

# REAL QUESTIONS ABOUT UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE

Since the start of the pandemic, calls for universal child care have picked up steam. Before pursuing this policy approach, however, there are important questions to answer. These questions pertain to all aspects of child care—accessibility, quality, and cost. Every family is different, and child care needs and desires vary.

**Will a federally funded, universal system be able to meet these needs?**

## QUESTION 10: IS THERE A SHORTAGE OF CHILD CARE IN CANADA?

Before the pandemic began in March 2020, just 3 percent of parents cited a shortage of spaces as a reason for not using child care, and two-thirds of parents reported “no difficulty” finding a child-care arrangement, according to Statistics Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, prior to the pandemic, most parents are able to find what they are looking for. Why, then, do we hear so much about shortages?

One reason is that advocates for a universal system count only one type of child care: licensed, centre-based spaces. If a parent uses a home-based daycare in the neighbourhood, a relative provides the care, or if the parent coordinates child-care “shifts” with their partner, then advocates for national daycare don’t count it. When advocates speak of child-care “deserts,” they are excluding the other forms of child care that exist outside of spaces in licensed centres.<sup>2</sup> It is a bit like saying that Canada has an extreme shortage of vegetation because you count only cactuses. Second, advocates for a universal system desire a space for *every child* under a particular age, usually the age of twelve. Given the diversity of child care that parents use and prefer,<sup>3</sup> this number of spaces is unnecessary, and counting only licensed centres is a poor metric for attempting to identify shortages.

Both pre-pandemic and current research indicates that there are centre-based child-care spaces sitting empty. For example, in Toronto, “there was a 45 percent increase in the average number of vacant spaces between 2009 and 2016.”<sup>4</sup> In British Columbia, “the average day-care vacancy rate including licensed centre-based care and family care, and across all child ages from infant through to school age, is 30.9 percent.”<sup>5</sup> After the initial quarantine period, Ontario schools opened in September 2020,

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1. Statistics Canada, “Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019,” *The Daily* no. 11, April 10, 2019.

2. “Both coverage rates and child care desert calculations only include licensed spaces at all points in this report.” “Child Care Deserts in Canada,” Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/child-care-deserts-canada>.

3. Rick August, “What Child Care Do Parents Really Want?,” August 2015, <http://rickaugust.ca/what-child-care-do-parents-really-want/>.

4. Andrea Mrozek, “Toronto’s Increasing Daycare Surplus,” *Cardus*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/articles/torontos-increasing-daycare-surplus/>.

5. Andrea Mrozek and Helen Ward, “Daycare Vacancy Rates in British Columbia: The Untold Story,” *Cardus*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/articles/daycare-vacancy-rates-in-british-columbia-the-untold-story/>.



and 93 percent of daycares in Ontario were open.<sup>6</sup> Peel Region, for example, was at 97 percent of pre-pandemic operation levels, yet only 20 percent of child-care spaces in Brampton, a municipality within this region, were occupied.<sup>7</sup> Alberta has reported that 94 percent of daycares were operating, with an enrollment rate of about 50 percent.<sup>8</sup>

None of this is to say that finding child care is always easy. It can be stressful, particularly in certain jurisdictions. And just as there are surplus spaces in some places, there can be shortages in others. The question is whether a universal system would be the best solution.

## THE TAKEAWAY

**Child care is never limited to only spaces in licensed day-care centres. Rather, child care is the care of a child, no matter who provides it. Provincial and territorial legislation and safety and licensing standards must enhance the mix of child-care options in a community and make it plausible and profitable for small, local providers to adhere to regulation. Funding to families, to put toward the form of child care that is best for them and for their child, will ensure that the government does not discriminate against parents and relatives providing child care.**

6. Ontario Ministry of Education, “Early Years and Child Care Annual Report 2020,” <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/annual-report-2020.html>.

7. Nida Zafar, “Despite Its ‘Childcare Desert’ Label Brampton Daycares Are Only 20 Percent Full Because of the Pandemic,” The Pointer, October 4, 2020, <https://thepointer.com/article/2020-10-04/despite-its-childcare-desert-label-brampton-daycares-are-only-20-percent-full-because-of-the-pandemic>.

8. New legislation supports safe, accessible and high-quality child care. Nouvelle législation pour appuyer des services de garde d’enfants sûrs, accessibles et de qualité [media release] <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=7457168AB88B4-0919-B336-0FDF971B388E12CA>.