

The 2004 Students with Children Survey Report

Introduction

The Students with Children Survey was administered in November of 2004 to develop an estimate of the number of UM students with children and to collect information about those parents' child care needs. The survey built on the experience of the Rackham Graduate School, which administered a shorter version of the survey in the spring of 2001. Historically, estimates of the number of students with parenting responsibilities have been difficult to develop because the University does not systematically collect parental status information. While data is available on the number of dependents carried on students' health insurance and the number of students who apply for child care subsidies, these numbers offer incomplete reflections of the total number of students with children.

The Students with Children Survey results offer policy makers and program administrators useful data so that University initiatives can be based on a more realistic estimate of the number of students with children. Survey information can be used in designing services as well as for educating the campus regarding student parent demographics and key issues these students face.

The Students with Children Survey was designed by the Committee on Student Parent Issues (COSPI) and implemented by the Center for the Education of Women (CEW). Survey funding was provided by the Office of the Provost.

Methodology

A link to the web-based survey was emailed to all graduate and professional students enrolled in the Fall 2004 term, as well as to those enrolled undergraduate students who claimed dependents on their financial aid forms. In addition to these 14,705 students, the email was also sent to those graduate and professional students who were not enrolled but had registered within the past two years and not yet completed their degrees. Also included in the email were doctoral candidates who were not currently enrolled but had registered at some time within the past ten years and not yet completed their Ph.D.s. This sampling strategy was intended to reach students who might still be in the process of finishing their degrees, but not currently enrolled. The total number of potential survey respondents was 15,901.

UM Lessons, a university web tool for the administration of tests and surveys, was used to create the survey instrument and database. The survey was established so no respondent could submit more than one survey and the researchers would be blinded to his/her identity. First, survey recipients were asked to respond to an anonymous, one-question survey designed to help the University count the number of students who have parenting responsibilities. All students were encouraged to answer the survey, regardless of whether or not they had children.

Results

Of the 15,901 students who received the survey, 5,280 (33%) responded. Of these, 1,286 (24%) indicated that they had children under 18 years old, children over 18 with special needs, or were expecting a child.

Students who indicated they had children were then presented with another set of questions regarding their degree level, field of study, marital status, the employment and UM student status of any spouse/partner, number and birthdates of their children, location of residence, and current and preferred child care arrangements. Of the 1,286 students who indicated they were parents, 1,016 (79%) responded to the second set of survey questions. See Appendix A for the survey instrument and email invitation sent to potential respondents.

Provided below are highlights from the survey results. Complete analyses of the data are included in Appendix B.

Degree level and field of study: Thirty-five percent of respondents were working toward a doctoral degree, 28% toward a professional degree, 23% toward a master's degree and 9% toward a bachelor's degree. Respondents were also asked to identify their field of study. Twenty-four percent of respondents were enrolled in Business, 17% in Literature, Science and the Arts, 12% in Engineering, and 10% in Medicine. Most of the remaining 37% of respondents came from the schools of Nursing, Education, Public Health, Law, Social Work and Dentistry.

In order to assess how survey respondents differed from UM's general student population, CEW researchers analyzed the degree level and field of study of the two groups. As expected, the percentage of survey respondents pursuing an undergraduate degree was small relative to the proportion of undergraduates among the overall student population. Compared to the general undergraduate population, Students with Children Survey respondents were disproportionately from the schools of Nursing, Dentistry and Natural Resources and the Environment. The survey received a greater proportion of its responses from doctoral and professional degree students than from masters degree students relative to the overall student enrollment in these categories. Among graduate and professional students, survey respondents were disproportionately from the schools of Business, Nursing, Education, and Music.

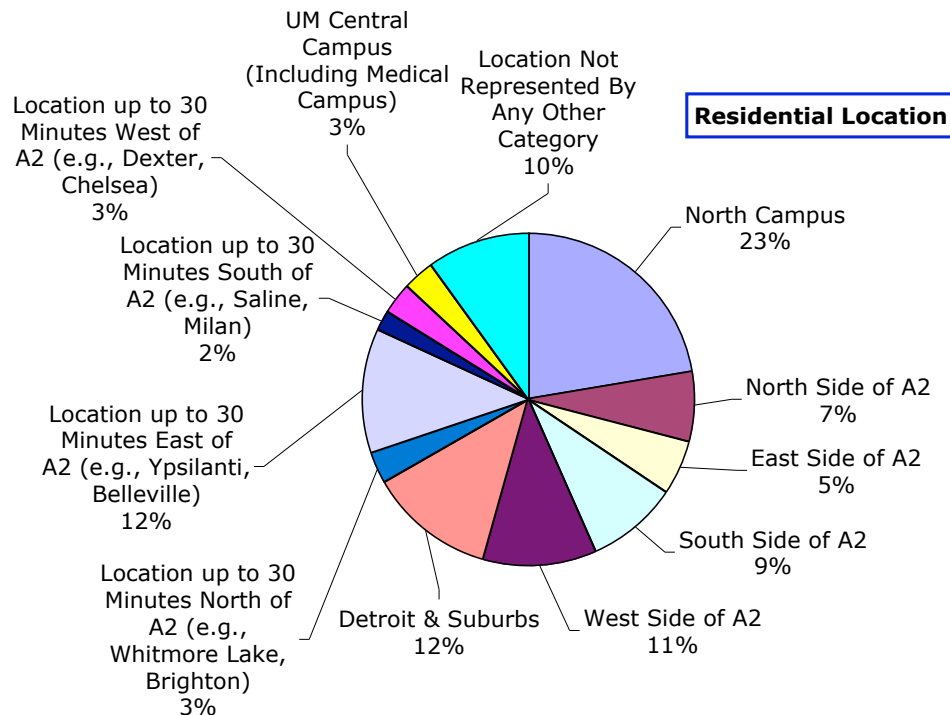
Spouses/Partners: Of the 1,016 respondents, an overwhelming majority was married (85%). Seven percent were divorced, separated, or widowed, 5% had never been married, and 2% had a same-sex or opposite-sex partner. Ninety-one percent of the spouses/partners were not UM students. When both parents were UM students, they were directed to submit a single response to avoid duplicate reporting.

When asked the question "does your spouse/partner work for pay outside the home?" 35% of 909 respondents answered "no." Twenty-nine percent of these respondents indicated the spouse/partner worked between 40-49 hours/week, 8% worked between 30-39 hours, and 6% worked between 20-29 hours.

Number and age of children: Fifty-three percent of the respondents had one child, 33% had two children, 9% had three children and 5% had four or more children. Among parents with only one child, one-third of these children are under one year of age and likely to still be nursing; another 27% are between the age of one and three years. One limitation of the survey should be noted here. Researchers were given poor technical advice when setting up the question related to the birthdates of children. Therefore, only the birth date of the first child listed was captured in the database; subsequent children's birthdates were incorrect. By analyzing the available birth

date information sorted by the number of children respondents had, it appears parents listed their eldest child's birth date in most cases. With this caveat in mind, it appears that among those student parents who have two or more children, 30% have an oldest child between the age of five and ten, while another 29% have an oldest child under the age of five.

Residential location: To better understand where student parents live, the survey asked for their approximate location of residence. The graph below demonstrates the results from this question.

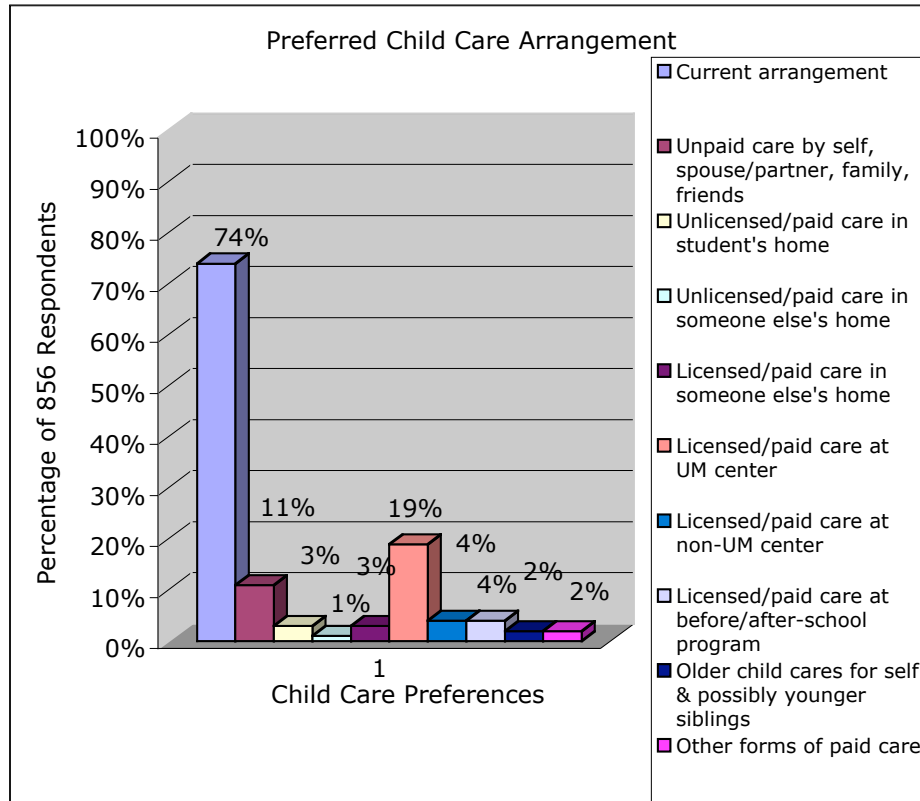


Child care arrangements, current and preferred: Respondents were asked about the type of child care arrangement they currently use and what type of arrangement they would prefer if they could choose a different child care arrangement. Out of 891 respondents, 58% currently use unpaid care by themselves, spouse/partner, family, and/or friends as their primary child care arrangement. (“Primary” was defined as the child care arrangement where the child(ren) spends the most hours during a typical week, Monday through Friday.) Twenty-two percent use non-UM childcare centers, while 11% use unlicensed but paid care in either their own home or the child care provider’s. Eight percent use each of the following types of care: licensed and paid care in someone else’s home, licensed and paid before/after school program, or an older child caring for him/herself and possibly also for younger siblings. Only 7% reported using a UM child care center.

Of the 856 students responding to the question regarding their preferred child care arrangement, 74% were happy with their current arrangements, 19% would prefer care at a UM child care center, and 11% would prefer unpaid care by themselves, their spouse/partner, family and/or friends. Four percent or fewer of the respondents preferred each of the other types of child care arrangements. Responses add to more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one type of child care if they had children in different types of child care. All child care options listed on the survey are shown in the following bar chart.

When the data were examined further to look at the preferred types of care by the care arrangement currently used, researchers found clear preferences for licensed over unlicensed care in the home of someone else and in favor of UM licensed centers over non-UM licensed centers.

When asked whether they used summer camp programs as a form of child care during any of the summer months, 78% of 938 respondents said “no.”



Respondents who indicated they would prefer to have their child(ren) in different child care arrangements were asked to explain why. Five reasons stood out among the many comments that were received:

1. Student prefers to have child cared for by one or both parents.
2. Student prefers the convenience and familiar setting that can be provided by a nanny, sitter or family member (other than the parents) in the child’s home.
3. A closer location to the student’s school/work was preferred (but this didn’t necessarily mean the student was seeking University-sponsored child care).
4. Student needs more flexible scheduling arrangements (part-time, evenings, weekends).
5. Student is concerned for a safe, high-quality learning environment for the child(ren).

General comments: At the end of the survey, students were given the opportunity to write in comments. These were later coded and placed into general categories. See Appendix C. The four categories receiving the most comments were:

1. Child care expenses (122 comments),
2. Lack of support for school/family balance (77 comments),
3. The high cost of housing, particularly North Campus Family Housing, and objections to reductions in the number of family units available there (29 comments), and

4. The need for more UM child care facilities so that student access is not impaired by long waiting lists (22 comments).

The largest number of comments related to child care expenses. Specific comments varied within this category. Some students commented that child care subsidies were not large enough and wished they could be used for unlicensed care. Many students felt their financial aid budgets did not adequately reflect the cost of raising children. Several said UM child care facilities were too expensive to afford.

Among students commenting on a lack of support for school/family balance, some described professors or departments that did not understand or respect the responsibilities of student parents (including parents supporting children over 18). Some said that inflexible academic requirements had slowed their time to degree or threatened to lower the completion rates of student parents. Others desired evening and/or weekend class offerings.

Appendix C outlines the comments noted above as well as other categories that received fewer comments, including concerns about health care costs, lack of infant/toddler care, and a number of recommendations to improve the lives of students with children.

Limitations of the Survey

Two technical problems may have impacted the survey response rate. Shortly after the survey was fielded, the UM Lessons system experienced an overflow of users, slowing and eventually shutting down the site completely. Anyone responding to the survey at this point experienced slow movement through the survey, possibly causing them to quit the survey without submitting. Other potential respondents sent emails of frustration that they were unable to log in to the survey at all.

Second, potential respondents were sent an email inviting them to answer a one-question survey. For those students who indicated that they had children, a survey screen was supposed to pop up, asking them to respond to a second set of survey questions. Because of an incorrect set-up, this screen was not viewable for the first few days of survey administration, leaving some respondents feeling misled regarding the length of the survey and possibly causing them to quit prior to completion.

Survey for Fall 2005

Students will be surveyed by email again in the fall of 2005 with the goal of achieving an even higher response rate than in 2004. All students will be encouraged to respond to the survey, whether they have children or not, so the University can gain as accurate an estimate as possible of the number of student parents.

Contact Information

Lindsey Bishop and Beth Sullivan prepared this report for the Committee on Student Parent Issues. For any questions regarding the 2004 or 2005 surveys, please contact Beth Sullivan, Senior Associate for Advocacy & Policy, Center for the Education of Women (bsulliva@umich.edu or 998.7225). A PDF version of this report is available on the Students with Children website (<http://www.studentswithchildren.umich.edu/>).

Appendices

- A. Fall 2004 Students with Children Survey and Email Invitation to Respond
- B. Data Analyzed from the Fall 2004 Students with Children Survey
- C. Comments Received on the Fall 2004 Students with Children Survey