

# Summary and Analysis of Key Findings

Early childhood education and care  
in Canada 2021 and beyond

CHILDCARE RESOURCE AND RESEARCH UNIT  
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COMPANION DOCUMENT  
Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2021

This summary and analysis of key findings about the state of early learning and child care in Canada is based on [Early childhood education and care in Canada 2021](#) (April 2023) and its previous editions beginning in 1992. *ECEC in Canada 2021* covers the period between 2019 and early 2023. Its numerical data is primarily for 2021 but the descriptive information captures changes in policy, provision and funding occurring throughout the period 2019 – March 2023.

*ECEC in Canada 2021* is the Childcare Resource and Research Unit’s 13th Canada-wide comprehensive report on early childhood education and care. [The full report](#) includes detailed sections on each province/territory, 35 tables, and sections about the significant recent changes to early learning and child care, government roles and responsibilities, parental leave and First Nations, Métis and Inuit ELCC. All *ECEC in Canada* publications are available free of charge for download on the [CRRU website](#).

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# Canada-wide developments

*In the last three years, Canadian child care has undergone unprecedented changes.*

The child care crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a historic commitment from federal/provincial/territorial governments to build a sustained publicly funded ELCC system for all families and children.

The April 2021 federal budget earmarked \$27.2 billion for 2021 – 2026 to develop a Canada-wide child care system, committing to at least \$9.2 billion annually after 2026. Funds will be transferred to provinces/ territories/Indigenous governance organizations to transform child care Canada-wide to a universal system.

Agreements between the Government of Canada and each province/territory were completed with all<sup>1</sup> jurisdictions by March 2022. The agreements and action plans set out specific initiatives to which each jurisdiction has committed in the first phase of system-building.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit ELCC will have earmarked funding. It will continue to fall under the 2018 Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework agreement (IELCC), the umbrella for distinctions-based First Nations, Métis and Inuit ELCC frameworks and provision.

Federal legislation, [\*An Act respecting early learning and child care in Canada\*](#), was tabled in the House of Commons in December 2022.



<sup>1</sup> Quebec, which has an asymmetrical agreement with the Government of Canada, will work toward its own ELCC goals.

## Demographics

*The number of children aged 0 – 12 years fluctuated over the last three decades rather than showing a one-way trend.*

In 2021 there were 5,101,000 children 0 – 12 years (2,210,000 children 0 – 5 years and 2,891,000 children 6 – 12 years).

Over the last three decades, some provinces/territories lost, and some gained child population over time. The number of children has dropped over the years in the Atlantic provinces, while growing in Alberta and maintaining the status quo in other jurisdictions.

*The number of children with employed mothers remained high in 2021.*

The number of children with employed mothers is a product of mothers' employment rate, which has increased steadily, and the number of children, which has fluctuated.

In 2021, there were 1,437,000 children aged 0 – 5 years and 1,959,000 children aged 6 – 12 years with employed mothers Canada-wide .

The number of children with employed mothers dropped over three decades in Atlantic Canada, while it increased in Alberta and Quebec..

[Research on employment](#) during the pandemic found the gender wage gap was exacerbated by the pandemic, with mothers of school-aged children more affected than mothers with preschool-age children.

Consistent with this, between 2019 and 2021, the numbers of children with employed mothers decreased by 4,000 and 17,000 respectively for children aged 0 – 5 and 6 – 12 years.

Despite the decrease from 2019, the number of children with employed mothers in 2021 remained close to the highest it has been since 1992.

## *Mothers' employment rates remained high in 2021.*

In 2021, the employment rates for women with youngest child aged 0 – 3, 4 – 5 and 6 – 12 were respectively 76%, 79% and 84%.

Mothers' employment rates remained high despite the drops in women's employment during the pandemic.

Mothers' employment rates over the past decade or more have shown slow, steady increases year after year. While the employment rate has more or less levelled off for mothers of older children, it continued to rise for mothers of the youngest children<sup>2</sup>, from 65% in 1995, to 70% in 2012 and 76% in 2021 Canada-wide.



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<sup>2</sup> The youngest child age grouping was changed from 0 – 2 to 0 – 3 in Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey. Data were included for both age groups in 2020 and only for 0 – 3 in 2021. Therefore, data prior to 2020 are not directly comparable. See Table 28.

## First Nations, Métis and Inuit ELCC

*In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada had 94 action items areas including “federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments developing culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families.”*

The 2021 federal budget promised \$2.5 billion over five years for Indigenous ELCC, building on existing federal funds including those for the two Aboriginal Head Start programs and the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative.

The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (IELCC) is an umbrella framework for the unique First Nations, Métis and Inuit frameworks, which will support development of culturally responsive, distinctions-based ELCC provision.

Licensed child care centres on First Nations reserves and Inuit lands total 112 centres. There are also close to 280 Indigenous-led centres not on reserves Canada-wide.

Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR) and Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Rural Communities (AHSUNC) are both federally funded. In 2021, there were more than 500 AHSOR programs Canada-wide. There are also 115 AHSUNC programs Canada-wide, covering all provinces and territories.

## Availability, enrolment and coverage

### CHILD CARE CENTRES AND REGULATED FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES

*Both child care centres and regulated family child care homes dropped in number between 2019 and 2021.*

In March 2021, there were 17,065 child care centres (full- and part-day for age 0 – 5 and before- and after-school for age 4 – 12), representing a drop of 477 from the 17,542 centres reported in March 2019.

This (net) loss is the only drop in licensed centres since 2004 (the first time this information was included in *ECEC in Canada*). Most jurisdictions either gained centres or lost a relatively small number of centres.

Regulated family child care lost considerable capacity between 2019 and 2021, dropping from 21,513 to 17,840 active family child care homes, a loss of 3,673 homes, or 17%. Of these, 2,777 were in Quebec.

Between 2004 and 2014, the total number of regulated family child care homes had fluctuated between 26,000 and 28,000. The number of active homes then dropped to 23,445 in 2016, then again to 21,513 in 2019.

### CHILD CARE SPACES

*Child care spaces dropped by more than 16,000 between 2019 and 2021. There were regulated spaces for 37% of 0 - 12 year-olds and centre spaces for 28% of 0 - 5 year-olds.*

There were 1,490,046 regulated child care spaces for children aged 0 – 12 across Canada in 2021.

This represents a decrease of 16,612 spaces since 2019—the first decrease in regulated spaces since *ECEC in Canada*'s first edition in 1992. This is not surprising as the snapshot date for these figures was March 2021—one year into the pandemic. To put space expansion and contraction in context, (net) child care spaces had previously

grown in every two- or three-year period covered by *ECEC in Canada*, sometimes by more than 50,000 spaces a year.

The 2021 figures include:

627,333 full-day and part-day (nursery school) centre spaces for children aged 0 – 5, of which 589,453 were full-day<sup>3</sup>;

753,938 before- and after-school centre spaces for children aged 4 – 12;

108,574 spaces for children aged 0 – 12 in regulated family child care.

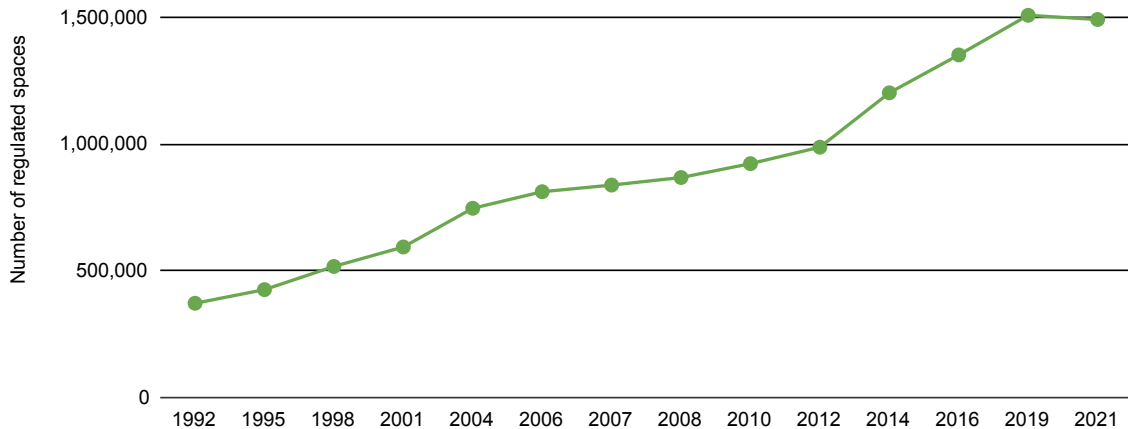
Overall, there was a regulated space available for 37% of children aged 0 – 12 years in 2021.

A regulated centre space (full-day or part-day nursery school) was available for 28.4% of children aged 0 – 5 years.

A full-day centre space was available for 26.7% of children aged 0 – 5 years Canada-wide in 2021.

The percent of children aged 0 – 12 for whom a space was available ranged from 10% in Saskatchewan to 54% in Quebec.

FIGURE 1 Regulated child care spaces by year. Canada. (1992 – 2021).



<sup>3</sup> Due to missing data, the Canada-wide figure for full-day centre spaces for 0 – 5 year olds is estimated.



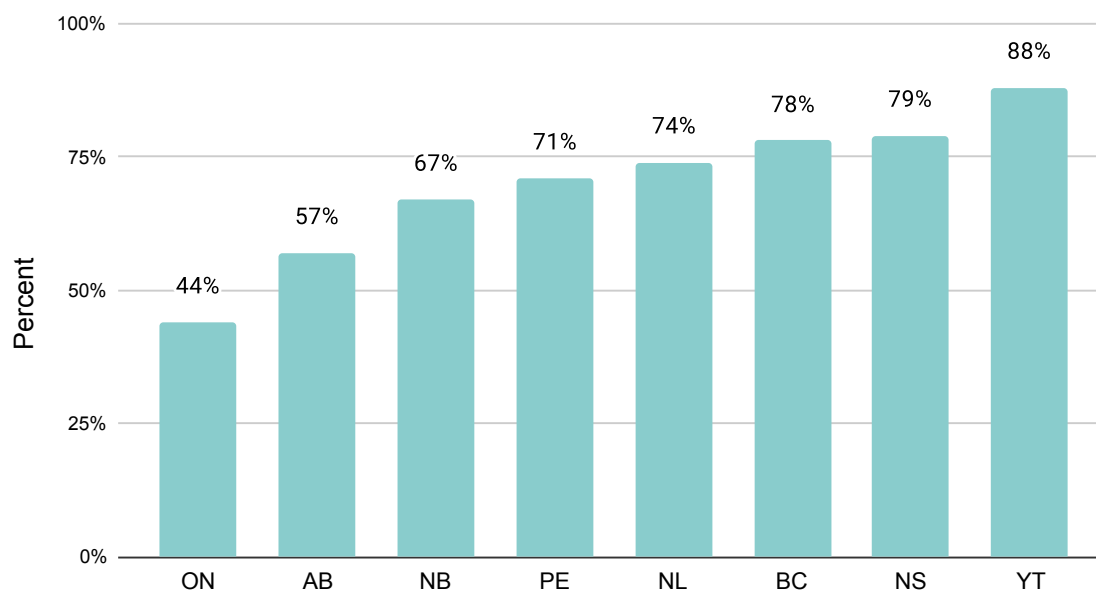
## ENROLMENT AND LICENSED CAPACITY

*Enrolment in child care centres remained low for months, even after they were permitted to reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Enrolment data, available from eight jurisdictions, shows that as a percent of licensed capacity data, centre enrolments in March 2021 were all considerably reduced.

The data show that although it was more than seven or eight months after most regulated child care reopened following the pandemic's first wave's massive shutdown in 2020, low enrolment persisted.

FIGURE 2 Centre enrolment as a percent of licensed capacity in selected provinces/territories (March 2021)



## CONSIDERING COVERAGE

*Regulated child care and kindergarten care for and educate four- and five-year-olds in Canada. For a growing number of parents, “coverage” includes child care and kindergarten for four and five-year-olds.*

Full-school day kindergarten is now the norm in Canada. Nine provinces/territories offer full-school day kindergarten, while Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Nunavut still provide part-day kindergarten.

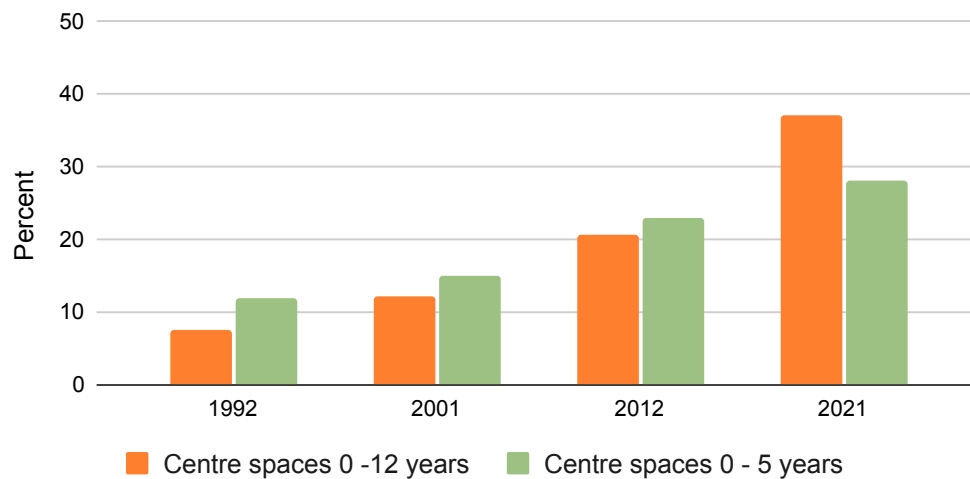
Junior, or pre-kindergarten is growing. Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Yukon and Northwest Territories all provide, or are phasing in, kindergarten for all four-year-olds and Saskatchewan and Alberta have sizable targeted pre-kindergarten. In addition, Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island offer, or will offer hybrid kindergarten/child care for four-year-olds, both operated as licensed child care.

Regulated full- or part-day child care for children aged 0 – 5 has also grown steadily. In 1992, there were enough centre spaces for 12% of children aged 0 – 5, growing to 28% of the same age group in 2021.

Child care outside school hours has also shifted, so the assumption that it is for 6 – 12 year olds no longer fits the reality. All jurisdictions include four and five-year-olds in before- and after-school child care along with older children and most also offer other options for kindergarten-aged children outside school hours.

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FIGURE 3 Percent of children 0 - 5 years and 0 - 12 years for whom there was a regulated centre space. Canada-wide. (1992, 2001, 2012, 2021)



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Some jurisdictions have before- and after-school child care that are not required to be licensed. Some of these programs (Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia) have some requirements and/or funding, while in Saskatchewan they are exempt from licensing with no requirements or provincial funding if they are on school grounds.

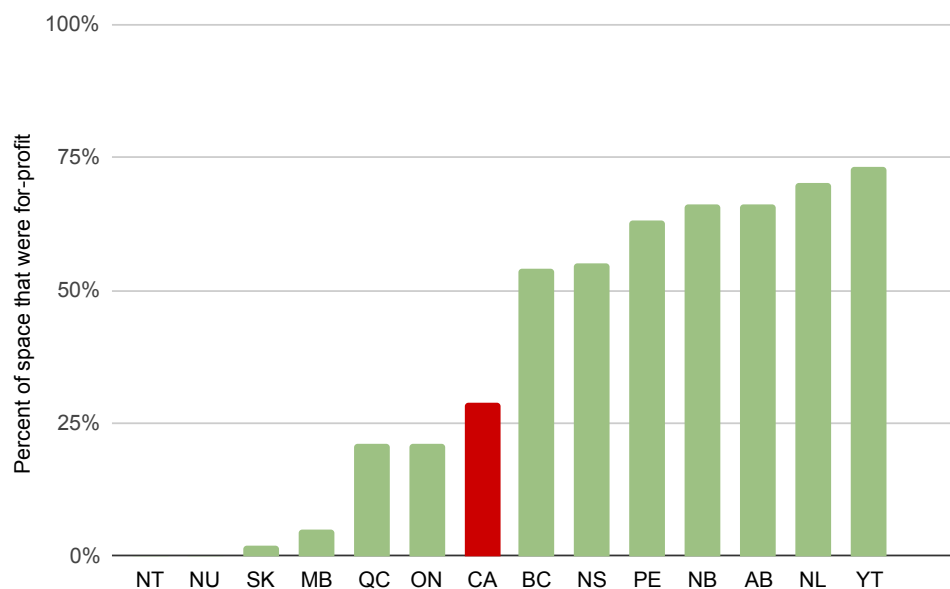
# Ownership of child care services

*The for-profit child care sector has grown to 29% of licensed spaces in 2021.*

The for-profit share of child care spaces was at a low point of 20% in 2004 but it has been increasing in recent years. Since 2014, the percentage of for-profit spaces has gone up steadily, from 26% in 2014 to 29% in 2021.

Newfoundland and Labrador (70%) and the Yukon (73%) had the highest proportion of for-profit child care relative to total spaces. Saskatchewan and Manitoba had very little, and the Northwest Territories and Nunavut had none.

FIGURE 4 Percent of full- and part-day spaces for children aged 0 – 12 that were for-profit. Provinces/territories/Canada (2021).



Fifty percent of full-day spaces are for-profit Canada-wide, while only 12% of part-day nursery school/preschool and before- and after-school child care programs were for-profit.

Five provinces/territories use a family child care agency model. Five of Nova Scotia's nine agencies are for-profit. Newfoundland and Labrador's sole agency is non-profit and Quebec's 161 family child care agencies are required to be non-profit. Of Ontario's 126 agencies, 33 are for-profit (up from 2016, when 14 of the 108 agencies were for-profit). Of Alberta's 67 family child care agencies, 28 are for-profit.

Almost all provinces/territories have some publicly delivered centres<sup>4</sup>, mostly in small numbers.

TABLE 1 Number of public and municipal child care centres. Provinces/territories/Canada (2021).

	<i>Public centres</i>	<i>Municipal centres</i>
<i>NL</i>	7	0
<i>PE</i>	4	2
<i>NS</i>	0	0
<i>NB</i>	8	3
<i>QC</i>	66 <sup>5</sup>	0
<i>ON</i>	183	109
<i>MB</i>	0	0
<i>SK</i>	5	3
<i>AB</i>	10 (est) <sup>6</sup>	4
<i>BC</i>	302	63
<i>YT</i>	8	0
<i>NT</i>	10	4
<i>NU</i>	11	7



4 A municipality/ municipal entity, school authority, other government agency or Indigenous governance organization

5 This represents only centres for 0-5 year olds. In addition to these, all before-and after-school programs in Quebec are operated by local school authorities. The number of before- and after-school care centres was not available but they operate 340,685 spaces, so it is substantial.

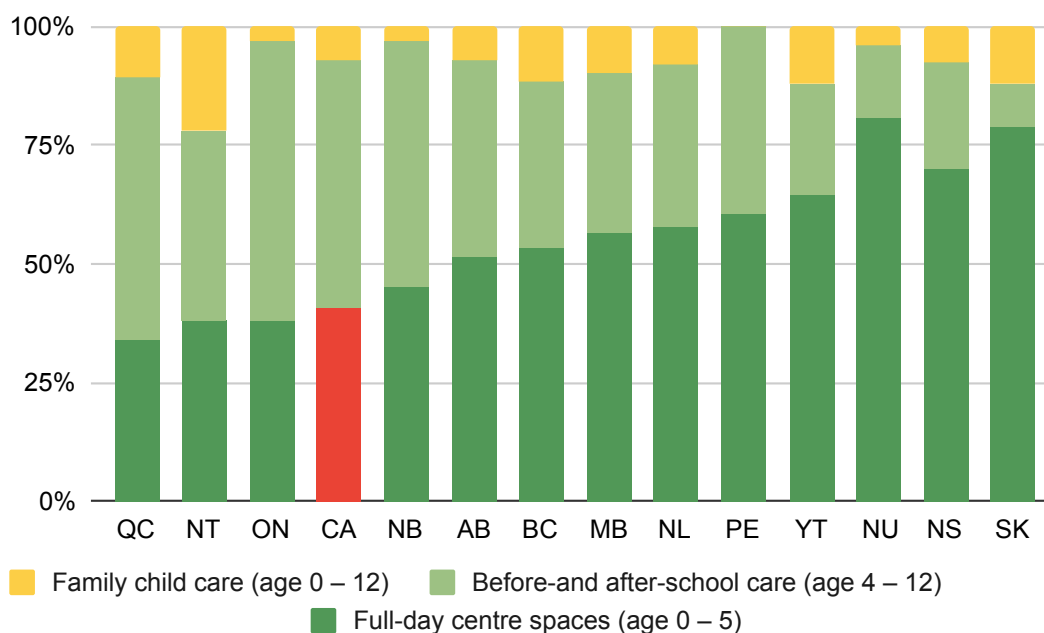
6 Publicly operated centres in Alberta include four municipalities/municipal entities that operate centres and six licensed on reserve centres. It is an estimate, as the municipal entities may be operating more than one centre.

# Types of child care services

*In most provinces/territories, full-day centres and before- and after-school care predominate, with much less part-day nursery school/preschool and family child care provision.*

Regulated child care provision includes four main types of child care services in most provinces/territories: full-day centres, part-day centres (nursery schools or preschools), before- and after-school child care and family (home) child care, with the relative proportion of these quite variable by province/territory.

FIGURE 5 Percent of spaces by child care by program type. Provinces/territories/Canada (2021).



## Child care workforce

*A shortage of qualified educators is a barrier to expansion, as demand for child care spaces has grown in tandem with parent fee reductions.*

The shortage of qualified early childhood educators willing to work in child care under conditions of low wages and often poor working conditions limits expansion—even preventing some existing centres from operating at full capacity.

Census data shows that Early Childhood Educators and Assistants<sup>7</sup> working in child care centres for children 0 – 12 earned median hourly wages between \$18.65 and \$21.32/hour Canada-wide. Provincial/territorial median wages ranged from as low as \$14.81 – 16.92/hour in New Brunswick, to a high of \$22.12 – 25.27/hour in the Yukon.

2021 median hourly wages

**\$18.65 - \$21.32/hour**

Early Childhood Educators and Assistants (including supervisors)  
full-time, full-year in centres with 0 – 12 year olds, Canada-wide.

## WORKFORCE STRATEGIES IN PROVINCIAL/TERRITORIAL ACTION PLANS

### *Wage grids*

PEI and Quebec wage grids have been in place for some years.

Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick released wage grids in 2022 and 2023.

Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Northwest Territories and Nunavut all commit to wage grids.

<sup>7</sup> This Special run by Statistics Canada includes Early Childhood Educators and Assistants, as defined in NOC 4214 and “working in the day care services industry in centre-based environments with children aged 0 – 12 years”, as defined in NAICS 6244. Included are individuals who worked full-time (30+ hours/week) and full-year (48+ weeks/year), did not work at home, and were not self-employed. Included are supervisors but not managers. “Employment income” refers to income from all jobs if the Early Childhood Educator or Assistant holds a second job providing a wage, salary or commission.

### *Increasing early childhood education certification levels*

Almost all provinces/territories have committed to more certified/qualified staff, usually to 60% of staff.

Northwest Territories and Nunavut, which do not yet have a staff certification process, have committed to introducing one.

Most jurisdictions have committed to wage enhancement or increasing wages. In the last three years, several improved staff wages, in some instances more than once.

Action plans commit to many ECE-training initiatives including non-traditional training, financial support or bursaries, fast-tracking educational programs, partnerships with post-secondary institutions, pilot projects and others and professional development.



## Parent fees and affordability

*Post-2021, parent fees dropped significantly Canada-wide<sup>8</sup> as federal funds under Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements (CWELCC) Agreements began to flow.*

### IN 2021, BEFORE CWELCC

High parent fees were the norm in most of Canada and considerably varied across jurisdictions. Individual child care operators set their own market fees in most jurisdictions. In 2021, the highest median market fee for full-time child care was \$1,948/month for an infant in Toronto, and the lowest was \$625/month for a preschool-age child in Regina.

Most centres in Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Manitoba used provincially set fees, offset by public operating funds to facilities.

In a Canadian survey<sup>9</sup> of parent fees in 37 larger cities, median full-time parent fees ranged from \$189/month for age 0 – 4 year-olds in Quebec's set fee child care to \$1,948/month for an infant, \$1,615 for a toddler and \$1,300 for a preschooler in Toronto.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Manitoba, set fees ranged from \$8.50/day for all ages in Quebec, to \$27/day and \$34/day respectively for preschool-age children and infants in Prince Edward Island.

Median infant fees were higher than \$800/month in all cities included in the survey, except in the set-fee provinces and Whitehorse<sup>10</sup>. Median fees for preschool-age children were higher than \$700/month except in set fee provinces, Whitehorse and Regina.

8 Fees have been less than \$10/day in Quebec for more than 20 years, and were approximately \$10/day in Yukon as of 2021.

9 While most provinces/territories have fee data, it is collected in different ways, so is not comparable. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' Annual Fee Survey provides median fees by age group for regulated full-day child care in 37 larger cities. It includes at least one city in each province/territory (37 in total), representing about 60% of full-day centres and regulated family child care Canada-wide. The 2021 data were collected before CWELCC fee reductions had taken place.

10 In 2021, Yukon provided up to \$700/month/space to all licensed child care facilities, in advance of the CWELCC funding.



In almost all cities surveyed, for-profit programs charged higher fees than not-for-profits. Fees for preschool-age children in for-profit programs ranged from 1% higher in Calgary to 81% higher in Surrey, BC. In Quebec<sup>11</sup>, market fees for for-profit garderies ranged from \$846 to \$1,194/month.

All jurisdictions but Quebec used parent fee subsidies to offset fees for eligible lower income families. All jurisdictions but Nova Scotia use social criteria such as parent's employment, training or education to determine eligibility.

## IN APRIL 2023, POST-INTRODUCTION OF CWELCC

*Parents in six provinces/territories were paying \$10/day for full-day child care for age 0 – 5 year-olds. In others, fees were reduced by 50% (average) from the 2019 levels.*

Under the CWELCC agreements, provinces/territories<sup>12</sup> agreed to reduce child care fees for age 0 – 5 year-olds by an average of 50% by December 31, 2022, with further reductions to an average of \$10/day by 2026. All provinces/territories reduced fees—some exceeding the 50% requirement and reaching \$10/day.

By April 2023, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Nunavut had introduced set fees for eligible child care programs, and Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island and Manitoba had reduced their set fees.

Other jurisdictions provided grants to reduce market fees by an average of 50%. Grants came with certain conditions, including limits on new fee increases.

CWELCC funding is aimed at age 0 – 5, so may be applied to before- and after-school child care for kindergarten-age children. Some jurisdictions have also extended fee reductions to before- and after-school child care for children older than age six using provincial/territorial funds.

Provinces/territories except Quebec have retained fee subsidy systems.

Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Alberta have increased income levels for subsidy eligibility.

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11 Quebec has a substantial unfunded market fee sector; parents may receive a tax credit to offset the high fees.

12 Parents in Yukon and in funded centres in Quebec were already paying approximately \$10/day or less pre-CWELCC.

## Public funding for regulated child care

*Public funding for regulated child care has grown by more than eight-fold Canada-wide since 1992.*

In 1992, the annual child care budget in five provinces/territories was less than \$4 million, with total Canada-wide child care funding \$762 million.

In 2020 – 2021, Canada-wide spending on regulated child care totalled \$6.5 billion.

Due to the challenges and responses of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 – 2021 ELCC spending is not directly comparable to 2018 – 2019 or previous years and should not be used that way.

Due to the pandemic, child care spending was not as usual. The challenges of closures and low enrolment, additional health, safety and emergency demands, and one-time federal Safe Restart funds earmarked to child care were approached differently among provinces/territories.

New funds negotiated under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative had not begun to flow to provinces/territories in fiscal year 2020 – 2021.

