

Not done yet: \$10-a-day child care requires addressing Canada's child care deserts ^[1]

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Executive summary

As \$10-a-day child care is rolling out across Canada, one of the major remaining stumbling blocks is that there simply aren't enough child care spaces to meet the demand.

This report examines the availability of child care spaces by postal code across the country and finds child care deserts to be widespread: there were an estimated 759,000 full-time licensed spaces for younger children across Canada in centres and family child care homes in 2023. Of the 1.97 million younger children who might be using those spaces, 48 per cent live in child care deserts.

That means that almost half of younger Canadian children (defined as not yet attending Kindergarten) live in a postal code that has more than three children for every licensed child care space.

Canada needs more child care spaces, which also means more adequately paid early childhood educators (ECEs) to staff them.

In terms of child care deserts by postal code, here are the provinces listed from those with the highest proportion of younger children living in child care deserts to those with the lowest:

- Saskatchewan: 92% of younger children live in child care deserts
- Newfoundland and Labrador: 79% of younger children live in child care deserts
- Manitoba: 76% of younger children live in child care deserts
- B.C.: 64% of younger children live in child care deserts
- Alberta: 61% of younger children live in child care deserts
- Ontario: 53% of younger children live in child care deserts
- Nova Scotia: 47% of younger children live in child care deserts
- New Brunswick: 29% of younger children live in child care deserts
- Quebec: 11% of younger children live in child care deserts
- P.E.I.: 4% of younger children live in child care deserts

Saskatchewan has the highest proportion of children living in child care deserts by far: 85,500 younger children live in a postal code where there are more than three children per licensed space. This means that many more children are living in child care deserts in Saskatchewan than Quebec, even though Quebec has four times the child population. Saskatchewan parents who live in downtown Regina stand the best chance of finding a child care space nearby.

Newfoundland and Labrador comes close to Saskatchewan: 17,400 children live in a postal code with more than three younger children per full-time licensed space.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Prince Edward Island has the fewest child care deserts: the smallest province only has one postal code that is a child care desert. Children living in that area make up only 4 per cent of younger children on the island.

Quebec ranks second best: 11 per cent of younger Quebec children are living in child care deserts, amounting to 50,200 younger children. Unlike the slightly higher-ranked P.E.I., it is a much larger province, with 421 postal code prefixes.

The report also looks beyond postal codes, examining child care coverage rates in 50 Canadian cities, including all provincial and territorial capitals. The coverage rate is the proportion of full-time licensed spaces for every child not yet in Kindergarten.

For parents, infant spaces are the hardest to access. Only eight Canadian cities meet the 33 per cent coverage rate for infants (which is a goal for the European Union) and they are all in Quebec. This includes Terrebonne, Laval, Levis, the Island of Montreal, Longueuil, Saguenay, Gatineau and Quebec City. Charlottetown P.E.I. comes close, with a 28% coverage rate.

Most Canadian cities have a coverage rate below 20 per cent, meaning that in those cities, there are at least five infants for every licensed infant space. St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Ontario cities of Barrie, Guelph, Hamilton and Brampton, and Saskatoon scored particularly badly, with low availability of infant spaces compared to their population of infants. In those cities, there is less than one licensed space for every 10 infants.

Using a somewhat different approach to examine which cities have the most child care coverage for children who are not yet in Kindergarten including infants, the picture changes slightly but the trends continue.

Whitehorse, Charlottetown, and the island of Montreal rank best in terms of coverage rates, with roughly seven licensed spaces for every 10 children who are not yet in Kindergarten.

At the other end of the spectrum are Saskatoon, Regina, Kitchener, and Vancouver. In each of these cities, there are roughly two licensed spaces for every 10 children, equating to coverage rates of just over 20 per cent.

As this analysis shows, the availability of an age-appropriate child care space is highly variable. It shows, in some detail, that child care deserts are a feature of child care provision all across Canada. This reality, which represents the dysfunctional child care market that has developed over time as Canada has, until now, lacked unifying early learning and child care policy and funding.

As the federal government and provinces/territories have begun to roll out a child care system, not a market, its high-level early learning and child care policy framework is unified by the principles of affordability, accessibility, quality, inclusivity and flexibility. Within this, the commitment that early learning and child care expansion will be primarily public and non-profit is entirely consistent with evidence-based policy making and has been made explicitly and implicitly. This suggests that purposeful and rational expansion of public and non-profit licensed child care is a critical next step to ensure that all Canadian families can access the more affordable fees already in play. From many perspectives, supporting, facilitating and monitoring the impact of more accessible, more affordable, more inclusive and—importantly—better quality child care needs to be a collaborative effort by federal, provincial, territorial, Indigenous representatives, together with civil society, child care community partners, and parents in order to maximize success.

The report concludes with seven recommendations to address the shortage of child care coverage in Canada.

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