



# Pandemic Relief Funding Supported Georgia's Families With Young Children

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## Key findings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) used federal and state funding to support Georgia's families with young children. This report summarizes findings from Child Trends' evaluation of these support efforts.

- ▶ Participation in Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS), Georgia's child care subsidy program, slightly decreased from October 2019 to October 2021—despite the launch of Awarding Child Care Education Scholarship Supplements (ACCESS) in May 2021, which removed family fees and copays for CAPS recipients.
- ▶ Following the launch of the CAPS Expansion in November 2021, which broadened CAPS eligibility and the number of scholarships available, CAPS participation grew by nearly 1.5 times.
- ▶ The proportion of families with incomes above 150 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) increased over time, particularly after the initiation of CAPS Expansion, which in part raised the maximum income families could earn to be eligible for CAPS.
- ▶ Families reported that they would not have been able to afford child care if not for ACCESS. They expressed appreciation for the support and relief during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ Benefits for families participating in CAPS included increased socialization for children and parents/caregivers; parents being able to keep their jobs; and families having money for things like household essentials, equipment for remote learning, and contributions to their savings.
- ▶ Pandemic relief initiatives were positively perceived, although there were challenges to participation. These challenges included using the online application process, changes to families' eligibility when there were gaps in employment, and needing to switch care to a CAPS provider for newly eligible families.
- ▶ Families varied in their perceptions of the size of the impact from the end of the pandemic relief projects and initiatives. Some families needed to make significant changes, but others did not feel as much of an impact.

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# Introduction

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Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic began, federal funding started flowing to state agencies to support young children, families, and the early care and education (ECE) workforce. From 2020 to 2023, there were three federal pandemic relief acts: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act; the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act; and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Altogether, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) received over two billion dollars in federal relief funds. The state also used the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER), which provided additional funds to support the state's ECE and educational entities through an award from the U.S. Department of Education.

DECAL used federal pandemic relief funding to implement approximately 30 projects and initiatives designed to stabilize the ECE industry and support young children and families. Projects included 1) supporting families by covering family fees and increasing access to subsidized child care through expanded eligibility requirements in Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS), Georgia's child care subsidy program; and 2) stabilizing and supporting the ECE workforce by providing payments and bonuses, as well as launching pilots and trainings to increase child care quality.

In 2023, DECAL partnered with Child Trends, a national nonprofit research organization, to examine how pandemic relief funding supported Georgia's ECE providers, educators, and families. The goals of the evaluation were to gather information about the experiences of pandemic relief funding recipients (i.e., providers, educators, and families). Additionally, the evaluation sought to examine the perceived effects of the funding on DECAL's operations and priorities.

**This report focuses on families' experiences with pandemic relief funding efforts, particularly families participating in CAPS.** Information about the experiences of child care administrators and family child care providers (i.e., providers), educators, and DECAL staff are in partner reports. Table 1 describes the pandemic relief-funded projects that DECAL implemented to support families.

**Table 1.** Pandemic Relief Funding Efforts to Support Families

Pandemic Relief Project	Description	Eligibility Criteria
ACCESS*	Through ACCESS, CAPS providers were paid their full published rate for care, including the family fee <sup>1</sup> and differential, so families did not have to cover those costs	Families eligible for CAPS
CAPS Expansion*	Expanded eligibility criteria for CAPS including 1) increased income threshold to 85% of state median income (SMI), and 2) increased eligibility for the very low income priority group to 150 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) <sup>2</sup>	Families meeting new expanded eligibility criteria
CAPS Essential Services Workforce Priority Group*	Created a new CAPS priority group <sup>1</sup> for essential workers	Essential workers who met CAPS income eligibility requirements
CAPS Student Parent 2Gen Pilot	Supported student parents by helping them locate and pay for care	Student parents eligible for CAPS and enrolled in select technical college campuses
Supporting On-site Learning Virtual Education (SOLVE)	Scholarships for families with school-aged children to pay for care when their school offered primarily online learning	Families with children (ages 5-12, or up to 22 for students with qualifying disabilities) enrolled in a school setting with primarily virtual learning
Summer Transition Program (STP) Expansion	Expanded the existing STP program to offer more slots for children entering kindergarten	Children registered for kindergarten in the fall who did not participate in pre-K

\*These projects were the primary focus of this evaluation. The projects listed above that were not the main focus of this evaluation include: CAPS Student Parent 2Gen Pilot, which was just launching at the start of this evaluation and which Child Trends is evaluating through a separate effort; and SOLVE and the STP Expansion projects, as we did not have access to these administrative data and families in the focus groups did not participate in those efforts.

The following research questions guided this piece of the evaluation focused on families' experiences:

1. How many and which families participated in pandemic relief funding initiatives related to CAPS?
2. Were there changes in CAPS participation and usage of child care during the pandemic?
3. What were families' experiences with CAPS-specific pandemic relief efforts, particularly as funding has changed or expired?

<sup>1</sup> Starting October 2023, the family fee was no longer covered.

<sup>2</sup> A family's income cannot exceed the initial eligibility threshold, and they must qualify for one or more specific priority groups from DECAL's ranked list of priority designations (e.g., families of children with disabilities, families who lack stable housing, families with very low income) to be awarded a CAPS scholarship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, DECAL expanded access by increasing the initial income eligibility threshold to participate in CAPS from 50 percent to 85 percent of the SMI. In addition, eligibility for the "very low income" priority group expanded from 50 percent of the FPL to 150 percent of the FPL. Prior to this, families who earned between 50 percent to 150 percent of the FPL had to also meet another priority group criteria to receive a scholarship. Lastly, DECAL created a new temporary priority group during the pandemic specifically for families who were considered essential workers and qualified for CAPS.



# Methodology

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Child Trends used a mixed methods approach for this evaluation of families, which included 1) an analysis of administrative data and 2) focus groups with families who were eligible for CAPS and had children attending child care.

## Administrative data

Child Trends analyzed two types of administrative data for this report.

- **CAPS:** Data from children, families, and child care programs participating in CAPS. Data include demographic and enrollment data about children, families, and programs; as well as payment information from programs invoicing for services.
- **Supplemental administrative data:** Information about program characteristics including licensing status and program type.

## Family focus groups

Child Trends held seven focus groups and one interview with a total of 46 people whose families were enrolled in CAPS and had used child care in Georgia since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. DECAL sent emails to 5,400 randomly selected families<sup>3</sup> from a group of those who had used CAPS for at least 12 weeks between May 2021 (when ACCESS began) and September 2023. These emails let families know about the focus group opportunity. Each email asked interested families to complete an online form which included questions about their household composition, use of child care, receipt of CAPS since 2020, and demographic information. In total, 235 families completed the interest form.

Based on their responses on the interest form, Child Trends sorted families into four categories to ensure we heard from families with a range of experiences:

1. Those who were using care before the launch of ACCESS (and therefore may have been paying a family fee in the past),
2. Those who started using care after ACCESS began (and therefore were not paying a family fee when they started using care),
3. Those who were likely eligible for the CAPS Expansion (based on their income when they submitted an application), regardless of when they started using care, and
4. Those whose preferred language was Spanish, regardless of when they started using care.

We included this last group to ensure we had representation of Spanish-speaking families in our sample, allowing us to learn about their potentially unique experiences accessing and using the focal supports. We then randomly selected families from each category and sent email invitations to 85 families to participate in focus groups. Ultimately, 46 of these families attended focus groups, which were organized by the four categories described above. Child Trends held six focus groups in English and one in Spanish. Focus group participants received a \$40 gift card, and group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and coded using Dedoose qualitative software.

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<sup>3</sup> Outreach included 4,000 “non-expansion” families (i.e., families who qualified for CAPS under the original eligibility and priority group criteria) and 1,400 “likely expansion” families (i.e., families who likely qualified for the CAPS Expansion, based on their income at the time they submitted their CAPS application).

# Findings

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## Reach of pandemic relief supports for families receiving CAPS

As noted above, there were several pandemic relief projects focused on supporting families through CAPS. Child Trends analyzed CAPS administrative data to examine the reach of these projects. Reach was defined as the number of families who participated in or benefited from the pandemic relief efforts that helped cover costs of care, such as ACCESS, CAPS Expansion, and CAPS Essential Services Workforce Priority Group (see Table 1). We merged other administrative data about child care programs, including licensing and Quality Rated<sup>4</sup> information as well as Census data, with CAPS data to provide additional information about characteristics of the child care programs that children were attending.

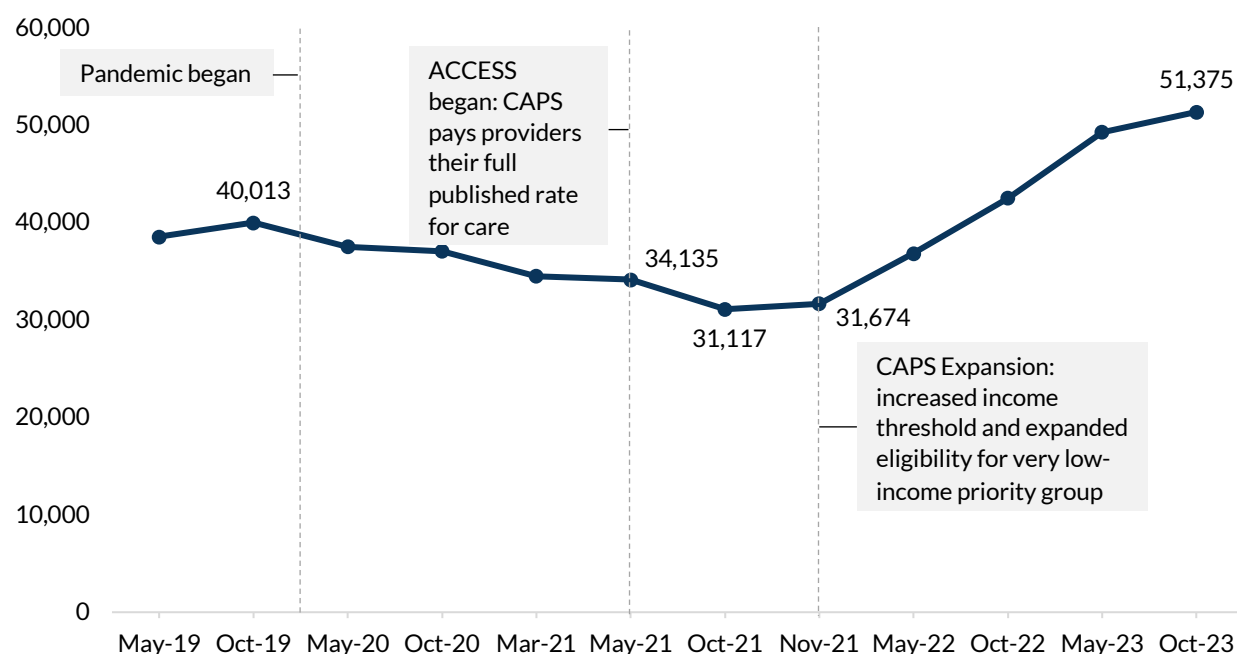
### CAPS participation rates over time

Child Trends analyzed CAPS data at specific points in time from May 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, to October 2023, after the pandemic ended. We selected specific time points between 2019 and 2023 to examine any trends or patterns in participation rates over time, including times when DECAL implemented new initiatives or projects. The number of families using a CAPS scholarship slightly decreased between October 2019 and October 2021 (see Figure 1). CAPS scholarship usage was defined as families using at least one service week of care between May 2019 and October 2023. This downward trend exists despite the introduction of ACCESS in May 2021, which helped families pay for their family fees or copays, and it may reflect families' preferences to keep their children out of child care to reduce their risk of exposure to COVID-19. However, there was a marked increase in CAPS participation following the CAPS Expansion, after which the number of families receiving CAPS grew by more than 1.5 times. This increase may exist because more CAPS scholarships were available to a greater number of families following the expansion of the initial income eligibility threshold (from 50% to 85% SMI). For example, more families that met requirements for a different priority group (e.g., families with children with disabilities), but did not originally qualify for a scholarship because their incomes were higher than the initial eligibility threshold could now receive a CAPS scholarship. Additionally, with the expansion of the "very low income" priority group, families who earned between 50 to 150 percent federal poverty level (FPL) now qualified for a scholarship based on their income alone.

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<sup>4</sup> Quality Rated is Georgia's Quality Rating and Improvement System.

**Figure 1.** Total Number of Families Using a CAPS Scholarship From May 2019 to October 2023



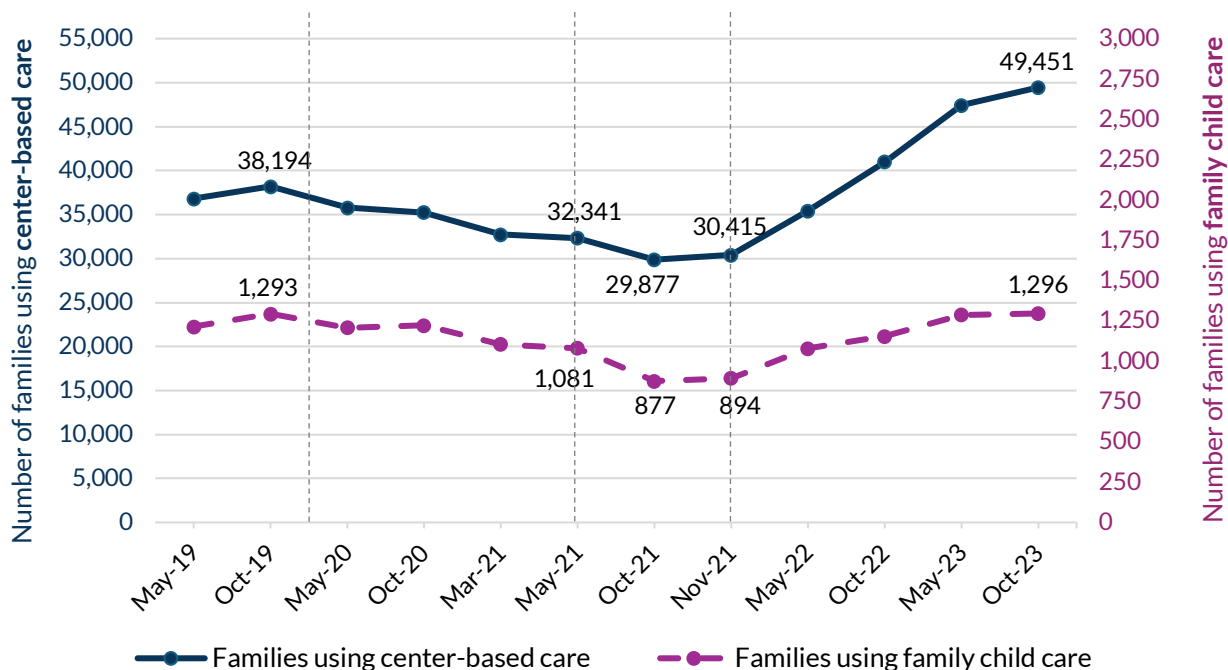
Source: Child Trends' analysis of CAPS data, 2019-2023.

Figure 2 shows that the trends in the number of CAPS families using center-based and family child care licensed homes (FCCLH) were similar over time. The use of care dropped early in the COVID-19 pandemic for both center-based and FCCLHs and then began to rise after October 2021, with a marked increase following the CAPS Expansion in November 2021. By October 2023, the number of children in center-based programs was considerably higher than it had been before the pandemic, whereas the number of children in FCCLH was roughly equal to pre-pandemic numbers. This difference may indicate greater capacity among center-based providers to serve more CAPS children relative to FCCLH providers, and/or it may reflect the preferences of families using CAPS Expansion for center-based providers over FCCLH providers during this timeframe.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the changes in the number and percentage of FCCLH providers serving CAPS families, please refer to the companion report focused on providers.



**Figure 2. Child Care Usage by Program Type for Families Receiving CAPS (May 2019–October 2023)**



**Source:** Child Trends' analysis of CAPS data, 2019–2023.

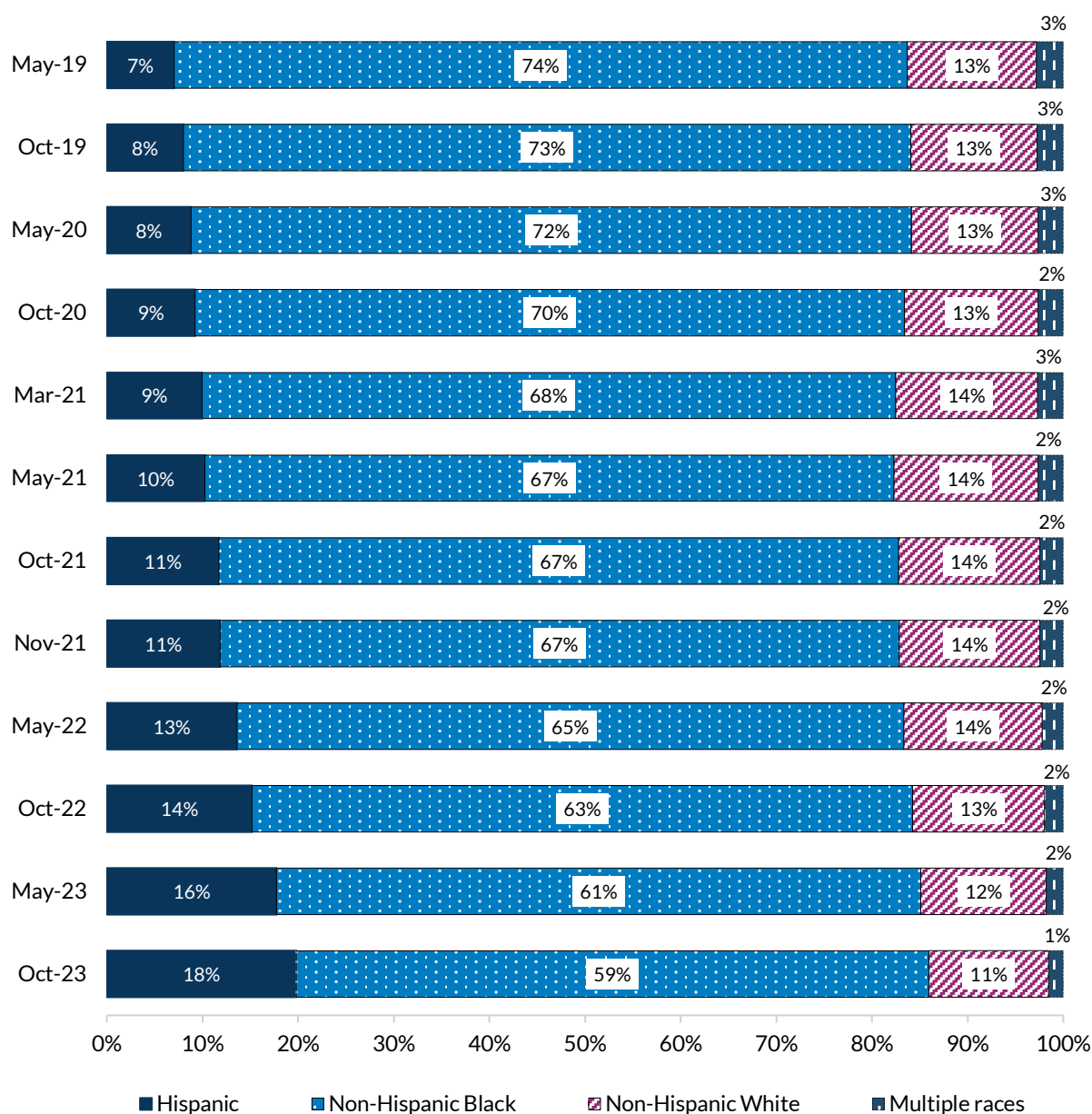
**Note:** Families using other types of care (e.g., exempt, informal, etc.) are not included in Figure 2.

## Characteristics of families receiving CAPS during the pandemic

The proportion of children in CAPS from different racial and ethnic groups changed from May 2019 to October 2023 (see Figure 3). Over this period, the number of children receiving CAPS gradually decreased across all racial and ethnic groups except for Hispanic children. For all other races and ethnicities, the numbers began to steadily increase following the CAPS Expansion in November 2021.

In contrast to participation rates of other racial and ethnic groups, participation rates of Hispanic children have consistently increased since May 2019. Because the number of Hispanic children receiving CAPS has increased more than the number of children in other racial-ethnic groups, the *proportion* of children receiving CAPS who are Hispanic has shown a sustained and steady increase, whereas the *proportions* of non-Hispanic Black children and children of multiple races in CAPS have decreased. It should be noted that while the proportions of total enrollment changed across different racial-ethnic groups of children, overall participation rates increased across all racial-ethnic groups. The proportion of non-Hispanic White children receiving CAPS remained relatively stable between May 2019 and October 2022, with a slight decrease in May and October 2023. Our analyses cannot identify the reasons for this increase in both the number and percentage of Hispanic children, but several explanations are possible. For example, it may be that Hispanic families were more likely than other families to meet CAPS Expansion criteria (i.e., had incomes between 50% and 85% SMI and therefore now met the initial income eligibility threshold for CAPS, or had incomes between 50% and 150% FPL and therefore now met criteria for the “very low income” priority group). It is also possible that the overall Hispanic population in Georgia increased during this time, or that DECAL and/or providers changed their outreach strategies in a way that increased participation among Hispanic families. Regardless of the contributing factors, it appears that the racial-ethnic composition of CAPS families in Georgia changed during this time, with CAPS serving more Hispanic families than before the pandemic.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Children Receiving CAPS, by Race/Ethnicity (May 2019-October 2023)**

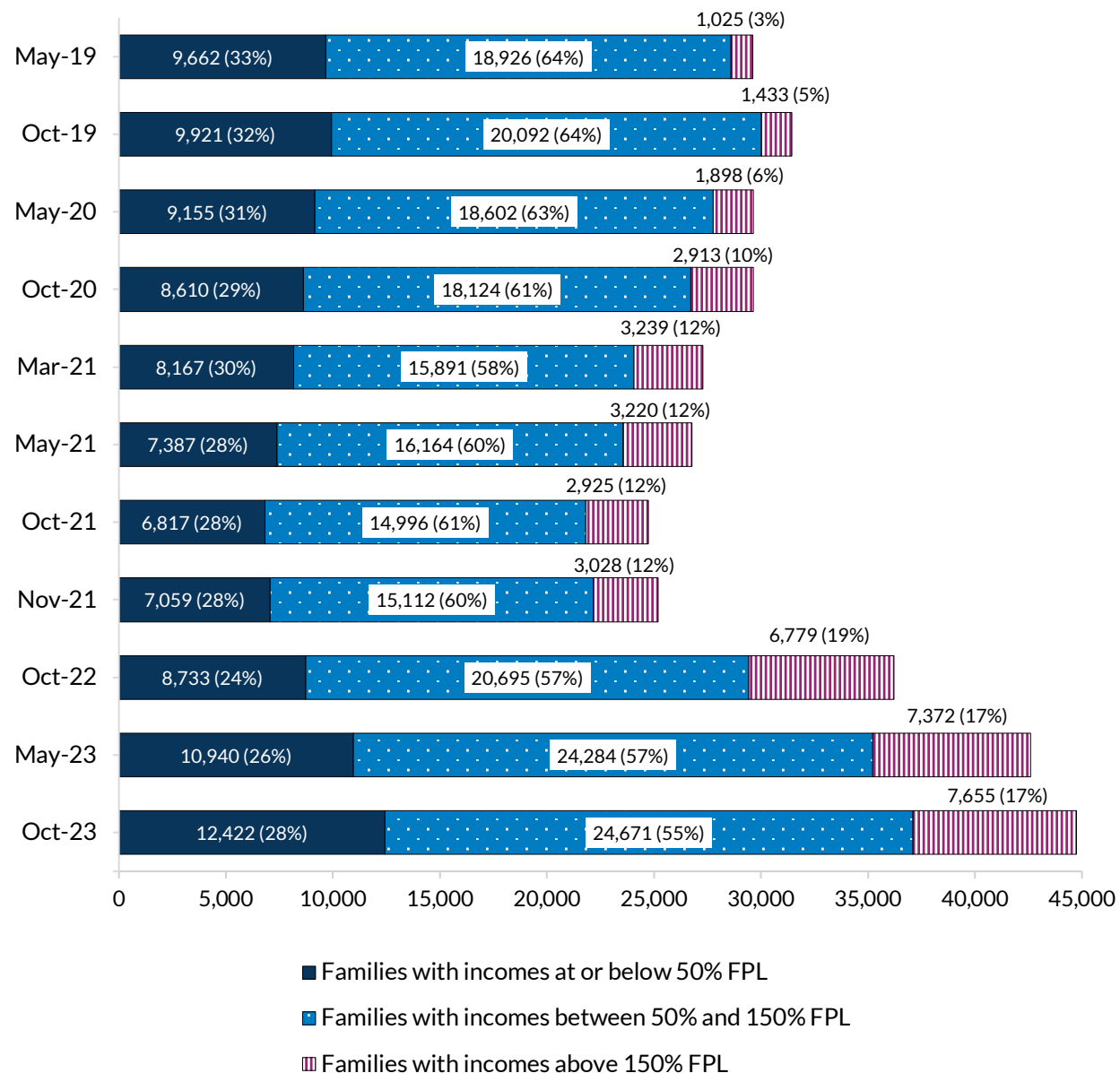


**Source:** Child Trends' analysis of CAPS data, 2019-2023.

**Note:** Findings for the non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN), non-Hispanic Asian, and non-Hispanic Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (NHPI) populations were not included in this figure due to their small percentages (< 1%).

As shown in Figure 4, the number of CAPS families at or below 50 percent of the FPL and those with incomes ranging from 50 percent to 150 percent of the FPL declined from October 2019 to October 2021, followed by an increase after the CAPS Expansion in November 2021. Over time, the proportion of CAPS families in these lower income groups decreased, while the proportion of families with incomes above 150 percent of the FPL increased, particularly after November 2021. The rise in this relatively higher income category may reflect the increase in the CAPS income eligibility threshold (from 50% to 85% SMI), which expanded access to CAPS for families in this income group.

**Figure 4. Number and Percentage of Families Receiving CAPS, by Income (May 2019-October 2023)**



**Source:** Child Trends' analysis of CAPS data, 2019-2023.

**Note:** This analysis included only families with complete income and family size information in the CAPS data. In addition, foster families in the "DFCS custody" priority group were excluded from this analysis due to data inconsistencies related to their family size. As a result, the numbers of CAPS families in this figure do not match the numbers of CAPS families in Figure 2.

# Families' experiences with pandemic relief supports

Child Trends conducted seven focus groups with a total of 46 caregivers. Focus group participants included families who were using care before and/or after ACCESS began, or those who were likely eligible for CAPS through the CAPS Expansion. Table 2 shows the demographic information of the participants.

**Table 2.** Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Characteristic	n	%
<b>Number of children</b>		
1 child	10	22%
2 children	15	33%
3 children	10	22%
4 or more children	11	24%
<b>CAPS status*</b>		
Family had at least one child currently receiving CAPS	32	70%
Family did not have any children currently receiving CAPS	12	26%
<b>Family fee</b>		
Family paid a family fee for at least one child at any time	37	80%
Family never paid a family fee for any child	9	20%
<b>Use of child care</b>		
Family used child care regularly before and after ACCESS	35	76%
Family used child care regularly after ACCESS, but not before	11	24%
<b>Education</b>		
Some college	14	30%
High school diploma or GED	10	22%
Associate degree (AA, AS)	9	20%
Bachelor's degree or equivalent (BA, BS)	7	15%
Graduate degree (MA, M.Ed., Ph.D., Ed.D.)	2	4%
<b>Age</b>		
Under 25	3	7%
26-34	25	54%
35-44	16	35%
45-54	2	4%
<b>Race and/or ethnicity</b>		
Black or African American	34	74%
White	7	15%
Multiracial	3	7%
Hispanic, Latino, or other Spanish origin	2	4%

Source: Child Trends' analysis of Family Focus Group Interest Form (2024).

\*Regular care was defined as families who used CAPS for at least 12 weeks between May 2021 (when ACCESS began) and September 2023. Two families were unsure about or did not answer whether they currently had a child receiving CAPS on the Family Focus Group Interest Form.

Among participants who reported they no longer had any children receiving CAPS, 42 percent reported that it was because their family was no longer eligible for CAPS and 33 percent reported that it was because their children no longer attended child care. For families with multiple children, the average age of the youngest child was 3.1 years old, and the average age of the oldest child was 9.8 years old, while the average child age for families with only one child was 4.3 years old. All participants who responded in the interest form were female, and nearly all spoke English (98%).

## Perceived benefits of ACCESS and CAPS Expansion

During the focus groups, families shared how ACCESS and the CAPS Expansion increased their access to affordable child care, supported their employment, decreased financial stress, and improved their well-being and the well-being of their children.

Parents in nearly all focus groups said that they had access to affordable child care because DECAL was paying providers their full published rate for care including the family fee, which meant that their child care was free or less expensive than before the pandemic. When asked what would have happened to their child care arrangement if DECAL was not paying the fee, several (35%) said that they would have had to keep their child(ren) home or in a different child care arrangement.

*"We probably would have had to pull him out, and then once we went back to work, then we might have possibly had to [find] a different daycare and whatnot if his spot had been filled at the current daycare that he was in."*

*"My kids probably wouldn't have went [to child care]. I would have had to try [to] find something else to do, maybe having to work less, because I couldn't afford for them to go during the pandemic and have to pay it all."*

Parents also shared that having child care because of ACCESS benefited themselves and their children. For example, several parents shared that their child(ren) **benefited from enrichment and developmentally focused activities** (e.g., speech, reading, age-appropriate activities) afforded by child care. Others shared that their children **benefited from the socialization** that they would not have had otherwise.

*"That was a big thing for me as well, with the socialization, having my kids socialize with other kids. Because in the beginning, my kid wasn't going anywhere, and then it helped him a lot because speech-wise, he wasn't really talking at one point at all, so yeah, it helped a lot with my child I would say for sure."*

In addition, many parents indicated that without ACCESS, they would have struggled with their employment. Some parents said that if DECAL had not covered the family fee, they **would have had to quit their job** to care for their child. For example, one parent described how she did not have family support and therefore needed child care to keep her job.

*"In my case, I probably would have lost my job if I didn't have the assistance because I don't have family in the state and because of how many kids I have, it was hard for me. So, CAPS did come through for me."*

Instead of having to pay the family fee or the differential (i.e., the difference between the child care subsidy amount and providers' full rate for care), families most commonly put the money toward essentials and household items such as groceries, gasoline, personal protective equipment (PPE), and cleaning supplies; savings; and equipment children needed for remote learning.

*"It may seem like a few dollars to some people, but some people don't have that few dollars to just give up... We had car payments, we had [a] mortgage, we had food problems. We used to go to the food banks for food because we didn't have it. We didn't have it... And then I had a parent fee to pay. Like I don't have money to pay everything else, but now I got a parent fee to pay. But when my daycare told me CAPS paid all, we got some food. We went grocery shopping. We took the little \$30 and went grocery shopping. It helped a lot."*

*"I know for me, what I did was... go buy like a little cheap tablet and get [my kids] headphones and stuff like that for them to do their classes and log in. So yeah, and then on top of the groceries and stuff, the essentials that they needed, I had to also get the electronic devices for them to log in."*

Several parents noted that having the full cost of child care covered gave them **peace of mind**. At a time when they were stressed about how to afford bills, many felt that their stress was alleviated by not having to worry about paying for child care. As one parent describes, it allowed for some breathing room.

*"For me it was like I actually was able to pay my bills ahead... I had peace of mind [having] that money that [would have been used] for daycare to pay a month ahead on rent, utilities, buy extra groceries and buy good clothing for my kids instead of having to penny pinch all the time. So, it was the for the most part, just the peace of mind."*

## Implementation challenges

When asked about the process of applying for and receiving CAPS, many parents said they heard about the CAPS Expansion or their newly eligible status for CAPS through an email from DECAL or by word of mouth (e.g., from their case manager, child care provider, employer, or staff from special needs services). Parents were then able to apply through the Gateway portal. **Several parents mentioned that they struggled to navigate the website and felt unsure about how to submit everything correctly.**

*"I think if they would make the application process and the stuff through like the Gateway website—I don't know if you've ever navigated through that Gateway website, but it is a terrible website to navigate through—I just think that that should be made a little bit more user-friendly."*

*"But the website is a bit of a challenge and getting a hold of people on the phone and getting answers to questions. I could see where parents may get a little frustrated and just give up and say, 'This isn't worth it,' because it seemed like the staffing maybe wasn't at full capacity or maybe they just were flooded with applications and it made it harder to get in contact with people. But that was a bit of a challenge for me. I will say I was going through and having lots of different things to have to submit, but then also not a clear and concise way of doing that. Maybe that's just my experience, but it's not the easiest process."*

**Apart from the application process, several families described challenges related to accessing child care with CAPS.** For families newly eligible for CAPS, some described having to switch their care arrangement to a CAPS-eligible location. They perceived finding a new program that was close to their home or work and adjusting to a new routine as a burden.

*"I had to travel further because I had to find a Quality Rated daycare...I had to take my babies to [a further town to go to daycare], and it was not close to us, and it was a real thing for us because having to get off of work, go pick my babies up, and then I have to go in traffic and get home. And then I have to wake up early because I have to drop them off miles away from the house. Or what if it's an emergency and I have to pick my babies up and they're nowhere close to me? It wasn't good."*

**Several participants described having a gap in their child care or payments for child care as they waited for approval, and some noted having to continue using child care even if they did not need it for a period of time to maintain their CAPS status.** Many of these families described having to work while watching their children or feeling the stress of managing payments with the transition. Some families also described having to keep their children in child care over summer break even if they had work flexibility so they would not lose their slot or CAPS.

*"I will say my daycare, we got the notification that they have to go at least one day a week in order for it to be paid [through CAPS.] And I don't know if that applies to everyone, or if it's just certain cases. But you know, my kids want to go and be with their grandparents for a couple of weeks, and if they don't go to daycare at least one day a week, I have to pay \$400 a week out of pocket. So that's \$800 for them to be with their grandparents and them not be in daycare. So I'm trying to figure out if I can take them for a little bit on Monday and then bring them back on a Friday kind of thing so that they can still receive their*



CAPS services even though [I don't work in the summer] so I don't necessarily need [the child care], but you lose your spot and then you don't qualify for services anymore, so it's that's a bit of a challenge, but yeah, just figuring out what works best for your family, I guess."

## Need for additional supports

When asked what additional supports related to child care families needed over the past few years, families had three main suggestions. The first suggestion was related to eligibility for CAPS during unemployment. Some parents found it difficult to find employment or begin working without child care, as they needed to start working before qualifying for CAPS assistance. Without child care, they had little time to find a job or lacked care for the first few days as they started their new job. Parents in this situation described it as a dilemma, where the lack of child care made it difficult to find or start employment, and without a job, they could not access child care support. Although CAPS policy<sup>6</sup> states that current CAPS recipients may continue to receive child care services through the end of their current eligibility period or up to thirteen weeks to conduct job searches, some parents perceived challenges with maintaining child care support if they lost their job or wanted to switch jobs. Along with child care support, some parents thought it could be helpful for CAPS to provide employment resources or guidance.

"I had lost my job and then I was trying to fill out for unemployment, and the question that she asked me at unemployment was, did I have child care? And I didn't qualify for CAPS anymore because I wasn't working and I wasn't in school, and so I didn't qualify...She was like, 'Well, do you have child care for you to go back to work? Are you looking?' I was like, 'I am looking. I do want to go back to work, but I don't have child care right now because I couldn't afford it obviously [while] I'm not working.' And so, I didn't qualify for unemployment either because I didn't have child care already set up. So, it was like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. I'm not working, I don't have child care, so I can't get unemployment. I have to find a job and [start] working before I can qualify for CAPS again, and so that means I have to come out of pocket for the first couple of weeks."

"Sometimes we do lose our jobs. Sometimes we do [want to] switch to other jobs, and the little period without a job, I feel like they should give us a little extension, maybe 30 days. If you don't find a job in 30 days, then you can lose your child care or something like that, not just taking it away from us so fast because it is kind of hard to get."

The second most common support that parents mentioned was **transportation for their child to get to child care**. Some parents said they struggle to get their child to the program because of work schedules and locations, traffic, or the cost of gas and car usage.

"I could say transportation. A lot of parents gotta get to and from work. I mean, I have a car but I'm saying kids-wise, maybe they could have helped out with the daycare. Maybe they could have hired some extra people, I don't know. Or just like transportation for those parents, that would help out a lot. I mean, this is Atlanta where I'm at and traffic is horrible as it is, but it's a big difference when you gotta fight through traffic to keep you getting to the daycare late because you can't control the traffic, if that makes sense."

Lastly, several parents requested **more communication or clarity around all the supports for which they may be eligible**. It can be challenging for parents to seek out and apply for every service, and they would prefer comprehensive information on the services they could use.

"It would be nice to have a clearer spot that say[s], 'Hey, because you qualify for CAPS, your family now has [access] to these resources,' or something along those lines, because it's constantly having to say, 'Oh, well, that's a really cool resource. I wonder if my child qualifies for that,' or 'I wonder if that would benefit us,' and it's going through the process every single time rather than one...I didn't know my child

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<sup>6</sup> This is the CAPS policy current at the time of this report, September 2024.

*qualified for free or reduced lunch because of CAPS until the schools told me, and I was like 'Oh, that's nice to know because that saves me a couple hundred dollars a month just in food [and] now I don't have to worry about that.' So it would be nice to have more of a one-stop shop place to have resources available or to see what resources are available."*

## Experiences with child care after ACCESS ended

Now that some of the pandemic relief funds have ended or are ending soon, many families who had benefited from ACCESS need to, or will soon need to, pay a fee for child care. We asked parents to describe how they learned about the changes in CAPS supports and fees and what it meant for them and their family. Most parents heard that they would have to pay a family fee from their provider, or in some cases from an email from DECAL, with enough time to plan for the increase. **Many parents said they were now paying more for child care than they were during the pandemic, but the increase in cost varied depending on their specific circumstances.** Although many parents said they had to pay more, several also described being able to plan for the change in the fee and re-work their budget. As described previously, families talked about being able to use the funds they would have otherwise used for child care to pay for their family's needs. **Because of the post-pandemic change in fees, they now had to rethink how to plan for their family's needs.** Many described having to work more to pay for the difference, cut out other necessities (e.g., new clothes, healthcare, healthier foods), or be creative in how they were spending their money. A few described having to change their child care arrangement by relying on family for support or even stopping using child care because of the added costs.

*"I had to stop using the child care because the family fee was expensive for me."*

*"Right now, I'm paying the family fee and I'm grateful just to be paying less than what I was paying before the funds... We were paying the full amount, so I think I was paying maybe like \$50 something per child, and then it went down to zero, and then now I switched [their care] but I'm just paying the family fee, which is like \$6, so it's still a good help right now."*

*"Just like with everybody else, you have to go back and re-align your budget and add that back in there. Where you wasn't paying nothing, now, like with me, I'm paying \$36 a week, so that's, you know, that's like 100 and something dollars you gotta go back and add, you know, so, I mean, you gotta take away something. Like some of the things that we used to do, we can't do. Like even now, it's time to buy school clothes. It's like, ok, you can't get all of this right now. You gotta get something now and wait and get something later. Because even with that, they even started, added a transportation fee, so daycare, you know they start adding. When y'all stop paying, they start adding stuff to make up for what y'all was paying."*

**Several families described feeling burdened with the post-pandemic cost of living beyond paying the cost of child care.** Families shared that inflation, cost of gas, and other necessities have challenged their livelihood and ability to care for their family. For example, one parent noted she had to stop paying for healthcare because she could not afford it.

*"Definitely for me it hasn't been the easiest... I know daycare is very high right now, but you know, it's still recovering from COVID and trying to still get your finances up and paying bills and making sure everything is taken care of, and then on top of that, you have now the daycare is added again. It's pretty tough."*

*"We remember when gas used to be a lot cheaper, so we were trying to keep up with the economy and the inflation and everything, and it's a strain. It truly is a strain. Everything is still inflated...I had to resort to different other ways of meeting the needs, like couponing even more, or going towards the deals, or choosing store brands over more mainstream brands. You know, making these changes in the household*

*just to meet the needs, and there's no discount or coupon or anything for gas, it is what it is... It is what it is, so it definitely impacted how I meet the needs in my household."*

## Conclusion

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, DECAL implemented a myriad of projects and initiatives aimed at stabilizing the child care industry and supporting children and families. For families, this primarily included DECAL expanding eligibility for CAPS as well as covering costs that families had previously been paying to attend child care, such as the family fee and the differential payment. Child Trends examined how pandemic relief funding and associated projects and initiatives supported families and their young children. This evaluation sought to understand changes in families' participation rates throughout the pandemic, including after new initiatives were launched, and to learn about families' experiences with CAPS-specific pandemic relief efforts.

**Despite the launch of ACCESS in May 2021, which covered costs for families participating in CAPS, there was a decrease in CAPS participation through October 2021.** This may have been because some families were not yet ready to send their children back to care after the start of the pandemic, or perhaps their care options or needs changed. Although ACCESS aimed to support families by helping cover their family fees or copays, it took some time for the number of CAPS families to stabilize or increase during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Beginning in November 2021, which was the launch of the CAPS Expansion, there was a marked increase in CAPS participation rates for families.** The CAPS Expansion initiative increased the initial income threshold for families, allowing more families to potentially qualify for a scholarship, and it expanded eligibility for the very low income priority group in CAPS from 50% to 150% FPL. This meant more families were eligible for this priority group and could receive a CAPS scholarship based on their income alone (i.e., they did not have to meet criteria for a different priority group). After launching the CAPS Expansion, the number of families receiving CAPS grew by more than 1.5 times. Within that overall growth in CAPS participation, the proportion of families with incomes above 150 percent FPL increased over time, especially after November 2021. For instance, in May 2019, only 3 percent of CAPS participants were families with incomes above 150 percent of the FPL, whereas in October 2023, 17 percent of CAPS participants were families with incomes above 150 percent of the FPL. The CAPS Expansion seemed to encourage more families with incomes above 150 percent of the FPL who might otherwise not qualify for a scholarship to participate in CAPS, as families with relatively higher incomes need to meet additional eligibility requirements.

**Families reported having access to child care that they would not have been able to afford without ACCESS and the CAPS Expansion.** Parents mentioned benefits such as being able to keep their job due to their children being in care and the ability to use their money toward things such as household essentials, equipment for remote learning, and their savings. Further, families noted the benefits for their children such as increased socialization.

**The pandemic relief initiatives were positively perceived, yet families noted that there were challenges with participation such as navigating the application process or issues with changes in eligibility.** Notably, challenges included using the CAPS online application process and needing to switch care to a CAPS provider for newly eligible families. Families mentioned wanting additional support from DECAL on the application process and information about other services or supports for which they may be eligible.

**Lastly, families varied in their perceptions of how large of a personal impact the end of the pandemic relief projects would have on them.** Some families noted needing to take more drastic measures, such as not paying for health insurance, working extra jobs, or cutting out household necessities, to cover the new costs of care. Other families reported it was helpful to being able to plan in advance and restructure their budget, although almost all families noted they still felt the burden. Overall, families expressed appreciation for the

support and relief during the COVID-19 pandemic and acknowledged that this funding granted them peace of mind in knowing their children had affordable child care.

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