

Calgary's daycares near capacity as parents struggle to find spots for tots ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Bridget Casey is facing the dilemma so many parents must deal with sooner or later: stay home with the baby or find a daycare and devote more time to her career.

However, the finance blogger thinks many people are deciding not to have children at all after crunching the numbers on the cost of daycare.

"I really think this is putting millennials in an extraordinary financial bind," she said. "Young couples are only qualifying for mortgages based on both their incomes."

Although parents in Toronto and Vancouver pay more for child care, Calgary is the most expensive city in Alberta. A 2016 survey of Canada's largest cities found that Calgary's median monthly daycare fee for a toddler was \$1,050, more than 20 per cent higher than Edmonton's median of \$835.

Cost aside, even getting a child into daycare can be a daunting task in and of itself, because the numbers also show a daycare crunch in Calgary. The provincial government said that, as of March, there was a 97 per cent enrolment rate at 300 daycare programs in the Calgary region.

That works out to 18,829 children enrolled in 19,429 spaces. Although that suggests there are 600 free spots in Calgary, those vacancies don't always line up with the communities where they're most needed.

Sarah Falk, registration team leader at daycare and preschool provider Kids U, has worked in child care for over a decade. She said that in a previous job she saw huge waiting lists in the southeast, as young couples and families moved into new communities there.

One facility had 600 names on a waiting list.

"You could go on the waitlist when you peed on the stick, and you could still not get a spot," said Falk. "I've seen that happen."

However the desperation of parents seeking a spot could actually contribute to those long wait lists in a vicious cycle.

"People will just put their name on any list — especially in those outlying communities where there's not as much availability," said Falk. "They will contact everyone and put their name on every list."

The province's Ministry of Children's Services said it doesn't keep statistics on wait lists. StarMetro contacted multiple daycares to talk about their wait lists, but none wanted to share those numbers.

Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a policy research unit in Ontario, has collected available data on daycares across Canada since the early 1990s. She explained that compared with European nations, or even the U.S. and Australia, Canada's data on daycare availability is lacking.

"Good data is a really good tool for planning," she said. "It's very hard to do that unless you have some decent data; you don't know if they're being under-serviced."

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