

Common Start Coalition Focus Group – SUMMARY REPORT

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women

Monday, November 17, 2025

Q&A BREAKDOWNS

What are your current childcare arrangements with: family and/or other providers?

Overview of Categories – participants fell into four groups.

1. Parents with current childcare needs
2. Family members providing childcare
3. Parents who previously used childcare
4. Childcare workers and those in related fields

1. Parents with current childcare needs.

- A. **Heavy reliance on grandparents and extended family.** Almost all current parents reported leaning on parents or in-laws for daily or supplementary childcare. Family support filled gaps created by hybrid work schedules, early release days, or weekend needs.
- B. **Patchwork schedules combining daycare/school with family care.** Parents often combine daycare/school hours, parent work or university schedules, and additional childcare from relatives for after-school or early-release days. This patchwork often changes week to week.
- C. **Challenges with special education, early intervention, and IEP access.** Difficulty finding in-home or out-of-home IEP services or early intervention programs. Families often had to commute long distances or even more towns to access services. Lack of after-daycare service hours makes it difficult to schedule therapy for children with special needs.
- D. **High cost and low quality of available centers.** Some parents reported seeing poor standards of care in local centers. Quality concerns were raised by parents who work in or write about childcare.
- E. Prior experiences as teen parents shaped access to childcare. One parent emphasized the importance of teen-parent vouchers, free IEP preschool time, and home visits that allowed her space to continue her own pursuits.

2. *Family members providing childcare.*

- A. **Family absorbing costs due to unaffordable childcare.** Costs of hundreds of dollars per week (even for part-time care) drives families to rely on grandparents.
- B. **Family stepping in during transitions or instability.** Families consistently act as a buffer when parents move, change childcare providers, or wait for voucher-based placements.

3. *Parents who previously used childcare.*

- A. **Reliance on community networks when lacking immigration status or language fluency.** Previously undocumented parents depended on community connections rather than formal systems. In the past, they were not asked about immigration status, enabling access that is no longer available to new immigrants.

4. *Childcare workers and those in related fields.*

- A. **Increasing reliance on multigenerational care.** Many families depend on grandparents, creating challenges for communication and support from schools and providers.
- B. **Structural barriers: transportation, after-school access, and adolescent supervision.** Students frequently cannot attend after-school events due to a lack of transportation. Older children often end up unsupervised in public spaces, creating safety concerns.
- C. **Severe shortages in infant care.** Virtually no infant slots in many communities. Waitlists are long and some centers charge flat rates equivalent to a month of rent regardless of attendance days.
- D. **Instability undermining early development.** Infants are sometimes moved between programs as slots open, harming developmental consistency.
- E. **Rapidly growing need for bilingual early education.** Increases are seen in Spanish-speaking and Haitian-Creole-speaking families, along with a myriad of others. Some regions have begun offering language-specific family childcare programs but need far exceeds capacity.
- F. **Cost burdens on working mothers, especially immigrants.** Childcare costs equal or exceed rent, particularly for women with new citizenship who work multiple low-wage jobs. Mandatory overtime in healthcare settings creates overnight childcare gaps, forcing some women to leave the workforce.

How has your ability to access childcare affected other parts of your life, like your employment/workforce participation or pursuit of education?

1. Impact on employment and workforce participation.

A. High childcare costs often consume half or more of a parent's income. Parents frequently require remote or hybrid schedules to balance childcare needs. Lack of childcare forces some parents to reduce hours, leave jobs entirely, or depend heavily on family members. One participant noted that grandparents are increasingly less available due to later retirement ages, reducing informal care options.

2. Barriers to childcare assistance and voucher access.

B. Long state voucher waitlists—reported up to 30,000 families—mean children often age out before families receive support. Parents note that vouchers can be easily lost during period of instability (e.g., COVID). Local childcare funding is limited; programs can be small, seasonal, or depleted quickly due to the high volume of need.

3. Necessity of flexible work arrangements.

C. Many parents rely on extremely flexible or piecemealed schedules of daycare, camps, IEP services, and family help. Summer care is particularly difficult; many camps end midway through the day, leaving several unpaid hours to cover the day. Flexible Spending Accounts or Dependent Care Accounts help but typically cover only a small fraction of the overall costs.

4. Effects on educational attainment.

D. Lack of childcare prevents many parents—and especially single parents—from starting or continuing higher education. Participants noted that expanding childcare at colleges, high schools, and workplaces could significantly improve access to education.

5. Financial and emotional stress.

E. Parents described chronic stress from juggling work schedules, transportation, and strict pickup deadlines. Late pickups often result in fines, even when delays are caused by work obligations or traffic. Single parents reported financial precarity, with one facing shutoff notices and court visits due to childcare costs absorbing nearly all income.

6. Gendered impact of instability.

- F. Childcare barriers affect women's employment and professional growth, with participants needing expended support systems—vouchers, housing, healthcare, and guidance—to enable career progression and prevent burnout. One participant noted that their experience with domestic violence fostered fear, shame, and distrust of workplace resources and created a uniquely intense childcare challenge.

What changes (if any) have you noticed since the pandemic, and how have those changes impacted you or your family?

1. Shifts in workplace flexibility.

- A. Participants observed a post-pandemic tension between flexibility and employer control, with many employers appearing to 'clawback' remote-work accommodations, advertising hybrid roles but expecting primarily in-person work. This style of work has created a blurring of boundaries between work and home life, increasing pressure to be constantly accessible. At the same time, participants reported feeling less stigma about having children with organizations hiring higher-quality staff who thrive on flexible schedules. These organizations have embraced greater flexibility, including flexed hours.

2. Childcare resource availability and infrastructure.

- B. Early COVID led to expanded wraparound childcare services with more centralized information, greater language accessibility, and more proactive HR support—more aware that childcare support is essential to retaining employees. However, one participant noted that the healthcare and childcare sectors facing a serious workforce shortage, with educators stretched thin both during and after the pandemic.

3. Loss of work.

- C. Some participants experience job loss during the pandemic, particularly in education and afterschool programs. Returning to early education work, safety concerns and a lack of meaningful support despite state-level assurances to the public persisted.

4. Family strain during remote work.

- D. Those managing school-aged children described challenges with remote schooling, managing multiple schedules and finding space for everyone to work or learn simultaneously. Those providing childcare to young children while working remotely described the period as overwhelming and unsustainable, described as “the hardest time” of their lives.

In an ideal world, what type of childcare arrangements would you choose if cost/access were not a factor, and why?

1. Employer-supported childcare solutions.

- A. Participants imagined workplaces that provide on-site childcare supports, including dedicated spaces where parents or students can work while their infants play nearby. There was a strong desire for coworking environments that welcome children. Participants emphasized the need for employer-driven financial supports, including subsidies, reimbursements, or pre-tax savings mechanisms, to make care accessible.

2. Government-supported financial supports.

- B. Participants referenced global models where government offer significant financial assistance for new parents, including paid leave and in-home helpers. Many expressed the need for public or local stipends to reduce economic burden and enable choice.

3. Community-based cooperatives.

- C. An ideal facet of this system would include parent co-ops, where families share caregiving responsibilities and create community childcare networks. This is viewed as a way to combine trust with flexibility on the community level.

Some have proposed a system where affordable, high-quality education and childcare is available for all Massachusetts families. What features would you want such a system to have?

- 1. Flexible hours.** Care available beyond 7:00-3:00—including evenings, weekends, and overnights for nontraditional workers.
- 2. Cultural and language accessibility.** Dual language supports and culturally responsive care.
- 3. Choice in curriculum.** Access to different learning models, like Montessori, bilingual, etc. based on children’s needs.

4. **Supported, well-trained educators.** Ongoing professional development and updated state regulations that reflect current demographics.
5. **Centralized, accessible resource hub.** A single, accessible database for families to find childcare options and supports quickly and easily.

In an ideal world, who should pay more and who shouldn't in order to help fund this ideal system?

1. **Employers should contribute a greater share than the employees.**
2. **Wealthier individuals should pay more through taxation.**
3. **Government must protect provider compensation.** Participants noted that when government funding enters a system, care providers risk being underpaid.

REVENUE PROPOSALS

Increasing the sales tax or income tax:

Position	# of Participants	Notes / Rationale
Support	2	Supports income tax over sales tax; sale tax burdens families already struggling.
Oppose	5	Sales tax burdens caregivers; unfair to those without children.
Clarifying	4	More information needed

Closing loopholes in the state's sales tax so that it includes things that aren't covered today:

Position	# of Participants	Notes / Rationale
Support	6	Support closing loopholes.
Oppose	2	This could raise the prices of currently untaxed goods and services.
Clarifying	3	More information needed

Reversing recent federal tax cuts for the wealthy in Massachusetts:

Position	# of Participants	Notes / Rationale
Support (capital gains & estate taxes)	7	Most support for medium-large spending areas over small ones.
Support (capital gains only)	2	No support for estate tax for low-income heirs.
Oppose	0	-----
Clarifying	2	Is this state level, or advocacy for lobbying at the federal level?

Increasing taxes on things that are unhealthy or dangerous for kids:

Position	# of Participants	Notes / Rationale
Support	3	Cannabis and gambling could be included.
Oppose	6	Who decides what's unhealthy? Slippery slope of stigmatizing foods, focus should be on lowering the cost of health foods.
Clarifying	2	Would support if targeted at products marketed to children, like flavored vapes.

Increasing taxes on the state's employers:

Position	# of Participants	Notes / Rationale
Support	0	-----

Oppose	0	-----
Clarifying	11	Risk of cost passed down to workers; need details on implementation.

Allowing cities and towns to increase local taxes:

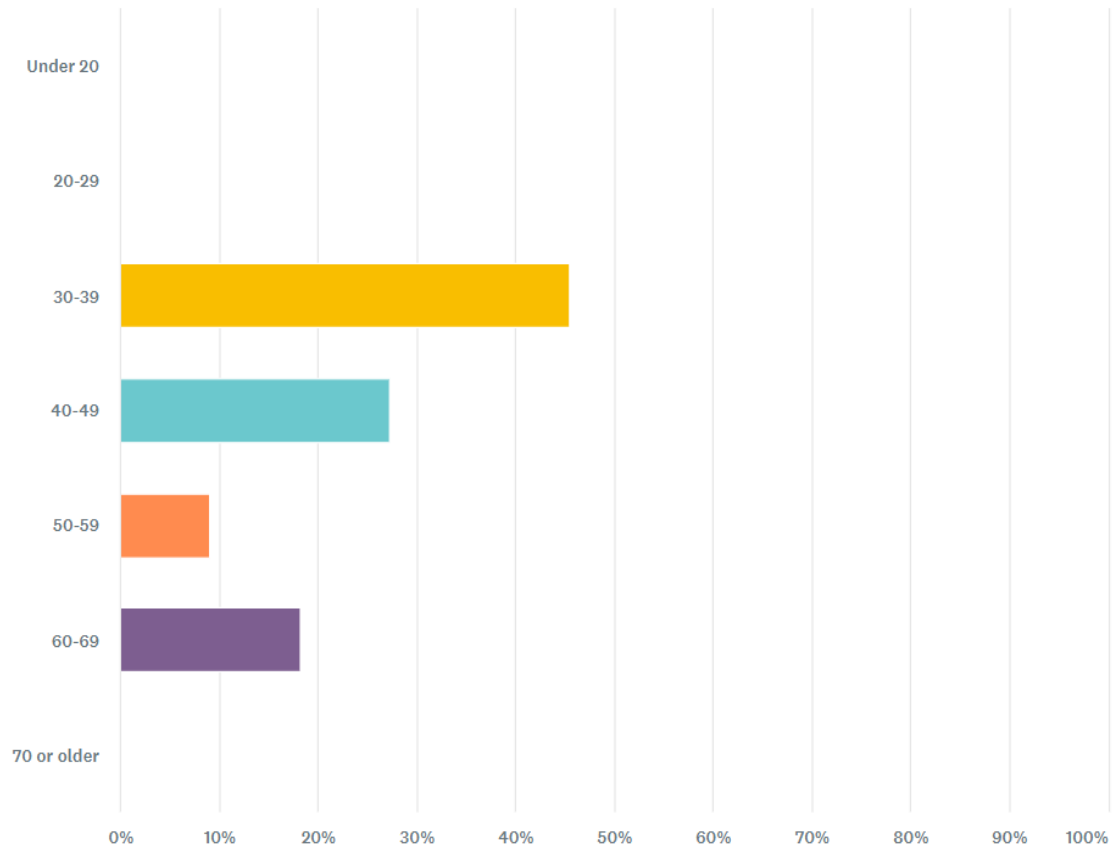
Position	# of Participants	Notes / Rationale
Support	0	-----
Oppose	6	Trickles down to low-income families, older residents without children oppose, and not all wealthy towns have uniformly wealthy households.
Clarifying	5	Questions about distributional equity, gateway cities, and municipal boundaries this would apply to. Questions about how much property taxes would rise.

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY RESULTS

Eleven women from across the Commonwealth participated in the focus group, verbally answering the questions provided by the Common Start Coalition (as noted above) – and answering the questions in the anonymous demographic survey (as noted below). The focus group was facilitated by MCSW Regional Commissions Director Tina Games with notes being taken and compiled by Regional Operations Coordinator Madeleine McCarthy.

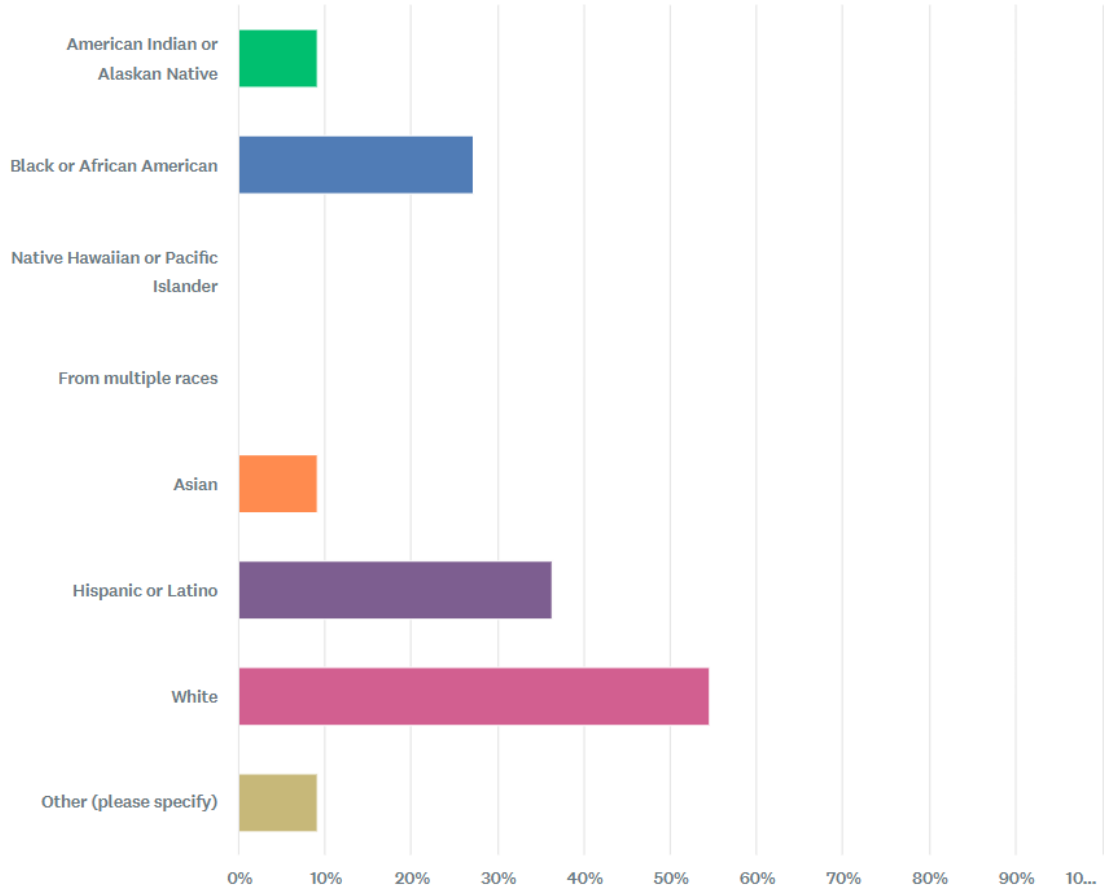
Age

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0



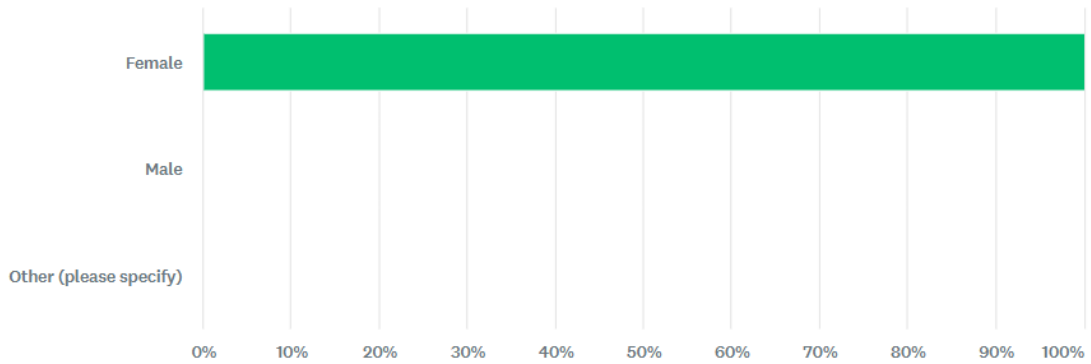
Race/Ethnicity (check all that apply)

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0



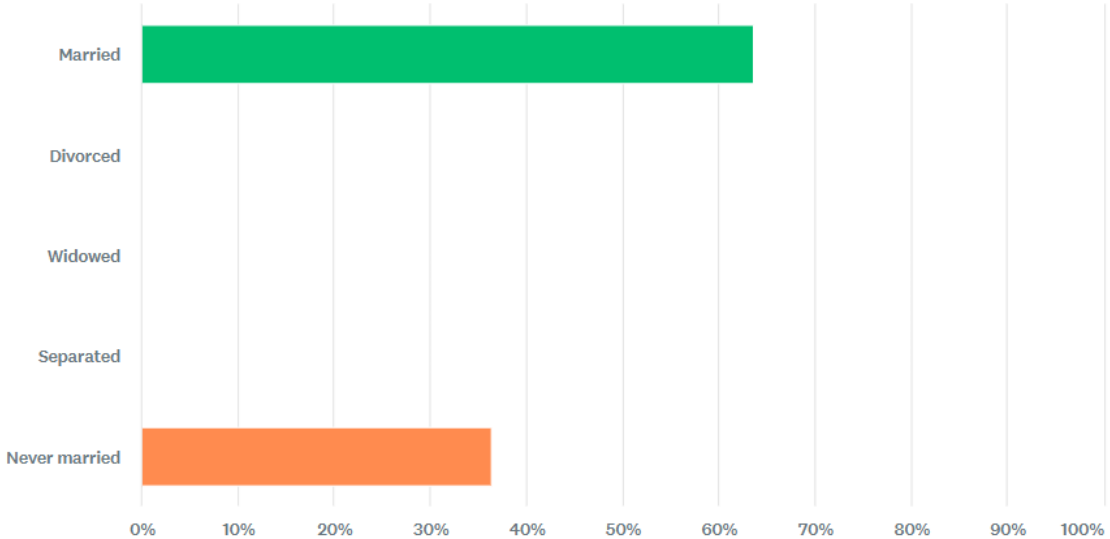
Gender

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0



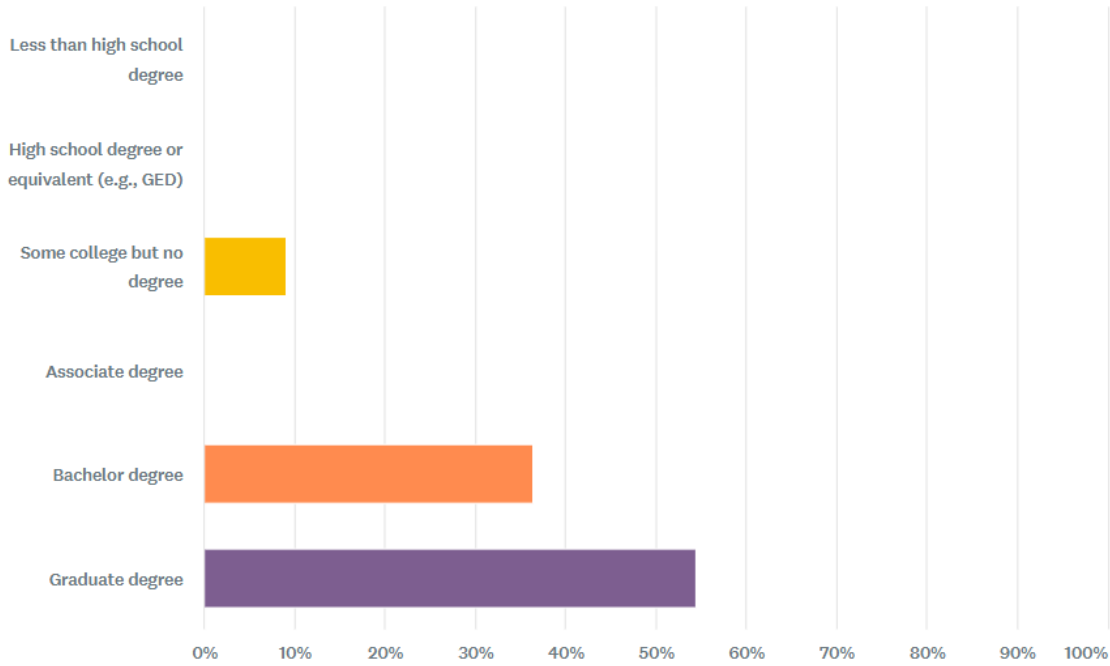
Marital Status

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0



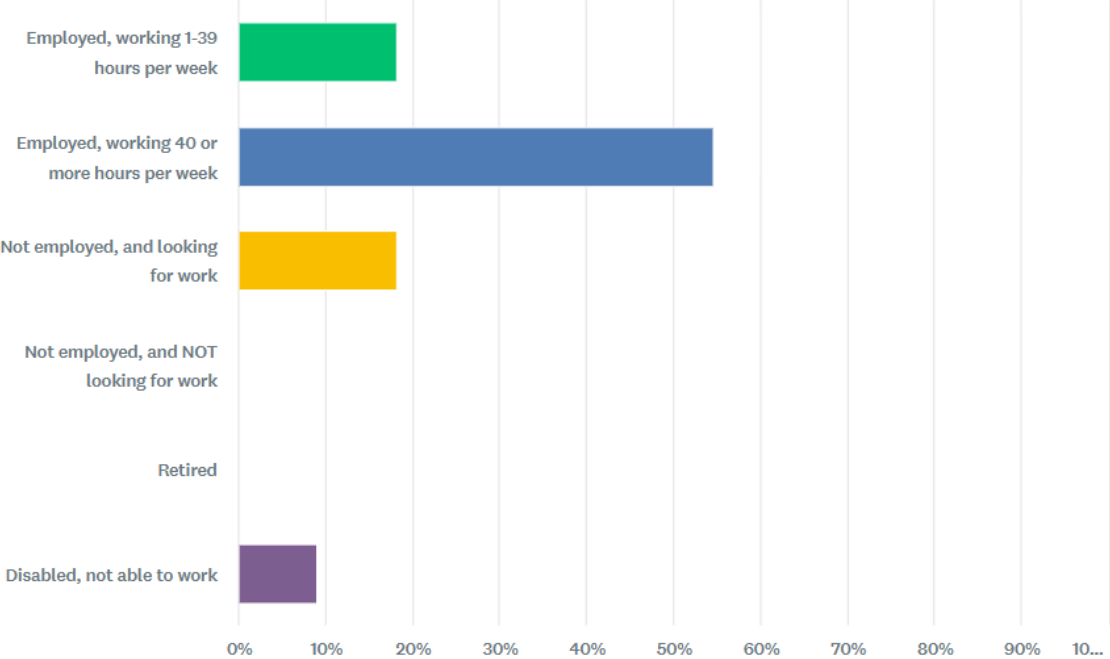
Education

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0



Employment

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0



Household Income

How much total combined money did all members of your household earn in 2018?

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0

