

Underfunding child care comes with a heavy toll ^[1]

Author: Kershaw, Paul

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EXCERPTS

Aggression and crime among boys has risen faster in Quebec than other provinces over the last decade. This coincides with the rollout of child care services in the province.

These findings are contained in a new study by Kevin Milligan, my University of British Columbia colleague, and his co-authors, Michael Baker and Jonathan Gruber.

A key design feature of the study is that the authors don't know which children were actually enrolled in Quebec's child care services. So their findings support two very different interpretations, both of which factor in the current federal election.

The authors' favoured interpretation is that the rise in aggression and crime may be among children who have been using child care services. This interpretation would signal that Quebec child care is not of good enough quality to achieve child development gains commonly found by researchers who examine the benefits of enrollment in high quality services.

In response, the government would have two options. It could withdraw from investing in child care services – but this would likely sink labour force participation, erode the disposable income of thousands of Quebec families with young children, and compromise gender equality. Or the government could invest more to improve the quality of the services so they contribute positively to child development.

The second interpretation of the research findings is that the rise in aggression and crime is among those children who didn't use child care services in Quebec. Given existing evidence about child care, it is entirely plausible that children who weren't enrolled fell behind a now larger group of children benefiting from the services.

Indeed, previous research shows middle- and upper-income households access the higher quality spaces that exist in Quebec more often. The result would then be a greater gap between kids who have experienced child care, and those who haven't, when they start school. This gap could then account for increasing aggression and criminal activity among a group of children who start behind a larger portion of their peers.

The policy response to this second interpretation would be to accelerate the creation of child care spaces, with a commitment to maintain or improve quality, and to integrate families who are not yet using the services.

In the federal election, the Conservatives are campaigning on a promise not to invest any more directly in child care services. One interpretation of the latest study about Quebec child care may affirm their confidence in this position.

But we don't just need child care services because they have potential to promote healthy child development. We primarily need them because young adults in their prime child rearing years now earn thousands less for full-time work than similar adults did a generation ago, start with larger student debts, and face housing prices that are up hundreds of thousands of dollars. As a result, parents need more time in the labour market, and are harmed when child care services are hard to find and expensive.

The NDP recognizes this, which is why that party is promising \$15/day child care.

The NDP, however, has budgeted just \$2 billion in annual funding four years from now. Our research shows a high quality system will cost closer to \$10 billion. The result is a big funding gap, which must be closed if the NDP takes the new study seriously. Such a shortfall in funding will either compromise the quality of spaces, and risk increasing aggression among boys in less than adequate services, or will compromise the number of quality spaces, and risk increasing aggression among those not getting access to the services.

By contrast, platform background papers show that the Green party would reallocate around \$6 billion in funding to child care services from an existing tax credit. So the Greens would get closer, more quickly, to paying for a high quality system with enough spaces.

We still don't know where the Liberals stand on funding for child care.

Let us hope all the federal parties begin to better understand the implications of the latest research about underfunding child care.

Dr. Paul Kershaw is a policy professor in the UBC School of Population Health, and Founder of Generation Squeeze (gensqueeze.ca).

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