

Child-care chasm can be bridged ^[1]

Other jurisdictions with universal, affordable daycare see positive impacts on domestic front, and economy

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Source: Free Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 21 Jun 2024

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

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Child care is the great equalizer. Even if you don't need it, you likely rely on someone who does.

But while society at large benefits when families have access to high-quality child care, it's not guaranteed to anyone. Ultimately, government policies have made it a matter for the domestic realm, rather than the public sphere, experts say.

"We're still stuck in the 19th century," said Susan Prentice, a professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba.

"We still think that there's this giant iron wall between what happens inside families and what happens inside the labour market."

That, she says, is an illusion.

In fact, research and case studies bear out that investing in child care pays off in a range of benefits, including economic gains, the positive impacts of healthy child development and the promotion of gender equality, which combats the "motherhood penalty."

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In Manitoba, just one in five children, or 20 per cent, have access to a licensed child-care space, according to a 2023 annual report from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning. The report shows that while 29 per cent of children five years of age and younger have access, only 12 per cent of children between the ages of six and 12 do.

Demand is so high that the Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA), which advocates for better child care, recommends parents put their child on a wait list before they're even born. In 2018, those province-wide wait lists contained 16,600 names. It's not clear how long the waits are today as the province no longer maintains the same centralized tracking system.

Even if parents are proactive far in advance, they still might be out of luck — multi-year wait lists are the norm in urban areas, the MCCA says.

"This is an enormous stress for families," Prentice said. "It's a terrible burden on parents."

Why does the situation remain so desperate in Manitoba and elsewhere in Canada? Prentice points to what society deems important.

"At a certain point, it comes down to your values. What do citizens owe each other?" she said. "Things that are associated with children, with women and with family have been a low priority."

This is evident when a comparison is made to other essential services, she said. For instance, while the country has collectively decided education and health care should be public and accessible to all, early childhood education and child care have largely been relegated to the non-profit or private sector.

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