

Health and Well-Being of the King County Child Care Workforce

Best Starts for Kids Wage Boost Pilot Pre-Launch Survey Findings

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CARDEA SERVICES

October 2025

In early 2025, King County, Washington, launched the Best Starts for Kids Wage Boost Pilot, which in its first year gave about 850 child care professionals up to \$8,320 in additional pay. Participation is expected to rise, with wage boosts continuing through 2027. Funded through the voter-approved Best Starts for Kids initiative, King County's public investment aims to solve a fundamental fiscal problem facing providers—increasing employees' wages without making child care even more costly to families. Direct supplemental payments also aim to address historically low wage levels for child care professionals and improve professional and personal well-being, workforce stability, and children's continuity of care.

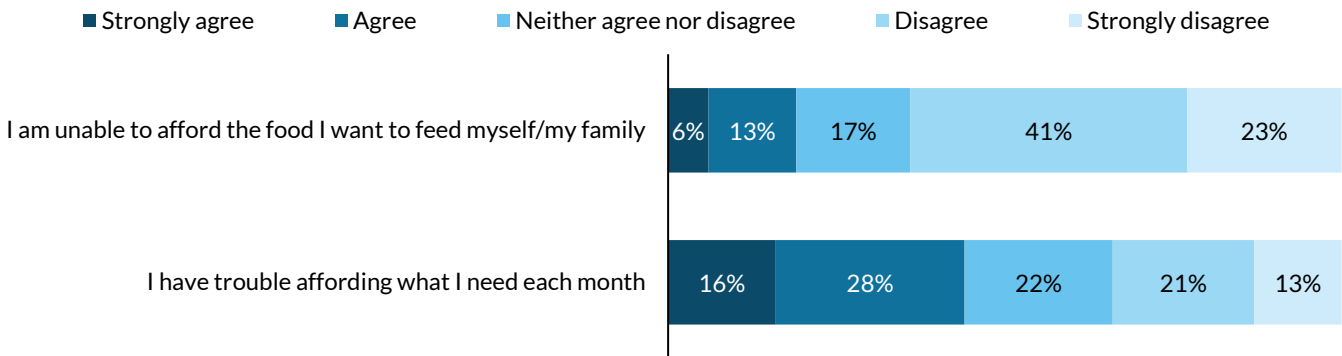
The Urban Institute, in partnership with Cardea Services, is conducting a [mixed-methods, community-informed study](#) evaluating the impact of the pilot on child care providers, their employees, and the children they serve. As one component of this study, we conducted a survey of 1,094 child care professionals to capture a snapshot of the King County child care workforce before the wage boost was implemented.¹

In this brief, we present key findings that suggest the King County child care workforce faces challenges to financial, emotional, and physical health, but that their networks of social support and self-care activities are a strength that can help sustain their well-being.

Many Child Care Professionals Experience Significant Financial Difficulties

Half of child care workers who took the survey were considered at risk for either food or financial insecurity before the wage boost pilot. They reported not being able to afford the food they wanted to feed their family (19 percent) or having trouble affording what they needed each month (44 percent, figure 1). Overall risk for insecurity was highest among administration, food, maintenance, or transportation staff (65 percent) and assistant directors (62 percent) and lowest among directors (43 percent).

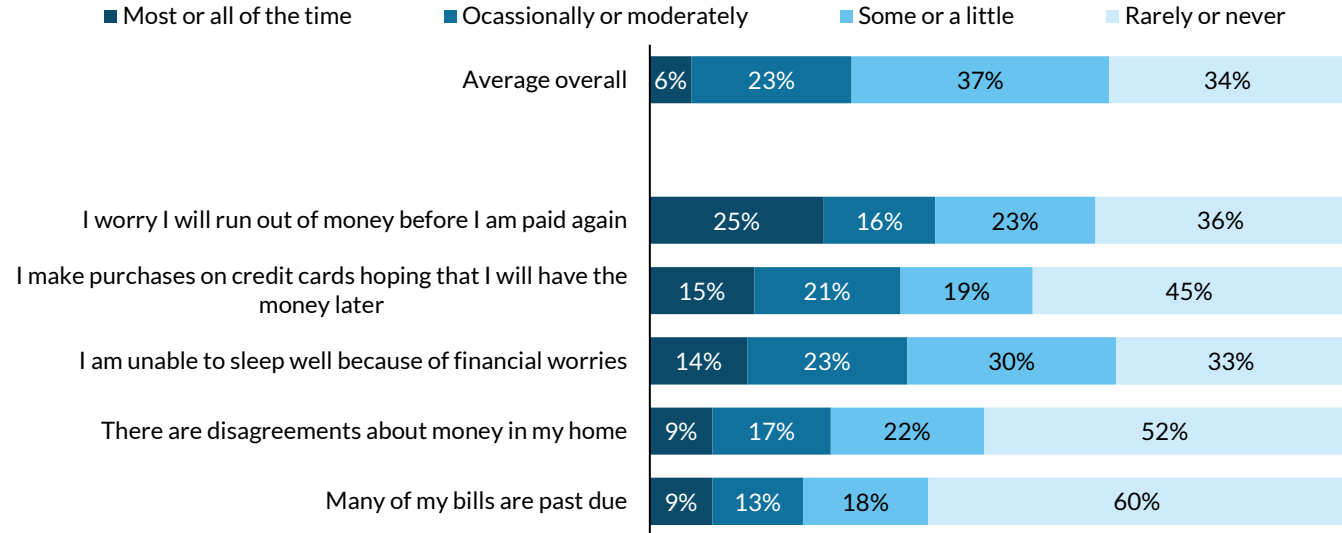
FIGURE 1
Prevalence of Food and Financial Insecurity Indicators



Source: Urban Institute survey of King County child care professionals, February–March 2025.
Notes: This figure represents observations from 891 child care professionals. Survey respondents were asked the question, “Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.”

Close to a third of child care workers also reported moderate to high overall financial stress (30 percent), further illustrating the experiences of financial hardship among survey takers (figure 2).

FIGURE 2
Prevalence of Financial Stress



Source: Urban Institute survey of King County child care professionals, February–March 2025.
Notes: This figure represents observations from 891 child care professionals. Survey respondents were asked the question, “Please indicate how often you felt this way during the past three months.”

Importantly, when child care professionals could not afford what they needed, they reported higher levels of stress and elevated depression symptoms. Low wages and financial stress may be contributing factors to their overall mental health.

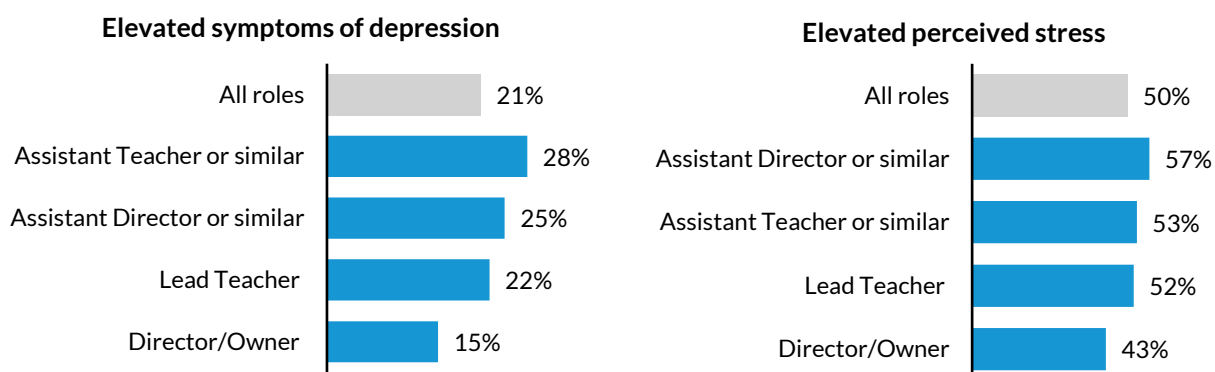
“As a single mother to 3 children, I want to build a career that I can feel confident will support us financially. I do not see a future in child care where I can achieve the level of financial stability that I would feel comfortable with. I also do not want to live in poverty forever.... We also do not have health insurance available which is something I need.... Our job is so important...for parents to work and also in helping develop the next generation. Even with this high level of responsibility, we are not respected.”

Child Care Professionals Experience Symptoms of High Stress and Depression

One-fifth of respondents (21 percent) reported elevated depression symptoms, and half reported elevated stress (figure 3). These rates are similar or slightly lower than other national estimates.² Rates of depression and stress varied by professional role, with the highest proportion of assistant teachers reporting elevated depression symptoms and the highest proportion of assistant directors reporting elevated perceived stress. Respondents with more depression had more education, were younger, and reported worse sleep on average.

FIGURE 3

Prevalence of Elevated Symptoms of Depression and Perceived Stress



Source: Urban Institute survey of King County child care professionals, February–March 2025.

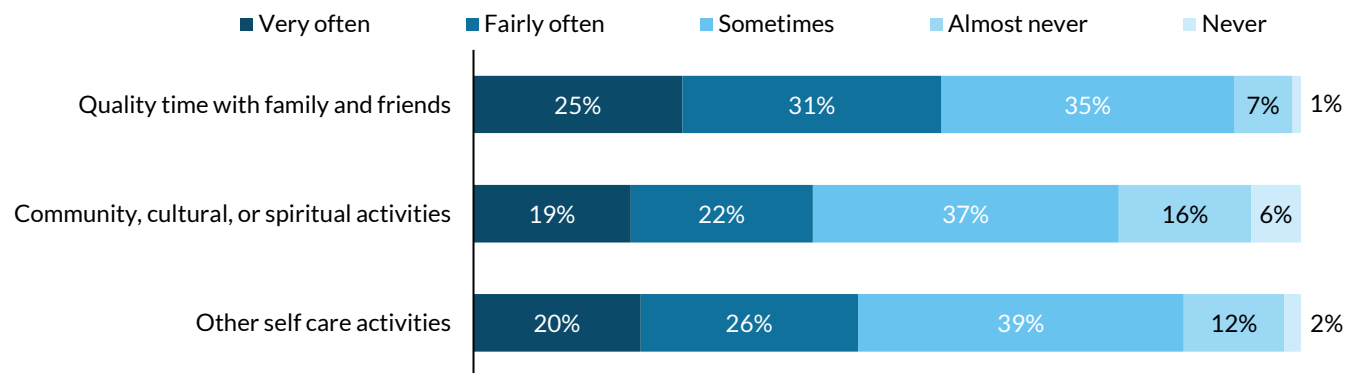
Notes: Displays respondents who scored 8 or higher out of 21 on the CES-D-7 scale. Displays respondents who scored 6 or higher out of 16 on the Perceived Stress Scale.

Child Care Professionals Draw on Social Support to Sustain Their Sense of Well-Being

Despite emotional and financial hardship, child care professionals had strength in their ability to spend quality time with friends and family, and to participate in community, cultural, and spiritual activities, and other self-care activities (figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Frequency of Ability to Participate in Social and Self-Care Activities



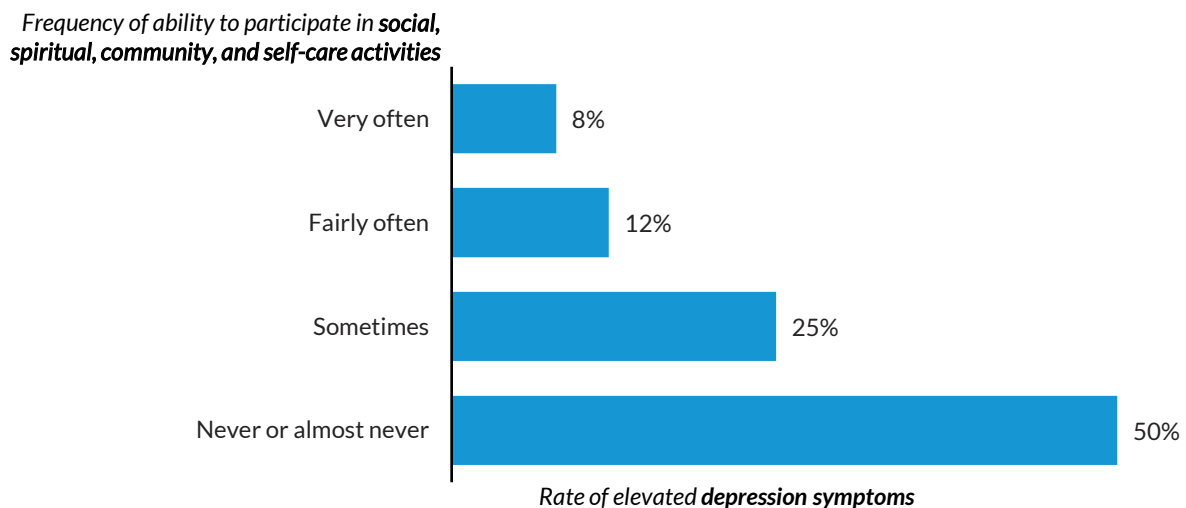
Source: Urban Institute survey of King County child care professionals, February–March 2025.

Notes: This figure represents observations from 958 child care professionals. Survey respondents were asked the question, “In the last month, how frequently have you been able to do the following.”

Respondents that could regularly participate in social, spiritual, community, or self-care activities were much less likely to report elevated depression symptoms (8 percent) than those that never or almost never participated in these activities (50 percent, figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Percent of Respondents with Elevated Depression by Frequency of Participation in Social and Self-Care Activities



Source: Urban Institute survey of King County child care professionals, February–March 2025.

Notes: This figure represents observations from 913 child care professionals.

Further, participants who had access to various types of social support—such as people they trusted for advice on topics like finances, food and nutrition, relationships, worries and stress, and caring for their children—reported moderate to high financial stress less frequently (25 percent) than those without social support (46 percent).

Child Care Professionals Were in Good Physical Health Overall, but Had Limited Benefits to Support Ongoing Health

The majority of respondents (83 percent) reported being in good to excellent health at the time of the survey. However, among the 17 percent that were not in good health, the majority (73 percent) reported that their health issues impacted their functioning. Participants experiencing poor health reported greater stress and lower sleep quality.

One in five (20 percent) respondents were not covered by any health insurance and 59 percent of participants reported working while sick or injured. For those who worked while sick or injured, two-thirds (65 percent) reported to work because no one was available to cover their shift, and nearly one-third (30 percent) did so because they did not have sufficient paid sick leave. As one respondent wrote, “I wouldn’t be able to meet my bills so I have no choice but to come in sick.”

In all, financial and emotional hardship presented a threat to child care professionals’ well-being. However, this community also has many strengths that support their resilience, including their networks of social support. The Best Starts pilot is well-positioned to improve professionals’ well-being, especially through near-term impacts on financial stress. Our future analyses will document if and how these well-being outcomes change one year after the Wage Boost implementation and examine the role of the pilot in improving these outcomes.

Notes

- ¹ For survey details, see Doromal, Justin, Eve Mefferd, and Elly Miles. 2025. “[Background and Competencies of King County’s Child Care Workforce](#).” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- ² For example, the National Study of Early Care and Education reports that in 2022, 27 percent of child care educators nationally demonstrate elevated depression symptoms. Similarly, the RAPID Survey Project found that 60 percent of child care providers surveyed from 2021 to 2025 demonstrated high levels of stress.

About the Authors

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Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the King County (Washington) Department of Community and Human Services and the Best Starts for Kids initiative. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples. Copyright © October 2025. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.

We are grateful to project partners from the Imagine Institute, Uncommon Bridges, and Aidkit Inc. for their support in data collection and their thought partnership throughout this project. Above all, we appreciate the many child care professionals who offered their wisdom, expertise, and insight by helping to shape the survey instruments, supporting our survey recruitment effort, and providing early interpretations of survey data.