

'This is in fact what we need': From daycares to hospitals, here are the effects of Saskatoon's baby boom ^[1]

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Saskatoon's economic boom was followed by a boom in births, says Doug Elliott, publisher of the Sask Trends Monitor.

The number of newborns in the Saskatoon area has grown by an average of four per cent per year since 2002, reaching 4,148 last July, according to his data. The total population of the Saskatoon area in 2016 was 315,150.

"The province as a whole is growing at 1.5 per cent, so the number of infants in Saskatoon is growing almost three times as fast as the population in the province," Elliott said.

"This is in fact what we need. Because the opposite scenario that we were looking at in the 1990s was people like me were hanging around, so we had an aging population. We didn't have any young people. So there were worries about skill shortages; and the economic impacts of young people are quite significant as well. This is pretty much good news."

That kind of growth doesn't come without challenges, however.

DAYCARES

The numbers appear promising. Licensed child care spaces in Saskatoon have more than doubled since 2005, to 2,697 this year, spread across 59 centres, according to the education ministry.

Martensville and Warman both had no licensed spaces as recently as 2010; the former now has two centres with 117 spaces, and the latter three centres and 198 spaces.

This year's figures include spaces set to open in joint use schools in three cities. An additional 101 child care centre spaces in Saskatoon have been approved for funding by the education ministry in the 2017 budget year, according to spokesman Chris Hughes.

Not all spaces are created equal, however.

Maryann McKay, a board member of Saskatoon Family Home Child Care Association, said spots for infants — defined as children under 18 months — fill up quickly.

Daycares are allowed only a certain ratio of infants in their mix of children. A home with one care provider can have eight children, but as the number of infants rises, the number of preschoolers must decrease.

With an assistant, McKay can have 12 children in her care, but only five infants — and one of those spaces is taken by her own child. Some providers she knows take few infants or none at all, she said.

"Recently I put down three people's names that were wanting in. And I've had parents ask me when they got pregnant, 'When should I be looking for a daycare?' And I said, 'You should be calling as soon as you can,'" she said.

"The other thing too is, years ago there were a lot more stay-at-home moms. Now you're getting into the fact that most families are two-income families," she said.

Another barrier for parents is that the cutoff for government subsidies for care haven't risen with the minimum wage, McKay noted. A full subsidy is worth \$485 per month, while infant fees range from \$800 to \$1,200 per child per month — which is a lot for even two-income families. It would be helpful to raise that bar, she said.

"I currently have a parent on subsidy and she just struggles month to month. Because yes, on paper it looks like she makes a lot of money, but she's a single parent, she's trying to pay her rent, she's got to pay her food, her gas, and then pay me over \$400."

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