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Early Learning and Child Care for Children aged 0 to 5 years: A Provincial/Territorial Portrait

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Early Learning and Child Care for Children aged 0 to 5 years: A Provincial/Territorial Portrait

by Leanne Findlay, Health Analysis Division, Analytical Studies Branch, Statistics Canada

This article in the *Economic Insights* series examines participation in early learning and child care for young children in Canada. Child care is an important economic contributor for families since provision of non-parental child care is a necessity for some parents to engage in the labour market or to study. In addition, child care offers opportunities for child development and socialization. Results indicate that approximately 60% of children aged 0-5 years participate in some type of child care arrangement, be that formal (e.g., daycare centre, 52% of those in child care) or informal (e.g., care by a relative, 26% of those in child care). Some differences were found by province/territory in terms of participation, type of child care arrangement, and reasons for choosing the main child care arrangement. Approximately four in ten parents of children in child care had difficulty finding a child care arrangement. This article also provides estimates of the reasons that parents were not using any child care.

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Introduction

According to findings from the Canadian Labour Force Survey, in 2015, 74% of couples with at least one child under the age of 6 had two parents who participated in the labour force (Bernard, 2018). However, parents' participation in the labour market is dependent on the accessibility, availability, and affordability of non-parental child care (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2008). Furthermore, child care options may contribute to the 'motherhood wage penalty' whereby women with children may be more apt to reduce work hours and be less likely to travel or move for work or to prioritize their career due to (unpaid) family obligations or the non-availability of high quality child care arrangements (Weeden, Cha, & Bucca, 2016). Thus, the supply and demand for child care are important considerations for labour market participation and decisions among parents of young children.

Little information is currently known about Canadian child care participation, in particular for children age 0-5 for whom parents are the most likely to need non-parental care, that is, before formal schooling begins. The most recent published child-level national information from 2002-03 suggested that 54% of children age 0-5 participated in some type of non-parental care (Bushnik, 2006). More recent data is necessary given numerous changes in child care policies and recent national, provincial, and territorial efforts on increasing child care opportunities (Pasolli, 2019).

Participation in early learning and child care varies by province and territory and by child age

About 60% of children under the age of 6 participated in some form of formal or informal child care in the past three months (between October 2018 and January 2019), representing almost 1.4 million young children ([Table 42-10-0004-01](#)).

However, early learning and child care, including formal child care and kindergarten, is organized and regulated at the provincial and territorial level, therefore participation rates may vary across the provinces and territories. Children living in Quebec and Prince Edward Island were more likely to be in a formal or informal child care arrangement than children in the other provinces or territories. By comparison, children living in Nunavut, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Alberta were less likely to participate in early learning and child care.

Participation in child care also differed based on the child's age. About two-thirds of 1 to 3 year olds (68%) and 4 and 5 year olds (65%) were reported to be in child care, compared with about one quarter of children under the age of 1 (24%). The lower participation rate of infants may reflect the fact that some parents make use of parental leave early in the child's life (Hou, Margolis, & Hann, 2017).

Type of child care arrangements varies by child age

Among children in any child care arrangement, parents/guardians were asked to report all of the different types of child care in which their child was participating ([Table 42-10-0005-01](#)). Daycare centres, preschools, or centres de petite enfance (CPE) were the most commonly used types of arrangements (52% of children in child care), followed by care by a relative other than a parent (26%), and a family child care home (20%). Approximately 14% of parents used multiple arrangements to meet all of their child care needs.



Differences in the type of care were also found based on the child's age. Children who were under the age of 1 and whose parents used non-parental child care were most likely to be cared for by a relative (46% of infants in child care), while children older than one year of age were more likely to be in a daycare centre, preschool, or CPE (58% of children aged 1 to 3 years, and 47% of children aged 4 and 5 years). About one in four (24%) children aged 1 to 3 who were in child care were in a family child care home, compared with 14% of children aged 4 and 5 years. Finally, about 25% of 4- and 5-year-old children in child care participated in a before and after school program. Other findings have suggested that 98% of 5 year olds are registered for school (Statistics Canada, 2019), although information on full or part time Kindergarten, or school participation among 4 year olds, is not currently available.

Differences in types of child care were also noted between provinces/territories. For example, approximately 43% of children aged 0-5 participating in child care were in a daycare centre or preschool in Newfoundland or Labrador compared to 73% in the Yukon. These two regions also had the highest (38%) and second lowest (19%) participation in care by a relative, respectively. Children in Quebec were less likely to be cared for by a relative, and were also the most likely to be in a family child care home. Children in Ontario were the most likely to be in a before or after school program, with 41% of children aged 4 and 5 who were in child care participating in that type of arrangement.

Parents have many reasons for choosing a specific type of child care arrangement

The reasons that parents/guardians choose a particular child care arrangement are unique to their family needs. The SELCCA survey provides insight into the overall reasons that parents/guardians choose certain child care arrangements.

Parents/guardians reported a variety of reasons for using the main type of child care, that is, the one used for the most hours per week. More than half of parents/guardians of children aged 0 to 5 years who were in child care said that the choice was based on location (61%) and/or based on the characteristics of the individual providing care (53%). Many parents/guardians also chose their main arrangement because of the hours of operation (41%) or because it was affordable (40%).

Provincial/territorial responses for the reasons that parents/guardians selected their main type of care are presented in [Table 42-10-0006-01](#). The most variability in responses between the P/T's was for location and affordability. In Nunavut, 32% of parents/guardians reported that location was a reason that they selected their main child care arrangement, followed by 43% in the NWT. In the north, it is possible that parents have to travel long distances to find child care, or that there are few options due to relatively low coverage of child care facilities in Nunavut and NWT (Macdonald, 2018). In Newfoundland/Labrador and in Alberta almost half of parents/guardians responded that they had selected their main arrangement because it was affordable.

More than half of parents did not have difficulty finding child care arrangements

More than half (64%) of parents/guardians who had a child in child care reported that they had no difficulty finding an early learning and child care arrangement, be that a formal or informal current type, although 36% did report difficulties. Again, some differences were found between the provinces and territories, ranging from 48% of parents/guardians in Manitoba to 70% of parents/guardians in Quebec who reported that they did not have difficulties finding some type of child care ([Table 42-10-0007-01](#)).

However, many parents/guardians of children aged 0 to 5 years did report challenges, which may be related to availability, cost, flexibility, or quality. Among parents of children aged 0 to 5 who experienced difficulty finding child care, 53% had difficulty finding child care in their community (12% of all parents of children aged 0 to 5 years).

Among parents who had difficulty finding childcare ([Table 42-10-0008-01](#)), almost half had difficulty finding affordable care (48%, or one in ten of all parents of children aged 0 to 5), more than one third had difficulty finding care that fit their work schedule (38%, or 8% of all parents of children aged 0 to 5), and 37% had difficulty finding the quality of care that they desire (8% of all parents of children aged 0 to 5).

The trends in the types of difficulties as well as the consequences of those difficulties were similar across the provinces and territories. However, those in PEI, Manitoba, BC, Yukon, and Nunavut were more likely to report that they had difficulties finding care in their community, whereas those in Quebec were less likely to report difficulties finding care in their community.

These results reflect the challenges generally experienced by parents/guardians of children aged 0 to 5 in the different provinces/territories and do not take into account any particular characteristics of the family situation, such as child characteristics or parent work schedule.

Having difficulties finding child care can affect parents' ability to work

The SELCCA survey indicates that having difficulties finding child care can result in one or more negative consequences for the parent, including having an impact on their ability to work. Among those who had difficulties, 4 in 10 parents of children aged 0 to 5 years changed their work schedule (9% of all parents of children aged 0 to 5 years), 33% worked fewer hours (7% of all parents), and more than one in four postponed their return to work (6% of all parents). Approximately one in three (35%) parents/guardians of children aged 0 to 5 years who experienced difficulties also resorted to using multiple care arrangements or a temporary arrangement (8% of all parents of children aged 0 to 5 years) ([Table 42-10-0009-01](#)).



The reasons parents/guardians report not using child care vary

Not all parents need or chose to use non-parental child care arrangements. Results from the survey suggested that almost half of all children whose parents were not using child care (43%) had decided to stay at home, which was 17% of parents of all children aged 0 to 5. More than one in four (28%) children not in care had a parent at home on maternity or parental leave (one in ten children overall), and 16% had a parent who was unemployed (6% of all children aged 0 to 5 years). Approximately 15% of all children aged 0-5 were not in child care because they were in Kindergarten (6% of all children). Among the possible school aged population (i.e., 4 and 5 year olds), 50% of those who were not in child care did not use care because they were in kindergarten.

Other reasons for not using child care included that the cost was too high (one quarter of those who were not using child care, or 10% of all parents of children aged 0 to 5) and/or that there was a shortage of spaces or a waiting list (7% of those not using child care, or 3% overall).

Few notable differences were found between provinces and territories in terms of the reasons that parents were not using child care ([Table 42-10-0010-01](#)). In Quebec, 27% of parents decided to stay at home, whereas about half of children in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, BC, Yukon and Nunavut had a parent who stayed at home. Not using care because the cost was too high was lower in PEI and Quebec and higher in Manitoba, Alberta and in the north.

Discussion and conclusion

The SELCCA survey provides current, child-level information on child care participation in Canada and the provinces/territories. Findings suggest an increase in child care participation over the past two decades from 54% of children aged 6 months to 5 years who were reported to be in non-parental care in 2002-03 (based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth; Bushnik, 2006) to 60% in 2019 based on SELCCA.

The top reasons for choosing child care arrangements among users of child care for children aged 0-5 were location and characteristics of the caregiver. Results also suggest that while the majority of current users were able to find formal or informal child care arrangements, those who report difficulty experienced challenges to work such as working fewer hours or postponing their return to work.

Child care is regulated at the provincial/territorial level and as such some differences were noted in terms of child care participation and reported challenges. Patterns were particularly notable for Quebec – children aged 0-5 were more likely to participate in child care and parents were less likely to have difficulties finding child care. This likely relates to Quebec's policies on the provision of subsidized child care, which has also led to a marked increase in Quebec women's participation in the labour force over the past several decades (Fortin, 2017).

Limitations and next steps

Although the current report highlights provincial and territorial information on child care use, challenges, and reasons for not using care, further investigation of the SELCCA is required to fill further gaps in child care information. For example, affordable child care was described as an important reason for selecting the main child care arrangement but was also a barrier for those who were not using child care. Exploration of the cost of child care (by child care type) is a potential area for future analysis. Although information about quality of care was limited in the present study, parents reported on whether or not child care was licensed, an area needing further study. Other important information on child care in Canada, such as more nuanced descriptions of families and children using child care (e.g., low, middle and high income families, Indigenous identity, and parental education level) is warranted. An exploration of participation in population centres compared to rural areas would also be of interest.



Data and concepts

The Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements (SELCCA) provides a current snapshot of early child care usage in Canada, and can be utilized to understand the reasons why families choose to use or not use different types of child care arrangements. The survey was conducted from mid-January to mid-February 2019 and was part of the 'Rapid Stats' program offered by the Centre for Social Data Integration and Development, Statistics Canada, to rapidly respond to urgent data needs.

The survey frame was the Canada Child Benefit, which includes 96% of all children in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019). As expected with a rapid collection process, the response rate was 55% in the provinces and 40% in the territories, yielding a sample size of 7,548 children. This response rate is similar to other Rapid Stats surveys.

The target population was children aged 0 to 5 years of age, although the information was obtained from a parent, guardian, or person that was knowledgeable about the child's child care arrangements (or lack thereof). The respondent was female in 91% of cases. Children living in institutions or on-reserve were excluded from the target population.

Early learning and child care arrangements include any form of child care for children, formal or informal, by someone other than their parent or guardian. For the SELCCA data collection, this did not require that the parent was working or studying. Examples include the use of daycare facilities, in-home care by a relative or non-relative, as well as before and after school programs. Occasional babysitting or kindergarten were excluded from the survey.

Type(s) of child care. Respondents were asked to report all types of child care in which their child participated, including: daycare centre, preschool, or centre de petit enfance (CPE); care by a relative other than parent; care by a non-relative in the child's home; family child care home; before or after school program; or other child care arrangement.

Reasons for using main child care arrangement. Respondents were also asked the main reason(s) that they chose their main child care arrangement, that is, the one that they used for the most hours per week. Options included: location, characteristics of the individual providing care, hours of operation, affordable cost, program characteristics, recommendation or own research, their other children have gone/go there, to keep all children in the same arrangement, ability to meet child's special needs, only option available, other, or none of the above.

Difficulties finding care. Whether or not parents/guardians had difficulty finding care and the reasons for and consequences of those difficulties were also of interest. Respondents indicated whether or not they had experienced any difficulties, and among those that did, they were asked to indicate whether those difficulties related to finding: care that was available in their community, affordable child care, care that fit their work or study schedule, the quality of care they desire, licensed care, a qualified care provider, care that could accommodate more than one child, care that meet's their child's special needs, or other difficulties. Those with difficulties were also asked whether the difficulties had resulted in one or more of the following: changing their work schedule, using multiple arrangements or a temporary arrangement, working fewer hours, postponing their return to work, deciding to split care with their spouse or partner or relative, postponing or discontinuing school or training, deciding to work at home, or other consequences.

Reasons for not using child care. Respondents who were not currently using child care were asked the reason(s) for which they did not use any care. Options included: one parent decided to stay at home, maternity or parental leave, the cost is too high, unemployed, child is in kindergarten, prefer to adjust work or study schedules, shortage of spaces or waiting list, lack of flexibility of hours, lack of transportation, work or school schedules are unpredictable, could not find licensed care, child care is located too far, services not adapted to special needs, or other reason.

Analytical strategy

Descriptive analyses were performed in order to describe rates of participation in child care nationally and by province or territory, as well as characteristics among those who participate or among all Canadian children. Means and proportion are reported, as appropriate. When applicable, statistical comparison were performed (t-tests or chi-squares, $p < .05$). Survey sampling weights were applied to render the analyses representative of Canadian children aged 0 to 5 living in the provinces or territories. Bootstrap weights were also applied when testing for significant differences in order to account for the complex survey design.



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