

Why rising child-care costs are bad news for everyone - not just parents^[1]

Opinion: Child-care expenses are keeping families in poverty and women out of the workforce. So why have the Tories cancelled a fund that helped keep costs down

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EXCERPTS

This spring, the Ontario government cancelled a \$50 million fund that helped child-care centres cover rising labour costs. Without it, those costs will likely be passed on to parents, many of whom are already paying daycare centres as much as I fork out each month in rent. According to the CBC, one child-care centre in Peel Region has already increased its fees in response to the provincial cut — the cost of infant care there is now \$70 more per month, per child — and facilities across Ontario are expected to do the same.

For families that are already stretched thin, \$70 a month is hardly pocket change. That extra cash could be the difference between catching up on bills or falling behind. And Ontario's already-astronomical child-care costs might well be the difference between women entering the workforce and staying at home.

The Progressive Conservative government has argued that its recently announced child-care tax credit, part of the 2019 budget, is a better plan. The credit applies to families with a household income of up to \$150,000 and provides a rebate of up to \$6,000 per child under seven and up to \$3,750 per child between the ages of seven and 16. To its credit, the government also pledged up to \$1 billion, over five years, to create 30,000 desperately needed child-care spaces in the province.

Education Minister Lisa Thompson assured media that nobody would lose out under the changes. "When we take a look and drill down a little bit deeper," she told the Canadian Press, "the supports for the parents that they need will still be in place."

Except they won't be. Arguably, they never have been. Beyond the fact that the tax credit doesn't offer full coverage, the glaring flaw in the government's plan is that parents will still have to pay their child-care costs upfront (only as of 2021 will some families be able to apply for regular advance payments). For low-income and single-parent families, this could prove especially burdensome, if not impossible.

Consider child-care costs in Ontario: last year, in Toronto, the most expensive city in the country when it comes to child care, it cost an average of \$1,685 a month for infant care, according to a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report released in February. In Mississauga, Hamilton, and Kitchener, the monthly average was \$1,490. In 17 of the 28 cities that the think-tank surveyed, child-care fees were rising faster than the rate of inflation. How could anybody keep up?

Some parents may never even have the chance to try. In addition to rising costs, many jurisdictions are dealing with what the CCPA terms child-care deserts: postal codes where there are at least three children in potential competition for a single licensed space. In Brampton, for example, 95 percent of non-school-aged children live in child-care deserts. In Kitchener, 87 percent. Ontario ranks eighth out of the 13 provinces and territories in terms of child-care coverage, at 36 percent; in rural Ontario, that dips to 24 percent. In other words, a vast number of kids in Canada are living in child-care deserts.

And this is bad news for everybody, not just parents. There's a reason that basic, universal child care has long been a rallying point for feminists. It's something that many women — including those who, like me, don't and will never have children — have advocated for. Simply put: It helps women achieve economic independence. It helps keep them in the workforce. It's no coincidence that the families that least use daycare are those in which only one parent (typically, the father) works.

The perception of mothers as free, default, full-time caretakers is costing us. In 2017, the Conference Board of Canada found that expanding early-childhood-education programming, including via child care, into younger age groups could lift 23,000 families — many of them single-parent households — out of poverty. An estimated 76,500 women could enter the workforce. Financing models have shown, unsurprisingly, that better child care would pay for itself many, many times over. We just need to give women a chance.

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Region: Ontario^[3]

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