

Baby boom meets daycare bust in Canada ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the wake of Canada's largest baby boom in 50 years, public spending on licensed child care has barely budged, parent fees are soaring and growth in new spaces has slowed to a trickle, according to a **new analysis** ^[3].

"Policy-makers need a reality check," said Carolyn Ferns of the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit, which is working with researchers at the University of Guelph and the University of Manitoba on a series of briefs on the topic.

"We know that mothers are in the work force to stay and that the number of young children needing child care continues to rise, but child-care spaces haven't kept pace because government commitment and funding haven't kept pace," said Ferns, co-author of the report, being released Friday.

After shrinking for many years, the number of children under age 5 in Canada is on the rise, according to the report, which is a national snapshot of early childhood education and care in 2012, the year for which the latest data is available.

The 2011 Census noted that the 0-4 age group has been growing at the highest rate in 50 years.

At the same time, the labour force participation of mothers with children under age 2 grew to almost 70 per cent in 2012, while almost 77 per cent of mothers with children between the ages of 3 and 5 were working.

And yet there were full- or part-time spaces in licensed daycare centres for just 22.5 per cent of Canadian children from birth to age 5, an anemic 0.7-per-cent increase over 2010. In Ontario, there were licensed spaces for barely 21 per cent in 2012.

Even in the limited growth years after 2006, when Ottawa scrapped a \$5 billion national child-care plan, space increases "never dropped below 1 per cent," the report notes.

Meantime, parent fees "continue to be higher than university costs" across Canada and most provinces, the report says. Everywhere except Quebec and Manitoba, where fees are regulated, parents were paying more for care in 2012 than in 1998, in inflation-adjusted dollars. (PEI is the only other province that regulates daycare fees.)

The range of parent fees by province "was enormous," ranging from \$1,824 a year for an infant in Quebec, which charges just \$7 a day, to more than \$12,000 a year for a baby in Ontario. (In Toronto, infant fees can run as high as \$19,000 a year.)

"Parent fees are sky-high, while quality regulated spaces are as rare as hens' teeth," Ferns said. "That puts parents in increasingly precarious positions - trying to navigate a maze of difficult and constrained choices."

Brooke Richardson, a Toronto mother of three who is working part-time while enrolled in PhD studies, has to rely on her mother-in-law to care for her 6-month-old baby because she can't find child care.

"It is beyond infuriating and so sad," said Richardson, 29. "So many mothers say they want to have more children, but they can't afford it. If you want women to work, you have to provide child care."

Despite the high fees, child care worker wages remain low, according to the report. The median hourly wage of \$16.50 is about 69 per cent of the average Canadian hourly wage of \$23.92.

Wages rose in every province except Ontario between 1998 and 2012, according to the report.

However, Kathleen Wynne's newly re-elected Liberal government has promised to raise wages by \$2 an hour in the next two years.

While public funding for child care edged up in all provinces except Newfoundland, Yukon and British Columbia, where it dipped, "increases are generally too small and too unpredictable to allow for more than modest growth of services," the report said.

Report co-author Martha Friendly, head of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, said the report points to the need for a national child-care plan and more data collection to better understand the needs.

"This baby boom is a national trend. But young families are not being helped at all by the government of Canada," Friendly said. "It is not good for the economy and not good for the future of the country."

The report is part of the Moving Child Care Forward project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and is intended to help policy-makers, advocates and service providers address long-standing challenges in the area.

- Read online at the Toronto Star [2]

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