

# Solutions to our child care crisis <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

You may have heard there's a child care crisis in Canada. It's been a constant in policy and social justice conversations for decades now.

Child care is expensive and spaces are hard to come by. Its lack of accessibility has been a major contributing factor to lower labour market outcomes for women relative to men, the persisting gender pay gap and even to rates of domestic violence.

Now add a pandemic to that existing crisis. There isn't a word that could accurately describe the state of child care nationally, provincially or locally here in the Waterloo Region. It's a mess, the harms of which, if not addressed, will resonate across our entire economy and hinder any efforts at recovery.

Niki Cooper, a single parent who works as a hairstylist in Waterloo is just one example:

"We got the word that we could open up on June 14, but child care wasn't made available until July. So I had three weeks to fend for myself, and if I didn't take clients, I would lose them because people really needed their hair done," Cooper said.

"So I started driving back and forth to Ayr every day in order for my family to help. Thank god they were available — it was literally the most stressful three weeks of all time."

When the only option you have for child care is an informal network like family and friends, you are completely, as Cooper said, at the mercy of the "kindness of others like family, which isn't a support that is guaranteed."

It becomes nearly impossible to create a foundation for your own business, and economic security for yourself when it's built on the hope that someone is willing and able to care for your children, so you can work. And if there's no one, then what?

It wasn't long into the pandemic before the Ontario provincial government instituted emergency child care.

When the whole province was in crisis, the government recognized that child care was essential in order for our frontline workers to provide the necessary services to keep Ontarians safe, fed and cared for.

That very fact proves the necessity of child care for economic growth and stability, and, further, it's proof of the critical role it plays in economic recovery. We're not the only ones saying this — top economists, academics and advocates have been screaming this from the tops of their lungs since the early days of the pandemic.

The lack of accessible and affordable child care was a serious problem even before the pandemic. Only about 20 per cent of children had access to a child care space in Ontario. Even if parents are lucky enough to get into a centre, it's a "you get what you get" situation.

An inflexible system that is under-resourced has Cooper constantly at odds between securing income and having to fill gaps in her care needs. It's been this way since her kids were babies. When her youngest was born and she was returning to work from maternity leave, it was an incredibly overwhelming period. While Cooper was rebuilding her client base, her income was actually lower than the subsidy cut-off for minimum wage, the qualifying income for daycare subsidies.

So Cooper was left in a situation where she needed more income to get subsidies, but couldn't work more without those subsidies for child care.

According to Municipal Benchmarking Network Canada, in 2018 in Waterloo Region, there were 216 regulated spaces per 1,000 children, with only 12 per cent of spaces being subsidized. For parents not receiving subsidies, the fees for those spaces are upwards of \$21,000 a year — nearly the equivalent of a full-time minimum wage job, and among the highest fees in Canada.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care projects that there could be even fewer spaces as the pandemic continues: up to 60-70 per cent fewer across Ontario.

As it stands, 132 child care centres in Ontario have permanently closed since March. And while it's nearly impossible to find real numbers on how child care centres are fairing, we know that enrollment is low, hovering around 40 per cent due to the pandemic. These figures can be devastating, considering child care centres run on fee-for-service and many need 100 per cent occupancy in order to break even.

How is all of this impacting women? According to a recent CBC report, more than 20,000 women left the workforce between February and October, while three times that number of men joined it. Authors of the report point to the demands of raising young children as a likely factor in the discrepancy, especially considering the cohorts leaving the workforce the fastest were between the ages of 20-24 and 35-39 and with children under the age of six.

But Cooper is a single parent. She doesn't have the option to leave the workforce. When the lockdown happened earlier this year, Cooper lost important income, and she continues to. Worse, she's in a position where she is not losing enough income to qualify for any COVID-19-related benefits. It's a precarious place to be.

Unsurprisingly, Cooper is one of many lone parents in similar circumstances. According to Katherine Scott, the senior economist for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, single parents have recouped a fraction of their employment losses experienced this spring. Many are still working fewer than 50 per cent of the hours they were working prior to COVID-19, in part because of increased child care needs.

So where do we go from here? Let's consider strategies:

YWCA Canada and the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto penned Canada's first feminist economic recovery plan. In it, the authors point to Quebec as an example of publicly-funded child care working: each \$100 invested in child care by the Quebec government returned \$104 to provincial coffers and \$43 to the federal government.

If we had a publicly-funded child care system that allowed women to be fully engaged in the economy, we could be adding upwards of \$60 billion to Ontario's GDP by 2026, according to a recent McKinsey & Company study.

To fix our crumbling child care system and reach economic recovery, it's going to take a unified front.

We need Trudeau to lead a federal child care action plan.

We need Ford to be accountable for provincial commitments.

We need Redman's regional council to have a bold strategy.

And we need you to build child care into your everyday advocacy for the sake of our community.

We've been talking about universal child care for decades. But now, we're seeing the first-ever recorded recession that's disproportionately impacting women. Child care is our ticket out of this hole, and an essential part of our playbook moving forward.

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