

# Opinion: Saskatchewan resembles a desert when it comes to child care <sup>[1]</sup>

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### Excerpts

In social policy, a “child-care desert” refers to a location where there are nowhere near enough full-day licensed spaces.

Notoriously, areas across Canada have long been home to these deserts of inequitable child-care distribution, often because governments of all stripes have viewed child care as a family responsibility, rather than a government responsibility.

But while all of Canada produces these child-care deserts, Saskatchewan is a veritable Sahara.

In a recent report on child care access, David Macdonald and Martha Friendly report that 92 per cent of younger children in Saskatchewan live in a child-care desert versus 48 per cent for the country as a whole.

In Saskatchewan, 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.

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.

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. Saskatoon scores particularly badly here, with less than one licensed space for every 10 infants.

For older children not yet in kindergarten, the picture in Saskatchewan isn’t much better. In both Regina and Saskatoon, there are roughly two licensed spaces for every 10 children, a coverage rate of just over 20 per cent.

There was no doubt that as the federal government sought to reduce child-care fees across the country to \$10 per day, demand would explode

Unfortunately, Saskatchewan had some of the poorest levels of accessibility for child care before the introduction of the program, meaning we have to play catch-up more than most if we want an affordable and accessible child-care system in this province.

The province has moved to improve wages for child-care workers and has introduced free training for Early Childhood Educators at provincial learning institutions. All of these are important initiatives. We cannot hope to expand the amount of spaces without ensuring there is a trained and stable workforce to meet this growth.

However, there are other important initiatives the government should consider if it wants to not only increase child-care spaces, but increase them in the places that need the spaces the most.

Because child-care provision has been treated mostly as a private responsibility and left to the market, groups or individual operators have decided for themselves where they’d like to locate. This can result in haphazard expansion that will only exacerbate existing inequities of access.

For instance, new child-care spaces are much more likely to be sited in higher-density urban areas than rural areas or smaller towns. Even in urban areas, spaces are often plentiful downtown, but lacking in the suburbs.

Indeed, according to Macdonald and Friendly’s data — fully 100 per cent of children in rural areas in Saskatchewan live in a child-care desert — compared with 86 per cent in the larger cities.

While the government has sought to incentivize the creation of new regulated family child-care homes in the province, there doesn’t appear to be any plan to ensure that some of these homes will be sited in areas of high need, like rural Saskatchewan.

If we truly want to see both an affordable and fully accessible child-care system, the government should move to co-ordinate and plan for child-care facilities and spaces the same way it does for public schools.

Without a coherent planning process to ensure the equitable distribution of child-care spaces, we will see a growing divide of have and have-nots, as families in some regions of the province can access the promise of affordable child care, while others simply cannot.

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