

Rural communities need federal child care investments ^[1]

Targeted, long-term investments would help the many families in rural America who desperately need child care.

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EXCERPTS

In the United States, 1 in 5 people live in a rural area. This includes more than 1.1 million families with young children. Unfortunately, many of these families face barriers to affordable and accessible child care.

Indeed, rural families have fewer options for child care than urban and suburban families. Overall, nearly two-thirds of rural families live in a child care desert, areas where there are more than three young children for every licensed child care slot available. They also spend more of their income on and travel farther for their care arrangements. Families in rural areas spend an average of 12.2 percent of their income on child care, while families in metropolitan areas spend 10.8 percent of their income on child care. Additionally, a Bipartisan Policy Center analysis of child care subsidy recipients found that those in urban areas live about 3 1/2 miles from their child care provider, compared with 7 1/2 miles for rural families. And nearly one-third of rural families live more than 10 miles away from their care—a significant strain on their time and resources as they travel between home, child care, and work.

Moreover, the child care services available in rural areas look different than those available in urban and suburban areas. Family child care slots comprise a much larger proportion of the existing options in rural communities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas 1 in 3 rural child care sites was a Head Start program, Head Start represented only 13 percent of child care capacity in metropolitan areas.

Among children under the age of 5, those living in rural areas are 37 percent more likely to live in deep poverty than those living in metropolitan areas. Child care is a costly burden; low-income families paying for child care spend almost \$200 per week on care, amounting to about 35 percent of their household income. Many families must choose between using a significant portion of their income to pay for care, rather than other necessities, and reducing the time they spend at work, which means earning less income. For this reason, states must receive significant, sustained, and flexible federal funding to address rural child care deserts through new targeted funding initiatives.

Child care deserts in rural Appalachia

In 2019, the Appalachian region was home to nearly 26 million people. It includes areas of 13 states, ranging as far south as Alabama and Georgia and as far north as New York. Both child poverty and overall poverty are higher in Appalachia than they are nationally, with the highest poverty rates found in the central subregion that includes portions of Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Appalachia has historically lacked sufficient investments and resources due to its geographic isolation. The cost and difficulty of building infrastructure in rural Appalachia, where a significant portion of the region's population resides, have resulted in fewer public infrastructure projects, which are imperative for larger economic development. Due to the higher costs of building and the persistently low rate of funding—a result of the inadequate local tax base—Appalachia has struggled to match the capacity of other regions.

This lack of funding and resources extends to child care access: Rural Americans are 9 percent more likely to live in child care deserts than the general population—60 percent versus 51 percent—and the proportion is even greater in rural Appalachia. In fact, a new Center for American Progress analysis of Appalachian counties, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, finds that nearly 70 percent of people in rural Appalachia live in a child care desert—about 20 percent more than the general U.S. population.

Melissa Colagrosso, the owner and director of a child care center in Fayette County, West Virginia—an Appalachian child care desert—testified before the Senate in April 2022 about the difficulties she experienced accessing capital to start her center in the mid-1990s, which resulted in her having to take out a second mortgage on her home. Colagrosso's child care center has now fulfilled an important need in her community for decades, yet it is barely able to cover its costs.

The gap between available child care and what is needed is larger for rural areas than for urban areas, and it brings significant economic burdens. The cost of this gap for one year results in an estimated economic burden of between \$41,000 and \$63,000 per child on households, businesses, and tax revenue.

The Bipartisan Policy Center estimated the costs of the gap by state and found that many rural states face heavy economic burdens. In

West Virginia, for example, the long-term economic cost of the lack of child care is nearly \$1 billion. Meanwhile, in Arizona, the estimated cost is between \$3 billion and \$4.6 billion.

RURAL CHILD CARE: BY THE NUMBERS

70% - Share of people in rural Appalachia living in a child care desert

2/3 - Share of rural families living in a child care desert

12.2% - Proportion of income the average rural family spends on child care

Closing the gap between available and needed child care would create value that could be reinvested into communities and generate economic dividends. Although addressing this market failure will not be without cost, the upfront cost is justified by the ample benefits that would flow from matching child care supply to demand.

Building child care capacity in rural America will require targeted investments and significant funding. Rural communities need the resources to help ensure that existing providers can keep their doors open and to fund the development of new providers. This will require funding for capital investments, early childhood educator workforce development, and equitable compensation for child care teachers and staff.

Sustained investments in rural child care will allow families to thrive, help businesses maintain a well-supported workforce, and ensure equity with nonrural communities.

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