

# Child care can help rural economy <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Adkin, Laurie

**Source:** Edmonton Journal

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 20 Nov 2004

## EXCERPTS

With the crisis in farm incomes, livelihoods in small Alberta towns are precarious. Farm families try to scratch together a living doing all kinds of off-farm work, from men going off to the oil rigs to women working part-time in the local grocery store. Because work is irregular and unpredictable, people with children need highly flexible child care arrangements. Or, they need enough income to pay for full-time child care.

The crisis in farm income affects all business in a small town, where service work tends to be low-wage to start with. Few people have the means to pay for quality, full-time, government-approved child care (even where it is available).

And there are no government child care subsidies for children who are not enrolled in a government regulated child care centre or family day home.

There are few of these in small-town Alberta. Insufficient income, or lack of providers equals no child care. No child care, no work. No work, no income.

One rural day-home provider recently told me about the unravelling crisis in her town, triggered by the unavailability of affordable child care. Parents in her community couldn't afford to pay for full-time child care, so they were using an informal system of dropping their children off at her home as required by their changing part-time or casual work schedules. At \$2 per child per hour, this day-home provider needs to take in eight children to earn \$16 an hour. (In this case, the provider is a single mother, with no other source of income.) Why \$2 an hour? Because most of her parents are earning only between \$5.90 and \$10 an hour at their jobs, and can't afford to pay more for child care. But the province sets a limit on the caregiver/child ratio, even for private babysitters (that is, providers who are not government-approved family day homes, meeting certain child care standards and monitored by a Family Day Home Agency). This limit is six children under 12 years of age. No more than three children can be under two years of age. These numbers include the caregiver's own children under the age of 12 years.

So, when the government's Child and Family Services authorities recently began enforcing child care standards, this provider was told to respect the rules, and to make sure that she did not have more than six children in her home at a time. This meant that she had to turn children away whose families had been relying upon her for years. The parents -- left with no options -- were faced with losing jobs, or the stress of finding less reliable and/or satisfactory arrangements for child care. For the remaining children, the day home provider estimated that she would have to raise her fee to \$2.50 per hour, to try to make ends meet.

She described the anguish that she and her families have experienced due to the rupture of long-term relationships between the caregiver and some of her charges.

The average monthly fee in child care centres (including private as well as non-profit centres, and for children of all ages) was \$522.84 when last calculated in 2001. In four non-profit child-care centres in Edmonton, monthly fees run from \$590 to \$881, depending upon the age of the child (infant care is more expensive because the ratio of caregivers to children is higher).

How many families can afford this, even assuming that spaces were available?

And it's not because child care workers are making big salaries. A study commissioned by the Alberta Government reported in 2002 that the average child care worker's salary in Alberta was only \$8.36 an hour, and that the staff turnover rate was 44.8 per cent.

The problem is not the regulation of child care -- everyone agrees that children must have safe, healthy, and developmentally rich learning environments. What parent would choose otherwise?

The problem is that families are not receiving the support they need for the costs of raising children.

For real choices to become possible, the child care needs of families call for a societal strategy -- one shared by parents, families, neighbourhoods, communities, employers, public institutions, and governments.

Therein lies the failure of the Conservatives' approach to early childhood care and development. The Conservatives believe that raising children is primarily a matter for the private sector, meaning families and private child care providers. But this assumes a set of conditions that no longer exist. Most families -- including most farm families -- rely on two incomes to make ends meet today, and have for a long time. Seventy-three per cent of mothers of young children were in the workforce, when last measured in 2001 -- the majority employed full-time. The male breadwinner earning a family wage is a nostalgic fantasy that has nothing to do with the reality of most families today.

Which is not to say that women don't still bear a heavy load as primary caregivers for young children and elderly relatives on top of their jobs in the paid workforce. As for the market, insofar as available, affordable and high-quality child care is concerned, the market has clearly failed to deliver.

The government provides limited child care subsidies to low-income families, so that they can pay for child care while making a living. (Child care subsidies add up to a much smaller budget line than welfare payments to the unemployed parents.)

But child care subsidies do not create child care capacity. They are not, alone, an adequate policy measure to achieve the goal of universally available, high-quality child care.

To achieve these goals, the government would have to recognize that society also has an important role to play in ensuring the well-being of children and in supporting the families and educators that help them grow. The government would have to recognize the need for a substantial social investment in the costs of raising children.

- reprinted from the Edmonton Journal

**Related link:** CRRU ISSUE file: Rural child care in Canada [2]

**Region:** Canada [3]

Alberta [4]

**Tags:** subsidy [5]

funding [6]

accessibility [7]

rural [8]

legislation and regulation [9]

---

**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/11/child-care-can-help-rural-economy>

#### Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/11/child-care-can-help-rural-economy> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/resources/issue-files/rural-child-care-canada> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/subsidy> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/rural> [9] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation>