

Policy Implementation and Service Accessibility: Evaluating China's Childcare System under the Three-Child Policy in Chongqing

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Abstract:

Amid the demographic shifts brought about by China's three-child policy and the growing participation of women in the labor market, the demand for equitable and high-quality childcare services for infants aged 0–3 has intensified. This study investigates the evolution of childcare policy in Chongqing from 2015 to 2024 through an integrated approach combining policy analysis, literature review, and field research conducted between 2022 and 2025. The findings reveal that despite the government's efforts to expand childcare access, structural inequalities persist. Key challenges include imbalanced resource distribution between urban and rural regions, fragmented coordination among governmental departments, shortages of trained childcare personnel, limited financial incentives, and unresolved tensions between work and family responsibilities. In addition, insufficient public awareness and unclear policy accountability mechanisms continue to hinder sustainable policy outcomes. The analysis highlights a notable gap between national policy intentions and local implementation, particularly in areas of affordability, inclusiveness, and service coverage. Drawing on international best practices, the study proposes a multi-level governance framework aimed at strengthening policy coherence and implementation capacity. The proposed framework emphasizes: (1) a coordinated city–district supervision mechanism to ensure accountability; (2) diversified financing models integrating public and private resources; (3) performance-based regulatory systems to enhance service quality; and (4) mechanisms that encourage community engagement and parental participation. These recommendations are expected to reduce regional disparities, foster long-term institutional resilience, and align China's childcare policy with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: *Childcare policy, three-child policy, urban-rural discrepancy, service accessibility, work-family conflict, government coordination, China*

Introduction

With the profound adjustment of China's population structure and the full implementation of the "three-child" policy, alongside the continuous increase in female labor force participation, the importance of childcare services for infants aged 0-3 has become increasingly prominent. Childcare services function as a vital interface between family-based childcare and broader social support systems. Beyond shaping the quality of early childhood development, these services exert profound and enduring influences on family fertility decisions, women's work-life balance, and the sustainability of population development. Therefore, since 2019, the national government has gradually introduced a series of policy documents, including the "Guiding Opinions on Promoting Childcare Services for Children Under 3 Years Old" and the "14th Five-Year Plan for Childcare Development," marking the official entry of childcare services into the stage of institutionalized and systematic development (National Development and Reform Commission, 2024; Ministry of Civil Affairs, & National Health Commission, 2024). Chongqing, one of China's key national central cities located in the central-western region, has a permanent population exceeding 30 million. This demographic scale underscores the importance of well-designed childcare policies capable of addressing the complex needs of families in rapidly urbanizing contexts. It exhibits significant urban-rural structural differences and a complex backdrop characterized by a large population base, diverse family structures, and an imbalance between economic and social development (Chongqing Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Previous research shows that in responding to the national childcare strategy, Chongqing possesses strong institutional execution capabilities but also faces prominent issues such as "resource concentration regional imbalance" and "policy overlap insufficient coordination," which make it a typical case for research and practical reference (Wang, Li, & Chen, 2024).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), endorsed by the United Nations in 2015, were established to confront global challenges and promote inclusive prosperity while safeguarding the planet. Among these, Goal 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Specifically, Target 4.2 seeks to ensure that every girl and boy has access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary educationan essential foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Within this framework, the provision of childcare for children under the age of three represents a critical dimension of educational equity, as it directly influences cognitive, emotional, and social development during formative years. As China's demographic landscape evolves with the introduction of the "three-child" policy and a growing proportion of women participating in the labor market the need for accessible, high-quality childcare has become increasingly urgent. The effectiveness of childcare

policy implementation not only determines developmental outcomes for young children but also affects family planning behavior, gender equity in employment, and sustainable population growth. Chongqing's ongoing efforts to reform and expand childcare services, despite facing obstacles such as regional disparities and policy overlaps, provide an instructive case for understanding these dynamics. This study therefore aims to contribute to the discourse on how quality childcare can advance the realization of SDG Target 4.2 by promoting equitable access to early childhood care and education.

Building upon the contextual background and significance discussed above, this study addresses three core research questions. First, what is the current status of childcare policy implementation in Chongqing? To answer this question, the study systematically reviews both national and regional policy documents, focusing particularly on the Guiding Opinions on Promoting Childcare Services for Children Under Three Years Old and related local implementation plans. This analysis seeks to identify existing policy gaps, coordination challenges, and areas where execution diverges from policy intent. Second, what are the major challenges and structural barriers affecting the effective implementation of childcare service policies in Chongqing? Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and official reports, the study aims to locate specific institutional, administrative, and socioeconomic constraints that hinder policy effectiveness. Guided by Policy Diffusion Theory (Rogers, 1962), this phase explores how contextual and systemic factors interact within the local governance structure. Third, how can Chongqing's childcare policies be optimized to enhance their overall effectiveness and sustainability? Drawing upon insights from Policy Diffusion Theory (Rogers, 1962) and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1988), the research examines how diverse stakeholder coalitions influence policy adaptation, learning, and reform. Through this analytical integration, the study aims to propose evidence-based strategies that strengthen both policy equity and implementation efficiency in the childcare service sector. The research will analyze policy documents and conduct fieldwork to pinpoint structural bottlenecks, focusing on resource allocation mechanisms and interdepartmental coordination processes (Tsang & Li, 2019). Through this integrated analytical approach, the study seeks to develop evidence-based recommendations aimed at improving both the equity and efficiency of childcare policy implementation in Chongqing.

Although prior research in China has examined childcare policies at the macro level, systematic investigations into local implementation—particularly within Chongqing—remain limited. Existing studies tend to emphasize policy formulation and strategic design, while relatively few address the contextualized processes of policy execution. Consequently, there is an insufficient understanding of how transnational analytical

frameworks, such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework, interact with China's decentralized governance mechanisms.

To address this gap, the present study adopts an integrative approach that combines international theoretical perspectives with empirical insights derived from Chongqing's local practices. Specifically, it aims to conduct a comprehensive assessment of childcare policy development and implementation in Chongqing through policy document analysis and an extensive review of relevant literature. The study identifies and evaluates key issues related to policy formulation, resource distribution, family participation, and inter-institutional coordination, with the ultimate goal of proposing evidence-based strategies for policy optimization and sustainable improvement. By combining policy interpretation and literature research, this study not only explores the reality of the transition of childcare policies "from paper to practice," but also attempts to address the practical challenges in advancing the construction of an inclusive childcare system at the local level.

Research Objectives

- To study the implementation status of childcare policies in Chongqing;
- To analyze the structural barriers in policy implementation;
- To propose recommendations for improving childcare services policies.

Literature review

This research based on Policy Diffusion Theory (Rogers, 1962; Zhang et al., 2023; Mo et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2021; and Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1988; Li et al., 2024; ; Sengchaleun et al., 2022 ; Wesche et al., 2025).

Chongqing, a major municipality situated in central and western China with a population of more than 30 million, encounters multifaceted challenges in the implementation of childcare policies for infants and toddlers. Although government initiatives have sought to expand and improve childcare and nursery services, several structural and practical barriers continue to impede effective policy delivery.

1) Urban-rural Disparity

Urban-rural disparity represents a major challenge in Chongqing's childcare landscape, leading to an uneven distribution of facilities and services due to significant structural differences between urban and suburban areas (Han et al., 2016). This creates a "resource concentration-regional imbalance" where urban centers enjoy better access to qualified childcare institutions while suburban and rural areas lag behind, severely limiting equitable access for families in less developed regions (Liu et al., 2024). This mirrors the inefficiencies seen in preschool education, where

urban areas face unmet demand while rural areas may over-supply services, reflecting a broader issue of imbalanced resource allocation (Yang & Jiang, 2024). Studies on childcare demand in China confirm that urban mothers, facing greater work-family conflict, are more willing to invest in high-quality childcare, further emphasizing the affordability and accessibility gap for formal services between urban and rural areas (Chen et al., 2023). This parallel with disparities in healthcare, where uneven distribution of resources exacerbates inequalities in access (Wang, 2023; Luo, 2024), underscores the critical need for targeted investment in rural childcare infrastructure despite government efforts to promote equity in early childhood education (Rao et al., 2023).

2) Insufficient Coordination

Inadequate financial support significantly hampers Chongqing's childcare services, as existing subsidies and fiscal mechanisms fail to fully cover high costs or incentivize expanding affordable options, especially in suburban areas, thereby burdening families and hindering the growth of quality institutions (Xinhua News Agency, 2025; UNICEF, 2024). Studies on China's childcare subsidies confirm that while crucial for low-income families, inconsistent access to these funds often exacerbates financial hardship (Xiao et al., 2023; Kim & Henly, 2021). Broader financial support principles, observed in Chinese healthcare and agriculture, demonstrate that while well-designed policies improve outcomes, subsidies alone are often insufficient, particularly in areas with high living costs or diverse regional needs (Chen et al., 2024; Kong et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). This underscores the urgent need to reform and enhance financial support for Chongqing's childcare services to ensure greater coverage and efficiency.

3) Scarcity of Qualified childcare services

The scarcity of qualified childcare services is a pressing issue in Chongqing, where the existing 541 registered facilities with a maximum capacity of around 98,900 children are simply insufficient to meet the city's demand (Liu et al., 2024). A persistent shortage of affordable and high-quality childcare services remains a critical concern. This situation is intensified by the dominance of private providers, whose services are often costly and inconsistent in quality, rendering them inaccessible for many families (Ferguson et al., 2020). As a result, a substantial proportion of parents continue to rely on grandparents for daily childcare. While such intergenerational arrangements offer temporary relief, they frequently give rise to dissatisfaction stemming from concerns over care quality and differing generational practices (Chen et al., 2023). The dependence on informal caregiving, in turn, constrains women's participation in the labor market and influences family fertility decisions (Wang & Zhao, 2022). Studies in

Chongqing confirm a growing demand for quality, affordable childcare, particularly among higher-income, educated parents in urban areas, yet access remains limited (Liu et al., 2024). The increasing caregiving burden placed on grandmothers further underscores the urgency of developing more inclusive and affordable formal childcare systems (Zhong & Peng, 2020). Addressing this scarcity also necessitates improved training and professional qualification standards within the childcare sector to enhance overall service quality (Dai, 2023), as expanding public childcare services is crucial to support working parents and reduce their dependency on informal care (Wang & Zhao, 2021).

4) Inadequate Financial Support Policies

Moreover, inadequate financial support policies remain a significant hurdle for childcare services in Chongqing, as existing subsidies and fiscal guidance mechanisms are insufficient to fully cover the high costs of childcare or to incentivize the expansion of affordable services, particularly in suburban areas (Xinhua News Agency, 2025). Inadequate cost-sharing mechanisms have also transferred a disproportionate share of financial responsibility to families, thereby restricting the expansion of sustainable, high-quality childcare institutions (UNICEF, 2024). Studies on optimal childcare subsidy design in China highlight that while direct subsidies are crucial for low-income families, challenges persist in ensuring consistent access to these funds, often leading to increased financial hardship when support is intermittent (Xiao et al., 2023; Kim & Henly, 2021). The broader application of financial support principles, as seen in healthcare and agricultural sectors in China, demonstrates that well-designed financial policies can significantly improve outcomes, but also reveal that subsidies alone are often insufficient, particularly in areas with high living costs or diverse regional needs (Chen et al., 2024; Kong et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). This underscores the necessity for reforming and enhancing financial support to ensure better coverage and efficiency for childcare services in Chongqing.

5) Work-family Conflict

Work-family conflict presents a significant challenge, disproportionately affecting women who often bear primary caregiving responsibilities and subsequently face employment discrimination and career interruptions due to insufficient workplace childcare support (UNICEF, 2024). While Chongqing has attempted to mitigate this through initiatives like "mother-friendly" jobs and job fairs (ECNS, 2025; China Daily, 2025), these efforts often fall short of providing the systemic workplace policies necessary for true work-life balance. More comprehensive measures are needed, such as mandated paid parental leave that encourages shared

caregiving, alongside policies promoting flexible working hours, telecommuting, and employer-sponsored childcare facilities (Zeng et al., 2023; Wu, 2023). Without the establishment of comprehensive public support frameworks, many parents will remain caught between professional obligations and family duties, an imbalance that risks undermining the success of demographic initiatives such as the “three-child policy” and perpetuating gender inequality in the workforce.

6) Public Awareness and Childcare Culture

Lastly, public awareness and childcare culture significantly influence the adoption and effectiveness of childcare policies, as many parents prioritize early education and convenience but are often constrained by the affordability and availability of service options (Peng et al., 2021). At the global level, international organizations and policy norms have increasingly influenced national approaches to childcare, promoting deinstitutionalization and community-based care models that can improve public engagement with childcare reforms (Ulybina, 2022). Furthermore, cultural attitudes toward maternal employment, influenced by public awareness of available childcare, significantly impact maternal employment rates, with cultural conservatism potentially weakening the positive effects of childcare availability (Fervers & Kurowská, 2022). Within the Chinese context, empirical evidence suggests that public attitudes toward childcare policy are closely linked to socio-economic status, educational background, and gender, highlighting the importance of developing localized and socially responsive strategies to enhance both public awareness and policy implementation (Fan & Ngok, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design that integrates literature review and theoretical framework analysis to examine the development and implementation of childcare services in Chongqing. This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the policy environment, implementation challenges, and family needs associated with childcare for infants and toddlers.

The first stage involved a systematic review of policy-related information available on the official website of the Chongqing Municipal Development and Reform Commission (2025). Using the keywords “childcare for infants and toddlers” and “childcare services,” the researcher collected and analyzed policy documents issued between 2015 and 2024. These documents constitute the core data set for assessing the evolution and orientation of childcare policy at the municipal level.

In the second stage, data were obtained from the Chongqing Municipal Health Commission (2025) to examine the progression of childcare policy development, the distribution of resources, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Particular attention was given to identifying obstacles in policy execution, including regional disparities, coordination inefficiencies, and service accessibility gaps that hinder effective policy delivery.

Data Analysis

The third analytical phase focused on assessing family needs and satisfaction with childcare services. Demographic and socioeconomic data were reviewed to interpret how policy implementation influences parental access to childcare and the overall quality of service provision. Through the triangulation of policy document analysis and empirical literature, the researcher identified key structural barriers affecting policy outcomes and implementation efficiency.

Summary of Methodological Approach

Overall, the methodological framework combines document analysis, policy review, and theoretical interpretation to generate an in-depth understanding of the current state of childcare services in Chongqing. This integrated approach not only clarifies the institutional and practical challenges within the childcare system but also provides an evidence-based foundation for recommending strategies to enhance policy effectiveness and service equity.

Results

1. Status of Childcare Policy Implementation in Chongqing

The evolution of childcare policy in Chongqing from 2015 to 2024 reflects a gradual yet significant institutionalization of childcare services. During this period, policy initiatives transitioned from broad national directives toward more localized and operationally detailed frameworks, emphasizing improved accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity in early childhood care provision. The trajectory illustrates the municipality's growing recognition of childcare as both a social welfare priority and a mechanism for supporting family well-being and gender equality in the labor force.

The details of these identified 13 policy documents between year 2015 to 2024 that related to childcare services, one of which was later retracted, are as follow:

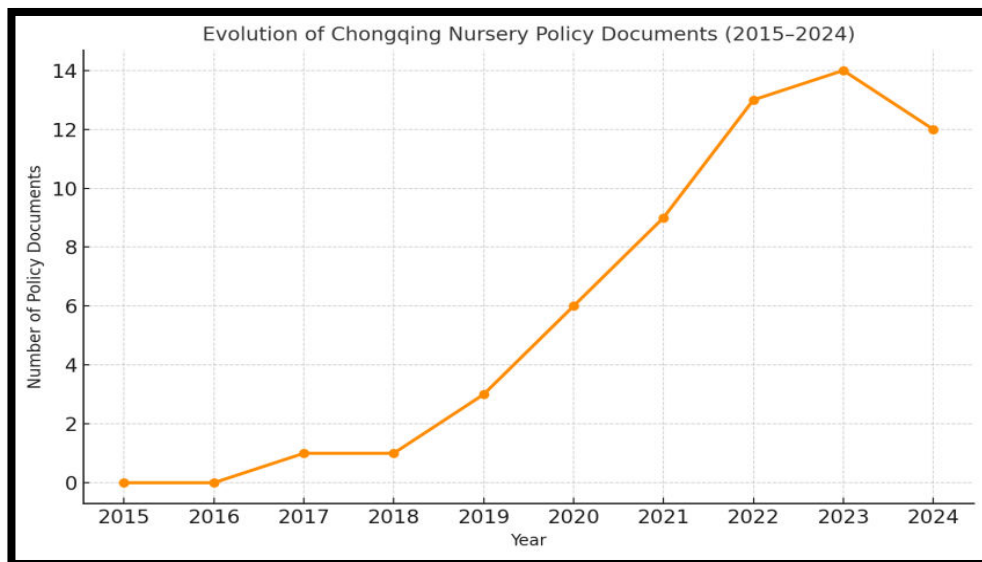


Figure 1. Evolution of Policy Documents (2015–2024)

Source: (Author,2025)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the evolution of childcare policy documents in Chongqing between 2015 and 2024 demonstrates a distinct pattern of phased growth that can be broadly categorized into three developmental stages.

Stage 1 (2015–2018): Policy Initiation Period. This initial phase was characterized by limited policy activity, with only a small number of documents issued. Most policies during this period took the form of preliminary opinions or advisory guidelines rather than binding regulations. Such patterns suggest that while childcare services had begun to attract local governmental attention, the policy framework remained fragmented, lacking systematic institutional design and stable financial commitment.

Stage 2 (2019–2021): Intensive Policy Introduction Period. A notable policy surge occurred during this stage, largely driven by the release of the State Council’s Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Development of Childcare Services for Children under Three Years of Age. In response, Chongqing introduced a series of local supporting measures, resulting in a steady rise in policy output approaching ten documents by 2021. The policy agenda expanded beyond general advocacy to include specific mechanisms related to service access, registration management, and quality standards. This stage thus marked the initial establishment of a structured and recognizable childcare policy system at the municipal level.

Stage 3 (2022–2024): Institutional Deepening and Collaborative Advancement Period. The third phase signaled a period of institutional consolidation, with the number of childcare-related policies reaching its peak in 2022 (13 documents). Although the total number declined slightly in subsequent years, the overall momentum remained strong. This stage reflected the government’s sustained efforts to reinforce the institutional

foundation through enhanced financial support, interdepartmental coordination, and quality supervision. Importantly, policy initiatives during this phase increasingly shifted from department-specific actions toward cross-sectoral collaboration, underscoring a transition from fragmented policymaking to a more systematic and sustainable childcare governance model.

The overarching policy objective articulated for this period is to achieve 4.5 to 5.0 childcare places per 1,000 residents by 2025, with inclusive childcare services representing approximately 60%–80% of total capacity. This quantitative target underscores a strategic shift toward capacity expansion and equity-driven service provision, reflecting the city's commitment to building a more inclusive and sustainable childcare system aligned with national population and social development goals.

2. Spatial Distribution and Accessibility of Childcare Services

This section analyzes the spatial distribution of childcare institutions in Chongqing, emphasizing the imbalances between urban and rural areas. It further examines the underlying factors contributing to these disparities, including population density, fiscal capacity, and the distribution of educational resources. The analysis highlights the urgent need for more balanced regional allocations to enhance the accessibility of childcare services, particularly in suburban and rural regions.

According to official data, as of 2024, Chongqing hosts a total of 1,743 childcare service institutions, distributed across both the main urban districts and several suburban counties. In terms of spatial patterns, childcare resources display a pronounced “central concentration and peripheral scarcity” trend, as illustrated in Figure 2.

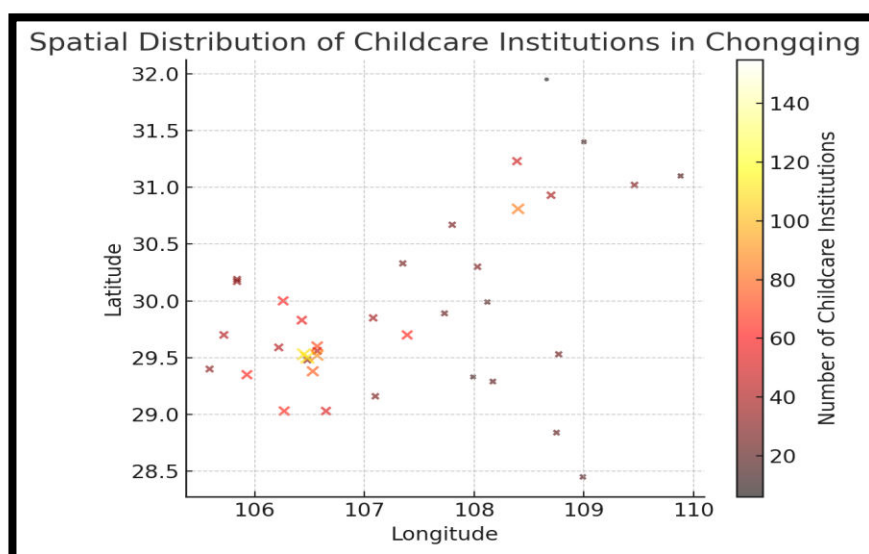


Figure 2. Spatial Distribution of Nursery Institutions in Chongqing (2024)

Source: (Author,2025)

As shown in Figure 2, childcare institutions are densely clustered within the area bounded by 106°–107°E longitude and 29°–30°N latitude, corresponding to the core urban districts of Yuzhong, Jiangbei, Shapingba, Nan'an, and Yubei. This area features dense point distributions and brighter color intensities, indicating a high number of institutions and strong service capacity. Such a pattern reflects a typical concentration of childcare resources within the urban core, where population density and economic vitality are highest.

In contrast, suburban and peripheral districts such as Wanzhou, Fengdu, and Wuxi exhibit sparse and scattered distributions, characterized by fewer childcare institutions and weaker service capacities. This spatial imbalance may lead to several consequences: first, families in outlying areas may face difficulties in accessing convenient childcare services due to longer travel distances and inadequate transportation networks; second, institutions in the central city could experience excessive enrollment pressure, which may result in declining service quality or increased entry thresholds.

The main factors contributing to these disparities include differences in population density, regional fiscal capacity, educational resource allocation, and policy implementation capabilities. The central urban areas supported by higher economic development levels, concentrated populations, and stronger parental demand have become the primary zones for institutional growth. Conversely, suburban and rural areas lag behind due to limitations in land availability, fiscal resources, and professional talent, resulting in an insufficient service supply.

Looking ahead, childcare policy planning should place greater emphasis on the “spillover effect” and “regional coverage balance” in institutional allocation. By employing mechanisms such as fiscal guidance, differentiated subsidies, and policy incentives, Chongqing can strengthen childcare provision in suburban districts and promote a strategic shift from “central concentration” toward “regional equity and coordinated development.”

3. Determinants of Family Satisfaction and Demand for Childcare Services

This section investigates the determinants shaping family satisfaction and demand for childcare services in Chongqing. It examines how demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, childcare models, and regional disparities influence parental preferences and usage patterns. The section concludes with policy implications aimed at narrowing service quality gaps and enhancing equitable access particularly for lower-income families and those residing in rural areas.

1) Parental Preferences and Demand Scale

A large-scale cross-sectional survey involving 3,921 parents of infants and toddlers in Chongqing revealed that 52.7% of parents preferred to enroll their children in childcare facilities, reflecting a moderate level of demand for formal childcare services. The findings further indicated that parents with higher income, higher educational attainment, urban residence, and dual-career status were more likely to express stronger preferences for formal childcare arrangements (Li & Wang, 2022). These demographic attributes constitute key determinants in shaping the overall scale of childcare service demand.

2) Impact of Care Models on Satisfaction and Demand

The predominant childcare arrangement in Chongqing is shared care between parents and grandparents, representing 56.5% of families, followed by exclusive parental care at 27.7% (Li & Wang, 2022). Prior research suggests that families relying solely on parental care demonstrate greater willingness to use formal childcare services compared to those primarily dependent on grandparental care (Liu & Xu, 2024). This pattern implies that satisfaction with informal caregiving models directly influences the propensity to seek institutional childcare options.

3) Regional and Urban–Rural Differences

Substantial disparities persist between urban and suburban/rural areas in both satisfaction levels and demand for childcare services. Parents residing in urban districts generally report higher satisfaction and stronger willingness to use childcare services than their suburban or rural counterparts (Liu & Xu, 2024). Logistic regression analyses further confirm that residential location serves as a significant predictor of childcare service demand (Li et al., 2024). These findings underscore the uneven spatial distribution of resources and the consequent inequalities in service accessibility.

4) Effects of Income and Education

Households with monthly incomes above 4,000 CNY and higher parental education levels tend to exhibit stronger preferences for, and greater satisfaction with, formal childcare services (Liu et al., 2024). A higher socioeconomic status correlates with increased expectations for quality, educational enrichment, and convenience in childcare services (Gordon et al., 2024). Conversely, lower-income families often rely on informal caregiving arrangements due to cost-related constraints and limited access to affordable public options (UNICEF, 2024).

5) Child Age and Demand Variation

The age of children is a significant factor influencing parental demand. Parents of toddlers aged 2–3 years show markedly higher willingness to enroll their children in childcare facilities compared with parents of infants under six months (Chen et al., 2023). This trend corresponds to the interplay between child developmental needs and parental work commitments, highlighting the temporal dynamics of childcare demand.

6) Satisfaction Levels and Service Quality

Despite the rising demand, overall satisfaction with childcare services remains moderate. Approximately 35.9% of parents reported being satisfied, whereas 64.1% expressed dissatisfaction, primarily citing issues related to service quality, facility conditions, and staff qualifications (Hong et al., 2022). Enhancing the quality of facilities, safety standards, and early education programs is thus essential to improve both parental satisfaction and long-term service sustainability.

7) Policy Implications

The evidence suggests the need for targeted policy interventions that prioritize regional equity, quality enhancement, and financial accessibility. Specific measures include subsidizing childcare costs for lower-income families, expanding public childcare provision, and strengthening interdepartmental coordination to ensure effective policy implementation (Halle et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). These strategies are expected to foster a more inclusive and responsive childcare ecosystem in Chongqing.

Through a review of the childcare policy documents, institutional distribution, issues in policy implementation, and family needs and satisfaction in Chongqing from 2015 to 2024, this paper assesses the current implementation status of childcare services policies in Chongqing and identifies the structural challenges faced in policy execution. Overall, Chongqing's childcare service policy system has been established, forming a clear institutional framework and governance path. Despite substantial policy initiatives to enhance childcare provision, significant deficiencies persist in Chongqing's policy implementation. These include urban–rural disparities in childcare resource allocation, weak interdepartmental coordination, a shortage of qualified personnel, inadequate fiscal support, persistent work–family conflicts, and limited public awareness of childcare culture. Collectively, these factors undermine the effectiveness of childcare policies and constrain equitable access to high-quality childcare services.

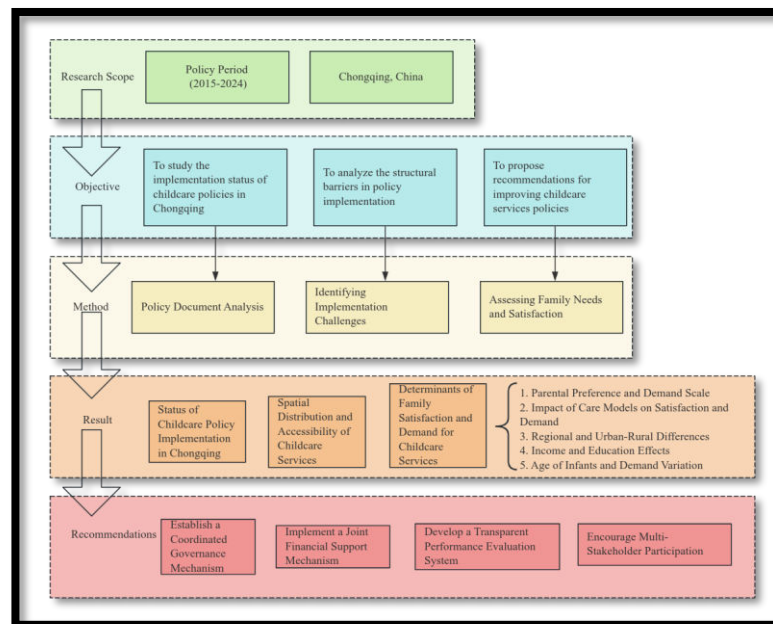


Figure 3. Research Framework (2025)

Discussion

1. Implementation Status of Childcare Policies in Chongqing

The implementation of childcare services in Chongqing demonstrates pronounced disparities, particularly between urban and rural regions. Urban areas tend to have better-developed childcare infrastructure and services, while rural communities continue to face severe shortages. This uneven resource distribution illustrates the challenge of translating policy intentions into equitable outcomes across diverse localities.

Drawing on **Policy Diffusion Theory (Rogers, 1962)**, policy adoption and spread are influenced by both the perceived benefits and the social contexts in which policies operate. In Chongqing, the urban–rural divide constrains diffusion, as national policies have not been sufficiently adapted to local conditions. Consequently, a gap has emerged between top-level policy design and on-the-ground implementation (Li et al., 2024).

Additionally, limited coordination among government agencies compounds these issues. Although childcare policies are designed at the national level, their execution at the local level often lacks coherence. This disconnect between policy formulation and operational practice hampers effective implementation and restricts the diffusion of childcare services across regions.

2. Structural Barriers to Policy Implementation

Several structural barriers impede the effective realization of childcare policy goals in Chongqing. One major obstacle is weak coordination among government agencies. Because childcare policy spans multiple sectors—health,

education, and social welfare misalignment among these entities frequently leads to overlapping responsibilities and inefficiencies (Zhong & Peng, 2020).

The **Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)** (Sabatier, 1988) suggests that policy outcomes depend on coalitions of actors pursuing shared objectives within a policy subsystem. In Chongqing, the absence of cohesive coalitions means that stake holders including local authorities, private childcare providers, and families often act independently or even competitively. This fragmented approach results in resource misallocation, administrative inefficiency, and a failure to address the needs of rural families.

Financial constraints further aggravate the problem. Local governments, particularly in less affluent areas, face budgetary limitations that restrict their ability to deliver quality childcare services. The lack of an integrated, cross-sectoral policy approach thus represents a fundamental barrier preventing equitable policy outcomes.

3. Recommendations for Policy Enhancement

To strengthen childcare policy implementation in Chongqing and promote equity across regions, the following recommendations are proposed:

(1) Establish a City-Level Childcare Coordination Agency

A permanent city-level coordinating body should be created to harmonize decision-making, define departmental responsibilities, and ensure alignment between central directives and local implementation. This vertically integrated and horizontally coordinated governance system would enhance accountability, optimize resource allocation, and improve overall policy coherence (Zhao et al., 2024; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2008).

(2) Develop a Joint Financial Support Mechanism

A shared financial framework involving both central and local governments should be adopted to ensure sustainable funding. Differentiated childcare subsidies could be introduced based on regional economic capacity, population distribution, and the actual cost of childcare provision, thereby promoting equitable resource allocation and ensuring that vulnerable communities receive adequate financial support.

(3) Implement a Comprehensive Performance Evaluation System

A results-oriented evaluation framework should be developed to monitor service quality, parent satisfaction, and coverage. Independent third-party agencies could be engaged to assess performance, ensuring objectivity and transparency. This system would not only strengthen accountability but also foster continuous service improvement (National

Health Commission, 2023; Ruźniak-Lubocka & Sawicki, 2023; Bassok et al., 2018).

(4) Promote Multi-Stakeholder Participation

Enhanced engagement of private enterprises, communities, and civil society organizations is vital for sustainable childcare service delivery. The government can incentivize participation through tax reductions and policy guidance (World Health Organization, 2024; Nairn, 2024). A model combining government leadership, market participation, and community engagement would foster a responsive and inclusive childcare ecosystem.

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to China's childcare policy discourse in two key dimensions.

First, it provides the first comprehensive examination of policy implementation challenges in Chongqing, revealing how urban-rural disparities, fiscal constraints, and human resource shortages collectively hinder equitable access to childcare services. The findings underscore the limitations of China's decentralized governance system, particularly its weak linkage between national policy frameworks and local administrative capacity.

Second, the study proposes practical strategies for addressing these deficiencies. Recommendations such as equitable funding formulas, hybrid public private service models, and localized workforce training programs offer feasible pathways for narrowing the coastal and inland childcare divide. These policy directions align with **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2**, promoting inclusive and quality early childhood education (United Nations, 2025).

By combining empirical insight with policy analysis, this research strengthens both theoretical understanding and practical policymaking for ongoing childcare reform in China.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study relies primarily on secondary data policy documents, reports, and existing research which may not fully reflect the evolving realities of childcare service delivery in Chongqing. Moreover, as this article represents part of a broader master's dissertation, it excludes empirical data gathered through field research.

Future research should incorporate primary data collection including interviews and surveys with childcare practitioners, parents, and local officials to capture nuanced perspectives on implementation barriers. Comparative case studies between Chongqing and other successful cities in China or abroad would further illuminate transferable policy innovations.

Such empirical and comparative analyses would enrich understanding of local policy dynamics and contribute to the formulation of more effective, evidence-based childcare policies.

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