

High cost of child care keeps many Toronto families in poverty ^[1]

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EXERPTS

A brand new Honda Civic. Three years' tuition at a Canadian university. A transatlantic cruise aboard the Queen Mary 2. All of these could be yours for less than the cost of a year of child care in Toronto.

With a space for a single infant setting parents back more than \$20,000 a year, the price of licensed child care is higher here than anywhere else in the country.

But the cost is only half the story.

Toronto is suffering a severe shortage of child-care spaces — there are only 64,700 spots in licensed facilities in a city with a child population of almost 350,000.

That's leading to the growth of a large, unlicensed and unregulated child-care sector.

A city report ^[3] that went to council last week put it bluntly.

"The current supply of child care in Toronto is nowhere near adequate."

Critics say the shortage affects parents of all backgrounds by limiting their economic opportunities, destabilizing family life and, in some cases, pushing them out of town.

The lack of affordable child care "keeps us in poverty," says Sultana Jahangir, director of the South Asian Women's Rights Organization.

Her makeshift office in a Scarborough highrise sees a daily influx of women struggling to work their way out of poverty while raising kids.

Jahangir estimates that 80 per cent of women in her immigrant community are unemployed, and not having access to affordable child care is the reason.

Some mothers leave their children with neighbours, who charge \$3 to \$4 an hour for unlicensed, sometimes unreliable, care, Jahangir says.

Others take the night shift at factories, working 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., then coming home to look after their kids.

"When everybody's sleeping, the woman is working," Jahangir says.

With financial help from the province, the city gives child-care subsidies to the neediest parents. But there aren't nearly enough to go around. There are only 25,116 subsidies available, but 87,590 children live in low-income families. Nearly 17,000 eligible children are on the subsidy waiting list.

Jahangir says a solution would be for the city to provide more subsidies. But it would take \$582 million to fund enough subsidies for all low-income families — more than Children's Services' entire 2015 budget of \$452 million.

Gabriela Lopez is one of the lucky ones, at least for now.

A 37-year-old single mother from Mexico, she receives a monthly subsidy that covers the \$400 it costs to send her 5-year-old son to an after-school program. That gives Lopez time to take graphic design courses at Centennial College.

But last month she realized how unstable that arrangement can be.

To continue to qualify for a subsidy, parents may spend no more than three months of any 12-month period out of work or out of school.

Lopez used up a month of that time last year, so when her classes ended in April she was told she had two months to find work, or she would lose her subsidy.

"How can I study or improve or get more skills if I don't have that help, that subsidy?" she asked, calling the situation "very stressful."

After failing to find work, Lopez decided to re-enroll for summer courses, which will allow her to keep her subsidy. But she's worried she'll be in the same predicament next spring.

Those who do fall off the subsidy list end up caught in a catch-22, according to Jane Mercer of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care ^[4]. It's much harder to find work while having to look after a child full-time, she said. "You can't get a job if you don't have child care, and you can't get child care if you don't have a job."

Even parents who are comparatively well-off can be forced into difficult decisions by the high costs of child care.

Angela Cole and her husband make a combined \$125,000 a year; she works as an analyst for a major bank, and he's in sales. They already have one daughter and are expecting twins in about two weeks. Cole, who lives in High Park, estimates it could cost \$3,000 a month to get for licensed spaces for all three kids, so the couple are going to move to Milton to be closer to her mother, who can help with the children.

"It's kind of heartbreaking," said Cole, 31. "But child care is going to cost us more than I make."

Rather than move, other parents simply used unlicensed child care, which tends to be cheaper.

There's evidence to suggest that a lack of affordable child care poses an economic burden not just for families but for society as a whole.

One 2012 study [5] found that a decade after Quebec's universal child-care program was introduced, 70,000 more mothers were employed, and the province's GDP was boosted 1.7 per cent.

Ward 31 (Beaches-East York) Councillor Janet Davis (open Janet Davis's poliscard) [6] says expanding access to child care is an urgent need, and that all levels of government need to commit money to solve the problem.

Last month, the provincial government announced it would provide \$120 million to create 4,000 new child-care spaces across Ontario, some of which will end up in Toronto. But Davis says the city is still waiting for a major contribution from Ottawa.

She argues that access to affordable child care is a moral imperative.

"It's a prerequisite for equity," she said, "to ensure that all families can participate in the social and economic life of our city. It is that fundamental."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario [7]

Tags: poverty [8]

affordability [9]

mother's labour force participation [10]

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