

# Momentum is building for a Canada-wide child-care system. Let's keep it going <sup>[1]</sup>

This commentary is drawn from a new report from the Century Initiative that examines Canada's early learning and child-care system.

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**Source:** First Policy Response

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 13 Aug 2021

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

There have been efforts to build a national universal child-care system in Canada for more than 50 years. As the current federal government moves forward with its ambitious plan for a Canada-wide early learning and child-care system, we again have the opportunity to implement this vision. So far, eight provinces and territories, representing a range of political perspectives, have signed bilateral agreements with the federal government under the plan. We need to build on this momentum with the remaining provinces and territories no matter the outcome of the next federal election.

We can no longer treat early learning and child care as a “nice-to-have” or as a partisan issue. Child care is an essential core public service, similar to schools, health care and public transit, and should be treated as such. It is an essential pillar of our economic prosperity and well-being.

Century Initiative's recent report, *Canada's early learning and child care system: Building a foundation for sustainable population growth*, highlights how robust child-care systems can have a positive impact on our society and economy. Access to high-quality, affordable child care has a positive impact on the well-being of children and families, and can contribute to job creation, the attraction and retention of newcomers to Canada, and greater participation of women and parents in the economy. This latter point is particularly important given that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in record levels of women leaving the workforce due to a lack of child-care options.

Regardless of which party forms government, all children and parents in Canada deserve high-quality, accessible and affordable child-care.

This report draws on the findings of Century Initiative's 2021 National Scorecard on Canada's Growth and Prosperity, which illustrates that Canada is lagging behind on early learning and child care compared to peer countries. Canada has lower levels of child-care participation and spending on children and families compared to similar countries. It has also declined significantly in its ranking on the UNICEF report card on child and youth well-being in the last decade.

There are three inter-related goals that must be part of a strong Canada-wide system: access, affordability and quality. There are currently a limited number of regulated child-care spaces available to meet demand in Canada, often leading to long waiting lists — with low-income populations, those who work non-standard hours, newcomers, Indigenous peoples and rural communities facing more significant barriers. Affordability and quality of care are also major challenges, with high fees and uneven quality across the child-care landscape. Bilateral federal-provincial agreements have so far aimed to address these issues.

Addressing these gaps will contribute to Canada's long-term social and economic prosperity. By some estimates, a universal national child-care system could increase Canada's annual GDP by \$63 billion to \$107 billion per year. A robust child-care system can also support increased labour-market participation among immigrant parents, and particularly mothers, helping to close the income gap for newcomer women while supporting the Canadian economy to leverage their talent and skills. Strong social infrastructure, including child care, is important to attract and retain immigrants to Canada, including top talent from around the world.

In the long term, a universal child-care program could also contribute to addressing Canada's population challenges. Studies have found that the availability of child care can be associated with the decision to have children. In 2020, Canada's population growth rate was at its lowest in more than 100 years due to the pandemic. If that downward trend continues and our population continues to age, we will not have enough working-age people to meet our labour needs or generate the economic activity required to sustain the social supports and programs we cherish as Canadians.

For these reasons, Century Initiative advocates for increasing Canada's population to 100 million by 2100 — ensuring a high quality of life and standard of living for all Canadians. Achieving these objectives requires that we get the foundation right with policies such as universal child care.

The debate over what a universal child-care system should look like will continue in Canada, particularly in the context of a federal election. Regardless of which party forms government, all children and parents in Canada deserve high-quality, accessible and affordable child-care.

Now is the time to finally achieve the decades-long vision of a universal, Canada-wide child-care system. In this moment, as we recover from the pandemic, we must not lose sight of opportunities like this one to secure our long-term economic prosperity and well-being. We must act to ensure that this issue remains non-partisan and on the policy agenda to deliver critical social infrastructure.

**Related link:** Canada's early learning and child care system: Building a foundation for sustainable population growth [3]

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