

## **Rules or discretion in the access to collective daycare in a context of limited places? The case of France**

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### *Extended abstract*

Developing the early childcare sector is a policy priority and a matter for social welfare action in the European Union today. While family policies as such are not directly within the scope of EU intervention, it does issue recommendations on reconciling paid work and family life under the goals of gender equity and full employment. Already, in 1992 the Council of the EU formulated a first recommendation directly concerning the private sphere, encouraging member States to develop solutions to make it easier for parents of young children to reconcile work and family, earning and parenting. It proposed several solutions: developing childcare services, drawing up industrial policies that facilitate this reconciliation, encouraging fathers to take part in childcare and introducing parental leave. In 1996 the EU issued a directive on parental leave. This was legally binding, although member States defined their own eligibility criteria and payment levels. But in 2000 the European Council formulated quantified and future goals for women's workplace participation in Europe: to reach a female employment rate of 60% in 2010. Finally at the Barcelona Summit in 2002 it was decided that member States should actively encourage women's employment, eliminating all factors dissuasive to women's occupational activity. It defined a goal for collective childcare services for 2010: that 90% of children aged three and over and 33% of children under three should have access to collective daycare. These goals were mentioned again in 2008 when the employment guidelines were adopted.

In France, the expansion of early childcare options is fairly high on the political agenda. Since twenty years the number of public day care has grown considerably. In 2011 there were 373 700 children in daycare (Acs, 2011). Despite the political will to develop collective child care and the means allowed by the state, the regional municipalities and the employers, the number of places at daycare is still not enough to meet the demand. Only 15% of the children below 3 years are in collective daycare – the so called “crèche” – in France (in the Nordic countries the percentage is 3 time higher as for instance 44% of the Swedish children of the same age are in collective day care). But, at the birth of their child, 32% of parents in France would rather choose collective daycare than a childminder as childcare. French employers as well point out collective daycare as the best way to conciliate between family and work life for their employed (Pailhé Solaz, 2009).

Consequently 15 percent of children in collective daycare are far below the need expressed by parents, politicians and employers. The question is how the places at collective daycare are allocated in a context of the scarce supply in relation to the demand. There are national directives to define priorities for certain family situations, as for example the priority given to single parents, or to families in less economically favourable situations. But as the early childcare system is managed locally by municipalities the criteria can differ geographically. We study what criteria that really do

matter for having a place at collective daycare; if it is only a question of chance, or if we can observe any patterns in the allocation of places at collective daycare. If the latter is the case, does the family's need for daycare, the professional situation of parents constitute key factors? And moreover, is there a national policy or are geographical disparities observed?

To better understand who gets a place at the collective daycare ("crèche"), we establish the socio-demographic profiles of parents whose child(-ren) is attending a collective daycare comparing to the parents of baby who use another childcare arrangement.

### **Data and sample**

We use the French survey "l'enquête Famille et logements" (EFL) from the census conducted in 2011 (INSEE). More than 360 000 adults in 1 400 communes answered a detailed questionnaire on the topics of family structure; household composition, childcare and housing. It is a large scale inquiry which provides information on three familial generations (grand-parents, parents, children). Our sample consists of 44,007 children having less than 4 years of age, belonging to 37,908 households.

Additionally, we have built a contextual database at the regional level to take into account also geographical disparities in the childcare offer. Different data sources are used to calculate estimators that resume the available local supply of "crèche" and alternative childcare solutions for parents.

### **Method**

We first build socioeconomic profiles of parents and children using the following covariates:

- the child characteristics : age, sex, month birth, sibling-ship size and place in this sibling-ship
- the parents' characteristics : family situation, employment status and sector, level of education, social and ethnic origins.
- the availability of free childcare from family (proximity of other family members) and the availability of local childcare supply (town size, number of crèches places and nannies relatively to the children under three in the region). These last variables come from our contextual database.

### **First results**

Among the cohort of children aged between 0 and 3 and who are not yet attending school, half are cared for mainly by (at least one of) their parents. In most cases the mother. 30% use a childminder and 16% are attending collective daycare. A small portion around 5% are cared for by others relatives such as grandparents.

The decision for childcare occurs mainly during the first year (as shown in figure 1). Numerous children attend a daycare or are kept by a childminder from the end of the maternity leave which last two months. After the first birthday, the childcare arrangement remain stable until the beginning of school (école maternelle) which is not compulsory but free (paid by the State) for all kids from the age of three. Some schools accept younger children (from two and a half years but then often on part-time (mornings usually)). We observe huge geographical disparities concerning the possibility to attend school at the age before three, but from 3 years old, full-time school is the norm.

Figure 1

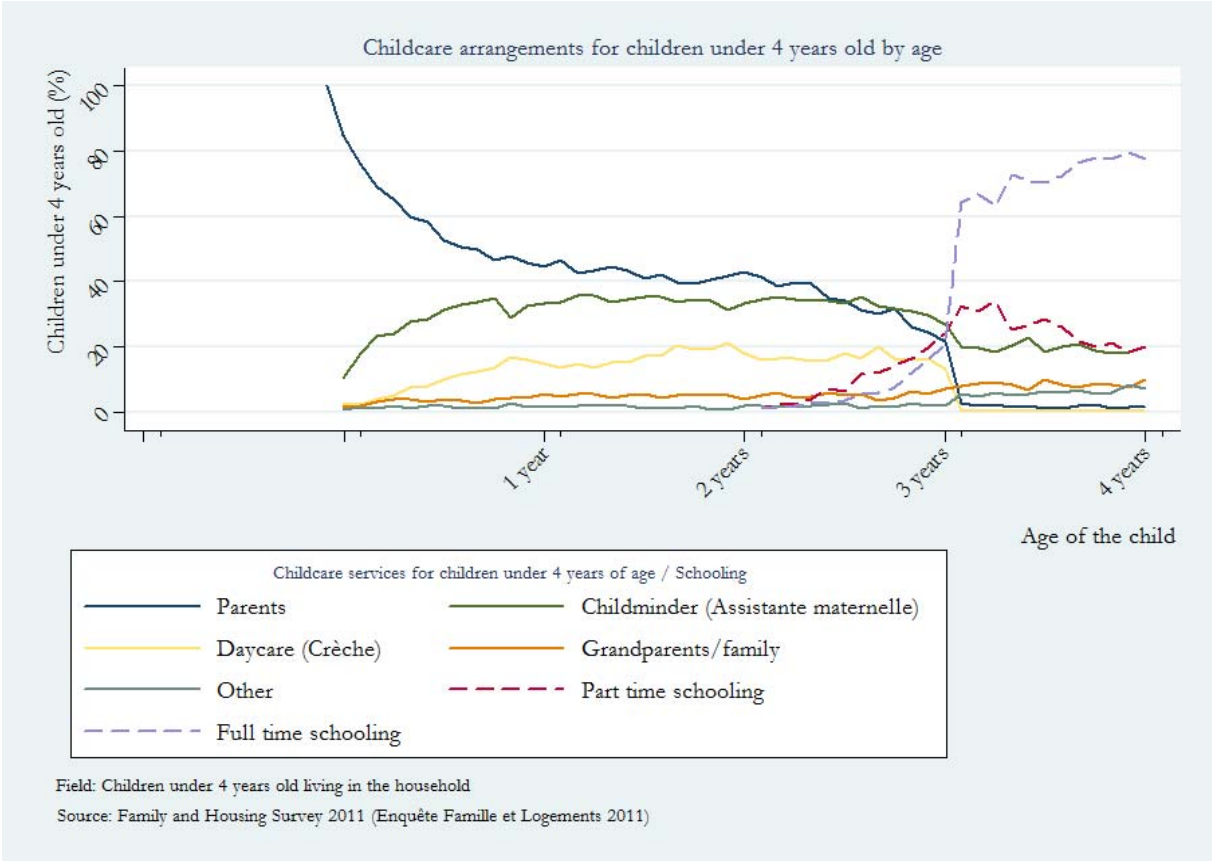
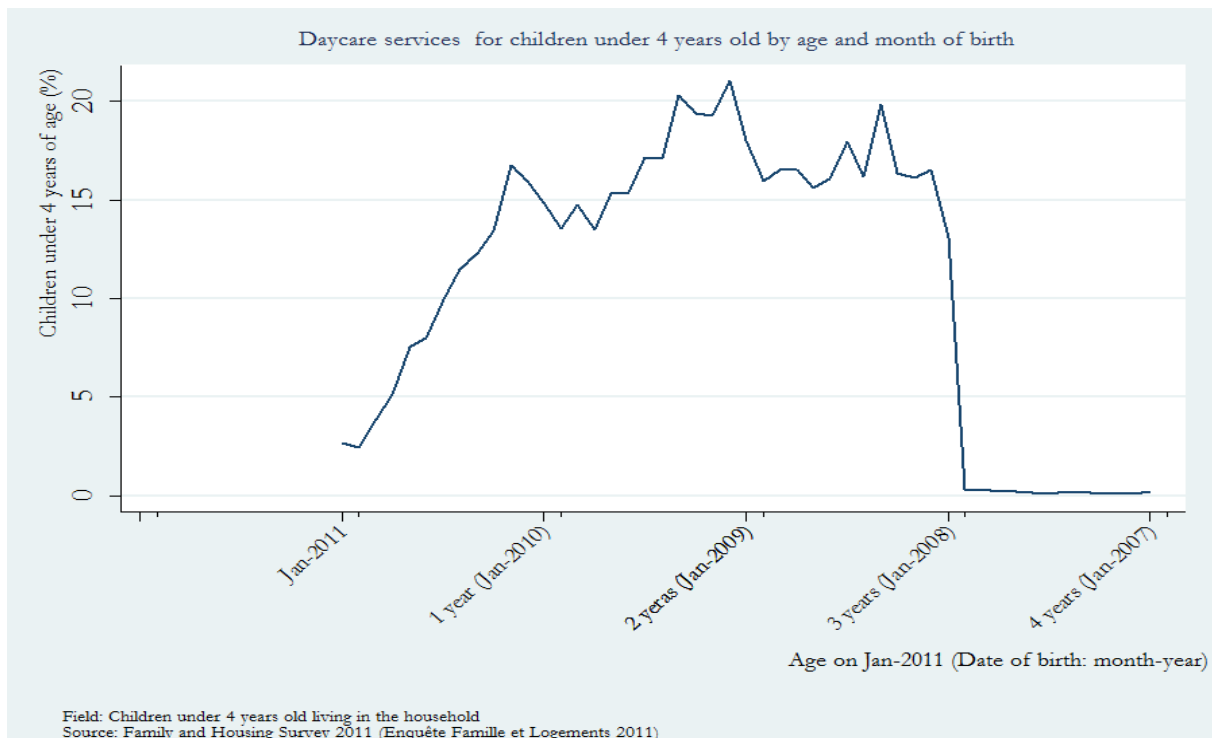


Figure 2 focuses on the situation for kids before attending school (école maternelle) and it shows that the month of birth has an impact on the chances to attend collective daycare. There is a threshold effect of the calendar year for the entry to school for children born in 2007. But we also observe some other seasonal effects, such as children born at the beginning of the calendar year are overrepresented in collective daycares (15%) in comparison to those born in the fall (around 10% for births in October November and December). One explanation is that the flow of children leaving collective daycare to start school at the age of three happens in the beginning of September when the new school year begins. Thus this shifts up the number of places available at the collective daycare. The children then entering keeps their places in the collective daycare. The regional commissions for the allocation of places in collective daycare acts shortly after birth (even if prior registrations during pregnancy generally are required) and thus children born in the first semester are more likely to benefit from these places opening up with the school year in September.

Figure 2



Regarding the family situation, single mothers are slightly overrepresented, but this effect becomes insignificant in the regressions analysis. It turns out that children of older parents (+40 years at birth) and with high educational level are more likely to be kept in a collective daycare. At the reverse, immigrants from non European countries are less likely to attend collective daycare. Also, collective daycare is more available to habitants in urban areas rather than in rural areas. 16.6% of children living in a community with 100000 habitants or more, have a place in collective daycare to compare with 9.2% of children living in a smaller towns.

We are currently running logistic and multinomial regressions analysis on the probability of attending a collective daycare among children below 4 years not yet attending school. Our preliminary results confirm the regional and seasonal birth effects. All things being equal, we also found a gender effect that girls are less likely to be welcomed in collective daycare than boys.

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