

Preconception to Age 5 Blueprint for Funding and Advocacy

Findings from Phase III –
Community Engagement

March 2019



Contents

Introduction 1

Common Issues Facing Fresno County Families 3

Challenges to Effective Systems Coordination 11

Takeaways and Considerations 12

Appendix A. Heat Map 14

Introduction

The Preconception to Age 5 Blueprint for Funding and Advocacy is a shared project between First 5 Fresno County (F5FC), Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission, the Central Valley Community Foundation, and the Fresno Cradle to Career Initiative, which aims to help improve the lives of children and their families across Fresno County. In order to create an informed early childhood community agenda, these organizations sought to gather community input from Fresno County residents through community engagement and discussion. First 5 Fresno County, with the support of Harder+Company Community Research, has led this data collection effort.

The following report details the findings from the engagements, including information on the methodologies used and information on the community members that contributed to this work. The report then details the most pressing issues facing Fresno County families today, as highlighted by parents with young children, and community stakeholders and service providers. The report then concludes by detailing systems coordination recommendations and considerations for organizations that provide services to young children and families.

Methodology

In October 2018, F5FC began engaging agencies that provide services to Fresno County families with young children via large-group convenings, engaging parents directly via local focus groups, and gathering insights from interested community members via a Community Input Survey. Given the early childhood focus of the Blueprint, community engagement discussions were primarily centered on issues related to health, early childhood care and education, and other factors to promote strong and resilient families. Areas of inquiry included:

- What common challenges or barriers do families with young children face when accessing services or programs? What strategies do families use when facing these challenges?
- What experiences have families had when accessing services for themselves and their young children?
- What additional supports or services would families with young children like to see offered in their local communities?

Being mindful of the diverse population residing in Fresno County, parent focus groups were facilitated in English, Spanish, and Hmong, and the Community Input Survey was translated and made available in these three languages. Through these various methods, F5FC had the opportunity to collect input and feedback from diverse segments of the county's population. At the end of all data collection, F5FC successfully engaged 350 individuals through in-person engagements, and 279 through an online and paper version of the Community Input Survey, in total, receiving input from **629 individuals** in Fresno County.

Sources of Feedback

F5FC gathered wide-ranging input via:

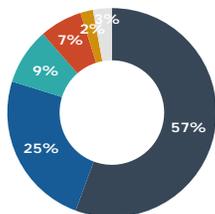
- Large-group convenings for community stakeholders and service providers
- Parent focus groups
- Community input survey

Exhibit 1 below summarizes some key characteristics of all the individuals reached through data collection. Overall, **the majority of participants identified as Hispanic/Latino** (57 percent), 25 percent identified as White/Caucasian, 9 percent as Asian, 7 percent as Black/African American, 2 percent as Native American/Alaskan Native, and 3 percent as another race or ethnicity. When looking specifically at parent participants, these demographic characteristics remain mostly consistent, with a slightly higher rate of Hispanic/Latino Participation (69 percent). Additionally, Exhibit 2 shows how many community stakeholders and providers versus parents were reached. Notably, while 27 percent of overall participants (including in-person and survey respondents) were from rural areas of the county, **65 percent of in-person parent focus groups participants were from rural areas**. Extensive outreach was conducted to engage these parents directly in their home communities.

Exhibit 1. Participant Characteristics



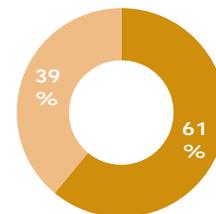
38 percent of participants identified as between the ages of 25 and 34. 29 percent identified as between 35-44 years of age.



The majority of participants identified as **Hispanic/Latino** (57 percent), while 25 percent identified as White/Caucasian and 7 percent identified as Black/African American.



Approximately **73 percent** of local participants (in-person and survey) are from urban areas in Fresno County. 27 percent of participants are from rural Fresno County.



61 percent of participants are the parent/guardian or primary caregiver of a child aged 0-5.

Exhibit 2. Breakdown - Parents and Community Stakeholders¹

	Parent or Caregiver	Community Stakeholders and Providers
In-Person Engagements	190	160
Community Input Survey	124	185
Total	314	345

¹ When completing the Community Input Survey, respondents could identify as a parent or caregiver of a child, an interested community member, or an early childhood professional or service provider. Multiple response options were possible. For this reason, the total number reported in Exhibit 2 exceeds the 279 individuals that completed the survey.

Common Issues Facing Fresno County Families

Overview

Asking both community stakeholders and providers, as well as directly asking parents with young children about the challenges and barriers they face in accessing services or programs, we are able to assess how relevant certain issues are to the success and happiness of families in Fresno County. Then, by sorting how frequently certain issues were brought up, we are able to identify the most pressing service needs families with young children currently face. A complete list of all the issues raised by families and community stakeholders can be found in Appendix A of this report, summarized in a heat map.

Of all the early childhood issues that arose from the data analysis, we were able to categorize issues into one of the eight domains below:

1. Access to high quality early care and education
2. Building parents' understanding of early childhood development
3. Access to quality health care services
4. Support with service navigation and access
5. Economic security
6. Access to mental and behavioral health services
7. Access to nutritious food
8. Access to safe community spaces

Although there was some general consensus about the most pressing needs, there were also some differences between what community stakeholders and providers, and parents with young children prioritize. The exhibit below lists the most highly relevant issues as noted by community stakeholders versus those most mentioned by families. The chart illustrates the percent of group discussions in which each particular issue was a highly relevant topic of discussion. For the purposes of these calculations, each group discussion was weighted equally, regardless of size.

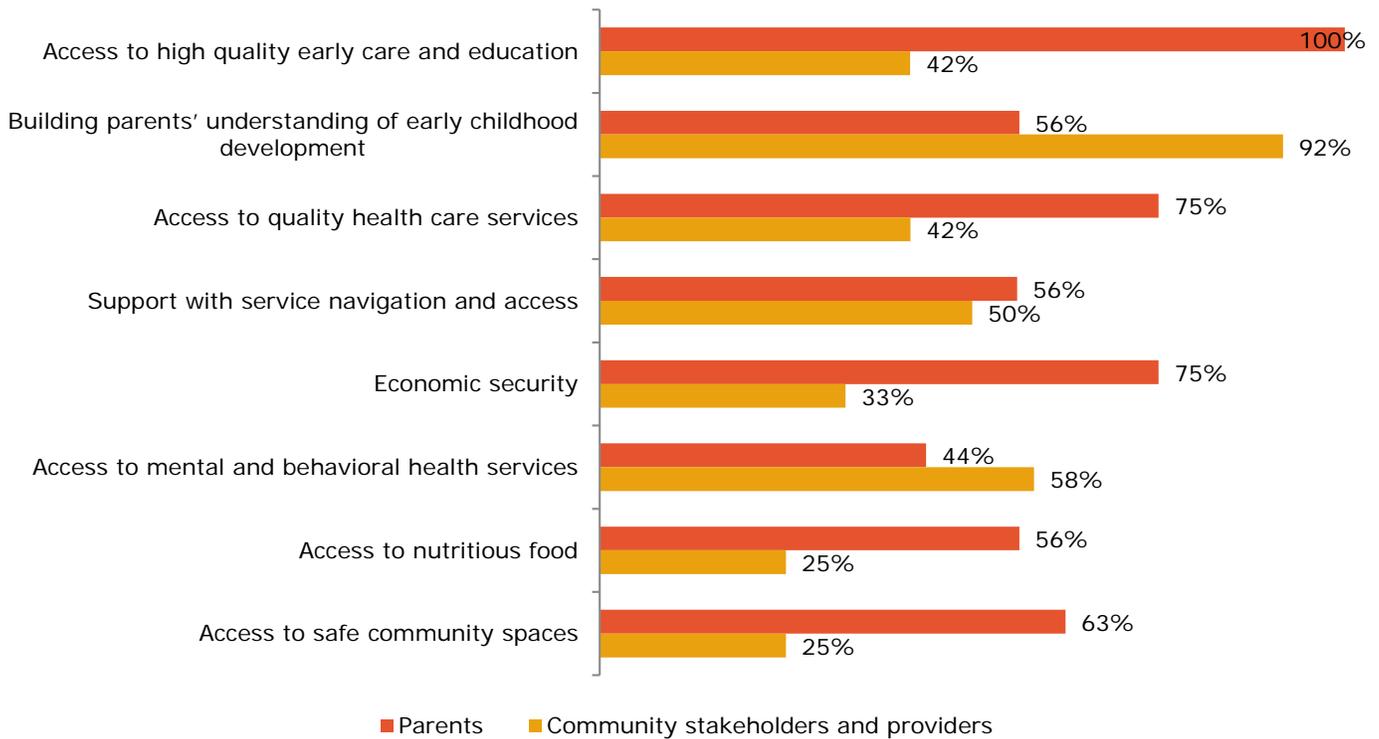
In the sections that follow, we provide detailed findings and representative examples for each of the eight issue areas.

Terminology

Throughout the report, findings will be shared from both the parent and the community stakeholder and provider perspective. When charts are used, findings from parents are shared in red, while findings from community stakeholders are generally presented in yellow in order to compare and contrast perspectives. For the purposes of this report, below are definitions for each respective group:

- **Parents:** Parents are caregivers of children who participated in the Community Engagement process through either in-person focus groups or the Community Input Survey.
- **Community Stakeholders and Providers:** This group includes community members invested in the success of the early childhood system, and/or providers who directly serve families with young children. This group participated in the Community Engagement process through either in-person large table convenings or the Community Input Survey.

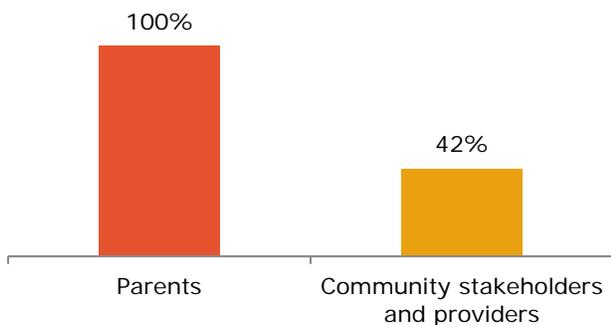
Exhibit 3. Top 8 Most Pressing Issues in Fresno County



1. Access to high quality early care and education

Overall, looking at both parent and community stakeholder and provider engagements, access to high quality childcare and education was **the most frequently cited challenge facing Fresno County families**. While there was general agreement on the importance of this issue, it appeared to be significantly more pressing and urgent for parents themselves. 100 percent of the focus group discussions with parents mentioned **childcare availability and costs** as a major challenge in their local communities, compared to 42 percent of community stakeholder and provider discussions. In addition, 56 percent of parent focus groups specifically mentioned that limited available hours discourage parents from enrolling their child in care.

Exhibit 4. Percent of parents and community stakeholders - Childcare cost and availability is a highly relevant issue in Fresno County



Due to the challenges parents face accessing childcare, they sometimes rely on family, friends, or neighbors to take care of their children. 38 percent of focus groups mentioned these informal caregivers play an important role in filling their childcare needs, sometimes going to great lengths to ensure a trusted family member provides childcare. One parent shared bringing her mother from Mexico to have her care for her children while she was at work.

In situations where informal caregivers are not readily available, parents have to compromise work in order to take care of their children. One parent shared her experience and how she came to the decision to stay at home with her children, saying, "I decided to stay home with my son because I figured, what's the point of both parents working if half of the income is going towards paying the daycare center?"

Even in communities where childcare might be readily available, **parents strongly hesitate enrolling their children due to mistrust or misconceptions about early childhood care and education.** Half of parent focus groups admitted that this distrust of early childhood care is a major issue in their communities, and about 1 in 5 of the focus groups with community stakeholders and providers agreed (17%). From the community stakeholder and provider perspective, this mistrust generally comes from undocumented Fresno County residents who fear requirement restrictions, however, the information from the Community Engagement focus groups indicates that this mistrust spans across families from diverse socioeconomic and legal status backgrounds, and that **mistrust of childcare providers is a major cultural challenge facing Fresno County today.** As one parent shared, "Even if it was the best daycare... I don't trust anyone else."

2. Building parents' understanding of early childhood development

Parents and providers agreed that there should be more education offered to parents in order to build their understanding of their child's development in their first years of life. Parents recognize the important role they play in their child's development, and want more support and training on what they could do to foster their child's growth. One parent summarized this point, saying "there is also a lack of education provided for parents to help their children. Like they say, the home is the first school before they actually go to school."

When asked how important certain services are to their communities, parents and early childhood stakeholders agreed on the importance of support services for parents. 79 percent of stakeholders and service providers and 69 percent of parents believe that parent education is a very important service in their community.

Specifically, when discussing what kind of education or support they need, various parents shared wanting a better understanding of early childhood development stages and how to assess educational or developmental delays. As one parent shared:

My son was diagnosed with ADHD. It was hard for me to accept this because a doctor did the evaluations, but we didn't get to meet [the doctor]. I don't know if it's believable or not. [The condition] isn't

"... Doctors are always pushing breastfeeding, but if I go back to school, how can I do it? Where do I get a free pump or affordable pump, meal plan, and learn more about developmental milestones?"

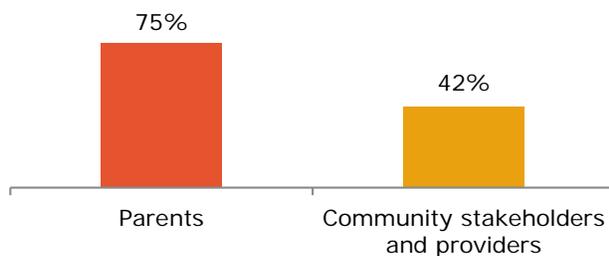
—Parent

persistent. I need more proof... more training. More classes for parents on how to deal with these types of things. We need hands-on [trainings] for these types of situations.

3. Access to quality health care services

Among the challenges parents discussed during focus groups, difficulties accessing vital health care services came up as a consistent issue, especially in rural areas of Fresno County. 75 percent of family focus groups agreed that accessing basic health care services is a highly relevant issue in their local community. This is due to the fact that **many rural communities in Fresno County lack the infrastructure and staff to provide health care services**, like the lack of a hospital in communities like Mendota, and the limited pharmacy hours in several other rural communities.

Exhibit 5. Percent of parents and community stakeholders – Access to quality health care services is a highly relevant issue in Fresno County



The lack of a hospital in communities like Mendota means that families have to rely on emergency services in order to get immediate medical care, limiting the capacity of already strained resources. Besides accessing emergency medical services, families have to transport themselves to neighboring communities to access health care facilities, yet families with limited transportation options are often left at a loss.

Given the unique needs of families with children aged 0 to 5, parents also mentioned wanting more prenatal and perinatal support, as well as services for their children with special needs. 92 percent of early childhood professionals and service providers strongly agreed about the importance of providing prenatal and perinatal of services in Fresno County, as well as 86 percent of parents. Notably, many parents noted the need for support for mothers suffering with postpartum depression. More information about this specific need will be included in the “Access to mental and behavioral health services” section of this report.

Last, beyond wanting easier access to health care services, parents noted the quality of health care services could be improved. Specifically, **many Spanish-speaking parents shared experiences facing discrimination and racism when accessing health care services**, even discrimination from Spanish-speaking staff that only serve patients in English. Due to language barriers and the limited capacity of health care staff, Spanish-speaking parents felt that the quality of care they receive is less than that of English-speaking patients, and as such, are less likely to have their health care needs met. More broadly, cultural competency and building service provider capacity to address the diverse needs of various

“... I had a nurse that treated me badly... but had I spoken English it would have been different because I see when people speak English, they treat them much better and they attend to them much better.”

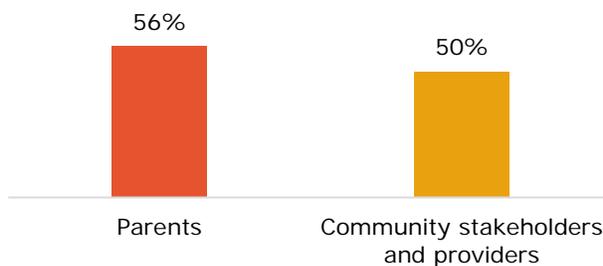
–Parent

cultures is a greater issue in Fresno County's service system. This issue, along with other service considerations, is delved into more deeply in the "Takeaways and Considerations" section of the report.

4. Service navigation and case coordination

Parents and community stakeholders both highlighted the challenges families face when accessing services, including the daunting scope and scale of services and support available to help families in need. Although there are many organizations and agencies providing services to help families with young children, parents continue to have **issues navigating the service system** and connecting the dots between services in order to meet their complex needs.

Exhibit 6. Percent of parents and community stakeholders – Service navigation and case coordination is a highly relevant issue in Fresno County



Many parent focus groups mentioned care coordination and service navigation support as a highly relevant issue facing their families (56%), while community stakeholders also agreed and noted the need for improved case coordination and a warmer handoff between services (50%). Providing service navigation support to families in need would address a number of issues, including the fact that parents lack the time and resources to familiarize themselves with all the services and programs currently available to meet their specific needs. 56 percent of parent focus groups agreed that the lack of awareness of services is a major issue facing their local communities, and 1 in 3 of the community stakeholder groups (33%) agreed. Further, many parents across the county—particularly in more rural areas—have a difficult time securing transportation to and from appointments for vital services. In this vein, community stakeholders and providers often stressed the importance of offering local and mobile services, rather than relying on more traditional models.

Additionally, even when parents are aware of certain services, they often face **rigid requirement restrictions**, or encounter a cumbersome paperwork and documentation process in order to register. 69 percent of parent focus groups and 33 percent of community stakeholders felt that requirement restrictions are a highly relevant issue facing their communities, and 63 percent of parent focus groups indicated that the registration process for accessing certain services is a highly relevant barrier. From the service provider perspective, requirement restrictions often mean that only children that meet certain criteria can be served,

and for a limited period of time. Age restrictions for many services often mean that service providers never get to see the long-term impact of their programs and services. As one provider shared:

Services need to be continuous. I see families and as soon as their children age out of the program, [parents] feel like their child isn't being supported. The time they spend with us is not enough for us to see results of change... the parents and children end up leaving before we can see the change. We need to build more long-term programs.

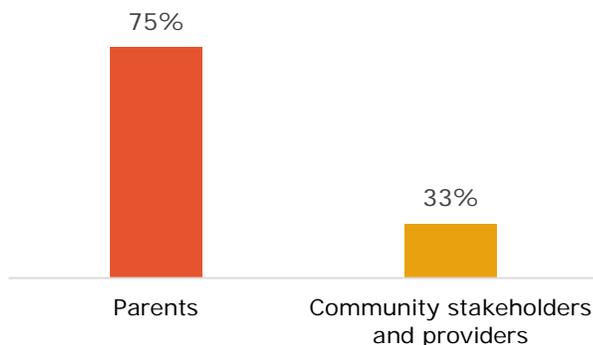
5. Economic security

Community engagement participants widely agreed on the **difficulty of focusing on a young child's education and development if basic household needs are not met first**. In this sense, many of the challenges highlighted through the community engagement process are rooted in economic insecurity and hardship. Many parents struggle to pay rent and make ends meet each month, which leaves little time to focus on children and their healthy development. One parent summed up this sentiment:

A lot of parents work, and they don't have enough time to be with their kids and help them in school. Sometimes it's the time that's missing because they're working. They can't give them the love, the patience. When you come home from work tired, you can't do it.

While economic security was a commonly mentioned challenge in parent focus groups, **the topic did not come up as often in community stakeholder and provider groups**. 75 percent of parent focus groups mentioned economic security as a highly relevant issue, while only 33 percent of community stakeholders agreed. This difference may signal a lack of perception among providers as to the true extent of their families' economic anxieties and barriers, or the relative importance these barriers hold in their daily lives.

Exhibit 7. Percent of parents and community stakeholders – Economic security is a highly relevant issue in Fresno County



Parents cited specific supports that could help alleviate financial strain, including increased assistance with housing costs, expanded job and education programs, and more availability of high quality English language learner courses. However, some noted the difficulty of accessing such supports while working long hours.

6. Access to mental and behavioral health services

Mental and behavioral health challenges were commonly mentioned as major issues affecting young children and their families. These challenges were highly relevant topics of discussion in 44 percent of parent focus groups and 58 percent of community stakeholder and provider engagements.

Many parents operate under a great deal of stress, often struggling to provide financially while making time for family. This stress can lead to mental health issues, or exacerbate existing issues. Community stakeholders and providers consistently mentioned **persistent familial and environmental stress** as a key consideration when serving children and families, lending to the importance of approaching service delivery through a trauma-informed lens.

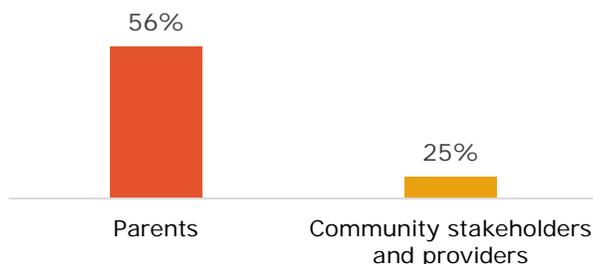
Parent focus group participants frequently cited **postpartum depression** as a common example of the types of mental health challenges they face. Mothers who had faced the disorder described feeling lost, confused, hopeless, and unable to connect with their young children. Others noted the many harmful effects **household substance abuse** has across the county, often leading to adverse and traumatic experiences for young children.

Parents commonly mentioned the **cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues**, noting how this stigma either keeps them from seeking mental health support, or leads them to be unaware of the importance of seeking mental health support. Community stakeholders and providers emphasized the need for more mental health support for parents of young children, and for greater advocacy and education for parents to combat cultural stigma.

7. Access to nutritious food

When asked what the most important factors are in raising a healthy and successful child, most parents immediately cited convenient access to nutritious and high quality food. Parents viewed **healthy eating as a key building block to overall child health**, and the topic was highly relevant in 56 percent of focus groups. In contrast, access to healthy food was a relevant topic in only 25 percent of community stakeholder and provider discussions, suggesting that the two groups may view the determinants of child health from somewhat different lenses.

Exhibit 8. Percent of parents and community stakeholders – Access to nutritious food is a highly relevant issue in Fresno County



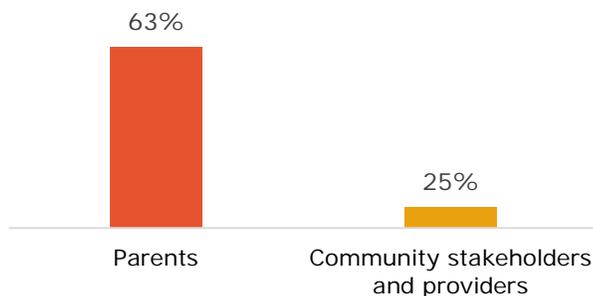
Parent focus group participants noted the need for additional support to meet their family’s nutritional needs, and many commented on the lack of fresh produce and groceries in their communities. In addition, some parents noted that access to healthy eating involves **not only the availability of nutritious food, but also the time it takes to prepare and serve it:**

A lot of times, the food that is nutritious—healthier—is the most expensive, and the cheapest is potato chips and all the stuff that’s not good for you.

8. Access to safe community spaces

Parent focus group participants widely noted the **importance of public safety and safe community spaces** to the wellbeing of young children and their families. Similar to the findings on nutritious food above, community space was cited by parents as a key focus; the topic was highly relevant in 63 percent of parent focus groups. In contrast, this topic was cited in only 25 percent of community stakeholder and provider convenings, once again highlighting these groups’ differing perceptions of the determinants of early childhood wellbeing.

Exhibit 9. Percent of parents and community stakeholders – Access to safe community spaces is a highly relevant issue in Fresno County



One parent noted the impact of public safety on child development:

To live a happy and healthy life, a child needs a safe environment to be able to leave [their house].

In addition to safe spaces, parents also noted the **importance of community-sponsored events and services**, meant to engage young children and their parents in positive and productive ways. Parents saw these events as opportunities to get out of the house, meet other families, and learn about services available to them. Many parents—especially those living in more rural areas—cited a decline in availability and prevalence of these types of events over time.

Challenges to Effective Systems Coordination

As detailed throughout this report, parents and community stakeholders and providers largely agreed on the prevalent issues facing Fresno County families today. However, from their position serving multiple families and having a broader perspective on service need trends, community stakeholders and providers often discussed service system challenges and how these challenges can inhibit the success of Fresno County families. These service system challenges extend beyond the barriers and limitations service providers face *within* their organizations, but instead include barriers *across* organizations striving to provide similar support to families with young children.

During group discussions, community stakeholders and providers listed various service system issues, including:

- **Poor communication and coordination across organizations and agencies.** Community stakeholders agreed that there should be a greater emphasis on promoting communication and coordination across organizations that serve Fresno County families. Currently, poor communication and coordination means that organizations often provide duplicate services or lack the support of organizations that could assist in broad initiatives.
- **Limited knowledge of the service system and all available resources.** Despite efforts to seamlessly refer families to services, community stakeholders and providers shared that they continue to feel siloed and lack a complete understanding of the service system in Fresno County. This often makes care coordination difficult and can mean families do not receive necessary referrals.
- **Lack of data and information sharing.** Community stakeholders admitted that many organizations in Fresno County lack the capacity to collect and share data on their programs or clients served. This lack of data makes it difficult for organizations to measure their intended impact, and can be especially limiting when applying for funding. Also, community stakeholders admitted that limited funding often causes organizations to compete against each other, and create an environment where organizations are incentivized to withhold their data.

In order to address these coordination issues, community stakeholders suggested that more time and funding go towards promoting networking and communication across organizations. This not only includes seeking out organizations that do similar work, but also pursuing partnerships with organizations that fall outside the early childhood realm, such as health care providers, faith-based organizations, and the K-12 school system.

“It would be nice for all of us to use the same language... We are saying the same words, but not the same definitions including things like income eligibility. The state has worked hard to match up with federal programs, but there is still a lot...”

–Community stakeholder

Takeaways and Considerations

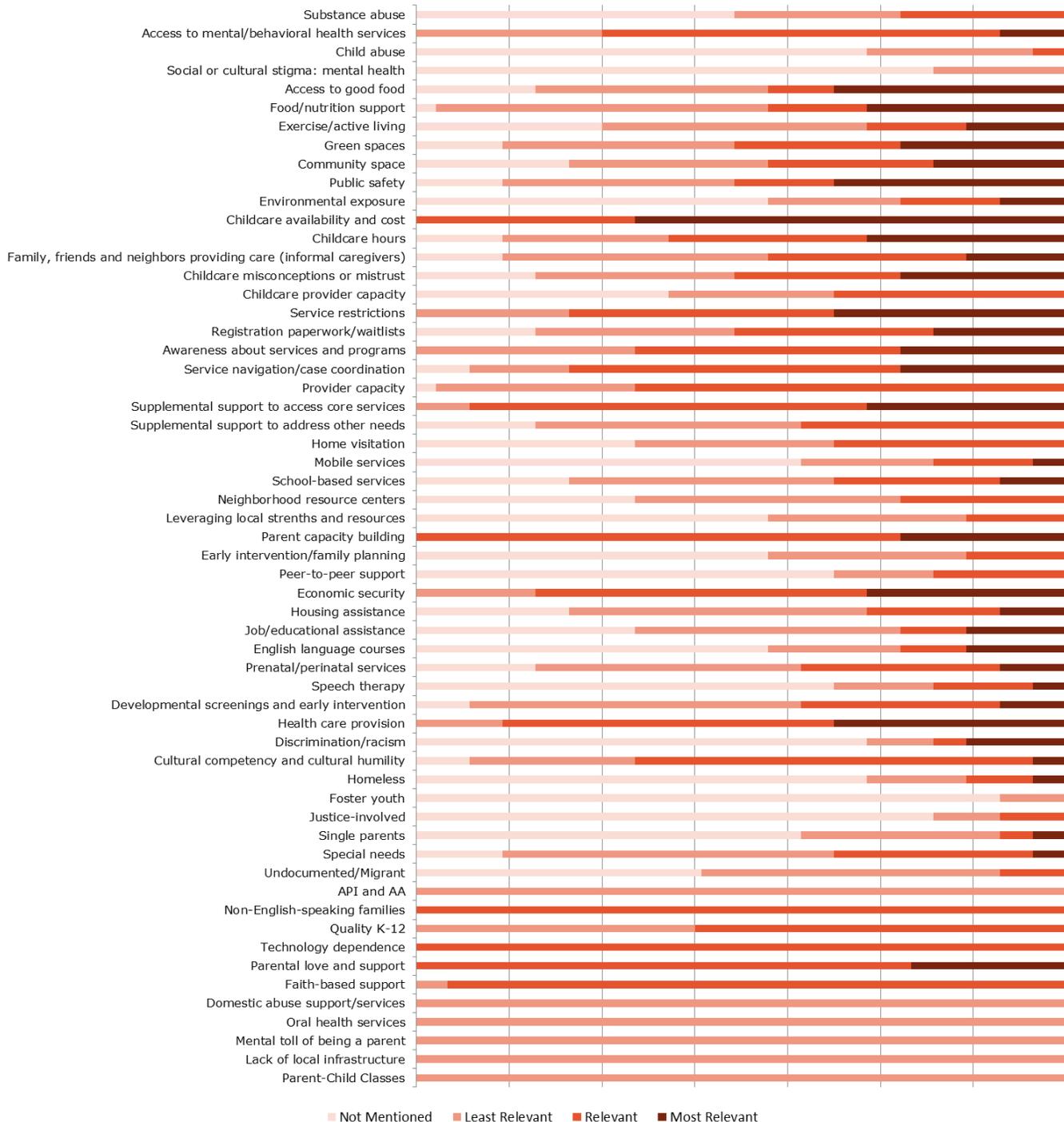
Throughout the analysis of findings from parent focus groups and community stakeholder and provider engagements, a number of cross-cutting takeaways and considerations have surfaced. These takeaways are not intended to be an exhaustive list of action items; rather, they are a potential starting point for further discussion and planning related to the needs of young children and their families in Fresno County:

- **Facilitate expansion of wraparound and holistic supports.** Community stakeholders and service providers consistently highlighted the need to look past traditional service and program models, and the importance of meeting families “where they are at.” Throughout the community engagement process, it became evident that many of the needs and challenges young families face interact with, and compound on one another. In addition, it became clear that many families are unable to focus on their children’s healthy development without first ensuring basic needs are met in their household. Addressing a child’s immediate presenting needs may first require addressing tangential family needs. Young children and their families face complex and individualized challenges, and service models would benefit from reflecting this reality.
- **Promote education, empowerment, and capacity building.** Community stakeholders and providers noted the need for a greater emphasis on educating the general parent population about the importance of early childhood care and education, and health literacy. In addition, many stressed the importance of empowering, rather than traditionally educating, parents. Participants cited peer-to-peer education as an ideal model to simultaneously increase knowledge across communities while promoting local and often overlooked leaders. In this same vein, community stakeholders and providers recognized their own blind spots and the need for additional training and capacity building to effectively serve young children and their families across the county. Specific capacity areas mentioned include cultural humility, trauma-informed care, harm reduction strategies, and general education around the impact of adverse childhood experiences. Both parents and providers could benefit greatly from a more central hub for training, education, and convening.
- **Leverage existing local knowledge and resources.** Community stakeholders and providers consistently mentioned the pitfalls of entering communities to provide services without first approaching local members with humility and a desire to develop shared understandings of challenges and program strategies. Providers described such efforts as destined to fail, and noted that this approach is sometimes the norm. For their part, parent focus group participants often described feeling isolated from vital services and service providers, and relayed in detail many of the negative and disrespectful interactions they have had with providers in their communities. Moving a community agenda forward will require time and effort to better understand *existing* community strengths, and to build off

of those resources when engaging families. Many participants described the importance of honoring and respecting local knowledge, recognizing that parents are experts in knowing what is best for their families. With this in mind, it may be helpful to explore an in-depth asset mapping process across the county, in order to better understand the most effective way forward.

Appendix A. Heat Map

The following heat map is a visual representation of the most pressing issues and priority areas facing Fresno County families, as informed by conversations with parents and with community stakeholders and providers. The chart indicates overall relevance of each topic, mapping the proportion of discussion groups in which the topic was not mentioned, least relevant, relevant, and most relevant.



harder  co | community
research

harderco.com

Harder+Company Community Research works with public- and social-sector organizations across the United States to learn about their impact and sharpen their strategies to advance social change. Since 1986, our data-driven, culturally-responsive approach has helped hundreds of organizations contribute to positive social impact for vulnerable communities. Learn more at www.harderco.com. Follow us on Twitter: @harderco.
