

Almost half of young Canadian children live in child-care deserts, report says ^[1]

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Excerpts

Nearly half of Canadian children younger than kindergarten age live in child-care deserts, areas of the country where there is a serious shortage of available licensed child care, says a new report released on Tuesday.

The prevalence of such areas has been a persistent problem across the country for years and is likely to become worse as the national child-care program, which promises to reduce fees to an average of \$10 a day by 2025, prompts increased demand for care.

In the report, researchers from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives conclude that 48 per cent of younger children – those not yet attending kindergarten – live in a child-care desert, defined as a postal code in which there are at least three children competing for every one licensed space.

“In this push toward building a national child-care system, there’s a lot of room for improvement in almost all provinces,” said David Macdonald, the CCPA’s senior economist and co-author of the report titled “Not Done Yet: \$10 a Day Child Care Requires Addressing Canada’s Child Care Deserts.”

By offering a fine-grained look at where child-care deserts exist, the report’s authors hope it will be used by policy makers to decide where to create spaces under the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care plan.

So far, that agreement has seen average child-care fees reduced by at least 50 per cent almost everywhere in the country. As provinces and territories now begin to focus on expanding the number of spaces available, the authors of the report say governments must play an active role in eliminating child-care deserts, and they can use this report to guide them.

“Now that the whole process is about expanding supply, this is a very good tool that can help in that,” said Martha Friendly, a CCPA research associate and co-author of the report.

Of 1.97 million younger children who might be in need of full-time licensed child care, there are currently spaces for only 759,000, according to the report.

It found large discrepancies among the 50 cities analyzed. For example, there are seven licensed spaces for every 10 children in Whitehorse, Charlottetown and on the island of Montreal. But there are only two spaces for every 10 children in Saskatoon, Regina, Vancouver and Kitchener, Ont.

Provincially, Saskatchewan has the highest percentage of younger children living in child-care deserts, at 92 per cent. Ontario has the sixth-highest percentage, with 53 per cent of younger children in child-care deserts.

Quebec and PEI have the lowest percentages, at 11 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively.

The report also found that child-care deserts are more likely to be found in rural communities than in places with bigger populations.

Ultimately, the report shows the shortcomings of leaving child care to a free-market system, the authors say.

Instead, governments should play an active role in making child care available where it is needed, creating a public system that treats child care like many other public services.

“In other areas, governments are very involved in the planning of these types of public services,” Mr. Macdonald said. “You don’t locate fire stations where you think some private fire provider thinks will be most profitable. You build fire stations equally distributed throughout the city. You build schools where the kids are and you manage that very publicly.”

The federal funding now pouring into the child-care sector increases the likelihood of being able to create a public system that is better equipped to serve rural communities, Ms. Friendly said.

One of the main factors that has contributed to child-care deserts is that starting up child care was a private responsibility, not a

government one, she said. “And then previously, things mitigated against it, like it was quite expensive and you couldn’t break even. But that’s now changing.”

Marni Flaherty, interim CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation, a national non-profit, said that a publicly managed child-care system is necessary to address the inequalities of access that the report identifies.

“We have an inequity across the country. And it’s obvious the expansion of child care requires public management, planning and financing,” she said.

The first phase of the national child-care plan focused on reducing fees, and it has been very successful in doing so, Ms. Friendly said. The expansion phase will be much more difficult.

“We have to develop a lot of child care in order to keep up with the demand at this point. And the provinces have all promised to expand quite a lot. So this is the time.”

Region: Canada ^[3]

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