

Missed Opportunities:

Promoting Latino Early Care and Education Access in Mecklenburg, NC

Assessing the Role of Family, Program,
and Community-Level Factors

A Project of the UNC Charlotte Social
Aspects of Health Initiative



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Equitable access to early care and education (ECE) is crucial for promoting upward social mobility, yet Latino children in Mecklenburg County enroll in ECE programs at strikingly lower rates (31%) than non-Hispanic Black (47%) and White (66%) children. Low Latino ECE enrollment rate is not driven by a lack of neighborhood access to high-quality facilities but reflects a missed opportunity to connect Latino families with affordable and culturally responsive ECE programs that align with their familial strengths and preferences.

Using multiple data sources, including U.S. census data and interviews with Latina mothers and ECE and ECE-related (e.g., pediatrics, home visiting) service providers, this report identifies factors contributing to this “Missed Opportunity” and offers strategies to improve Latino ECE enrollment in Mecklenburg County.

Mecklenburg’s Diverse Young Latino Population & ECE Enrollment Trends:

Mecklenburg's Latino family population is highly diverse, with heritage country, immigration status, and poverty intersecting to shape Latino ECE enrollment patterns. Key findings include:

- ***Heritage Country Differences:*** Children of Mexican and Central American descent are the least likely among Latino heritage groups to enroll in ECE programs due to resource disparities, language barriers, and experiences of racial/ethnic isolation and discrimination.
- ***Immigration Status:*** High rates of foreign-born and non-citizen parents—83% and 71% respectively—do not enroll their children in ECE. These families, especially those with unauthorized status, encounter acculturative stressors like language barriers and restrictive immigration policy concerns, which can impede ECE enrollment.
- ***Poverty:*** Approximately 70% of Latino families with young children live below 200% of the federal poverty level, making ECE services unaffordable even with subsidy support.

Mecklenburg’s Young Latino Family Strengths & ECE Preferences: Improving ECE access and enrollment requires building on Latino family strengths and addressing their diverse ECE preferences. Below are key strengths and preferences identified by Charlotte’s Latina mothers and ECE and ECE-related service providers.

Key Latino family strengths:

- ***Parental Love and Determination:*** Latino families exhibit strong resilience and determination, driven by a deep commitment to improving their children's future, often at personal sacrifice.
- ***Strong Advocates with Intercultural Resourcefulness:*** Latina mothers actively seek information and resources to support their children, often leveraging their intercultural skills and connections to do so.
- ***Strong Families and Stay-At-Home Parent Sacrifice:*** The vast majority (75%) of young Latino children come from two-parent households, with many supported by stay-at-home mothers who sacrifice personal goals for their child's development.

Key Latino family ECE service preferences:

- ***Tailored ECE Services for Diverse Needs:*** Latino family ECE preferences vary based on family composition and parental employment, with flexibility being key. Stay-at-home mothers prefer part-time options and parent-centered resources.
- ***Parent Education and Involvement:*** There is a strong desire for ECE programs that involve parents in their children's development from infancy, alongside access to comprehensive parent education resources.
- ***Recreational & Social Activities:*** Latina mothers seek more recreational and social activities that integrate their children into the broader community, enhancing social and developmental opportunities.
- ***Holistic, Familial Supports:*** Latino parents expressed a need for supports beyond ECE, including financial literacy, job training, English language classes, networking opportunities, and improved health services.

Barriers Hindering Mecklenburg Latino Family ECE Access. Though Latino families in Mecklenburg often want to enroll their children in ECE services, they encounter significant programmatic, geographic, and policy-related barriers that impede access. Key barriers include:

- ***Financial & Logistical Challenges:*** High childcare costs and stringent eligibility criteria for subsidies create affordability barriers, particularly for families with stay-at-home parents. Non-standard work schedules limit access to ECE services that align with Latino parents' work hours and inflexible job sectors.
- ***Limited & Confusing ECE Information, Especially for Newcomers:*** Confusing, often English-only resource guides and reliance on informal networks limit access to comprehensive ECE information, especially for recent immigrants.
- ***Transportation & Neighborhood Constraints:*** Limited transportation options in Latino cluster neighborhoods hinder access to ECE centers beyond their immediate area, exacerbated by concentrated poverty and resource disparities that further isolate families.
- ***Discriminatory Practices & Anti-Immigration Policies:*** Instances of discrimination based on ethnicity and/or accent further alienate Latino families from accessing ECE services and supports. Additionally, fear and confusion stemming from restrictive local and federal immigration policies, including historical and current anti-immigrant measures, deter Latino families from seeking ECE services.
- ***On-going COVID-19 Impacts:*** Pandemic-related closures, financial stress, and exclusion from relief funds due to immigration status continue to exacerbate barriers to ECE enrollment for Latino families.

Facilitators Promoting Mecklenburg Latino Family ECE Access. To minimize these barriers, Mecklenburg's ECE systems should strengthen and build upon Latino family ECE access facilitators, of which there are many:

- ***Culturally Relevant Programs & Curriculum:*** Latina mothers value bilingual programs like Charlotte Bilingual Preschool for their cultural inclusivity and welcoming environment, emphasizing the need for more such programs.
- ***Bilingual Supports Minimize Linguistic Gaps:*** Latina mothers noted that bilingual supports within the ECE system, when available, were a vital resource they used to connect to family and child development support services broadly.

- ***Trusted & Welcoming Churches & Bilingual Providers:*** Local churches and bilingual ECE providers play a crucial role in facilitating access to ECE resources and reducing anxiety stemming from immigration policies. These providers embrace and often represent Latino cultural diversity, promoting inclusivity through culturally sensitive practices.
- ***Two-Generation Approach:*** ECE centers adopting a two-generation approach foster a supportive community environment valued by Latina mothers for their holistic family focus. These programs offer comprehensive support beyond schooling hours, including parent education classes and connections to essential community resources.
- ***Creative Covid-19 Efforts.*** During Covid-19, some ECE providers innovated by offering wrap-around services like food and gas supports and using Zoom to enhance program delivery. These providers wish to continue these beneficial services to increase Latino family engagement, but face funding challenges.

Key Recommendations. To enhance equitable access to ECE for Latino families in Mecklenburg County, several key recommendations have been identified based on insights from Latina mothers, service providers, stakeholders, and the findings of this study:

1. ***Improve Access to Bilingual and Bicultural ECE Information:*** Develop clear, multilingual guides and resources about ECE services to effectively engage families. Partner with trusted organizations and explore the creation of online resource databases to ensure broad accessibility.
2. ***Provide Bilingual Parent Liaisons to Navigate Resources:*** Implement bilingual representatives to actively inform families about available ECE-related resources (e.g., literacy supports, health services, parental education programs).
3. ***Promote Flexible ECE Program Options & Support for Stay-at-Home Parents:*** Expand part-time and parent-centered ECE models that accommodate varied schedules and preferences, including tailored support for the large share stay-at-home Latino/a parents.
4. ***Create Affordable Community & Recreational Activities:*** Establish accessible community-sponsored activities for young children to address the current lack of affordable options noted by mothers.
5. ***Expand Affordable ECE Options & Subsidy Eligibility:*** Advocate for increased access to subsidies and financial assistance to make ECE services more affordable for low-income families, including those with stay-at-home parents.
6. ***Create More Holistic, Two-Generation ECE Supports:*** Develop holistic ECE services that include parental education, English language classes, workforce development, and wrap-around services like food supports to alleviate strain and improve health access.
7. ***Enhance Cultural Sensitivity Training:*** Expand training programs for ECE providers to include comprehensive cultural sensitivity training, respecting Latino diversity, family values and preferences.
8. ***Increase Bilingual and Bicultural Staffing:*** Recruit a diverse workforce reflective of Mecklenburg's Latino population to improve communication and address unique Latino family preferences effectively.
9. ***Strengthen Culturally Relevant Service Provider Coordination:*** Ensure referral systems integrate the Latino population from inception to mitigate barriers and clarify program eligibility for mixed-status families.

10. ***Broaden ECE Community Partnerships:*** Increase collaboration and coordination between ECE providers and local organizations to establish referral networks and provide holistic support, including job training and health services.
11. ***Combat Discrimination & Anti-Immigrant Policy Barriers:*** Implement anti-discrimination policies and advocate for inclusive federal, state- and local policies supporting immigrant and Latino families.
12. ***Sustain Covid-19 Innovations:*** Secure funding to maintain wrap-around Covid-19 service response initiatives developed to enhance Latino family ECE engagement.

By addressing these recommendations, Mecklenburg County can foster a more inclusive and supportive ECE system that promotes the upward mobility of Latino children and their families.

PROJECT BACKGROUND & METHODS

Project Background and Aims

Mecklenburg County has prioritized investing in more equitable early care and education (ECE) services to alleviate racial/ethnic inequalities and promote all children's well-being. However, Latino and ECE community stakeholders raise concern that these supports do not adequately address the needs of Mecklenburg's rapidly growing population of young Latino families.

This project responds to calls from Mecklenburg Latino and ECE leaders to advance Latino family ECE access. Using a mixed-methods community strengths and needs assessment, this project had two aims.

- **Aim 1: Provide a broad profile of Mecklenburg's Latino family population, their ECE access, and the overall ECE program and community landscape shaping their ECE access.** This project used administrative records, census data, Covid-19 data, and immigration enforcement data to profile Mecklenburg's Latino family population, their ECE access, and the community context shaping ECE access.
- **Aim 2: Identify best-practice strategies to improve Mecklenburg's Latino family ECE enrollment.** This project used stakeholder and service provider interviews and Latina mother focus groups to identify best-practice strategies for improving Latino family ECE enrollment.

By providing a clearer understanding of the preferences, strengths, and needs of Mecklenburg's diverse Latino population, this project provides vital information to guide the design of a more equitable ECE system that promotes upward mobility for Latino children and their families.

Project Methods and Data

A companion study to the larger *Landscape Study of Prenatal-Age 3 Services and Supports in Mecklenburg County* (funded by Smart Start, 2022), this project focuses on Latinos and ECE services specifically. We used mixed-methods and an ECE best-practice community strengths and needs assessment strategy to determine if available ECE resources match the location, preferences, strengths and opportunities/needs of different Latino families (Gelatt, et al., 2014).

Aim 1: Broad Profile. We used multiple levels of the American Community Survey (ACS), the U.S. Census' premier population data, and different administrative records to assess Charlotte's ECE program landscape, Latino family populations, and the factors shaping ECE participation.

- **US Census Individual-Level American Community Survey (ACS) Data:** The strength of the individual-level ACS data is that, unlike aggregated neighborhood-level ACS data, we can provide more detailed information about young Latino children (age 0-5) and families in Mecklenburg County, including their ECE enrollment rate, immigrant background, and familial characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic resources). Following best practice Census guidelines, we use the most recent 5-year ACS estimates that are not confounded by Covid-19 data collection challenges (i.e. 2013-2018).
- **US Census Neighborhood-Level American Community Survey (ACS) Data:** The strength of the neighborhood-level ACS data is that it allows us to describe and map

(using Geographic Information Software) Hispanic cluster neighborhoods—location, segregation levels, and population characteristics—within Mecklenburg County. We combine these data with ECE program administrative data to identify neighborhoods with limited ECE access.

- **Administrative and Other Records:** Data provided by Child Care Resource Inc. identify all licensed childcare centers and family childcare homes in Mecklenburg County in 2019, before the pandemic (N=435). The data indicate the facility address, type (home vs. center), and star rating (2=lowest quality to 5=highest quality). Additionally, we use a variety of national (Urban Institute, CDC), state (NC state government) and local (*Charlotte News & Observer*, *La Noticia*) data sources to contextualize Charlotte's immigration enforcement, Covid-19, and overall ECE contexts.

Aim 2. Best Practices: In conjunction with a broader companion *Landscape Study of Prenatal-Age 3 Services* study, we use focus group and interview data from Latina mothers and key service providers and stakeholders to identify barriers and best practices for improving Latino ECE enrollment. All interviews were conducted through Zoom videoconferencing, with English and Spanish options available for parents. Most were conducted in Fall 2021.

- **Service Provider and Stakeholder Interviews:** Based on data trends and community partner guidance, we conducted 19 interviews (7 for this study specifically, 12 for the broader companion study) with a diverse set of Latino/a and ECE stakeholders and service providers, including providers of ECE-related services (i.e. health and food/tangible supports) that contribute to a holistic ECE system of care approach. In combination, these interviews provide key insights from the providers' perspectives on the strengths and needs of Mecklenburg's Latino families and ways to create a more holistic, culturally responsive ECE system of support.
- **Latina Mother Focus Groups:** Focusing on Latino families—largely immigrant families and those with low-income—we conducted 3 semi-structured focus groups (approximately 5 participants each) and one parent-interview to explore: 1) Latino family ECE preferences, opportunities/barriers, and 2) Latino ECE outreach strategies. Most mothers were participants of Charlotte Bilingual Preschool's family program, and a few were recruited from social networks of the research team.

OVERVIEW OF MECKLENBURG'S YOUNG LATINO CHILDREN & ECE ENROLLMENT

The population of young Latino children in Mecklenburg County has rapidly increased over the past three decades and led to sizable gaps in child-based services for Latino families. Of particular concern is equitable access to early childhood education (ECE), a crucial early intervention that can promote upward social mobility for children as well as their parents.

In Mecklenburg, Latino ECE enrollment rates are strikingly lower than that of non-Hispanic Black and White children as well as Latinos nationally. Low Latino ECE enrollment rates persist across the county and do not seem to be due to a lack of neighborhood access to high-quality ECE facilities. Instead, the low Latino ECE enrollment rate in Mecklenburg County is a “Missed Opportunity” to connect Latino families with affordable and culturally responsive ECE programs that align with their familial strengths and preferences.

To understand these trends, we describe the diversity of Mecklenburg’s young Latino child and family population, and how the intersectionality of immigration, heritage country, and poverty shape Latino ECE enrollment patterns. We then highlight different ECE opportunities and barriers that Mecklenburg’s ECE system can address to increase Latino ECE enrollment.

Young Latino Children & Families are Changing the Face of Mecklenburg

Since the 1990s, Mecklenburg County's Latino population has surged, driven by young Latino children and families. Today, 21% of children under 5 are Latino, up from less than 2% in 1990. This demographic shift is likely to continue. While Latinos make up 14% of Mecklenburg’s population, they account for over 20% of new births. By 2040, the Latino population is projected to reach 23%, matching the national average (2019 Pulse Report).

***“If you haven’t met a Latino child,
you haven’t met the future of
Mecklenburg”***

Natalia Flores; Axios Mecklenburg

Mecklenburg’s future economic mobility depends on the success of its young Latino population. To help them thrive, the county must develop sufficient and culturally appropriate early care and education (ECE) resources and programs.

LARGE SIZE

1 in 5

(~18,000)

children under age
six in Mecklenburg
are Latino

The New Face of Mecklenburg: Young Latino Children

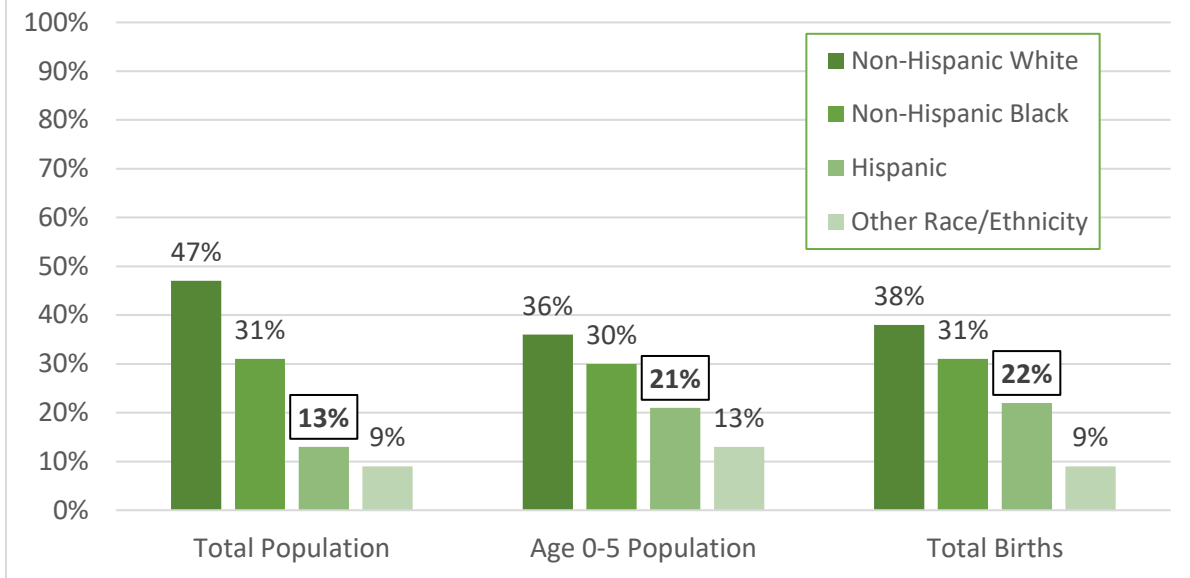
Latino share of Mecklenburg’s
Under Age 6 Population:

1990: <2%

vs.

2019: 21%

Young Latino Children Are Changing Mecklenburg's Racial & Ethnic Composition



Mecklenburg's Lagging Latino Early Care and Education (ECE) Enrollment

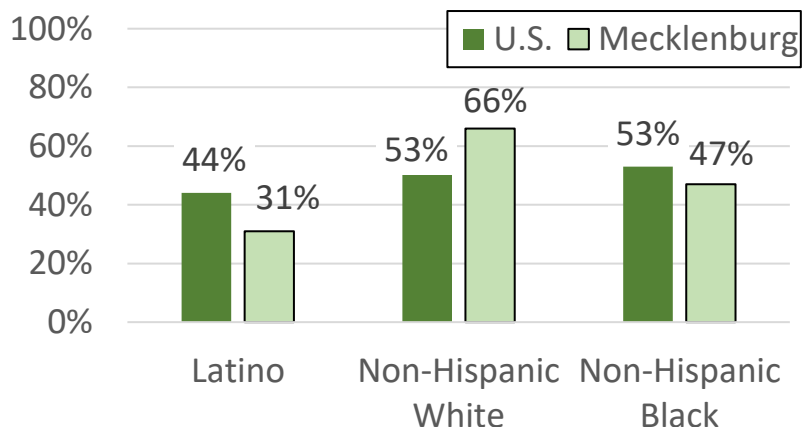
Like other fast-growing, new Latino destinations, low Latino ECE enrollment in Mecklenburg is a concern and a missed opportunity for future investment. While Mecklenburg surpasses the national average in non-Hispanic White ECE enrollment (66% vs. 53%), non-Hispanic Black and Latino children (among children aged 3-5) are falling behind. The gap is widest for Latino children, with only 31% enrolled, compared to 44% nationally

LOW LATINO ECE ENROLLMENT

69%

Of Mecklenburg's Latino children are not enrolled in early childhood education.

Unequal ECE Enrollment Rates



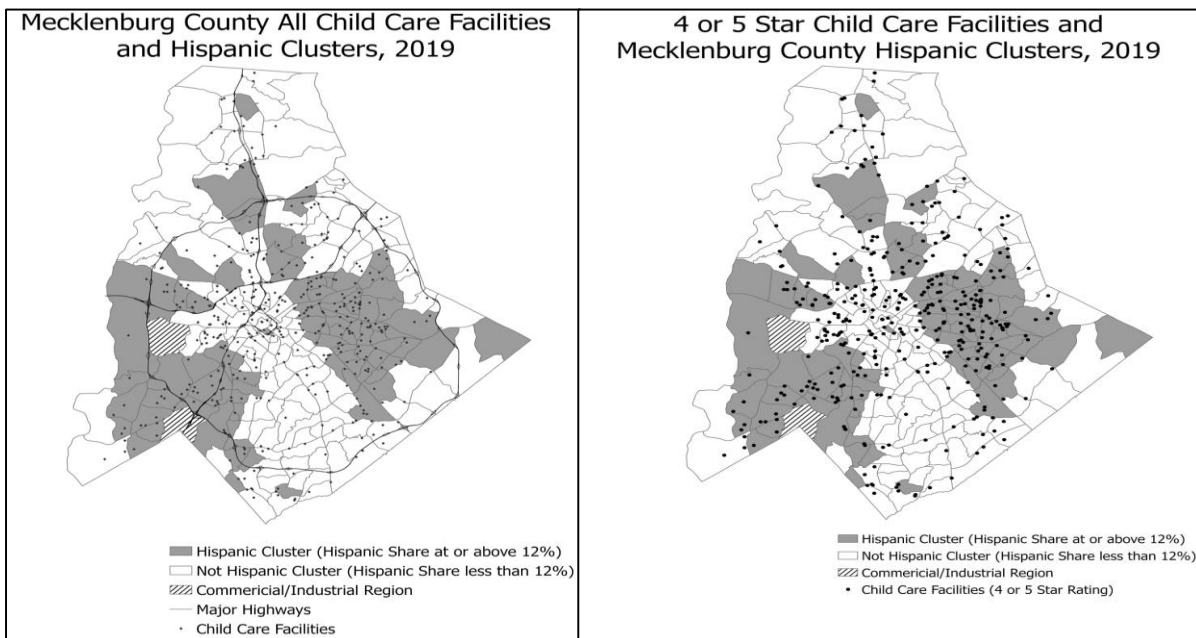
This lagging enrollment is concerning because high-quality ECE programs are widely known to minimize disparities in child development and prepare children for formal schooling, particularly for Latino and immigrant children, many of whom face a constellation of child development risk

factors (e.g., poverty, low parental education, language barriers; López & Grindal, 2020; Mendez et al., 2018). Consequently, stakeholders nationally and in Mecklenburg have called for the creation of more equitable ECE programs and early childcare services to foster economic mobility for all. But currently, many Latino children and families are not accessing these services in Mecklenburg.

Low Latino ECE Enrollment Is More than a Neighborhood “Access” Issue

The reason for Mecklenburg’s low Latino ECE enrollment does not appear to be driven by a lack of neighborhood access to high-quality childcare facilities.

- The childcare facilities maps (which predate Covid) indicate that most Charlotte neighborhoods have access to Child Care facilities, even high quality 4- and 5-star facilities. This is particularly true in Hispanic Clusters where the share of Latinos exceeds the county average. The one exception is the northwest region, which has fewer facilities.
- However, because we do not have slot availability for these different facilities, we cannot completely rule out lack of neighborhood access as a potential driver of Mecklenburg’s low ECE enrollment. Particularly with recent staff shortages and decreases in COVID-19 emergency funding, access may be hindered by constraints that are not evident from Census data and our inventory of childcare facilities.

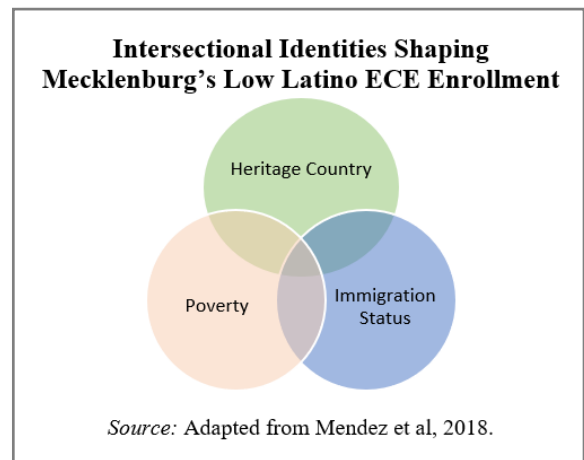


Either way, other ECE access factors beyond just physical proximity are shaping Mecklenburg’s low Latino ECE enrollment rate. ***Equitable ECE access requires that ECE programs and services are affordable and that they meet Latino parent and child preferences and needs*** (Mendez Smith et al., 2018). This report shows how other dimensions of equitable ECE access, beyond just physical proximity, are contributing to Mecklenburg’s low Latino ECE enrollment.

Mecklenburg's Diverse Young Latino Population & ECE Enrollment Trends

Best practices indicate that to effectively engage Latino families, ECE programs and services need to identify who the Latino families are in their community (Gelatt et al, 2014). In Mecklenburg, the young Latino population is widely diverse, often more diverse than Latinos nationally.

Three intersectional identities—heritage country, immigration status, and poverty/income—shape Mecklenburg's Latino ECE enrollment. These factors lead to diverging enrollment rates across sub-groups due to differences in resources, language, familiarity with the U.S. educational system, and racial/ethnic isolation and discrimination. These sub-group differences are important because they will affect Latino family ECE preferences and assets, as well as the ECE access barriers they face (Gelatt et al, 2014; Mendez Smith et al., 2018).



Heritage Country Differences

The Hispanic heritage of young Latinos is more diverse in Mecklenburg than the rest of the nation. Though nationally most young Latinos are of Mexican descent (63%), only 39% are of Mexican descent in Mecklenburg. Instead, the share of young Latinos from Central and South America are sizably larger—respectively triple (28% vs. 9%) and double (12% vs. 6%) that of the national average. Mecklenburg's remaining young Latino population (20%) is from a diverse array of heritage countries (notably Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba) or multiple heritage countries.

Mecklenburg Latino Children Not Enrolled in ECE Are More Likely To:

- Be of Mexican or Central American descent
- Have foreign-born and non-citizen parents
- Live in a linguistically isolated household
- Live below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level
- Have parents with less than a H.S. degree

Among children aged 3-5 years, Mecklenburg's ECE enrollment rates differ by heritage country. Latinos of Mexican and Central American descent are the least likely to enroll in an ECE program, but Latinos overall are less likely to enroll than non-Latinos.

- **Central American and Mexican Heritage.** In general, migrants from Central America compared to those from other heritage countries tend to be newer arrivals, have fewer economic resources, are more likely to lack legal status, and may speak an indigenous language rather than Spanish (National Academies, 2016). All these factors are associated with lower ECE enrollment rates (Mendez Smith et al., 2021). Migrants from Mexico often face similar challenges but have a longer US migration history.
- **South American Heritage.** Historically, Latinos from South America tend to have more economic resources and migrated as higher-skilled immigrants (National Academies, 2016), but these trends are changing amid economic and political upheavals in Venezuela

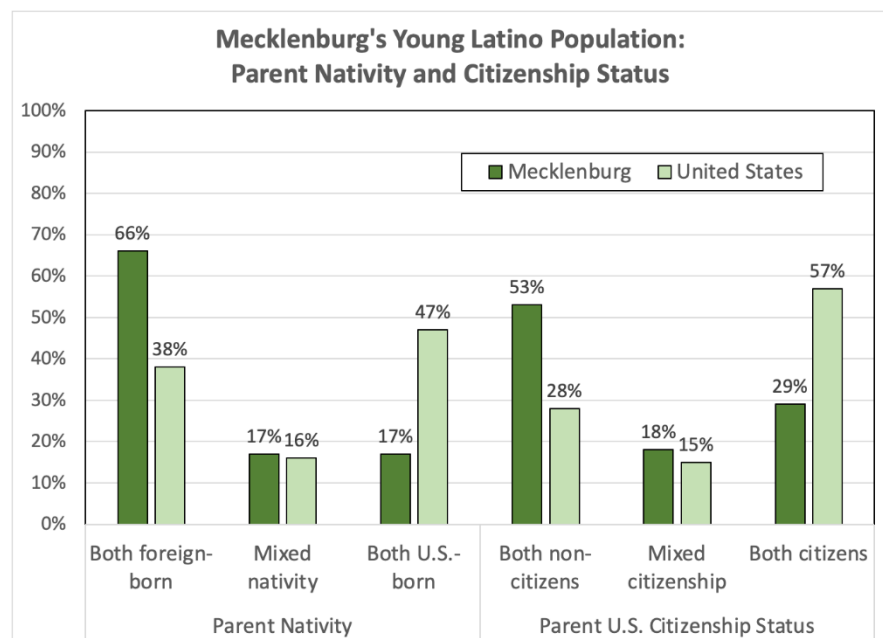
and other South American countries. Venezuela, for example, has struggled with skyrocketing inflation, which has prompted countless families to seek stability elsewhere. Venezuelan became the second largest nationality represented in unauthorized U.S. crossings, topping 33,000 in September 2022 (Verza & Spagat, 2022). This arrival of new Venezuelans has had a direct impact on Mecklenburg—an estimated 1,400 new arrivals came to Mecklenburg in summer 2022, half of them Venezuelan (Lee, 2022). Nonprofits, including ECE programs, report being overwhelmed at the sudden increase.

- **Other Heritage Countries.** Though US Census data is not sufficient to disaggregate this broad “other” group, it is important to recognize heritage country differences within it. Factors shown to shape ECE enrollment (e.g., economic resources, legal status) often differ across this broad “other” heritage country categorization. For example, Afro-Latino families from the Caribbean may face additional racism due to anti-Black sentiment. And Latinos from less represented origin countries (e.g., Bolivia) may have fewer co-ethnic social networks to connect them to ECE resources (Mendez Smith et al., 2018).

Immigration Status: Nativity, Citizenship & U.S. Duration of Residence Differences

Though most (95%) young Latino children in Mecklenburg are U.S.-born, 83% have at least one foreign-born parent, 66% have two foreign-born parents, and 71% of have at least one non-citizen parent. These rates are substantially higher than the national averages and likely contribute to Mecklenburg’s lower Latino ECE enrollment rate.

Latino children (aged 3-5 years) with foreign-born and non-citizen parents are less likely to enroll in ECE programs. These disparities likely exist due to the unique challenges that foreign-born Latino families face, especially for recent arrivals and those who lack documentation status.



- **Parent Nativity and Citizenship Status.** Foreign-born and non-citizen parents face multiple acculturative stressors (e.g., adjusting to new norms, language barriers) that can hinder access to vital child development services like ECE. Foreign-born parents are often unfamiliar with the U.S.’s ECE system, and non-citizens often experience "chilling effects," avoiding enrollment in programs they’re eligible for due to confusion or fear it might harm their legal status or naturalization prospects (Mendez Smith et al 2018).

- Documentation Status.** These “chilling” effects are most pronounced when one or more parents are undocumented (i.e. mixed status families). Though we do not have data on documentation status, this is likely to be a sizable challenge for parents of young Latinos in Mecklenburg. According to the Migration Policy Institute, 34% of Mecklenburg County’s immigrant population—the vast majority of whom are Latino—is estimated to be unauthorized (MPI, 2023). This suggests that potentially 1 out of every 3 Latino children in Mecklenburg County (compared to 1 out of 4 nationally) has an unauthorized immigrant parent. These families face additional acculturation stressors (e.g., deportation and family separation fears, labor market restrictions, social support exclusions), that can further hinder ECE access and enrollment (Yoshikawa, 2011).
- U.S. Duration of Residence.** Despite these potential challenges associated with nativity and citizenship status, the vast majority (80%) of Latino parents in Mecklenburg have been in the U.S. for at least a decade. Duration of residence matters, while challenges persist and cultural differences remain, longer-term immigrants tend to face fewer ECE informational and network barriers than more recent arrivals. For the 20% of Mecklenburg’s Latino parent population that are more recent arrivals (i.e. less than 10 years in the U.S.), ECE access barriers may be greater.

**Estimated Share of Latino Children
with an Unauthorized Immigrant**

Parent:

Mecklenburg: 33%

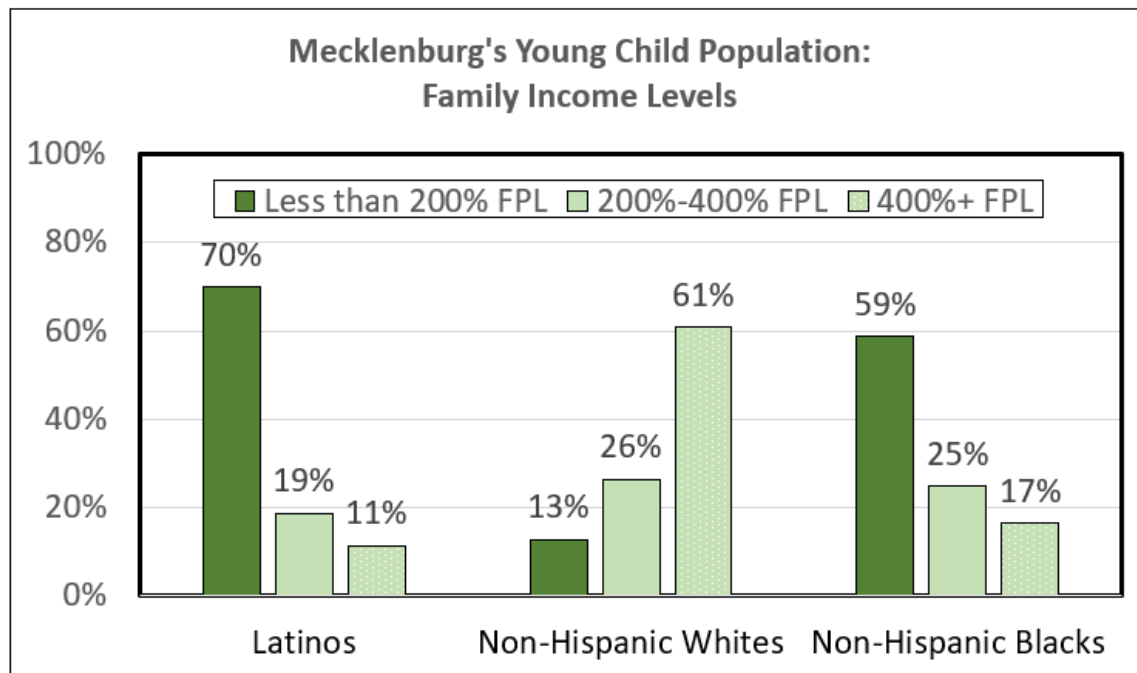
vs.

National: 25%

Poverty: Higher Family Economic Need. In Mecklenburg, approximately 70% of Latino families with a young child live below 200% of the federal poverty level; this is more than 5 times that of non-Hispanic White families. This makes it hard for Latino families to afford ECE services, which in Mecklenburg can exceed \$15,000 annually per child.

**Young Latinos in Mecklenburg are
5x More Likely
than Non-Hispanic Whites
to Live in a Low-Income Household**

Though subsidies are in place to help make those costs more manageable, a capped percentage of income may still be insurmountable when every dollar is already stretched thin.



LATINO FAMILY STRENGTHS & ECE PREFERENCES

To increase Mecklenburg County's Latino family ECE access and enrollment, ECE and other child development programs need to build on the multiple strengths of Latino families and address the diverse ECE preferences and needs of Mecklenburg's highly heterogeneous young Latino family population.

Latino Family and Latina Mother Strengths

Parental Love and Determination: In our study, Latino and ECE stakeholders and providers unequivocally cited parental love and determination as a key family strength—a sentiment strongly expressed by Latina mothers in our study as well.

- Migrated to Advance Children's Well-Being***—Several immigrant Latina mothers noted that a primary reason they migrated to the U.S. was “to give their children a better future.” While life in the U.S. was often more difficult for them personally—such as losing their professional status, leaving behind friends and family, experiencing feelings of isolation, and struggling with language barriers—they saw migration as a necessary sacrifice. They embraced these sacrifices, choosing to leave behind everything familiar and venture into an uncertain new world, all driven by the hope of securing greater opportunities for their children.

“So it's perseverance, constant. And as a mother, it's being there to be able to give the children a better future. [One] that we could not have in our country.” *-Latina Mother*

- ***Strong Advocates for their Child:*** All Latina mothers—U.S.-born and immigrant—reported that providing for their children is a driving motivator, even when circumstances are difficult. Though many mothers said that accessing needed services was confusing and frustrating, they continued to advocate for their child until their needs were met. This ranged from researching confusing Medicaid options to pushing for a second opinion in a medical situation.
- ***Leveraging Inter-cultural Skills & Connections:*** To overcome difficulties accessing ECE and other child services, Latina mothers leveraged their bilingual language skills, found creative networks, and sought out linguistically and culturally inclusive programs. For instance, one mother was able to rely on her emerging English language skills to successfully navigate her prenatal care, which did not provide Spanish translation as requested. Mothers agreed that online research and conversations in daily interactions and at church were the best way to find information about different child resources. And, when they found a culturally and linguistically inclusive program, they used that program to connect to other resources.
- ***Strong Two-Parent Families & Stay-At-Home Mom Sacrifice.*** The vast majority (75%) of Mecklenburg’s young Latino children live in two-parent households. Consistent with prior research, we estimate that more than half of these families have a primary caregiver (mostly mothers) who stays home with the children (only 43% of two-parent Latino families with young children are dual workers). Our focus group data suggest that many stay-at-home Latina mothers sacrifice their own progress toward professional goals to care for their children full-time. Several focus group participants noted that they wanted to work or enroll in educational and English programs—to help support the family, make network connections, and/or establish a career. But, for the time being, they chose to stay-at-home and care for their child because they felt it was better for their child’s development, particularly for children under age 3.

Latino Family ECE and Child Development Service Preferences

Family Composition and Employment Shape Latino Parents' ECE Preferences Mecklenburg’s ECE system must be responsive to and supportive of young Latino children’s diverse familial structures and parental employment status, both of which shape the type of services Latino families prefer and need.

- ***More Stay-at-Home Mom Supports:*** As suggested by our Latina mother focus groups and prior research, many of Mecklenburg’s stay-at-home Latina mother families prefer more flexible ECE services (e.g., part-time) and parent-based resources (e.g., parent education) to the traditional ECE full-time, drop-off center-based model (Mendez et al, 2018).
- ***More Single-Parent & Dual-Worker Family Supports.*** There is a sizable share of young Latino families—notably single-parent (25%) and dual-worker (43%) Latino households—that may need full-time ECE care. Additionally, many families, especially those with a single-parent, may need additional wrap-around services, such as financial, food, and socio-emotional support, due to the extra hardships they often face (Le Menestrel & Duncan, 2019).

- **More Supports for Families with Multiple Young Children.** Most Latino families need support for multiple young children. In Mecklenburg, 76% of young Latino families have two or more children under age 6. This can make childcare prohibitively expensive, resulting in an average ECE cost of \$30,000 or more per year (CCRI), and compounds transportation challenges if children must attend different ECE programs.

Flexible ECE Services & Wider Variety of Child Development Opportunities. Latina mothers noted that they want more flexible ECE programs and resources that allow parents to take the lead in their child’s development.

- **More Child Development Parent Education Resources:** Many stay-at-home Latina mothers in our focus groups noted that they did not want typical center-based services but instead wanted to learn more about developmental milestones, as well as caregiving strategies and child activities that they could use with their child at each age. Additionally, service providers advised that ECE and child development plans should be discussed from infancy, rather than trying to help children catch up quickly when they enter the ECE system.
- **More Flexible, Part-Time ECE Options.** Many Latina mothers wanted flexible, part-time supports that would enable them to study or work part-time. This was particularly true for recent arrivals who wanted the chance to take English Language classes or to invest in U.S.-based education credentials. Providers noted that programs that offer part-time options and parent involvement have high demand, and long waiting lists.
- **More Recreational & Social Activities for Moms & Children.** Stay-at-home Latina mothers often felt that they had to piece together different home-based child-development supports for their children. Instead, they wanted to engage their children more in the broader community and readily listed activities that they would like to do with their children (e.g., playing in the park, dancing, and painting). However, many organized recreational activities begin around age 4 or 5, leaving parents with younger children to organize their child’s entire day. Though toddler music classes or similar activities are available, they are often too expensive.

“Truthfully, I would love to be able to find a place . . . for childcare, that is, to say that I can leave my children or my boy or my girl in that place for a few hours, but with all the confidence in the world, I mean leave them with confidence in a good place. Well, I haven't seen a place like this so far...” -Latina Mother

“I went to a music place that is for babies, but . . . for 8 sessions once a week or twice a week [it cost] \$150 a week. I can’t pay \$150 dollars for that . . . it’s too much money. If there are programs, they do exist, but they are not within our reach.” -Latina Mother

Young Latino Families’ Preferences Extend Beyond Basic ECE Services. In focus groups, parents noted that in addition to supports for their children, parents desired supports for themselves, including financial literacy education, job training, English language classes, networking opportunities, and health services. These resources are crucial to addressing challenges such as low education levels (31% of Latinos in Mecklenburg have not completed high school), limited English proficiency, and restricted access to health care commonly faced by Latino parents in Mecklenburg.

- ***More Parental Education & Employment Supports:*** Though almost 25% of Latino parents with a young child in Mecklenburg have a BA degree, nearly a third (31%) lack a high-school degree—a necessary credential for many jobs. These low levels of parent education are mostly due to limited educational opportunities in many immigrant origin countries, not Latino immigrant parents’ ability or effort. Without parent educational opportunities, many Latino families may struggle to improve their socioeconomic position.
- ***More English Language Supports.*** In Mecklenburg, 35% of young Latino children live in a linguistically isolated household, in which no household member aged 15 or older speaks English proficiently. Parents and children in these households often struggle to successfully navigate and benefit from Mecklenburg’s largely English-only ECE system. Parents and children in these households would benefit from ECE and education systems that ensure language access and equity by providing bilingual education and additional language and translation support.
- ***More Child & Parent Health Access Supports:*** In Mecklenburg, 10% of young Latino children lack health insurance, and 67% rely on public coverage despite near-universal healthcare availability for children. Furthermore, 59% have at least one uninsured parent, reflecting the exclusion of many immigrant adults from public health insurance programs. This exclusion often creates “chilling effects,” where eligible children are not enrolled due to parental fear and confusion. Without coverage, many Latino families may forgo preventive care, increasing the risk of serious health issues for both children and parents.

BARRIERS HINDERING LATINO FAMILY ECE ACCESS

Latino families—particularly immigrants—often want to enroll their children in ECE programs and child development services, but they face multiple access barriers (Lopez & Grindal, 2020). In Mecklenburg County, Latino families face several programmatic, geographic, and policy related access barriers, all of which hinder their enrollment in ECE services and other vital systems that support child health and development.

Program-Level Barriers: Logistical Challenges & Discrimination

Limited and Confusing ECE Information—Especially for Immigrant Newcomers. Latina mothers noted that they often had limited and/or confusing information about ECE and other child services, and that they could not always rely on their Latino parent networks to navigate these challenges.

- ***Confusing Lists & Resource Guides.*** Mothers noted that even when provided with lists of ECE and other child resources, they receive limited guidance on how to navigate and utilize these resources effectively. As a result, these lists often lead to confusion.
- ***Networks & Word of Mouth Challenges.*** Many Latina mothers turned to informal networks and Google to make decisions ranging from health care providers to educational opportunities. Many of those networks are informal, through a friend or coworker, while

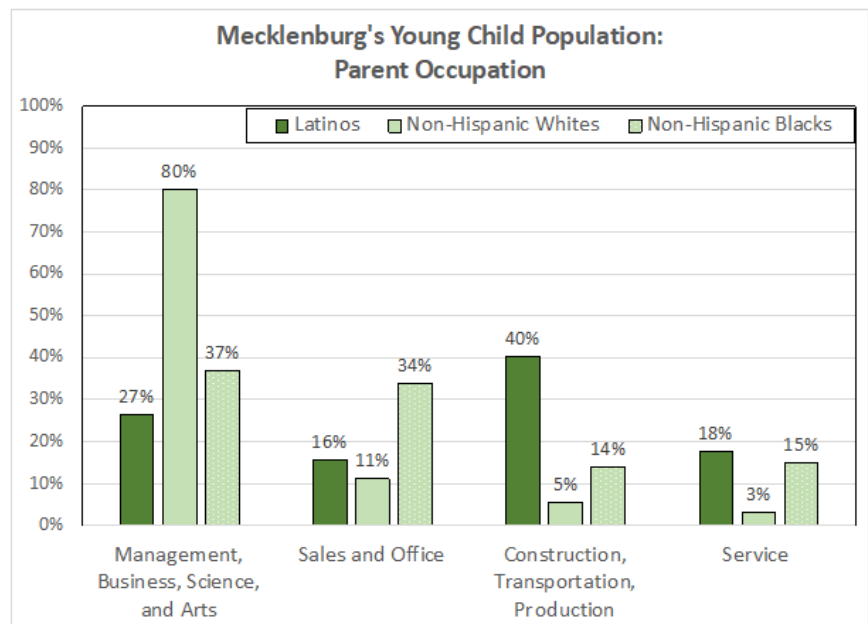
other mothers were pointed to information through social media or connections from other providers in the community. These efforts were time-intensive, not always reliable/fruitful, and challenging for recent arrivals.

- **Recent Arrival Social Network & ECE Information Challenges:** About 10% of Mecklenburg's young Latino families have migrated to the U.S. in the past 5 years, more than double the national rate of 4%. Providers and Latina mothers noted that recent immigrants face unique challenges, including navigating ECE services with limited support networks. Several Latina immigrant mothers in our focus group noted that they initially struggled to find trustworthy connections and were unaware of available programs. Once they found resources, often through church networks, they gradually built a support network, but this process took time.

Latino Parents' Work Schedules and Job Demands Conflict with Typical ECE Hours. Two-thirds of young Latino families in Mecklenburg work non-standard work schedules, meaning that they work nights and weekends when ECE center-based services are limited.

Additionally, 58% are employed in occupational sectors that provide limited work-family flexibility (e.g., construction, transportation, and service).

Parents in these occupations may not be able to stay home when a child is sick or when an ECE center is closed for holidays or teacher workdays because doing so can negatively affect their pay and job security. These Latino families would benefit from non-standard, flexible ECE hours that better accommodate their work demands.



Affordability, Red Tape, & Eligibility Challenges: Childcare is often prohibitively expensive for young Latino families—costing upwards of \$30k in Mecklenburg for two children. While subsidies exist, providers, stakeholders, and Latina mothers noted that red tape and strict eligibility criteria make accessing affordable ECE services difficult. Mothers likened finding eligible, affordable services to "finding a needle in a haystack."

- **Eligibility Cliffs for ECE & Child Development Supports.** Latina mothers and providers expressed concern about income-based eligibility criteria for ECE and other child development supports (e.g., Medicaid, Safety net access). They felt

"[S]ometimes [like] in the help for Medicaid, they see our record of per family how much we make, but they do not take into account all the expenses that the family has. Like the rent, it has gone up a lot. If one pays for a babysitter, the pay for the babysitter."

-Latina Mother

the income threshold for eligibility was often too low and did not consider child-related expenses, such as childcare, or inflationary effects on rent and other essential household expenses. Several Latina mothers noted that they struggled to make ends meet amid price increases in rent and other essential purchases.

- ***Mecklenburg's Childcare Subsidy & Stay-at-home parent challenge:*** Latino households with a stay-at-home parent noted that they are often excluded from ECE subsidies and cost-reduction programs that would make ECE services more affordable because Mecklenburg's childcare subsidy requires that parents either work or attend school full-time. These requirements extend to both parents for two-parent households. Several providers noted similar requirements for participation in their programs. As a result, upwards of 60% of Latino households—the share of Latino families with a stay-at-home parent—may be priced out of ECE participation and other vital child development resources because one parent does not work or study full time.

Dual-Parent Work Requirements Punish Stay-At-Home Latina Mothers
70% of Latino children qualify for Mecklenburg's Child Care Subsidy, but up to 60% may be disqualified because their mothers stay home to care for them.

Discrimination & Feeling Not Welcomed. Latina mothers recalled several instances of discrimination, regardless of immigration status, which made accessing ECE services and child development resources more challenging.

- ***Front-Staff Discrimination Experience - Depends On "Who You Get:"*** Latina mothers noted that while at times they felt welcomed when trying to access services, there were other instances when they were discriminated against. How they were treated largely depended on the front-staff individual to whom they were first introduced. Some of the front-staff they encountered went out of their way to be helpful, while others were short with them, rude, and/or blatantly discriminatory.
- ***Country of Origin & Accent Discrimination.*** Latina mothers described feeling like they were not welcomed by some programs and services because of their accent or their country of origin. One Latina mother, for instance, noted that when she spoke to Americans in English, they often acted like they couldn't understand her. Another noted that her child was denied access to a child education program due to her country of origin because the owner had one negative experience with a family from that country.
- ***Lack of Trust & Discrimination Within the Latino Community.*** Though Latinos often support each other, Latina mothers and service providers noted several instances of distrust and discrimination within the Latino community. One mom, for instance, noted that when she first arrived in the U.S. and Charlotte, she felt that other Latinos, particularly those who had been here longer, were guarded and hesitant to share information. Additionally, a service provider noted that *colorism* in the Latino community is a real challenge. There is greater discrimination against darker skinned individuals, whereas lighter skinned Latinos often face fewer discrimination barriers.

Geographic Barriers: Transportation Challenges & Neighborhood Isolation

Transportation Remains a Significant Challenge: Though Latino families may have access to a 4- or 5-star ECE center in their neighborhood, transportation challenges persist.

- **One-Car Household Challenge.** In Mecklenburg, nearly two-thirds of Latino families with young children own only one vehicle, making it harder to juggle work and childcare transportation.

“Maybe they’re taking two buses to get here, maybe they have to find a ride from a friend because they don’t have access to their own car, and then they miss a day of work. And for many of our families a day of work missed is hard; it’s food on the table, it’s potentially threats of losing your job.”

- Service Provider

Fathers often take the car to work, leaving mothers and children to rely on public transit. Latina mothers noted that while Charlotte offers many resources for children, they are often not in their neighborhoods or within walking distance. Traveling to multiple locations, especially by public transport, is a major challenge. Providers echoed this, adding that long distances and wait times can often force parents to take an entire day off work.

Neighborhood SES Disparities & Concentrated Disadvantage. Mecklenburg’s Latino population is highly concentrated in just a few neighborhoods (i.e. Latino clusters) with significant resource disparities that can hinder Latino family resource access and young Latino child development.

- **Concentrated Child Poverty & Child Development Risk:** One in four young children (ages 0-5) in Latino cluster neighborhoods live in poverty, nearly 10 percentage points higher than other Charlotte neighborhoods. This is concerning because concentrated poverty is linked to poorer academic performance and more social, behavioral, and health issues. (Redd et al, 2024).
- **Neighborhood SES Disparities & Isolation of Racially Minoritized Groups:** In Mecklenburg’s Latino cluster neighborhoods, socioeconomic indicators such as average income and education are notably lower, and racial isolation is significantly higher compared to other

Charlotte neighborhoods. The median household income is over \$18,000 lower, and fewer Latino adults have a high school diploma—57% compared to 72% in other areas. Additionally, Latino and Black residents comprise 62% of these neighborhoods, reflecting Charlotte’s long-standing racial and economic segregation. These neighborhood-level disparities create concentrated disadvantages that can limit Latino family access to economic opportunities and to informational social networks that can help them navigate the ECE system and its requirements (Leading on Opportunity, 2018).

Mecklenburg's Latino Cluster Neighborhood Resource Disparities		
	Mecklenburg's Latino Cluster Neighborhoods	All Mecklenburg Neighborhoods
Concentrated Child Poverty		
Young Child (Age 0-5) Poverty Rate	25.41%	16.87%
Neighborhood SES Disparities		
Median Household Income	\$50,460	\$70,290
% Total Population w/ BA degree+	30.87%	44.29%
% Hispanic Population w/ H.S. Degree	57.64%	72.30%
Isolation of Racially Minoritized Groups		
% Hispanic	25.06%	13.25%
% Non-Hispanic Black	37.22%	32.01%
% Non-Hispanic White	29.47%	46.57%

Policy-Level Barriers: Restrictive & Anti-Immigrant Policies

Providers, stakeholders, and Latina mothers all noted that fears and confusion related to immigration enforcement and immigration-related policies limit families' access to services and make it more difficult for ECE programs to operate. To understand these fears and confusion, we provide background information on key immigrant-related policies, then describe their consequences for young Latino families and ECE programs in Mecklenburg specifically.

Local-Level Policing Creates Broad “Chilling Effects” & Hinders ECE Enrollment

Background: NC House Bill 10 & Mecklenburg’s 287g Program. Despite widespread objections from law enforcement, including in Mecklenburg County, the NC legislature recently enacted HB 10, which requires all NC sheriffs to cooperate with ICE and act as immigration enforcers. Local-level policing, however, is not a new policy.

Mecklenburg County was one of the first adopters of HB 10’s predecessor, the 287g program, a local-level immigrant policing agreement intended to target criminal immigrants. The program, however, has been criticized for misuse and abuse by local police, some of whom use it as a broad tool for deporting immigrants and racially profiling Latinos (Capps et al. 2011). In 2018, Mecklenburg officially ended its 287g program following a shift in public opinion towards a more welcoming stance on immigration and the election of Sheriff McFadden, who pledged to end 287(g) and stop “tearing families apart.” (Morrill & Gordon, 2018).

Consequences: Broad Chilling Effects & Increased ECE Access Barriers. Our interview findings and local news reports indicate that Mecklenburg’s legacy 287g involvement and the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy fluctuations at the state- and national-level continue to create significant ECE access barriers for Latino families in Mecklenburg.

- **Broad 287g Chilling Effects Remain.** Mecklenburg’s participation in the 287(g)-program caused immediate harm with lasting chilling effects on the Latino community. Between 2006 and 2018, over 15,000 people in Mecklenburg were processed for deportation—more than any other county in NC (Arriaga, 2017; Wester 2018). Many deportees were fathers, leaving mothers to care for their children alone while facing the loss of housing and primary income (Dreby, 2012). Additionally, evidence shows that 287(g) and similar local policing agreements like HB 10 instill fear in the Latino community, creating barriers that reduce enrollment in ECE and access to vital health and social services (Perreira & Pedroza, 2019; Santillano et al., 2020).

- **Deportation & Driving Fears Hinder ECE Access.** For undocumented immigrant parents, the fear of being detected by law enforcement while driving is a significant barrier to accessing ECE services. Research shows that Latino ECE enrollment is lower in areas with heightened immigration enforcement due to fears of detention and deportation during transit (Santillano et al., 2020). Local news reports indicate that this fear continues to persist in Mecklenburg, despite the end of 287g and efforts by law enforcement, such as Spanish outreach campaigns, to rebuild trust with Latino communities (Armus, 2019). Once trust is broken, especially with a partner that a community was initially hesitant to trust, it becomes exceedingly difficult to restore.

Latino Distrust of Law Enforcement Persists

"Have you heard? You can call the police, no problem." That flier, written in Spanish, is being distributed at Latino businesses around the city by the Mecklenburg Police Department . . . But police are still struggling to build trust among the city's immigrants, legal or not, at a time when many are increasingly terrified - and misinformed - about what could happen if they interact with law enforcement.

-Charlotte News & Observer (Armus, 2019)

Restrictive State & Federal Policies Harm Mecklenburg Latino Families & ECE Programs

Background: Federal & North Carolina Immigrant Restrictions. To ensure equitable ECE access for Latino families, Mecklenburg's ECE system must navigate restrictive state and federal immigration policies. Unlike other states, NC severely limits unauthorized and some documented non-citizen immigrants' access to essential socio-economic and health systems that support family well-being and healthy child development.

- **Federal Public Charge Rule & Safety Net Use Restrictions.** Federal Public Charge rules can deny legal permanent residency or naturalization to immigrant families who use public benefits. Although the restrictive Trump-era rules have been rescinded, widespread confusion persists, leading many immigrant families to forgo essential services (Allen, 2022).
- **Limited Rights for Undocumented Immigrants in NC.** In NC, state laws severely impact unauthorized immigrant parents' ability to support their families. E-Verify limits job opportunities, driver's license restrictions create transportation hardships, and exclusion from higher education, health, and social support hinders social mobility. As a result, research suggests that young Latino children in mixed-status families—about 33% of Mecklenburg's Latino children—are likely to experience worse health, more hunger, and poorer school performance (Perreira & Pedroza, 2019).

State Immigration Policies Shaping Unauthorized Immigrant Rights	N.C. Has Policy	# of States with Policy
A. Restrict Unauthorized Immigrant Rights		
E-Verify Mandates: All New Employees	Yes	9
E-Verify Mandates: Some or All New Employees	Yes	21
B. Expand Unauthorized Immigrant Rights		
Extend in-state tuition & financial aid to unauthorized immigrants	No	22
State driver's licenses for unauthorized immigrants	No	16
Health insurance for some unauthorized immigrant children	No	8
Medicaid for unauthorized immigrant pregnant women	No	19

- *Limited Safety Net Access for Documented, Non-Citizen Immigrants in NC.* Unlike many states, North Carolina provides limited safety net access to legal permanent residents during the federal 5-year bar imposed by the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, which restricts access to

federal public assistance (TANF, Medicaid) for 5 years (10 years for food stamps). NC extends state

List of NC State Policies that Extend Safety Net Access to Federally Excluded Immigrants

Policy Extending Safety Net Support	Children Legal Permanent Residents	Adult Legal Permanent Residents	Pregnant Legal Permanent Resident Women	Unauthorized Immigrants (Children & Adult)
Food assistance during 5yr bar	✓	✗	Not Applicable	✗
TANF after 5yr bar	✓	✓	✓	✗
Medicaid during 5yr bar	✓	✗	✓	✗
Medicaid after 5yr bar	✓	✓	✓	✗

support only to children during this period, leaving immigrant parents and other adults ineligible. This exclusion reduces child enrollment in public benefits due to fear and confusion, directly harming children by failing to protect them from food and financial hardships. (Van Hook & Ballistreri 2006).

- *North Carolina's English-only Law Discourages Integration.* NC's English-only law designates English as the state's official language, focusing on its use in government and legal proceedings. While not banning other languages, it discourages bilingual programs, negatively affecting non-English-speaking immigrant families and diminishing the broader immigrant community's sense of belonging (Perreira & Pedroza, 2019).

Consequences: Immigrant “Chilling Effects” & ECE Service Disruptions. Our interview findings indicate that these restrictive federal and state policies create broad “chilling effects” that reduce Latino family enrollment in ECE services and hinder the ability of ECE programs to operate effectively.

- *Creates Eligibility Confusion:* Several Latina mothers reported confusion about benefit options and their qualifications, leading to a lack of enrollment in programs. Providers also often struggled with benefit eligibility confusion for immigrants with varying statuses and were unsure how to advise. Complicating matters, service providers were often hesitant to inquire about families' statuses due to the sensitivity of the question, which further prevented them from providing accurate guidance.
- *Creates Fear & Mistrust in Accessing Services:* Providers noted that immigration fear remains a barrier that often results in immigrant families not accessing resources. They noted that even families with legal status are fearful that using resources will hinder their ability to naturalize or become green card holders because of federal Public Charge rules, which discourage and penalize immigrant public benefit use.
- *Limits ECE Workforce Diversity.* Providers noted that restrictive immigration policies create staffing challenges and limit ECE workforce diversity. Despite a pool of qualified Latino educators, ECE programs often cannot hire them due to documentation issues. Even those with legal work status (e.g., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival recipients,

“We need to help families understand that just because their services are located within the County Health Department, citizenship or documentation is not required.” –Service provider

a relief program from deportation) face barriers, as NC requires them to pay out-of-state tuition—up to \$1,750 more per course. This makes it difficult for many Latino professionals to obtain U.S.-based credentials and for ECE providers to diversify their workforce.

COVID-19 Related Barriers: Long-Term Challenges

Covid-19 significantly strained ECE centers and young Latino and immigrant families, creating long-lasting effects for Latino family ECE access in Mecklenburg.

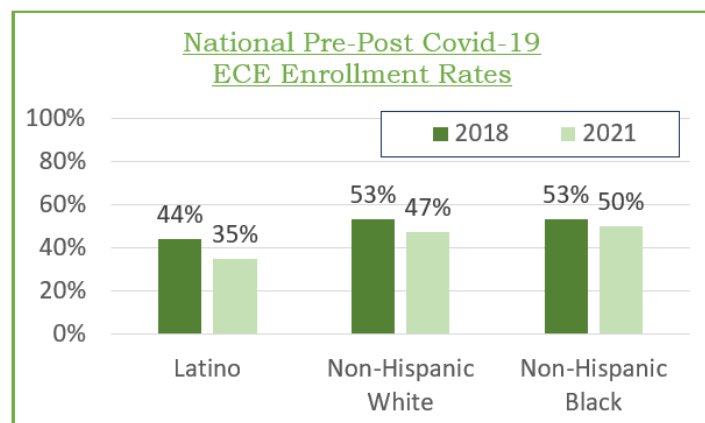
Strained Early Care & Education Capacity & Long ECE Waitlists: Covid-19 has strained the capacity of ECE centers to meet parent demand. During the pandemic (July 2020), 151 childcare centers in Mecklenburg closed, and overall child ECE enrollment declined by 54% across the county (CCRI). Though childcare providers have largely reopened, staffing shortages have resulted in waitlists, which leaves a sizable share of Latino families with limited or no ECE options (Mecklenburg County, 2022; Leshner 2022).

Heightened Latino Family Financial Stress & Exclusion from Covid-19 Relief Funds: Nationally, pre-post pandemic (2019 to 2021) Latino child poverty rates increased by 4.2 percentage points (from 23.0% to 27.3%)—more than double the national average and the highest for any racial/ethnic group (Chen & Thomson, 2021). Additionally, because a large share (upwards of one-third) of Mecklenburg’s young Latino families are mixed status, many were initially excluded from federal Covid-19 stimulus checks—\$2,400 for couples and \$500 per child—under the CARES act, which excluded families with any unauthorized immigrant member (Gelatt & Chishti, 2022). Thus, though child poverty rates are improving nationally, many young Latino families in Mecklenburg may continue to struggle to afford basic needs and ECE related services.

Larger Latino ECE Enrollment Gaps & Long-term Educational Challenges: Nationally, lagging ECE enrollment rates induced by Covid-19 remain a challenge, particularly for Latinos. In 2021, the Latino ECE enrollment rate was 9 percentage points lower than before the start of the pandemic (2018). This decline is greater than that for non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks.

Though the exact ECE enrollment rates and educational consequences for young Latino children in Mecklenburg are largely unknown, evidence suggests they are likely to be severe.

As a result of the pandemic, for instance, over 95% of 3rd grade Latino children in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system are expected to need remedial intervention to be on track for college and career readiness (Della Costa, 2022). These Covid-19 educational challenges underscore the importance of increasing young Latino ECE enrollment and creating supports to address unique pandemic-shaped ECE



experiences.

Low COVID-19 and Routine Vaccine Rates Increase Health Risks for Young Latino Children:

Vaccine protection is crucial for Mecklenburg’s young Latino children and families. Although the first Covid shot vaccination rate among Latino adults has improved to 67%, higher than most other demographics, efforts are needed to reach young children, with fewer than 5% of those under 5 vaccinated against COVID-19 and many missing routine vaccines (KFF, 2023; NC DHHS, n.d. Williams & Rudowitz, 2024). The percentage of kindergartners up to date on required vaccines has not returned to pre-pandemic levels (Williams & Rudowitz, 2024). Mecklenburg’s ECE system could play a key role in boosting vaccination rates and COVID-19 protections for young Latino children and families.

FACILITATORS PROMOTING LATINO FAMILY ECE ACCESS

Though there are multiple Latino family ECE access barriers in Mecklenburg County, there are also multiple Latino family ECE access facilitators. Mecklenburg’s ECE and child development system should strengthen and build upon these facilitators to engage more Latino families.

Culturally Relevant Programs & Curriculum: Latina mothers expressed gratitude for bilingual programs, like Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, because they felt welcomed and liked that the programs valued diverse cultures:

- ***Culturally and Linguistically Inclusive Programs:*** Latina mothers noted that they wanted culturally relevant programs that they can trust; where they feel comfortable leaving their child and where they themselves can actively participate as a parent. They applauded Mecklenburg’s bilingual educational opportunities, but they noted that programs remained scarce.
- ***Inclusive Curriculum Materials:*** Additionally, they want programs to include culturally diverse educational materials as part of the curriculum. This includes books in multiple languages, as well as materials that reflect narratives in which diverse characters, including Latino children, are represented. The challenge, as noted by one provider, is that bilingual and culturally diverse resources are often more expensive.

Linguistic Gaps & The Importance of Bilingual Supports: Latina mothers emphasized that, due to English language challenges, it can be difficult to communicate effectively with providers, even when both parties are trying in good faith.

- ***Bilingual Supports Minimize Language Barriers.*** Latina mothers noted that bilingual supports within the ECE system, when available, were a vital resource they used to connect to family and child development support services broadly. Stakeholders and providers highlighted the need for public-facing staff to have access to language resources and for ECE programs and services to be linguistically accessible to build a sense of community.

Trusted & Welcoming Programs: Latina mothers conveyed the importance of trusted community resources, such as bilingual ECE providers and local churches, to navigate

Mecklenburg programs and to reduce fear and confusion stemming from different and sometimes conflicting immigration-related policies.

- **Religion & Churches:** Latina mothers emphasized the importance of local churches for developing community and accessing ECE resources. Churches are critical places for many Latino families to exchange information and they can serve as entry points for otherwise siloed programs to promote their services to eligible families. Multiple parents said that relationships through their church community helped them identify and access their ECE program.
- **Recognize Latino Cultural Diversity:** Many service providers intentionally seek to provide culturally sensitive and relevant assistance. For instance, one medical provider proactively sends training materials and information about different cultures to colleagues in other practices with the hope of improving cultural competency broadly. Another service provider noted that they recognize Latino cultural diversity and gave a simple example of how knowing and using different food terms across countries can make *all* Latino families feel welcomed.

“When I start every interview I ask, what are some of the cultural beliefs you feel strongly about? That way I don’t offend anyone, because I’ve noticed that lots of things we do here in the U.S. are not done in South American or Latin American countries.”

-Service Provider

Two-Generation Approaches to ECE: Several ECE service providers sought to address needs that the family had beyond early care and educational experiences for the child, such as implementing parent classes and providing for acute material needs. These ECE centers often strive to form an engaged and safe community for the whole family. They offer educational classes for parents, as well as children. In addition, they work to connect parents to external resources, including trauma-informed therapeutic services for parents and early intervention programs for children. Several Latina mothers expressed gratitude for these resources and for the sense of belonging they found within their child’s ECE community.

Innovative Program Services & Outreach Efforts During Covid-19: Many stakeholders and providers sought creative ways to retain accessibility during the pandemic.

- **Program Revisions:** During the pandemic, programs often shifted to online services that could be fully offered through Zoom, or they created new, smaller groups to minimize Covid-19 risk for in-person participants. As a result, many parents continued to take up the programs offered despite uncertainty related to the pandemic.
- **Efforts to Expand & Reach More Families.** Providers have retained many initiatives from the Covid-19 response, such as providing material resources like food items and gas cards during financial hardships, as these wraparound services have proven to be effective long-term. However, maintaining these programs is challenging with funding cuts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance equitable access to ECE for Latino families in Mecklenburg County, several key recommendations have been identified based on insights from Latina mothers, service providers, stakeholders, and the findings of this study:

1. **Improve Access to Bilingual and Bicultural ECE Information:** Create clear, multilingual, and accessible guides and resources about available ECE services. Utilize

community outreach strategies relying on trusted organizations like churches and bilingual service providers to disseminate information effectively, particularly targeting newcomers and those with limited English proficiency. Additionally, consider creating or leveraging existing online resources or databases that are regularly maintained and updated to provide accurate and timely information.

2. ***Provide Bilingual Parent Liaisons to Help Navigate Resources:*** Latina mothers expressed a desire for representatives to guide families with young children toward the resources available so that access is not dependent on either a lucky community encounter or an internet search. Ideally, these resources should be multilingual.
3. ***Promote Flexible ECE Program Options & Stay-at-Home Parent Supports:*** Develop and expand flexible ECE program models that cater to the varied non-standard work schedules and preferences of Latino families, including part-time options and parent-centered resources tailored to the large share of stay-at-home Latino/a parents.
4. ***Create Affordable Community & Recreational Activities:*** Mothers noted a preference to engage with their children in community-sponsored activities, but they struggled to find affordable programs and recreational activities for toddlers.
5. ***Expand Affordable ECE Options & Subsidy Eligibility:*** Advocate for increased subsidies and financial assistance programs to make ECE services more affordable for low-income Latino families, including those with stay-at-home parents. Address eligibility barriers, such as the current work requirement in Mecklenburg's subsidy program, which excludes the large share of Latino families with a stay-at-home parent.
6. ***Create More Holistic, Two-generation ECE Supports.*** Many young Mecklenburg Latino families could benefit from more holistic ECE services that integrate parental education, English language acquisition, and workforce development. Additionally, offering wrap-around services—such as financial assistance and food support—could help alleviate financial strain and reduce disparities in healthcare access.
7. ***Enhance Cultural Sensitivity Training:*** Expand training programs for ECE providers, administrators, and the higher education institutions preparing them to include comprehensive cultural sensitivity training. These programs should emphasize understanding and respecting the diversity of Latino communities, as well as their family values, preferences, and strengths.
8. ***Increase Bilingual & Bicultural Staffing:*** Recruit and retain a diverse workforce that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of Mecklenburg's Latino population. This can improve communication, trust, and the ability to address unique Latino family preferences, strengths and needs in real-time.
9. ***Strengthen Culturally Relevant Service Provider Coordination:*** To improve holistic ECE care for Latino families, service providers highlighted the need to make referral

systems (e.g., NC Care 360 initiative) more culturally relevant. To be effective, these systems must integrate the Latino population from inception to mitigate language and cultural barriers affecting parents' ability to follow-through with referrals for services and clarify program eligibility for mixed-status Latino families.

10. ***Broaden ECE Community Partnerships:*** Collaborate with trusted community organizations, such as local churches and bilingual service providers, to establish referral networks and provide holistic support beyond ECE, including access to job training and health services.
11. ***Combat Discrimination & Anti-Immigrant Policy Barriers:*** Implement anti-discrimination policies within ECE programs and advocate for inclusive local and federal policies that support immigrant families' access to ECE services (and wrap-around services more broadly) without fear of repercussion.
12. ***Sustain Covid-19 Innovations:*** Secure funding to continue beneficial Covid-19 response initiatives, such as wrap-around services and virtual engagement tools, to maintain and enhance Latino family engagement in ECE programs.

By following these recommendation, Mecklenburg County can create a more equitable ECE system that supports the upward mobility of Latino children and their families.

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