

Child care in 25 states: What we know and don't know ^[1]

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Excerpt from Introduction

Child care plays a critical role in ensuring parents can work, children can learn, and the economy can thrive.¹ In recent years, there has been broad bipartisan support at all levels of government to ensure all working parents have access to child care. And during the coronavirus pandemic support for child care has only grown.^{2,3} But amid efforts to improve child care access, an important underlying question has yet to be answered: “how much additional child care does the country need?”

The Military Child Care Act which was included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1990 and 1991,⁴ posed this question to the Department of Defense in 1989 when it required the Secretary of Defense to conduct an assessment of the needs for child care among Americans associated with the United States Armed Forces. As it states:

“Not later than six months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Defense shall submit to Congress a report on demand for child care by military and civilian personnel in the Armed Forces over the five-year period beginning on the date of submission of the report. The report shall include a plan for meeting that demand, the cost of implementing such plan, and methods for monitoring the military’s family day care program.”

However, in the nearly three decades since this question was raised, an answer has not been produced for the United States as a whole. It should be noted that there have been serious efforts to investigate the need for child care. Spurred by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5),⁵ many states have undertaken assessments to define the need for child care within their borders. Beginning in December 2018, the PDG B-5 competitive grant awarded 46 states one-year funds to conduct state-level needs assessments.⁶ But these studies are not consistently available to the public and do not offer nationally comparative data that can inform both federal and state policy, alike.

Organizations like Child Care Aware of America and the Center for American Progress have developed informative maps on national child care access that have contributed greatly to our understanding of child care supply and the characteristics of communities that typically lack adequate supply.^{7,8} Yet, no analysis has both quantified the national gap in child care and done so in a way that accurately reflects how parents access child care programs in reality.

Incorporating the most comprehensive child care supply data collected to date, and an advanced methodology that incorporates parent choice data to calculate the number of children whose families do not have reasonable access to care, the present child care gap analysis conducted by the Bipartisan Policy Center’s Early Childhood Initiative provides a long overdue answer to the child care access question and offers a starting point from which the country can work to close the child care gap. With such data, federal, state, and local policymakers can produce evidence-based strategies and budget requests to expand the supply of child care in a manner that reflects the quantity of additional child care communities actually need.

This report, accompanied by an interactive map, describes BPC’s mapping methodology, insights gleaned from the data collection process that states can use to optimize the ways they collect supply data, and national findings on the gap in child care according to geographic location and socioeconomic factors across the country. The report also includes an important discussion about the further need to fully understand parents’ child care choices at the national and local level in order to accurately apply these findings to policy decisions.

The present analysis measured the supply of, need for, and gap in child care in 25 states prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. BPC’s complete 50-state analysis was cut short by the national emergency. A national parent survey conducted by BPC and Morning Consult in August 2020 indicates that child care supply and parent child care preferences will look different as the nation recovers from the effects of the virus.⁹ Thus, BPC plans to conduct a subsequent post-COVID-19 analysis to measure changes in child care access from before and after the crisis. However, when there are changes to the system, the availability of child care access data is even more important. BPC believes that the data collection lessons, child care gap findings, and new parent choice data discussed in this report can

provide critical information to inform child care policy decisions that will effectively help the system recover.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: access ^[4]

demand ^[5]

supply ^[6]

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