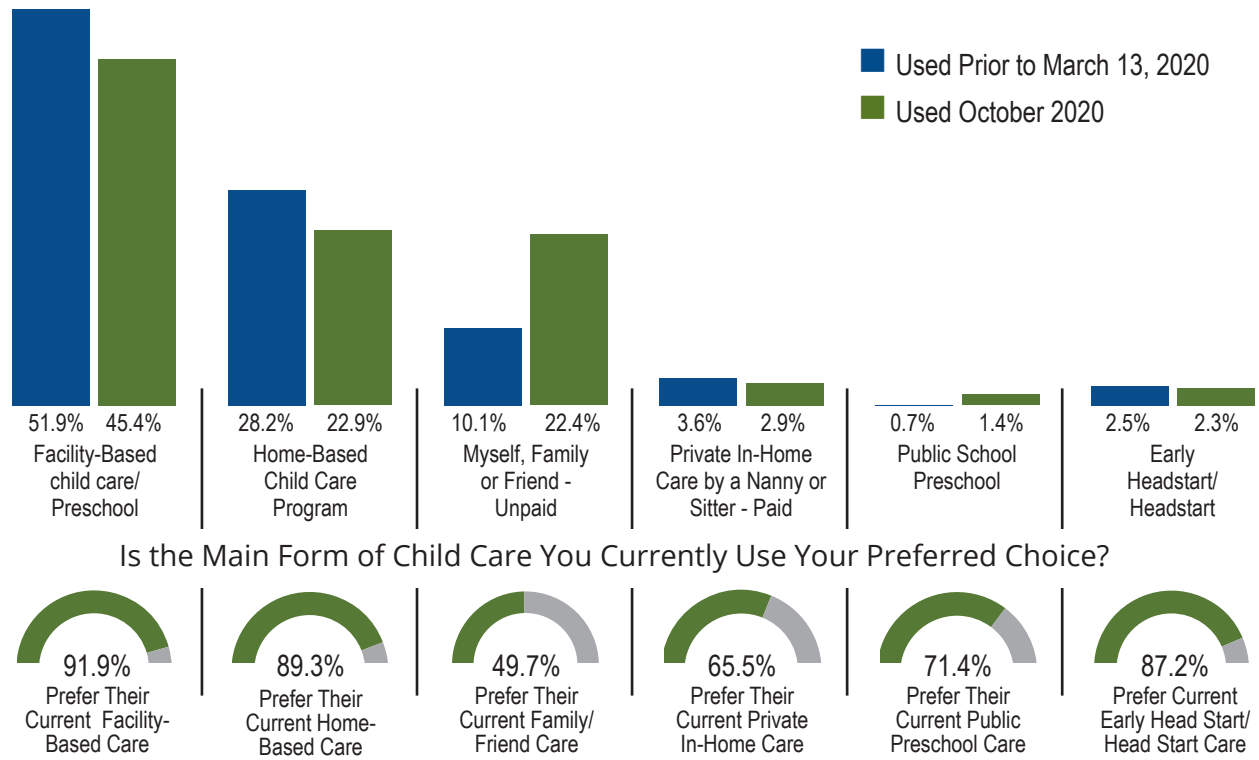


*“... the child care center shuffles [my child] to two different locations. He is also getting shuffled to babysitters and grandma, and sometimes goes to work with mom and dad. There are too many points of contact going on.”*

- Parent with a school-age child

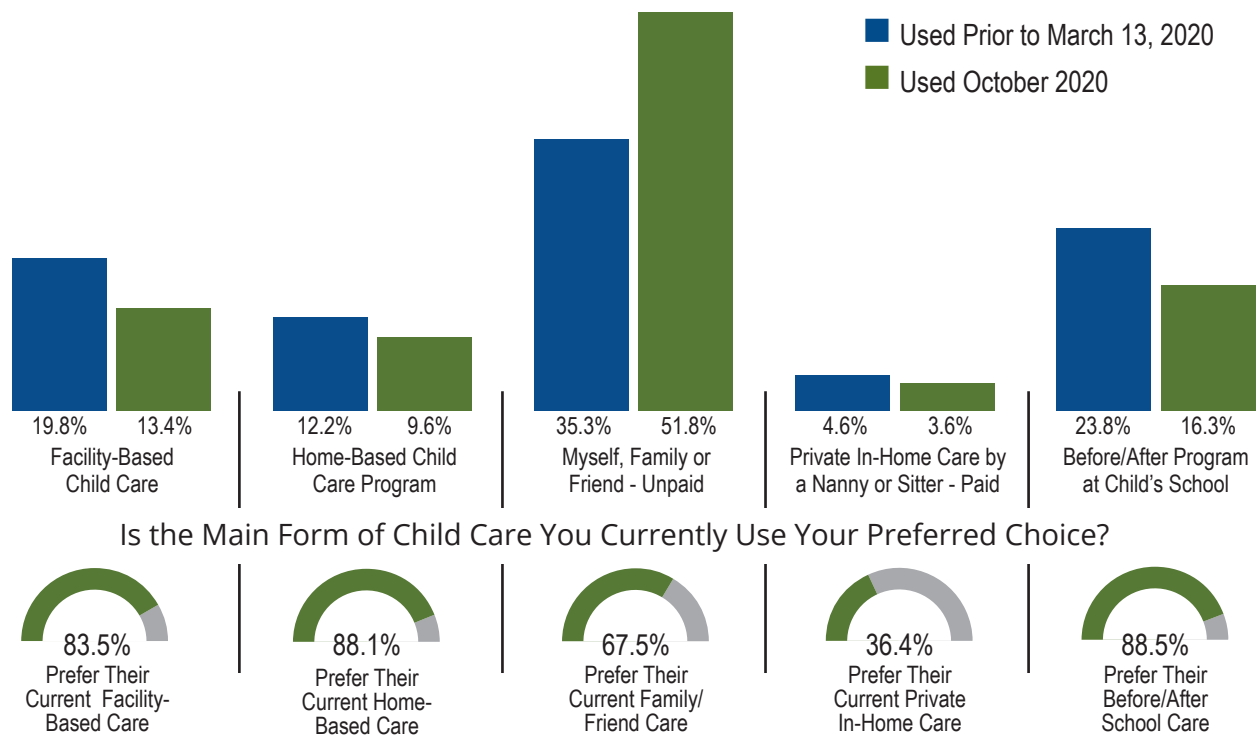


### Main Type of Child Care Used for Young Children



**FIGURE 5:** Bars compare the main type of child care used for young children prior to the emergency declaration in March 2020 with the main type of care used in October 2020. The dials represent whether respondents' current 'main' form of child care is their preferred choice. 3% of respondents reported other, uncertain or unknown in both time frames. N=2,007.

### Main Type of Child Care Used for School-Age Children

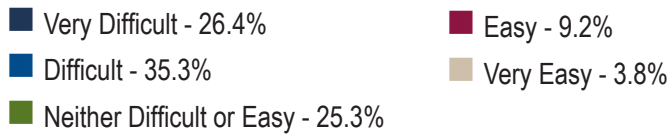


**FIGURE 6:** Bars compare the main type of child care used for school-age children prior to the emergency declaration in March 2020 with the main type of care used in October 2020. The dials represent whether respondents' current 'main' form of child care is their preferred choice. 4% of respondents reported other, uncertain or unknown just prior to the pandemic; five percent did so in October. N=1,227.



## Difficulties in Finding Preferred Care

Approximately 62 percent of respondents say it is difficult or very difficult to find their preferred child care arrangement.



**FIGURE 7:** The level of difficulty experienced by families when searching for preferred child care arrangement. N=2,244

When asked to provide additional comments, respondents shared that not only the presence of a provider, but access to providers who can accommodate multiple children, the ever-changing school schedules, and erratic work schedules were a concern. Travel times between home, work, and a provider can be extensive, especially in rural areas with a limited number of providers.

Along with concerns about access, respondents wrote about concerns regarding affordability. Respondents shared that the instability caused by changing school schedules and temporary provider closures can necessitate more costly forms of care.

## Increased Reliance on Multi-Care Arrangements

In addition to relying on unpaid care more often, families have had to rely on more types of child care arrangements for their children. When asked to select all forms of child care, respondents indicated an average of 1.4 arrangements per family before the pandemic. In the time since the pandemic, families of school-age children are using an average of 1.6 types of child care arrangements and families with young children are using an average of 1.7 types of care.

## Child Care Supports

The vast majority of respondents do not receive any supports for free or reduced child care costs (89% for families with young children and 86% for families with school-age children).

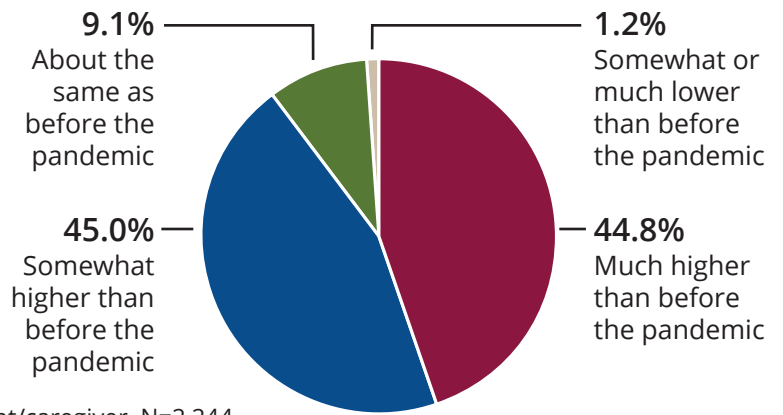


*"We make too much for child care assistance by only \$300 due to my husband's overtime. Overtime is not guaranteed and should not factor. He just recently started getting the overtime again when our children went from being with [their] aunt to a facility and we were barely making ends meet. System is very broken, punished for working. I almost had to quit my job because could not afford care, until my work decided they didn't want to lose me and helped me out."*

- Parent with two young children

# Stress and Anxiety

Approximately 90 percent of respondents somewhat or strongly agree that the pandemic has disrupted their home and family life. In addition, nearly all respondents indicated that their current stress level as a parent or caregiver is higher than before the pandemic (90%); about half said much higher (45%).

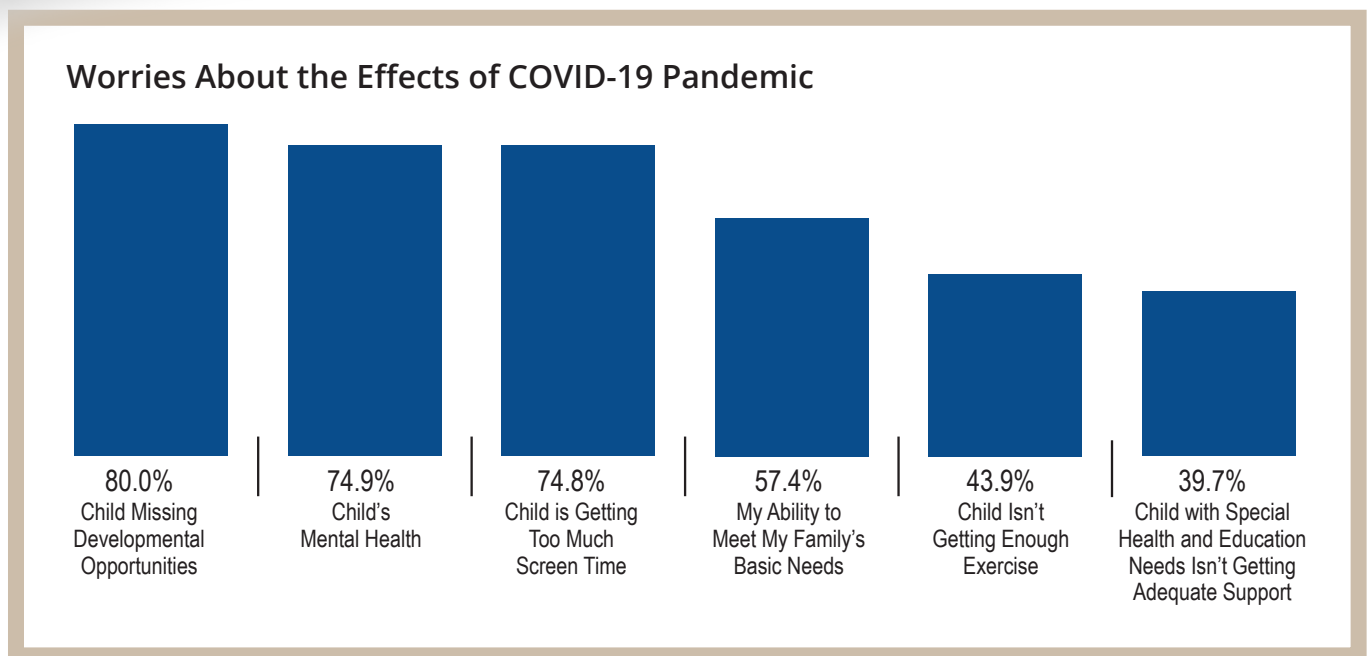


**FIGURE 8:** Current level of stress or anxiety as a parent/caregiver. N=2,244

To better understand the types of anxiety that parents and caregivers are experiencing, respondents were asked their level of agreement with six statements regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and family.

*Key Finding:  
Parents are worried about their children's health, learning development and the over-all well-being of their family.*

- Respondents worry most about their child missing out on important developmental opportunities (learning and socialization), with approximately 80 percent of respondents somewhat or strongly in agreement.
- Three-fourths of respondents are worried about their child's mental health and too much screen time (75% each).
- Just over half of respondents worry about their ability to meet their family's basic needs (57%).
- About 44 percent of respondents are worried their child is not getting enough exercise. For those respondents with a child who has a special health or educational need, 40 percent of parents and caregivers are worried their child is not receiving adequate support.



**FIGURE 9:** The percentage of respondents who somewhat or strongly agree that they worry about these issues.

## Future Concerns

When asked to think about their child care needs over the next three months, respondents were most concerned about safety and availability.

- About half of all respondents were moderately or very concerned that their children and family will be more likely exposed to COVID-19 (47%) and that their preferred child care arrangement won't be available or open (44%).
- Approximately one in four respondents are concerned they won't be able to fully return to work or school (27%) and that their family won't be able to afford their preferred child care arrangement (25%).
- About one in five were concerned about work and school hours not being compatible with child care options (18%). Respondents were least concerned about transportation (6%).

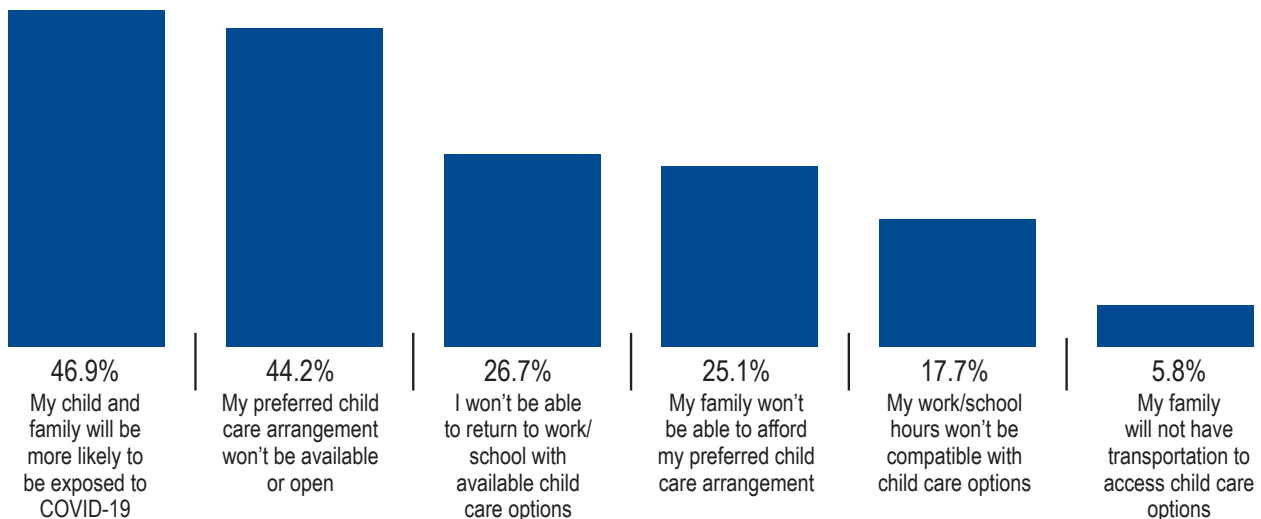


*“Education, social interaction, and [the] mental and physical health of my kids is prime. While I have the privilege to work remotely, I am not able to both work effectively and provide the level of care, interaction, structure and support that my kids need at their ages. This adds to my stress and anxiety as well.”*

- Mother with two school-age children



### Child Care Concerns Over the Next Three Months



**FIGURE 10:** The percentage of respondents who reported they are moderately or very concerned with each statement.

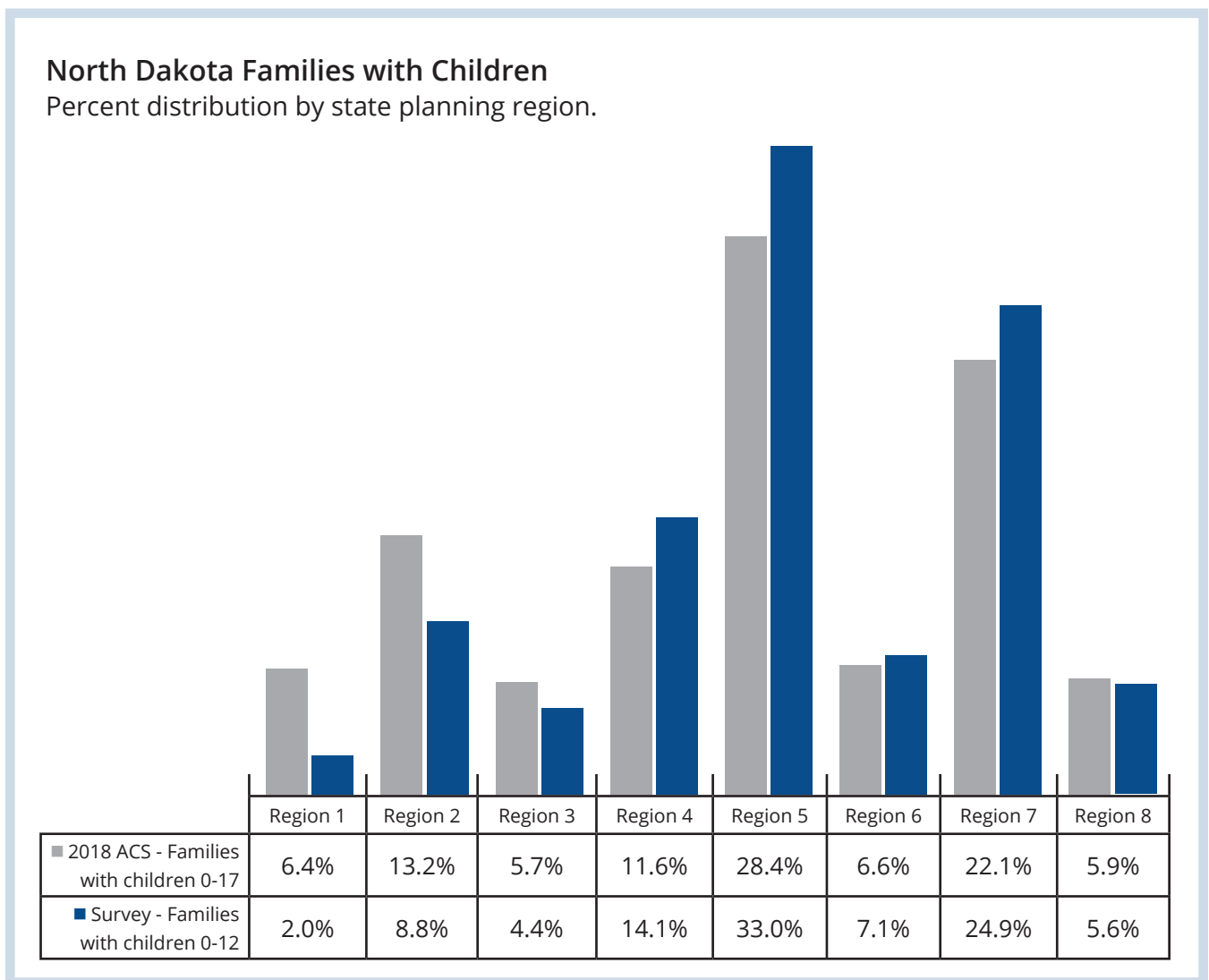
# Demographics

Survey respondents identified most frequently as white and 25 to 44 years old. In addition, the median household income for respondents was approximately \$100,000.

While participation in the survey was strong, when compared to the overall number of families with children in North Dakota, the following demographics were underrepresented among survey respondents: the northwestern part of the state; parents who were younger (less than age 25) and older (45 years and older); American Indian, Hispanic, Black, and Asian respondents; and respondents with lower household incomes (less than \$75,000).

## Location

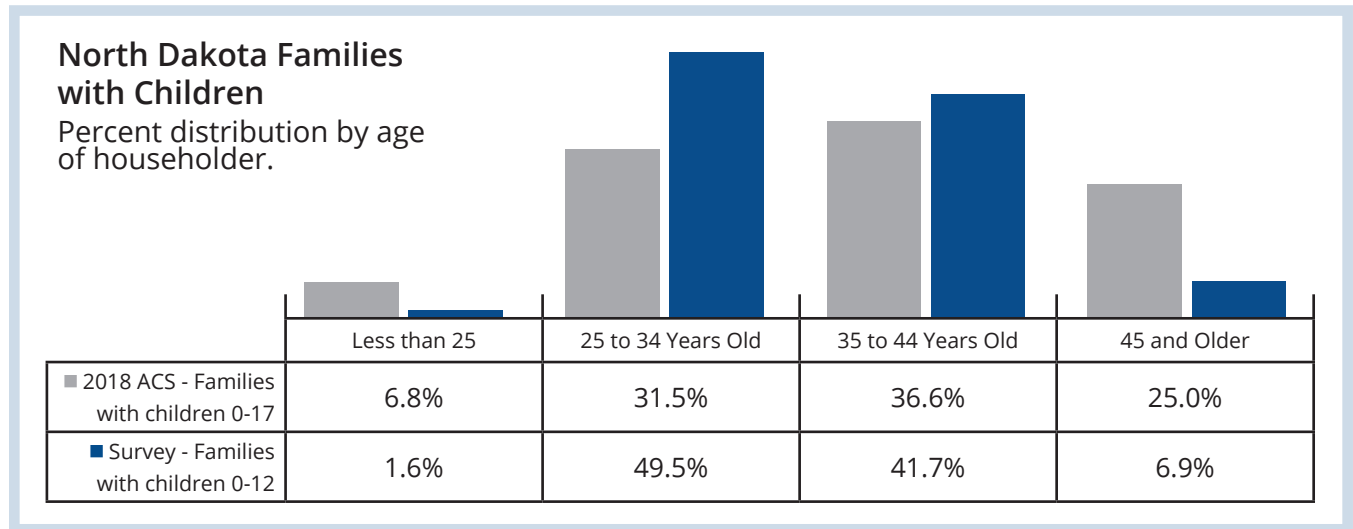
Surveys were received from families living in all 53 North Dakota counties. Responses were then aggregated up to a state planning region level and compared to the statewide distribution of families with children ages 0 through 17 by state planning region, based on data from the Census Bureau’s 2018 American Community Survey. The results indicate that the northwestern part of North Dakota is underrepresented in the results when compared to the statewide distribution. (i.e., Regions 1 and 2).



**FIGURE 11:** This figure compares the distribution of survey respondents by state planning region (N=2,178) with the distribution of the number of families with children ages 0 through 17 obtained from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates (85,873 families). State Planning Region boundaries can be found through the North Dakota Department of Commerce at <https://www.business.nd.gov/resources/RegionalCouncil/>.

## Age

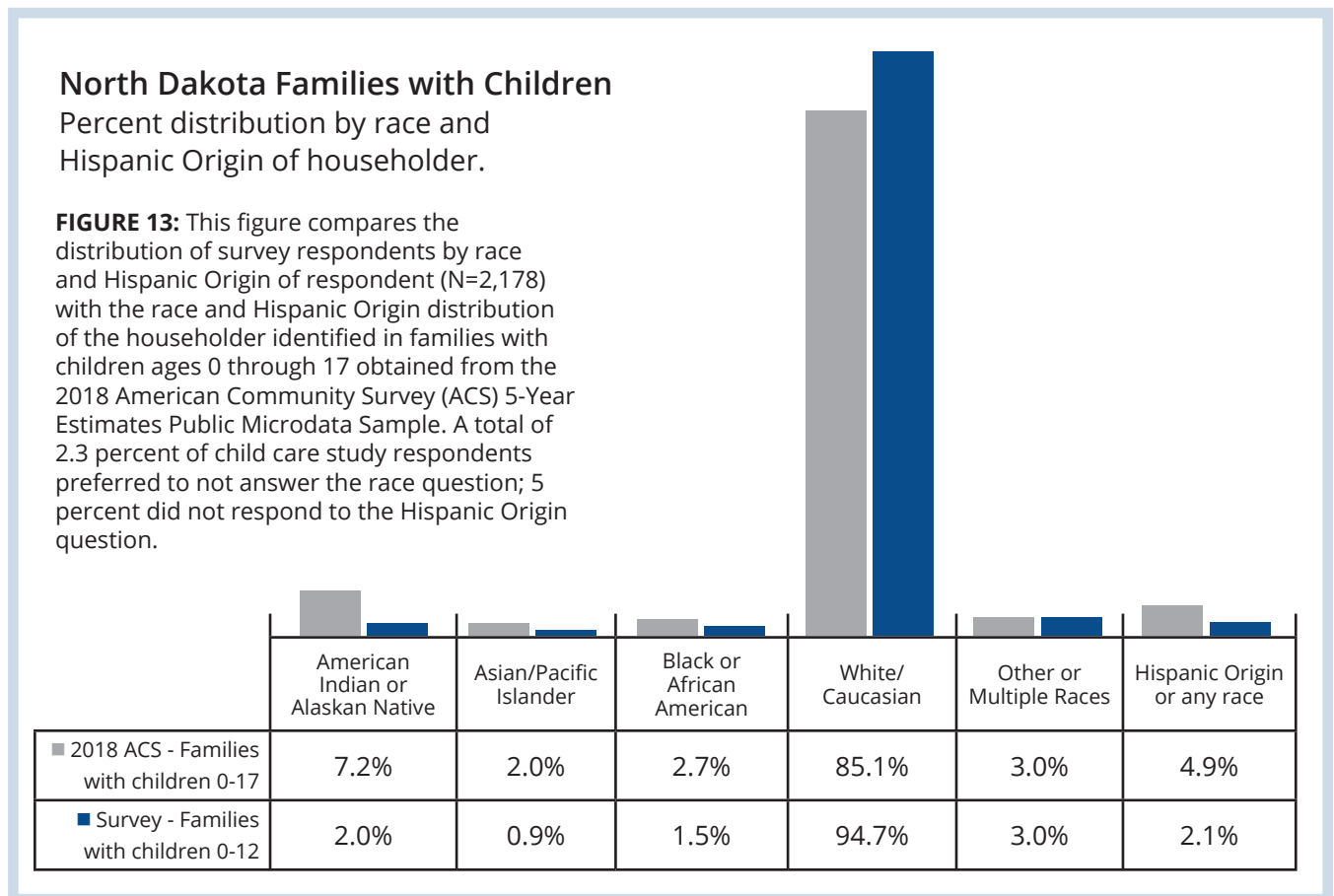
Half of all respondents were ages 25 through 34 (50%) and 42% were ages 35 to 44.



**FIGURE 12:** This figure compares the distribution of survey respondents by age of respondent (N=2,178) with the age distribution of the householder identified in families with children ages 0 through 17 obtained from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Public Microdata Sample. A total of 0.3 percent of child care study respondents preferred to not answer this question.

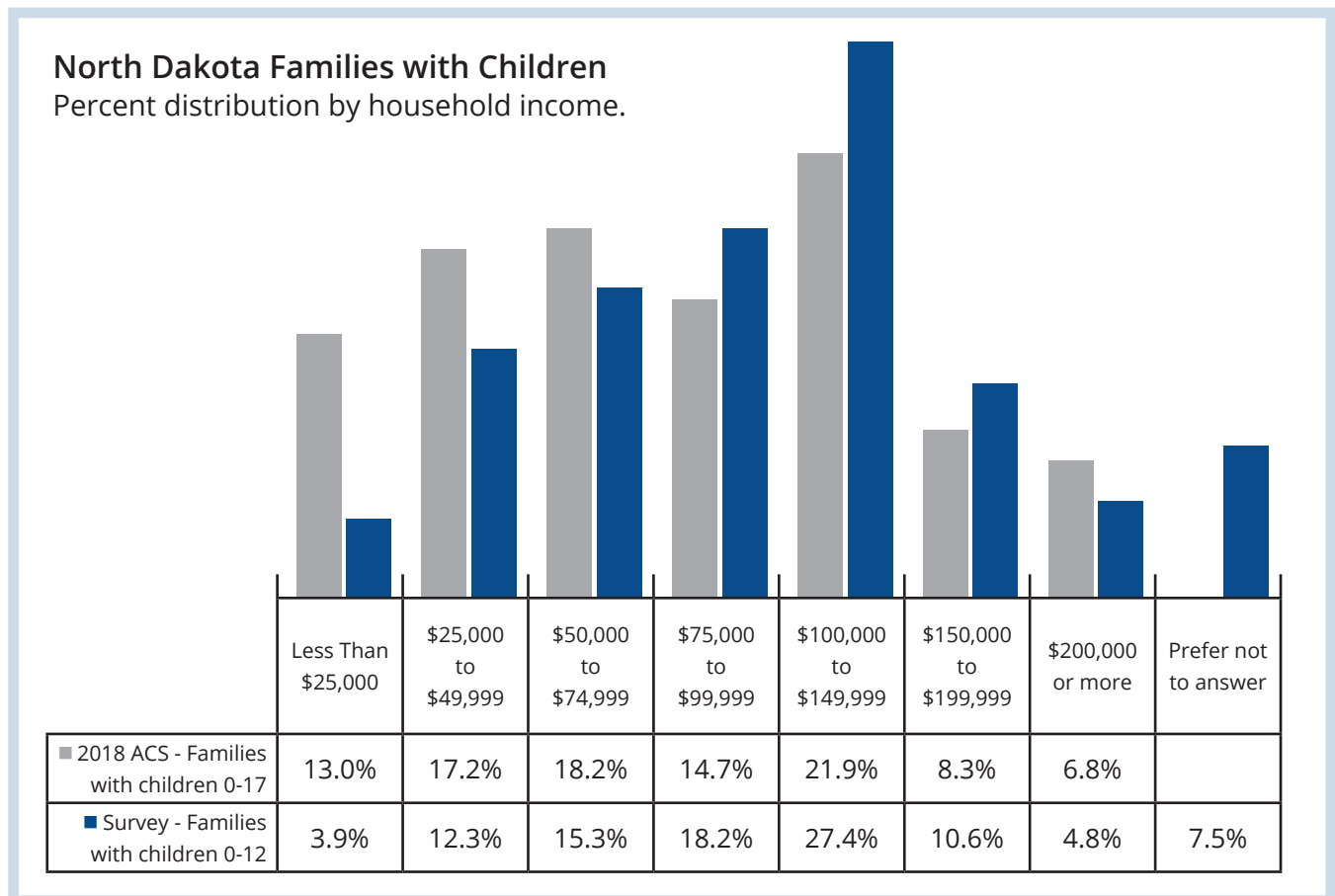
## Race and Ethnic Origin

The vast majority of all respondents identified as White/Caucasian (95%). When compared to the statewide distribution of families with children, American Indian, Hispanic, Black, and Asian families are underrepresented in the survey results.



## Household Income

The median household income for survey respondents was approximately \$100,000, which is higher than the median household income for families with children under the age of 18 in North Dakota (\$82,392 in 2018). This suggests that respondents with lower household incomes are underrepresented in the survey results when compared to the statewide distribution of families with children.



**FIGURE 14:** This figure compares the distribution of survey respondents by household income of respondent (N=2,178) with the household income distribution of families with children ages 0 through 17 obtained from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates Public Microdata Sample. A total of 7.5 percent of child care study respondents preferred to not answer the income question.



# About the Survey

Child Care Aware® of North Dakota in partnership with and on behalf of the state of North Dakota, reached out to parents and caregivers to ask how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their needs, experiences, and perspectives around child care. Representing their voices, this effort offers policymakers, advocates and stakeholders timely insights into the status of families with children from birth through age 12. This report aims to inform public policy that will strengthen and support child care infrastructure for working families in North Dakota.



## Creation and Distribution

*The COVID-19 Pandemic: Its Impact on Access and Use of Child Care in North Dakota* survey tool was designed by the North Dakota Department of Human Services with feedback and review by Child Care Aware® of North Dakota. The survey tool was developed using Survey Monkey® and administered through a convenience sample.

Newsletters, email, social media posts, traditional media news releases, posters and targeted Facebook advertising were used to create awareness and share access to the survey.

An 800 phone number was also available to individuals who did not have online access to complete the survey.

A soft roll-out of the survey took place on October 19, 2020. A news release was sent out from the North Dakota Department of Human Services to traditional media on October 22. North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum mentioned the survey in his weekly briefing on October 29 and encouraged participation from families across the state. The survey was closed end of day on Sunday, November 1, 2020.

### Family Composition of Survey Respondents

On or before March 13, 2020



**82.1%**  
Respondents with children not yet in kindergarten.



**50.2%**  
Respondents with children in kindergarten through age 12.



**32.2%**  
Respondents with children in both age groups

## Survey Response

A total of 3,155 surveys were received.

Those who responded 'No' to the question, "Do you live in North Dakota and are you the parent or primary caregiver of at least one child ages 0 through 12?" were excluded from the results (n=161). Another 548 surveys were incomplete and excluded from the sample.

The final sample size, after exclusions was 2,446. Of this total, 2,007 respondents indicated they had children who had not yet started Kindergarten as of March 13, 2020, 1,227 respondents had children who were school age (Kindergarten through age 12) on or before March 13, and 788 respondents had children in both age groups on or before March 13.

**FIGURE 15:** This figure shows the family composition of survey respondents on or before March 13, 2020

