

More kids pulled out of Toronto-area daycares during the pandemic than any other part of the country: report ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Greater Toronto Area, home to the most expensive child care in the country, also saw the steepest declines in child care enrolment during the pandemic's first wave, according to a new report.

Released Thursday, the report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which surveyed more than 11,000 child care providers in 37 cities across the country, found a "strong correlation" between cities with higher fees and those that had the biggest drops in enrolment between February and November of last year.

The report's authors caution that the decline in enrolment during the pandemic poses a "real threat of long-term damage" to the child care sector, both in terms of the viability of individual centres and also the stability of the workforce.

In every city outside of Quebec, there were at least 10 per cent fewer children in daycare last fall compared to before the pandemic, the report shows. The change in enrolment was most dramatic in Ontario, where it ranged from a 33-per-cent drop in London, to a 60-per-cent decline in Markham.

Toronto continues to be the least affordable city for child care in the country — with median preschool-age monthly fees of \$1,250 — and it had a 45-per-cent decline in enrolment during the first wave.

The GTA saw the steepest declines in child care enrolment during the pandemic's first wave

Among the 10 cities with the highest percentage declines in enrolment during the pandemic's first wave, seven are in the Greater Toronto Area.

Of the 10 cities with the highest child care fees in the country, seven are in the GTA, including Brampton and Mississauga, where fees rose by more than 15 per cent last year. Of the 10 cities with at least a 35-per-cent drop in enrolment during the pandemic, seven were in the GTA and all but one was in Ontario.

Where fees were lower, parents were less likely to take their children out of care, the report found. In Quebec, where child care is heavily subsidized and parent fees are mostly capped, enrolment barely declined.

The report's authors conclude that the enrolment data from the pandemic illustrates that "relying on parent fees to finance what should be a reliable, sustainable, quality child care system to support families in good times and bad does not work."

David Macdonald, senior economist at the CCPA and one of the report's co-authors, said the enrolment data shows how vulnerable the sector is, particularly in the parts of the country where providers rely heavily on parent fees to operate.

Macdonald said parents looking to return their children to daycare when they regain employment may find the space they once had is gone "That's the real danger," he said. "We've got a federal government really intent on expanding the child care system, but there has to be something left there to expand."

Child care figured prominently in the federal government's throne speech in October, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau committed to a "significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and child care system."

GTA home to highest child care fees in the country

Among the 10 cities with the highest monthly child care fees in the country, seven are in the Greater Toronto Area.

Carolyn Ferns, spokesperson for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said Ontario's government has "done nothing" to address the affordability of child care in the province.

"They're just kind of standing aside while the crisis gets worse and worse."

Ferns, who reviewed the report, said the consequences of reduced enrolment during the pandemic have forced many child care providers

to close. While some new centres have opened, Ferns said there has been a net loss of 58 child care centres in the province this year, the first time there has been a year-over-year decline in more than a decade.

Caitlin Clark, a spokesperson for Education Minister Stephen Lecce, did not confirm nor deny the number of facility closures cited by Ferns, but she said there has been a “less than one per cent reduction” in the overall number of child care licensees in the province.

Clark said Ontario’s Progressive Conservative government “inherited the second most expensive child care system in the country” from the Liberals and that it is “unacceptable for working parents.”

She pointed to the government’s \$2 billion investment in child care this year and its commitment to spend an additional \$1 billion to create 30,000 new spaces over the next five years. Clark also cited the Ontario Child Care Tax Credit, which she said saves parents \$1,200 per child. “We believe in putting money back into parents’ pockets, and that will continue,” she said.

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