

Early childhood education and care in Canada 2023

Summary and analysis

Childcare Resource and Research Unit August 2024



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This summary of key findings about early learning and child care in Canada is based on [Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2023](#) and its previous editions from 1992 to 2021. Based on these sources, key findings of interest are summarized and analysed.

ECEC in Canada 2023 is the Childcare Resource and Research Unit’s 14th Canada-wide report on early childhood education and care. This version is a shorter, mostly-numbers version of the fuller reports that make up most of the series. It provides 2023 data on early learning and child care in Canada, including a section on each province and territory, 21 comparative tables, a short section on “the state of ECEC in Canada” in mid-2024, and data sources. The next comprehensive version of the report, *ECEC in Canada 2024*, including detailed policy information and 2024 data, will be published in mid-2025.

All [ECEC in Canada publications](#) are available free of charge for download on the [CRRU website](#).

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Canada-wide developments

Significant changes have been made to early learning and child care but more are required as federal, provincial, and territorial governments undertake the complex task of building a quality ELCC system.

Early learning and child care (ELCC) transformation has been underway for three years through the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative, which is aimed at building a system of affordable, quality, licensed child care for all children aged 0 – 5¹ years. CWELCC is Canada’s first national child care plan to be sustained long enough for provinces and territories to begin implementing significant improvements to child care provision.

As part of the transformation, Canada’s first federal child care legislation to become law, [Bill C-35, An Act Respecting Early Learning and Child Care](#), received royal assent on March 19, 2024. It aims to “establish a permanent, legislated commitment to federal funding for early learning and child care,” and reiterates that affordability, accessibility (service availability), quality, and inclusivity are the principles of the CWELCC initiative.

Affordability was the first touchstone to be systemically addressed, with substantial new federal funding to offset

¹ This document uses 0 – 5 years to mean children from birth up to their sixth birthday.

child care services' loss of parent fee revenue. Provinces and territories were responsible for using their share of federal funds to design and manage the new funding arrangements. Although parent fee reduction initiatives were put in place more quickly than had been anticipated, the data in *ECEC in Canada 2023* show that other key touchstones – accessibility, inclusivity, and quality – are still works in progress, with varying incremental changes across Canada.

To support the child care workforce, most provinces and territories have introduced wage enhancement, benefits, pensions, and/or wage grids, with six jurisdictions now having wage grids in place.

Expansion of the supply of child care has been modest relative to demand. The federal government has allocated additional capital funds for expansion in both the 2022 and 2024 federal budgets, but the effects of these funds on the supply of child care were not yet evident in 2023.

Although a key element of the CWELCC plan is that expansion would be primarily public and non-profit, the data in *ECEC in Canada 2023* show that much of the expansion has been in the for-profit sector in a majority of provinces/territories.

Thus, significant changes have been made but many more are required as federal, provincial, and territorial governments Canada-wide undertake the task of building a publicly funded child care system for all children and families.



Parent fees and affordability

All jurisdictions have dramatically reduced parent fees, with six using fees set by the province or territory to reach the 2026 target of \$10/day.

Affordability targets of 50% fee reduction on average were either reached (or close to reached) by all jurisdictions by 2022. By mid-2024, six jurisdictions had also achieved the 2026 target of \$10/day by using parent fees set by the province or territory.

TABLE 1 Child care affordability targets (2024)

	Parent fees at \$10/day	Parent fees reduced 50% (average)
NL	✓	
PE	✓	
NS		✓
NB	See Note	
QC	✓	
ON		✓
MB	✓	
SK	✓	
AB		✓
BC	See Note	
YT		✓
NT		✓
NU	✓	

Note: New Brunswick has adopted set parent fees (\$16 – \$22/day) based on age group and size of community. British Columbia uses two fee reduction mechanisms: reducing all fees for children aged six or younger by a set amount, and growing its set-fee \$10/day sector incrementally.

Accessibility, expansion, and coverage

Accessibility and expansion

Both the number of centres and number of regulated family child care homes increased between 2021 and 2023.

Child care provision increased in the March 2021 – March 2023 period. This expansion built on a net loss of child care during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 – 2021), which showed Canada’s first recorded net loss of child care spaces.

Both the number of centres and number of regulated family child care homes increased following the initiation of CWELCC. The number of regulated child care spaces also increased between 2021 and 2023.

Centres

In March 2023, there were 18,028 licensed centres providing child care for children 0 – 12 years. This was an increase of 5.7% from the 17,059 centres operating in March 2021, which had been a small loss from the 17,542 centres recorded in 2019. Overall, centre-based child care space (both regulated spaces for children 0 – 12 years and full-day centre spaces for children 0 – 5 years) expanded modestly in the first phase of CWELCC (2021 – 2023).

Family child care

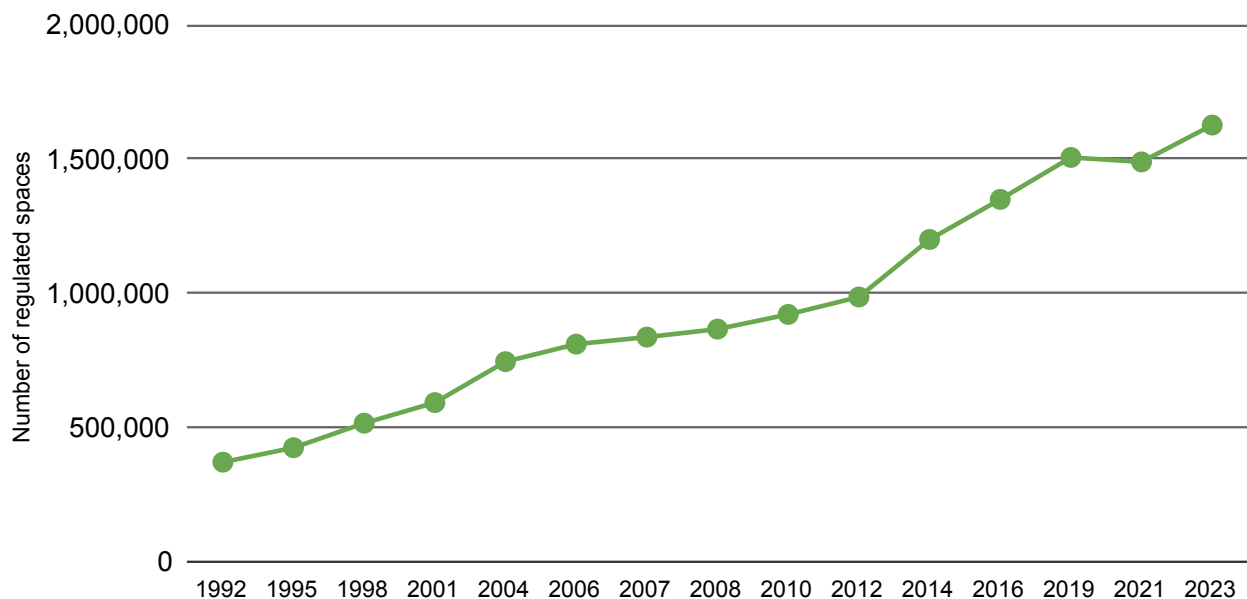
Regulated family child care also increased since 2021. The number of family child care homes Canada-wide had been fairly constant between 2004 and 2014, followed by a steady decrease in subsequent years. The 2021 – 2023 period saw the first increase in the number of regulated family child care homes in nearly 20 years.

Canada-wide, there were 20,221 active regulated family child care homes in 2023. This was an increase of 13.3% from the 17,840 active family care homes in 2021. The 2021 figures, by comparison, represented a substantial decrease of 20.6% from 2019's 21,513 active regulated family child care homes.

Total child care for 0 – 12 year olds

Total spaces for 0 – 12 year olds in full- and part-day centres, family child care, and before- and after-school child care reached 1,627,211, an increase of 137,165 spaces from 2021's 1,490,046 spaces.

FIGURE 1 Total number of regulated child care spaces for children 0 – 12 years. Provinces/territories/Canada (1992 – 2023)



Full-day centre spaces for 0 – 5 year olds

As noted, the main focus of CWELCC is children 0 – 5 years (that is, up to their sixth birthday). However, due to data gaps and/or variation in how data is collected, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle some of the child care provision for 0 – 5 year olds. Additionally, as full school-day kindergarten for five-year-olds has become the norm Canada-wide, and kindergarten for four-year-olds is also increasing, kindergarten has come to serve as the main child care arrangement for many four- and five-year-olds.

TABLE 2 Number of regulated full-day centre spaces for children 0 – 5 years. Provinces/territories/Canada (2021, 2023)

	2021	2023
NL	4,627	5,321
PE	3,719	3,851
NS	11,084	12,773
NB	14,341	15,660
QC	214,168	225,251
ON	180,758	194,340
MB	20,721	22,071
SK	13,735	15,206
AB	65,207	75,800
BC	58,466	62,542
YT	1,070	1,440
NT	763	820
NU	794	810
CA	589,453	634,885

Children 0 – 5 years who are in regulated child care may be in any of: full-day centres, part-day centres (preschools/nursery schools), family child care, or before- and after-school child care. Data on the number of available

spaces and/or enrolment is not consistently available for children 0 – 5 years in family child care or in before- and after-school programs, and until 2021, only limited data were available to break down full-day/part-day centre care. As a result, *ECEC in Canada's* data on full-day centre provision underrepresent child care participation for children 0 – 5 years and do not account for parents' use of kindergarten to provide child care.

Coverage

In 2023, there were enough full- or part-day spaces to cover 31% of 0 – 5 year olds (not including before- and after-school programs), an increase of 3% from 2021. There were 634,885 full-day spaces for this age group.

The coverage rate of 31% (an increase from 28% in 2021) includes full- and part-day spaces, or a centre space for roughly 3 out of 10 children in this age group. This does not include family child care or before- and after-school child care for 0 – 5 year olds. Nor does it include those children for whom kindergarten is the main or sole ECEC arrangement.

For children 0 – 12 years, there was a total of 1,627,211 regulated child care spaces including full- and part-day centres, before- and after-school child care, and family child care. This figure represents a coverage rate of 32%, or a child care space (including all regulated types) for roughly 3 out of 10 children in the 0 – 12 age group.

Ownership of child care services

Between 2021 and 2023, the percent of child care spaces that were for-profit decreased in four jurisdictions, remained the same in three, and increased in six; all changes were small. However, much of the net growth was in the for-profit sector.

Between 2021 and 2023, more than 40% of net growth of full-day centre spaces was in the for-profit sector in eight provinces/territories. Nevertheless, the percent of child care operated on a for-profit basis showed little change in most provinces and territories.

FIGURE 2 Percent of full-day centre spaces for children 0 – 5 years that were for-profit. Provinces/territories/Canada (2023)

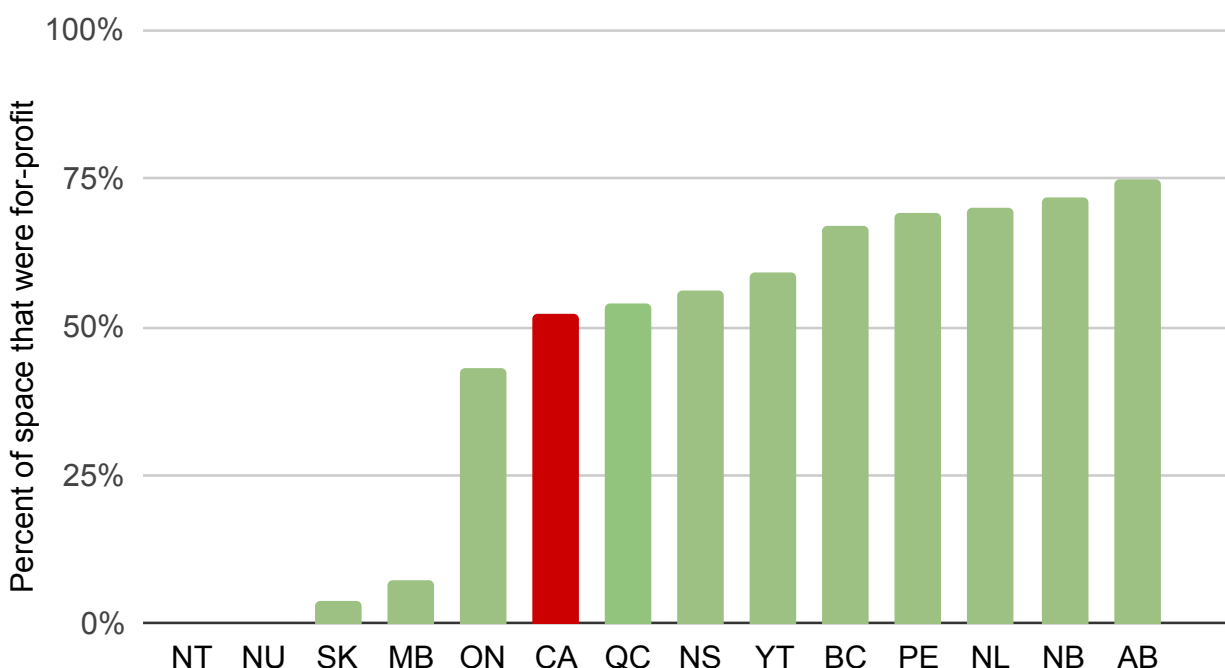
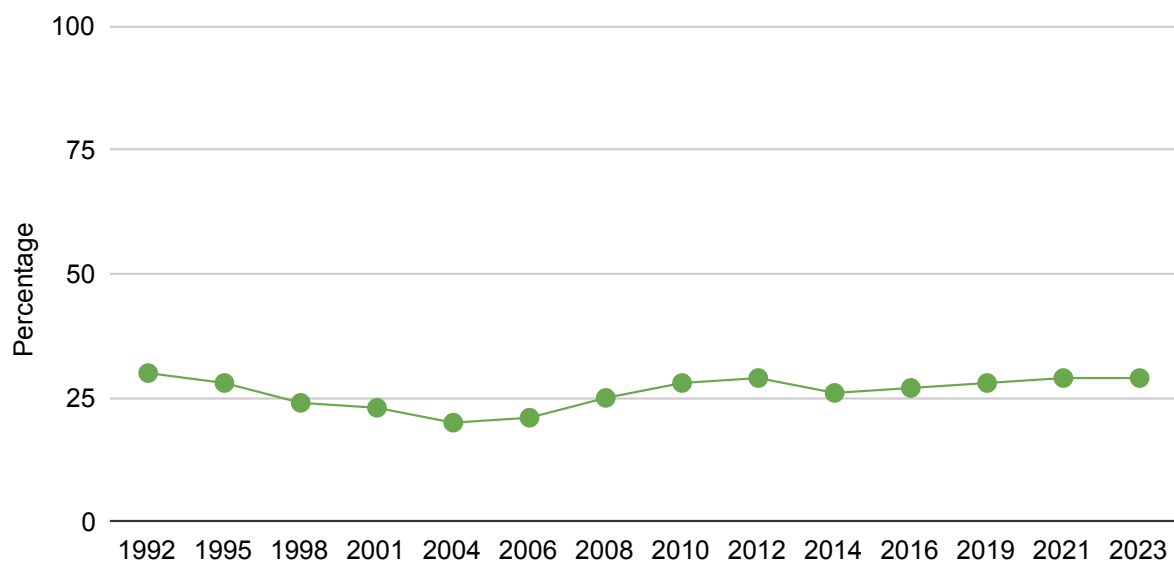


TABLE 3 Number of full-day centre spaces (children 0 – 5 years) that were for-profit. Provinces/territories (2021, 2023)

	Percent of full-day centre spaces that were for-profit (2021) %	Percent of full-day centre spaces that were for-profit (2023) %	Percent of net growth in full-day centre spaces that was for-profit (2021 – 2023) %
NL	74	70	43
PE	69	69	70
NS	57	56	46
NB	71	72	77
QC	55	54	23
ON	42	43	59
MB	6.5	7.2	17
SK	1.9	3.9	22
AB	76	75	66
BC	65	67	84
YT	57	59	67
NT	0	0	0
NU	0	0	0

FIGURE 3 Percent of regulated full- and part-day centre spaces for children 0 – 12 years that were for-profit. Canada (1992 – 2023)



The child care workforce

Most provinces and territories have introduced workforce measures such as pensions, benefits, wage enhancement, and/or wage grids, but comprehensive workforce strategies are not yet in place.

Challenges affecting the recruitment and retention of a qualified child care workforce are recognized as critical for the quality, maintenance, and expansion of child care programs. Issues of low wages, absent or limited benefits, poor working conditions, and lack of recognition have long been endemic in Canadian child care. These concerns are on child care community and government agendas across Canada as CWELCC is being implemented, with provinces and territories undertaking a variety of improvements thus far. Comprehensive workforce strategies have not yet come together, however.



TABLE 4 Child care workforce initiatives in place by province/territory (2023)

	Wage grid	Wage enhancement	Province- or territory-wide benefits
NL	✓	✓	✓
PE	✓		✓
NS	✓		✓
NB	✓		
QC	✓		✓
ON		✓	
MB	See Note	See Note	✓
SK		✓	
AB		✓	
BC		✓	
YT		✓	✓
NT		✓	
NU	✓		

Note: Manitoba uses a salary guide with minimum and target wages.



Public funding for regulated care

Total Canada-wide public spending on regulated child care reached almost \$9.8 billion in fiscal year 2022 - 2023. Of this total, which includes federal, provincial, and territorial dollars, \$5 billion was spent by the federal government.

The fiscal year 2022 – 2023 marks the first full year since substantial new federal child care funding was announced in 2021. *ECEC in Canada 2021* noted that provincial/territorial child care spending for the 2020 – 2021 fiscal year should not be compared to previous or subsequent years due to the impact of COVID-19 on child care enrolment, additional COVID-related funding, and jurisdiction-specific responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

The below table compares public ELCC spending in the 2018 – 2019 and 2022 – 2023 fiscal years. A comparison of Canada-wide child care spending (which includes provincial/territorial/federal dollars) for fiscal years 2018 – 2019 and 2022 – 2023 shows a substantial increase of 61%, with a rise in total from \$5.8 billion to \$9.8 billion. Total federal funding allocated to provinces/territories totalled \$5 billion for the 2022 – 2023 fiscal year.

TABLE 5 Total spending for regulated child care (2018 – 2019, 2022 – 2023) and total federal allocations (2022 – 2023) by provinces/territories

	Fiscal year 2018 – 2019	Fiscal year 2022 – 2023	
	Total spending on regulated child care, including provincial/ territorial/federal dollars. \$ (millions) rounded	Total spending on regulated child care, including provincial/ territorial/federal dollars. \$ (millions) rounded	Total federal allocations. \$ (millions) rounded
NL	48	84	60
PE	19	54	24.3
NS	65	148	119
NB	72	165	98
QC	2,654	3,203	1,114
ON	1,894	3,345	1,876
MB	174	399	216
SK	85	219	190
AB	351	975	673
BC	498	1,172	609
YT	9.5	29.9	10
NT	6.9	12.3	11.1
NU	5.2	11.7	13.8
CA	5,881	9,818	5,014



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CITATION

Childcare Resource and Research Unit.
(2024). *Early childhood education and care
in Canada 2023: Summary and analysis.*
Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

ISBN 978-1-896051-84-0