

Interpreting the stats is anything but child's play [AU] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Women are always complaining about the high cost of child care and the difficulty in finding suitable care. So much so that many believe we have a child-care crisis.

But here's a surprising thing. When the federal Treasury inquired into the matter, it couldn't find a problem.

"Contrary to popular perceptions," it concluded, "there is not an emerging crisis in the sector. Supply is generally keeping pace with demand and child care has remained affordable."

Its findings are reported in the current issue of Economic Roundup. Based on the best available recent survey evidence, it says, child care in Australia remains accessible and affordable at the aggregate level.

But how come Treasury's big picture is so far at variance with so many people's first-hand experience?

Well, here we're helped by an old decision rule coming from Treasury itself: if a figure looks wrong, it probably is wrong.

It's possible Treasury's startling conclusion that everything in the child-care garden is rosy arises from misinterpretation of inadequate statistical evidence. Getting down to specifics, Treasury's conclusion that child-care provision is adequate rests heavily on answers to surveys conducted by the Bureau of Statistics and as part of the household income and labour dynamics project, HILDA.

Trouble is, the bureau's answers were provided by parents with children aged up to 12, while HILDA's answers came from parents with children 14 or under.

Most of our complaints concern the cost and availability of long day care for pre-school-aged children. But the survey results Treasury relies on are likely to mix this up with something quite different: the cost and adequacy of before- and after-school care. Whoops.

It's also possible the survey results underrepresent the experience of parents who made no use of paid child care because it wasn't available to them.

Treasury makes much of the HILDA finding that, over four years, the proportion of parents reporting no difficulties with child care is consistently the highest response category at between 30 and 40 per cent of all respondents.

Talk about the glass being half full. I'd have thought the more intelligent way to interpret that statistic was to say that 60 to 70 per cent of respondents reported encountering difficulties with child care.

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So sorry, Treasury — not convinced. And certainly not impressed.

- reprinted from The Age

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