



# ECE Workforce Research Highlight

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## Wages, Benefits, and Financial Circumstances of Center-Based Infant-Toddler Educators

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*National ECE Workforce Center Research Highlights provide a focused look at research evidence related to topics relevant to the ECE workforce. These topics emerge from the Center's scan of the research and policy landscapes and technical assistance activities with states and programs.*

The early care and education (ECE) workforce has long faced low wages, limited benefits, and difficult working conditions.<sup>1</sup> Yet, these conditions are not experienced evenly across the workforce. Factors such as educators' roles (e.g., lead, assistant), credentials (e.g., certificate, degree), years of experience, and the settings in which they work (e.g., center-based, home-based) can influence their compensation, benefits, and broader economic well-being.<sup>2,3</sup> Another important, but less examined, factor is the age group of the children they serve.<sup>4</sup>

This brief focuses on center-based infant-toddler educators. These educators are often less visible in research and policy discussions about the ECE workforce. Caring for children from birth to age 3 requires specialized knowledge and intensive relational work, yet prior research suggests that infant-toddler educators are often paid less than those working with older children. This pattern is sometimes described as a “wage penalty” for serving the youngest children<sup>5</sup> and raises concerns about the broader quality of jobs available to those who care for infants and toddlers.

To understand the experiences of infant-toddler educators more fully, it is important to look beyond wages alone. This includes understanding who infant-toddler educators are and where they work, in addition to examining their financial circumstances and access to workplace benefits.

### About the 2024 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)

The 2024 NSECE is a set of four integrated, nationally representative surveys of: 1) households with children under age 13, 2) home-based ECE providers, 3) center-based ECE providers, and 4) the center-based workforce.

This analysis used the 2024 NSECE center-based workforce survey and analyzed responses from 7,511 lead teachers, regular or assistant teachers, instructors, and aides.

The analysis included individuals who worked at least five hours per week in a center-based program serving at least one child from birth through age five, not yet in kindergarten, in the United States.

Together, these dimensions provide a more comprehensive picture of the conditions infant-toddler educators face and help identify where policy attention may be most needed.

This Research Highlight is part of that effort. Specifically, we used data from the 2024 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) to examine center-based infant-toddler educators' reports on:

- Their demographic and professional characteristics
- The types of settings in which they work
- Their wages and broader financial circumstances
- Their access to workplace benefits

Furthermore, based on previous research, we investigate whether patterns in wages, economic well-being, and workplace benefits differ between infant-toddler educators and other early educators.

## Findings

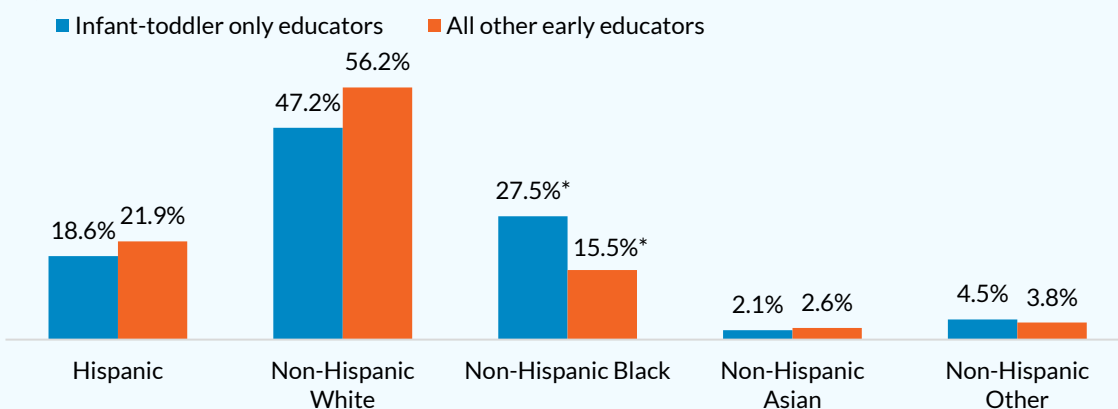
### 1 Across the center-based ECE workforce, infant-toddler educators held the same mix of roles as other early educators.

Among infant-toddler educators, 34.8 percent worked as aides or assistant teachers and 65.2 percent worked as teachers, instructors, or lead teachers. These shares were very similar to those of other early educators, among whom 35.1 percent worked as aides or assistant teachers and 64.9 percent worked as teachers, instructors, or lead teachers.

### 2 Center-based infant-toddler educators were more likely to be Non-Hispanic Black than other center-based early educators.

Center-based infant-toddler educators were more likely than other center-based early educators to be Non-Hispanic Black. About 28 percent of infant-toddler educators were Non-Hispanic Black, compared with about 16 percent of other early educators. This difference was statistically significant (see Figure 1). Although some descriptive differences appeared for other racial and ethnic groups, these differences were not statistically significant.

**Figure 1.** Race and ethnicity of early educators, by ages of children served



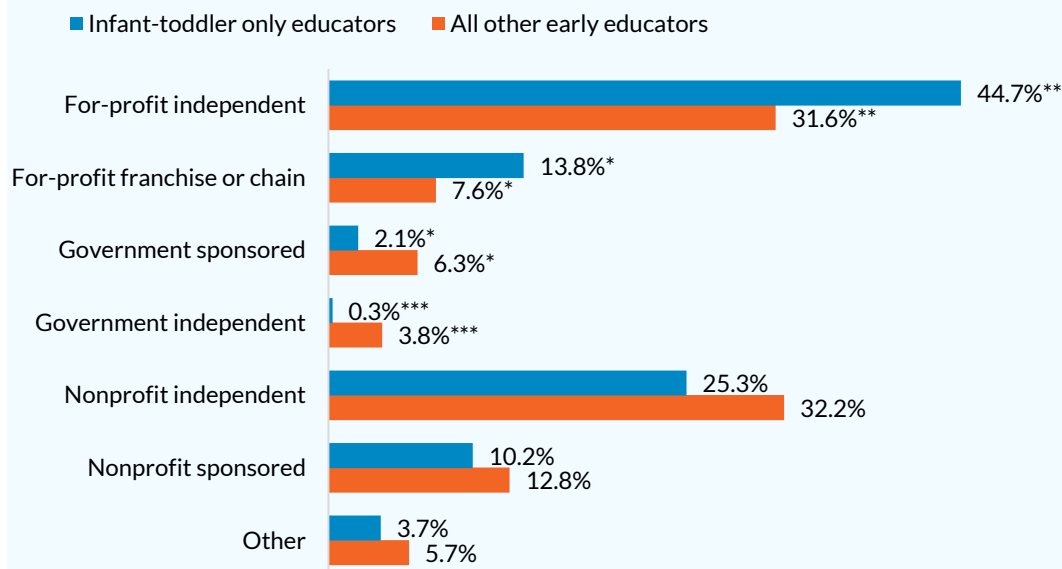
Source: 2024 NSECE Center-Based Provider Survey

Note: Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between infant-toddler educators and all other early educators within each category: \*  $p < .01$

### 3 Infant-toddler educators were more likely to work for for-profit programs than other early educators.

Compared with other early educators, infant-toddler educators were more likely to work in for-profit settings, including for-profit independent programs (44.7% vs. 31.6%) and for-profit franchise or chain programs (13.8% vs. 7.6%). By contrast, they were less likely to work in government-operated programs, including government-sponsored programs (2.1% vs. 6.4%) and government independent programs (i.e., programs run by a government agency that operate independently)(0.3% vs. 3.8%). Although a smaller share of infant-toddler educators worked in nonprofit independent programs (25.3% vs. 32.2%), this difference was not statistically significant after adjusting for multiple comparisons.

Figure 2. Early education program settings, by age of children served



Source: 2024 NSECE Center-Based Provider Survey

Note: Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between infant-toddler educators and all other early educators within each category: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

### 4 Infant-toddler educators earned lower hourly wages than other early educators.

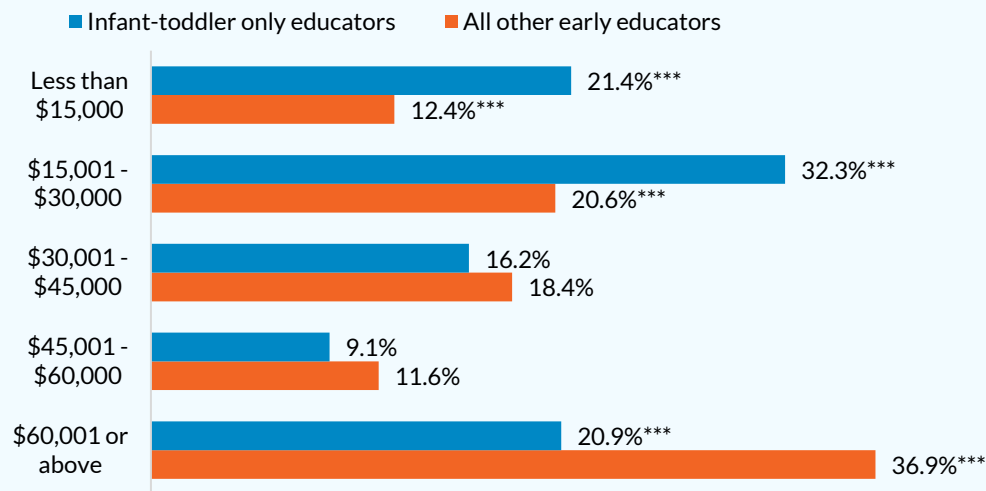
Educators who exclusively served infants and toddlers earned an average of \$15.93 per hour, compared with \$18.90 per hour among other early educators.

### 5 Infant-toddler educators faced greater financial strain than other early educators, as measured by household income and the ability to manage unexpected expenses.

Infant-toddler educators were more concentrated in lower household income groups than other early educators. Larger shares of infant-toddler educators reported annual household incomes below \$15,000 (21.4% vs. 12.4%) and between \$15,001 and \$30,000 (32.3% vs. 20.6%). In contrast, a smaller share reported household incomes of \$60,001 or more (20.9% vs. 36.9%; see Figure 3).

Differences also appeared in educators' ability to manage an unexpected expense. Compared with other early educators, a larger share of infant-toddler educators reported that they would not be able to cover a \$400 emergency expense (51.5% vs. 44.1%).

**Figure 3. Annual household income, by ages of children served**



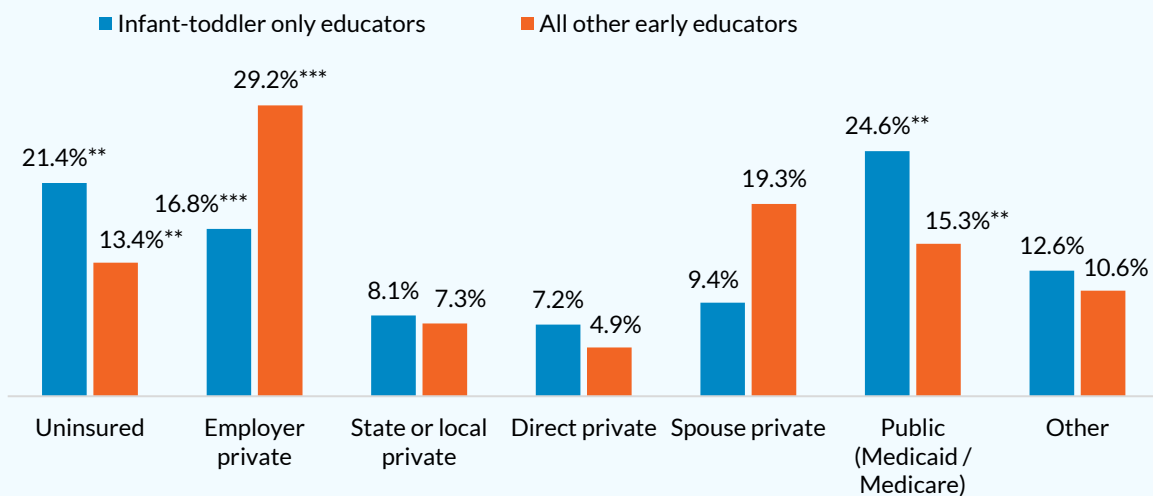
Source: 2024 NSECE Center-Based Workforce Survey

Note: Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between infant-toddler educators and all other early educators within each category: \*\*\* p < 0.001

## 6 Infant-toddler educators reported less access to workplace benefits, such as health insurance and paid time off, than other early educators.

Compared with other early educators, a smaller share of infant-toddler educators reported having employer-based health insurance (16.8% vs. 29.2%). In contrast, more infant-toddler educators reported having no insurance (21.4% vs. 13.4%) and relying on Medicaid or Medicare (24.6% vs. 15.3%; see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Source of insurance coverage, by ages of children served**

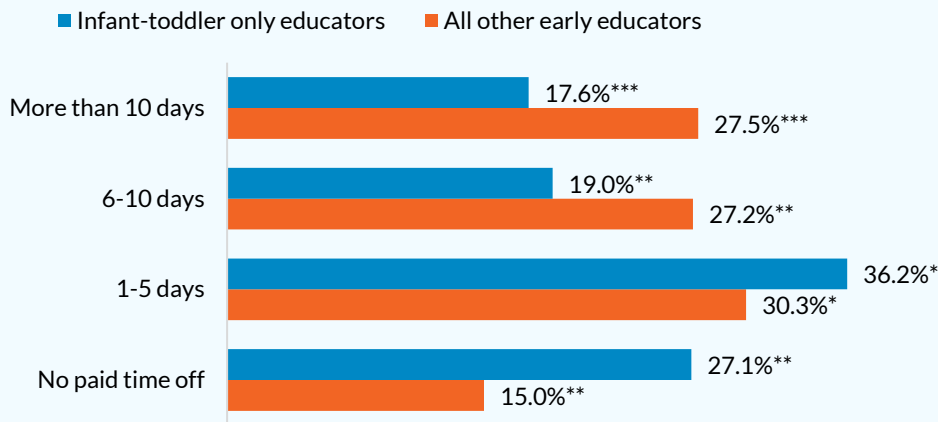


Source: 2024 NSECE Center-Based Provider Survey

Note: Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between infant-toddler educators and all other early educators within each category: \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

Paid time off also differed. Compared with other early educators, infant-toddler educators were more likely to report having no paid time off (27.1% vs. 15.0%) and 1 to 5 days of paid time off (36.3% vs. 30.3%) per year. In contrast, fewer infant-toddler educators reported having 6 to 10 days (19.1% vs. 27.2%) and more than 10 days of paid time off (17.6% vs. 27.6%; see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Paid time off by ages of children served**



Source: 2024 NSECE Center-Based Provider Survey

Note: Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between infant-toddler educators and all other early educators within each category: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Summary and Discussion

Analyzing the 2024 NSECE data, this brief found important differences within the center-based ECE workforce by the age of the children educators serve. Across multiple dimensions—including wages, workplace benefits, and financial circumstances—infant-toddler educators were in less favorable conditions than their peers working with older children. They earned lower wages, reported more financial constraints, and reported less access to workplace benefits such as employer-based health insurance and paid time off. Because infant-toddler educators and other early educators held a similar mixture of roles, these differences do not appear to simply reflect differences in whether educators worked as assistants or lead teachers. Rather, the findings suggest that other aspects of infant-toddler educators’ work contexts may be important to consider.

One aspect is where infant-toddler educators work; they are more likely to work in for-profit settings and less likely to work for nonprofit or government-operated programs. This pattern likely reflects a broader public funding difference in ECE. Publicly funded infant-toddler programs are more limited in scale than those serving preschool-aged children. For example, in 2024, Head Start was funded to serve about 505,000 preschool-aged children, whereas Early Head Start was funded to serve about 186,000 infants and toddlers.<sup>6</sup> This disparity means that there is a substantial difference in the scale of publicly funded services across age groups, and programs serving infants and toddlers are more likely to rely heavily on private revenue, such as parent fees. Because for-profit programs often operate with tighter financial margins and have fewer public funding streams, these settings may be less able to offer higher wages and stronger benefits.<sup>7</sup>

The findings also point to differences in who makes up the infant-toddler educator workforce. Among the center-based workforce, infant-toddler educators were more likely to be non-Hispanic Black than non-

Hispanic White. This is consistent with prior research showing that racial and ethnic groups are not evenly distributed across ECE settings and roles, and that wage gaps in early education reflect multiple overlapping factors including funding source, the ages of children served, and educators' race and ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> Although this brief does not examine the reasons for these patterns, they underscore the importance of looking at who infant-toddler educators are and where they work. Future research could build on these descriptive findings by using multivariable analyses to examine how program auspice, ages of children served, and workforce composition are associated with educators' wages, benefits, and financial well-being.

The financial well-being of infant-toddler educators matters because they play a critical role in supporting children during one of the most important stages of development. The first years of life are foundational for children's learning, and well-being, making a stable, qualified workforce especially important during this period. Yet lower wages, fewer benefits, and more financially constrained circumstances may make it harder for programs to recruit and retain educators in infant-toddler classrooms.<sup>9</sup> Under these conditions, some educators may seek opportunities in classrooms serving older children or leave the field altogether.<sup>10</sup> This can contribute to instability in infant-toddler care settings, make it harder for programs to maintain a stable, experienced workforce and limit families' access to available, consistent, high-quality care.

As states and communities work to improve compensation, benefits, and job quality across the ECE workforce, it will be important to ensure that infant-toddler educators are actively engaged in shaping and leading these efforts. The findings in this brief point to the need for policy strategies that address compensation, benefits, and broader job quality for infant-toddler educators. Some states have begun to implement approaches that are relevant to these challenges. For example, efforts such as Washington, D.C.'s Pay Equity Fund and New Mexico's wage scale initiatives aim to raise compensation across the workforce, including those working with infants and toddlers.<sup>11,12</sup>

Basing compensation on qualifications and experience, rather than on the ages of children educators serve, may be a useful policy tool for reducing disparities affecting infant-toddler educators. Other strategies, including wage supplements and initiatives to expand access to health insurance and paid time off, could address multiple dimensions of job quality.<sup>13</sup> Further study could help clarify the factors behind the differences identified in this brief and assess the effectiveness of policy strategies that states are using to strengthen workplace supports for infant-toddler educators.

## Methodology

For the data presented in this Research Highlight, we analyzed the 2024 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Center-Based Workforce Survey (see text box on page 1 for more information about the data source). To focus on the experiences of infant-toddler educators, we created an indicator based on the age groups of children served. Educators who reported working exclusively with infants and toddlers were coded as infant-toddler educators. The comparison group includes educators who reported working exclusively with preschool-age children (ages 3–5), as well as those who reported working with both infants/toddlers and preschool-age children. We report survey-weighted descriptive statistics to examine differences between infant-toddler educators and other center-based educators across several domains, including role, demographic characteristics, work settings, wages, financial circumstances, and access to workplace benefits. All estimates are weighted to be nationally representative and account for the complex survey design. Hourly wages were top coded at \$100 to reduce the influence of extreme values. For categorical outcomes (e.g., race/ethnicity, program setting, and workplace benefits), we estimated a series of survey-weighted binary logistic regression models to assess whether infant-toddler educators are more or less likely than other educators to be in each category. To account for multiple comparisons across related sets of outcomes, we applied the Benjamini–Hochberg (BH) procedure to control the false discovery rate (FDR).

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## Who Are We?

The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy. This center uses a research-to-practice model to advance compensation and career advancement for early educators.

Learn more and get in touch with us at our website:  
[www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org](http://www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org)

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