

Daycares saw enrolment drop during pandemic, with cost and unemployment rates among factors: report ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

VANCOUVER -- Child care centres across the country saw a substantial drop in enrolment during the first year of the pandemic, including in major cities in B.C., according to a new report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and high costs and unemployment rates were both factors in the decline.

The centre conducted a phone survey last fall between Sept. 22 and Nov. 13, as part of an annual look at child care fees for children aged five and under in regulated centres or home daycares. Last year, questions were also asked related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey found enrolment in Richmond child care had dropped 32 per cent from February 2020. Surrey saw a 23 per cent decline. Burnaby's enrolment fell by 20 per cent, and Vancouver's by 13 per cent, according to the report.

Report co-author David Macdonald said the overall enrolment drops were among the more concerning findings of the survey.

"It's very concerning and very difficult for centres and homes that rely on parental fees for funding to continue to operate," he said.

"They're at risk of closure but they're also at risk of losing staff. You lay off staff because you don't have the kids, and then potentially in September when people are vaccinated and are hopefully going back to work, people need to put kids in daycare so they can go back to work, but those spaces aren't there."

Macdonald said the reduction appears to be primarily related to two factors: unemployment rates, and the cost.

"The higher the fees, the more likely it is that we're going to see a decline in enrolment," he said. "Because it's probably harder for parents who have constrained budgets to continue to send kids to daycares."

Across the country, the centre found there were at least 10 per cent fewer children in child care in fall 2020 compared to February in every city they surveyed outside of Quebec, and 27 out of 37 cities showed drops of 20 per cent or more.

While the centre said Toronto continues to be the least affordable city for child care in Canada, some B.C. cities also saw fee increases between 2019 and 2020.

Macdonald said despite the province's cost-reduction program, fees for preschool aged children in Surrey and Richmond jumped by eight per cent, equating to an increase of between \$60 to \$73 a month. Similar fees in Kelowna increased by seven per cent, and in Burnaby, by two per cent. Vancouver's preschool age care costs dropped by two per cent, a reduction of \$19 a month.

"Fee increases of particular concern in British Columbia were in Richmond and Surrey, as well Kelowna, although the fees started lower in Kelowna," Macdonald said. "Richmond and Surrey have a higher concentration particularly of for-profit centres, versus non-profit centres, whereas the opposite is true in Vancouver."

Vancouver parent James Raymond has two children under the age of five in daycare, and the cost is significant.

"We pay over \$3,000 a month for the two of them," he said. "That works out to over \$40,000 per year, and that's just for four days."

He said access to an affordable childcare program would be "life-changing."

"It's an issue of equality, it's a feminist issue," he said. "And I really think we need that funding from the federal and provincial government to fix what has been a crisis for a while now."

Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC spokesperson Sharon Gregson said though the province has been making "huge" investments in child care, with no fee cap, costs continue to increase, particularly in the for-profit sector.

"In the province where fees are capped at an affordable rate, namely Quebec, they have not seen the kind of enrolment drops that we've seen in other places," she said, referring to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report. "When families are crunched for money,

maybe one partner has lost income, maintaining an unaffordable child care space isn't an option."

During last fall's provincial election campaign, Premier John Horgan promised to increase the number of \$10 a day child care spaces in the province. Currently, there are about 2,500 spaces in B.C. that were converted into Universal Child Care Prototype sites, where parents pay \$200 a month or less per child (based on full-time enrolment). At this point, the sites have been extended through to the end of this month.

"In British Columbia we have about 584,000 children between the ages of zero and 12, so the ages that need child care. And about 400,000 of those children have mothers in the paid work force. And yet we only have about 125,000 licensed spaces," Gregson said. "We know the need is huge with women being forced out of the workforce, and the only way they're going to get back in is through affordable child care."

B.C.'s Minister of State for Child Care, Katrina Chen, said costs have also been brought down through the province's fee reduction program and affordable child care benefit. As for the \$10 a day plan, she said they've gotten the "signal" from the federal government that the programs will continue.

"We'll bring more details to providers and families in the coming weeks and months," she said, and added they've "learned a lot" from the prototype sites and expansion is something they're looking at. "There's going to be a lot of major decisions made in the coming year to make sure we can continue to support families and especially to bring down the cost of child care."

Macdonald said the federal government and some provincial governments are "very interested" in child care as a part of the overall economic recovery from the pandemic, but "there needs to be a sector to build on there."

"Irrespective of the reason for why parents aren't sending their kids to daycare...if these spaces are lost, not temporarily, but permanently, it becomes very difficult, particularly in places where big losses are seen like Richmond, to rapidly restart their economies when parents start scrambling to get daycare if they get a new job and they can't find it."

Here are the survey's findings on median fees in 2020 for childcare in some Metro Vancouver cities:

Infant/Toddler median monthly fees:

- Vancouver - \$1,165
- Richmond - \$1,300
- Surrey - \$1,050
- Burnaby - \$1,000

Preschool Age median monthly fees:

- Vancouver - \$935
- Richmond - \$1,028
- Surrey - \$917
- Burnaby - \$870

The centre said the survey data in the report represents a sample of 53 per cent of regulated full-time care centres and regulated family child care in Canada.

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

Tags: fees ^[4]

enrollment ^[5]

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