

# Raising Clark County Issue Brief: **CHILD CARE**



## **ABOUT THE PROJECT: Raising Clark County**

All children are filled with tremendous promise, and our community shares the responsibility for protecting and fostering their potential. Raising Clark County (RCC) is a multi-phase project designed to identify how Clark County Public Health (CCPH) and community partners can build supportive, safe, and stable environments so all children thrive.

### **Public Health Approach**

CCPH's Lifecourse team works to develop policies and implement systems change to improve community health and wellbeing. Lifecourse Theory suggests that each life stage influences the next, and together the social, economic, and physical environments in which we live have a profound influence on our health and the health of our community. The RCC initiative prioritized hearing from families with young children because this critical developmental window has the opportunity to positively influence the life-long health of Clark County residents.

CCPH will distribute a series of issue briefs that describe the content aligned to themes identified during both phases of data collection.

### **Raising Clark County Issue Briefs**



RCC Background



**Child Care**



Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs



Economic Security



Access and Connection to Resources



Built Environment and Safety



Working Parent and Employer Support



Hopes and Dreams



Breastfeeding and Postpartum Support



Community Connection



Equity and Inclusion

This brief summarizes existing data points about our local child care infrastructure alongside the voices of over 600 families raising young children from across the county. For more information about the project purpose, phases, and data collection methods, please refer to the [RCC Background Brief](#).

## ABOUT THE TOPIC: Child care

We know infants and children thrive when exposed to consistent and responsive caregiver relationships. These engaging and interactive environments stimulate the bonding and attachment required for healthy brain development and social-emotional skill-building, providing the foundation for a child's future learning and well-being. Access to affordable, high-quality care offers children a dedicated space designed to facilitate this period of rapid development using age-appropriate learning activities created by educators to promote child health and development. Access to affordable child care also correlates with reductions in family stress, which supports a continuation of responsive and attentive parenting outside of the child care setting.

In addition to supporting families at an individual level, child care also serves as essential community infrastructure, providing fundamental structure in support of local workforce needs. Parents and caregivers rely on child care to go to school and work – giving families the ability to generate income, support opportunities for wealth-building, home ownership, and support the economy.

There are a variety of child care models designed to meet families' unique needs, with a range of available settings, state licensing requirements, ages of children served, and hours of operation. Care can be provided through multi-age, multi-classroom center-based programs, home-based settings, worksite care, faith-based organizational care, summer camps, and networks of Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care. Many of these models include evidence-based, child-centered early learning curricula designed to promote kindergarten readiness as part of the care model, mirroring preschool settings typically provided by school districts.

### Key Child Care Definitions

**Licensed child care:** Child care programs offered in homes or facilities that follow the the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) to ensure children in licensed care are in safe, healthy, nurturing environments.

**Child care center early learning program:** Child care and early learning are provided in nonresidential group settings, such as public or private schools, churches, preschools, daycare centers or nursery schools. These facilities provide care for children ages birth through 12 for periods of less than 24 hours a day.

**Family home early learning program:** A licensed child care and/or early learning program that is provided for small groups of children (12 or less) in a residential setting.

**Friends, family, neighbor (FFN) child care:** Providers including grandparents, aunts and uncles, elders, older siblings, friends, neighbors, and others who help families by providing child care. In Washington and around the nation, FFN care is the most common type of child care for infants and toddlers and school-age children before and after school. FFN providers are unlicensed and not regulated by the state, although some FFN providers can receive child care subsidies for the care they provide.

**Child care subsidy:** Private or public assistance that reduces the cost of child care for families. Working Connection Child Care (WCCC) is an example where the state pays a portion of the child care cost for eligible families.

**Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP):** A free early learning child care program for children 3 and 4 years old and, in some locations, infants or toddlers who are younger than 3 years old. This program supports a child's development and learning and is funded by Washington state.

**Head Start:** A federally funded program for children ages 3 and 4. Early Head Start is for pregnant women and children birth to age 3. Like ECEAP, this program is free and supports a child's development and learning.

**High-quality child care:** A high-quality program that goes beyond essential health and safety requirements to protect the well-being of children and includes methods to support a child's overall growth and development, including their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development.

**Early Achievers:** A quality improvement and rating system in Washington to help families understand their child care providers' policies and practices. Child care providers participating in this program receive a rating between 1-5, which help families find high-quality child care and early learning programs. About 57% of all licensed child care centers in Clark County are enrolled in Early Achievers!

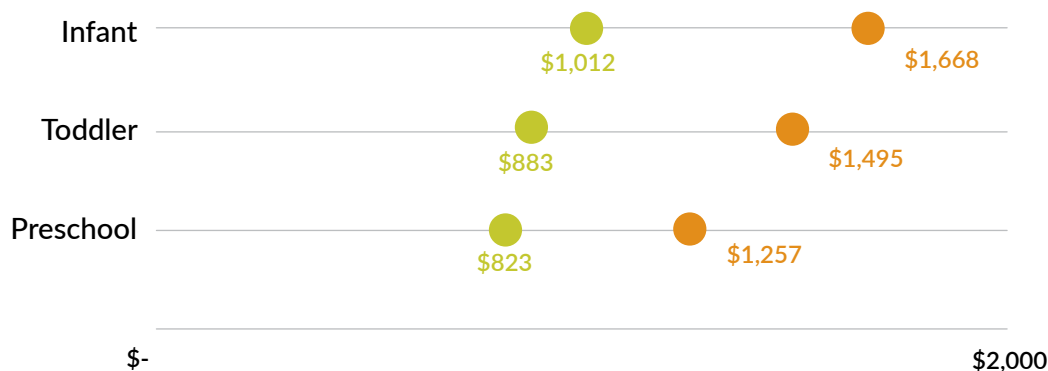
## BACKGROUND

**Ensuring children have high-quality child care and early childhood education can help build a strong foundation for future learning, behavior, and health.** The first years of life are crucial to a child's long-term development and well-being as the brain reaches approximately 90% of its development by age 5<sup>iii</sup>. Children who experience positive interactions at an early age benefit from improved success in school, the workplace, and greater community. Quality experiences within child care assist children with social, emotional, cognitive, and language development. Additionally, strong social-emotional connections with caregivers are linked to positive academic outcomes, interpersonal skills, self-regulation, and motivation<sup>iv</sup>. Child care also serves as a strategy for preventing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which can have lasting, adverse effects on the health and well-being of children. High-quality child care provides children with safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments that can buffer against challenging home environments and ensures a strong start in life.<sup>vi</sup> Access to affordable child care is linked to reductions in parental stress, a risk factor for child maltreatment, and other risk behaviors associated with ACEs<sup>vii</sup>.

**Child care is an essential economic service.** There are currently 14.1 million parents serving as part of America's workforce<sup>viii</sup>. Due to the high cost of child care, parents must consider leaving the workforce or reducing their work hours to care for their children, which significantly impacts household income, contributions to retirement/social security, and career advancement. In 2022, a national report found that 67.9% of mothers with children under age 6 participated in the labor force compared with 76.7% of mothers whose youngest child was aged 6 to 17<sup>ix</sup>. Resignations impact businesses, too. Employers lose revenue with gaps in employment (productivity), recruitment expenses, and training costs. A 2021 report estimated that U.S. businesses lose approximately \$13 billion annually due to employees missing work, leaving work early, or leaving their job altogether for child care-related reasons<sup>x</sup>.

**The high cost of child care.** The cost varies depending on the location, age of the children, care setting, the type of care needed, and the number of children requiring care. Data from 2022 shows that the average cost at a child care center in Clark County for an infant is \$1,668 a month and \$1,495 for a toddler<sup>xi</sup>. Fees for two children in a child care center exceed annual median rent payments in every state<sup>xii</sup>. Child care often exceeds the cost of in-state tuition at a public college. In-state tuition at the University of Washington averages \$12,242 a year or \$1,020 a month<sup>xiii</sup>.

**Child care costs vary by age group and licensed child care setting.** In Clark County, the monthly cost of **child care centers** is 50-70% higher than the monthly cost of care at **family home programs**. The highest costs are for infant care.



Data Source: Child Care Aware of Washington <https://childcareawarewa.org/2022-state-and-county-data-reports/>

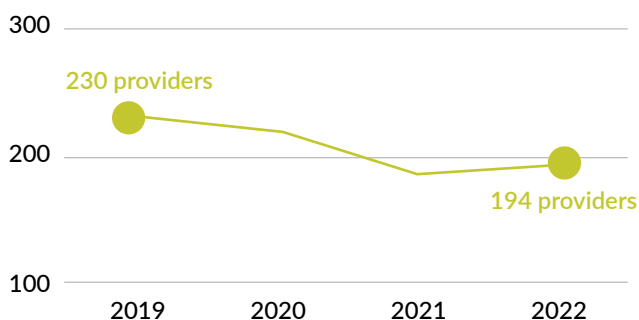
**Child care is a private good.** The kindergarten to 12th grade (K-12) education system is a critical example of a public good. Funded through a system of federal, state, and local tax structures and programs, our public education services are available to all school-age children. This equal access to K-12 public education serves an essential two-generation economic function, allowing parents and caregivers to attend work during traditional business hours. While essential, limitations exist for parents and caregivers working jobs with operating shifts outside of public school schedules, leaving many parents searching for before- or after-school care throughout the year, during scheduled breaks, and on some holidays. The K-12 system also experiences challenges managing budget cuts and funding shortages, classroom capacities and student-teacher ratios, infrastructure/maintenance issues, increasing social-emotional needs of students, and an increasing need to address safety and security protocols.

**Child care subsidies are not meeting the needs for all families.** Eligible families can receive various child care subsidies (or financial assistance) through tax credits, their employers, or through government programs that provide low-cost care. Eligibility requirements and programs vary by state. These programs offer support but could benefit from offering additional operating hours to reduce the complex child care scheduling arrangements for working parents. Additionally, families qualifying for subsidies need help finding and accessing care due to high demand and limited availability, as 49% of licensed child care providers accept subsidies<sup>xiv</sup>.

**COVID-19 reduced the overall supply of child care.** The pandemic further reduced the availability of child care as a result of permanent closures over the last four years. Clark County recorded a loss of 36 licensed child care providers, 16% of the area’s supply, between 2019-2022<sup>xv</sup>.

### Child Care Provider Supply

Over the last 4 years, **the number of licensed child care providers** in Clark County serving families decreased by 16%, from 230 providers in 2019 to 194 providers in 2022.

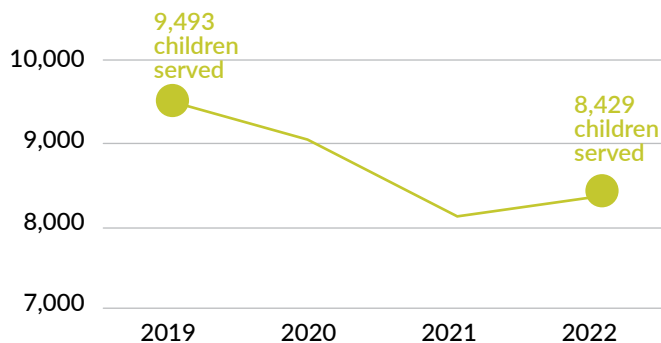


Includes licensed child care (centers and family child care) and exempt school-age programs.

**Data Source:** Child Care Aware of Washington  
<https://childcareawarewa.org/advocacy/#data>

### Total Child Care Capacity

Over the last 4 years, **the number of children served** by licensed child care providers in Clark County decreased by 11%, from 9,493 in 2019 (pre-pandemic) to 8,429 in 2022.

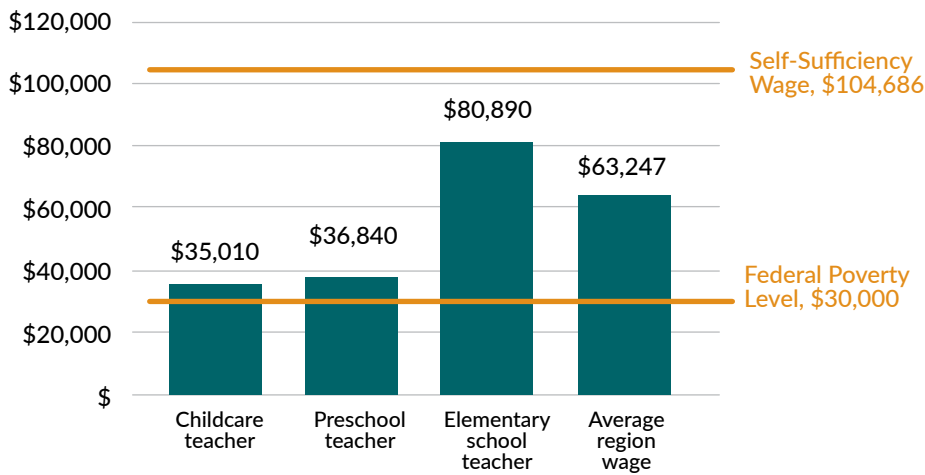


Includes licensed child care (centers and family child care) and exempt school-age programs.

**Data Source:** Child Care Aware of Washington  
<https://childcareawarewa.org/advocacy/#data>

**Inadequate wages for providers.** Child care and preschool teachers in Clark County are paid about \$45,000 less per year compared to their elementary school teacher peers<sup>xvi</sup>. The poverty rate for early educators in Washington is 17.7%, 7.9 times higher than the 2.3% poverty rate for K-8 teachers<sup>xvii</sup>. Early childhood educators generally leave centers and family child care positions for other jobs to earn more money and benefits<sup>xviii</sup>. A national survey of child care providers in November 2020 showed that 69% of respondents found it more difficult than before the pandemic to recruit and retain qualified staff<sup>xix</sup>. Staffing shortages can lead to fewer spots for child care and longer waiting lists, in addition to sporadic classroom closures due to staff absences.

### Annual Workforce Wages for Early Educators

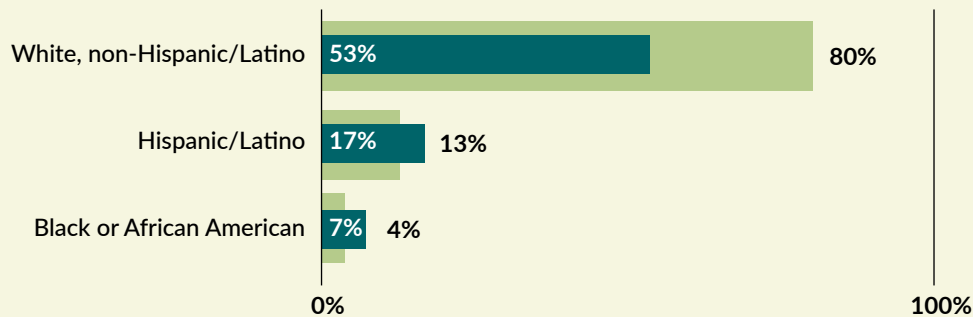


Self-Sufficiency Wage is for a family of 3 (1 adult, 1 infant, and 1 preschooler) in Clark County in 2023. Federal Poverty Level is for a family of 4 in 2023.

**Data Source:** Washington State Employment Security Department. (2022). Occupational employment and wage statistics (OEWS). Retrieved from: <https://esd.wa.gov/labormarketinfo/occupations>



Communities of color are overrepresented in the **early learning workforce**, compared to racial/ethnic make-up of Washington State's **overall workforce**.



**Data Source:** MERIT, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Expanded State Employment Status Demographic Data, 2017 <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/reports/CompensationTechWrkgrpRprt.pdf>

## SUMMARIZING THE ISSUE:

### Voices of Clark County Families

In the Raising Clark County project, parents shared how the local child care landscape has impacted their careers, finances, and family health. Their input describes the challenges of finding high-quality, affordable child care, as well as sharing the value of early educators and associated resources.



### What's Working for Families



**Resources in schools and child care settings are valued by families.** Child care subsidies increase access to affordable child care, educators trained in child development, and other supports for their families. Respondents highlighted teachers as a significant source of support. They also identified other school personnel, such as student advocates, family liaisons, counselors, child care directors and school administrators, as sources of knowledge and comfort.

**Child care subsidies are impactful for qualifying Clark County families.** Child care subsidies increase access to affordable child care and benefits associated with high-quality early learning.

Respondents identified various sources that provide subsidies or support of some kind including Head Start, Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF), Educational Opportunities for Children and Families (EOCF), Clark County and Child Care Aware.

“

*I love my child's speech teacher at our local elementary school. I also appreciate my kid's preschool. She loves it and the teachers care a lot and work hard.”*

- Female, in her 40s, white, upper-middle income

*DSHS child care subsidy and all DSHS services have greatly assisted my family. (Our child care center) has been extremely supportive and have gone above and beyond to help my family thrive and become stable.”*

- Female, in her 20s, white, low income

## What's Not Working for Families

**Navigating the complexities of the child care system results in challenges and increased stress for families.** Availability, accessibility, affordability, reliability, safety, and quality of child care options are all factors parents consider when navigating the child care system.



**Affordability:** Affordable child care allows families to work without depleting their earnings. Affordability was the most important factor identified by respondents regarding child care. Child care is considered affordable when it equals no more than 10% of a family's income. In most American families (especially single parent families) the costs associated with securing care amount to well over 30% of household budgets. This cost is crippling for most families, generating emotional and mental stress associated with making hard budget and career decisions about what is best for the family's current and future well-being.



**Accessibility & Availability:** Accessible child care means families have the care they need during the hours they need to work, study, and attend to other commitments.

Respondents highlighted the discouraging experience of encountering sometimes years-long wait lists to secure a slot. Intermittent lack of child care is a substantial issue for parents whose children attend programs tied to school year schedules and close for holiday or seasonal breaks.



**Quality:** A high-quality program goes beyond basic health and safety requirements and includes curricula and frameworks designed to support a child's overall growth and development. These applied curricula and approaches devote age-appropriate attention to social, emotional, intellectual, and physical child development. Children who receive high quality child care are more likely to develop skills of cooperation, teamwork, socialization, good confidence and self-esteem – equipping their brain with a foundation to thrive into adulthood. Parents voiced difficulty associated with finding quality child care that is also affordable.



**Outdated Provider Lists:** Parents and caregivers reported the registries and provider lists that are available to locate child care are regularly inaccurate and outdated. Finding the care that best fits a family's needs, even if they can afford it, can feel like finding a needle in a haystack. The spectrum of what is lacking, according to respondents, is vast. Issues ranged from lack of part-time care to lack of full-time care, lack of availability and high cost of infant care, lack of full-day preschool, lack of more affordable in-home providers, and lack of settings that provide non-traditional options (e.g. last minute/backup/emergency care, weekend care, and care outside of business hours).



**Infant care costs and availability – extremely hard to find and/or costs more than monthly take home.”**

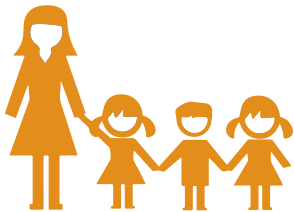
- Female, in her 20s, Asian, lower-middle income

**The lack of feasible child care options is impacting the workforce in Clark County.** Many families describe balancing the choice of spending most of their income on child care or leaving the workforce.



**Spotlight on equity**

Women's workforce participation in the United States declined between 2000 and 2016, and affordable child care was listed as a common reason for leaving. COVID-19 only exacerbated these challenges as there were 1.7 million fewer women in the workforce in September 2021 compared to September of 2019.<sup>xx</sup>



### **Low-cost preschool is a support that is missing in our community**

**Families in Clark County desire free or low-cost preschool options.** Many respondents identified free or low-cost preschool as a support that is missing in our community. Many parents and caregivers shared beliefs that access to quality early childhood education should be a public good that benefits all families.

In addition, many respondents who reported being “just above” or even “well above” qualifying income thresholds for free or reduced-cost preschool expressed that the financial burden of child care is a major source of stress. Those who do qualify for reduced-cost child care still have to navigate through options to find those that accept these subsidies.



*Finding child care was super hard and we got lucky. It was a really stressful process. I'm not even sure it's the best fit but starting the process over with long wait lists and how expensive it is feels daunting.”*

- Female, in her 40s, Hispanic, middle income



*Any kind of support for public access to child care for young children – public preschool would be amazing.”*

- Female, in her 30s, white, middle income



*There is child care subsidy offered by DSHS but unfortunately I 'get paid too much' as they don't take into consideration that I'm a single parent and I'm left with nothing from my paycheck after paying ridiculously high rent, utilities, food, and all other living expenses.”*

- Female, in her 20s, Hispanic, lower-middle income



## The Kindergarten-12th Grade System



Respondents also mentioned the K-12 education system in addition to early learning settings. Some families have children in child care and the K-12 school system. Respondents also interact with the K-12 system in preparation for transitioning their children to kindergarten.

### **Elementary schools are providing support, but there are still concerns with the school systems.**

Respondents highlighted how their respective elementary schools provide programs and staff that support their family, connect them to important resources, and offer opportunities for social connection through events such as family nights.

However, parents also listed many concerns about the K-12 school system. Families noted a lack of sufficient funding for schools and poor educational quality as areas of concern. Other sources of stress included large class sizes, bullying, and gun violence and school shootings.

Respondents also expressed concerns about poor teacher retention, lack of representation of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) teachers, and incongruent values systems between school district systems, educators, and families.

In addition to the challenges listed above, additional barriers exist for families and children from historically oppressed groups in Clark County when accessing both child care and primary school. Parents and caregivers with children with special needs face additional challenges finding child care and school locations that adequately support their individualized health and behavioral needs. The education and health care systems further complicate leveraging additional layers of supports, programming, and staffing necessary to help the child and family thrive, with responsibility often falling to parents to navigate these systems in isolation. Inadequate interpretation services in schools and health care settings create additional language barriers for families with first languages other than English. Interpretation services are critical to support families with communication, and the availability and quality of services varies widely across systems. A lack of diversity and welcomeness toward minorities in schools was also identified as an issue by respondents, underpinned by reports of experiencing racism.



***Increase in school violence - bullying, gun violence, administrations with their hands tied, little to no consequences due to politics. Lack of funding for 'extracurriculars' in school resulting in cuts - sports, art programs, clubs, languages."***

- Female, in her 20s, Asian, lower-middle income, on what causes stress

**FOR MORE INFORMATION,** please refer to the **Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs (CYSHCN)** and **Equity and Inclusion** issue briefs.

## COVID-19



### Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on fragile educational systems.

Parents shared feelings of anxiety and frustration when sharing experiences related to the historical and current impacts of the pandemic.

Ongoing school closures and strict illness protocols impacted respondents' abilities to effectively work and parent simultaneously at home. Other people's lack of caution or willingness to receive COVID-19 vaccinations also raised concerns about disease transmission for many parents.

Some respondents shared concerns of the potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 on their children due to a lack of educational and social opportunities resulting from being isolated.



***Inclement weather, pandemic outbreak, or any other small hiccup crashes everything we have to the ground. Schools/preschools close for days/weeks at a time, with no alternatives. No available backup/emergency care available, so we have to miss work. Very stressful. Feel very isolated and alone."***

- Male, in his 40s, white, upper-middle income, on what causes stress

## WHAT'S NEXT: Moving to Action



Voices from across Clark County have echoed other national and state data sources: families face barriers to accessing quality child care.

We **can** improve systems of support for families in Clark County.

Here are some ideas for how you can get involved in eliminating the child care crisis for Clark County.

**Share** this information with others, including your elected officials and the decision-makers in your community.

**Collaborate** with organizations in your area serving families and young children to amplify local needs and solutions.

**Include** considerations of families, especially families with young children, in your programming efforts, policy development, and collaborative community efforts.

**Leverage** resources, including the series Raising Clark County Policy Briefs, to inform action when addressing identified barriers to accessing affordable, high-quality child care for Clark County families.

**Encourage** civic participation for action in your community to address the needs of families and children.

**Visit our website to view more about Raising Clark County:**  
<https://clark.wa.gov/public-health/raising-clark-county>

## Questions?

Please email: [RaisingClarkCounty@clark.wa.gov](mailto:RaisingClarkCounty@clark.wa.gov)



**For other formats**, contact the Clark County ADA Office

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**Email** [ADA@clark.wa.gov](mailto:ADA@clark.wa.gov)



*Parents are left to fend for themselves and make choices or compromises when searching for child care so they can have kids and work."*

- Female, in her 30s,  
white, middle income

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