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Abstract

Most available information on child care has examined parent-reported use of child care, often called “demand,” with much less information on the supply of child care. The recent pilot of the Canadian Survey on the Provision of Child Care Services (CSPCCS) explored the feasibility of a frame to conduct a Canada-wide survey on child care to better understand characteristics of the supply of child care in centres and regulated homes and in unregulated home child care. This frame included child care that was identified using the Canadian Business Register (North American Industry Classification System code 62441) and publicly available administrative lists of child care in each of the provinces and territories. Despite the benefits of a national data collection initiative such as the CSPCCS, several limitations based on the pilot collection should be noted. However, the CSPCCS is a tool to collect information to address gaps in knowledge regarding regulated child care centres and homes and unregulated child care in Canada.

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Introduction

There has been much attention on early learning and child care for Canadian children, including recent announcements about a Canada-wide child care program for children aged 0 to 5. However, most available information on child care has examined use of child care as reported by parents (i.e., demand), with much less information on the supply of child care. Data reflecting both the demand and the supply of child care are critical to address the principles of the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework—accessible, affordable, inclusive, flexible and high-quality child care (Employment and Social Development Canada 2018).

Administrative data are available to describe the regulated child care sector within each of the provinces and territories. However, a pan-Canadian survey of the supply of child care with comparable definitions and coordinated data collection and reporting has not been conducted in many years. In addition to regulated types of child care that are required to adhere to provincial or territorial standards, some parents use unregulated forms of child care, including unregulated family child care homes, relative care, babysitters and nannies. There is little information on unregulated child care in Canada, although parent-reported information suggests that almost one in five parents of children younger than school age use unregulated child care (Wei and Findlay 2021; Varmuza, Perlman and White 2019).

Data and methods

The recent pilot of the Canadian Survey on the Provision of Child Care Services (CSPCCS) attempted to test the feasibility of a frame to conduct a Canada-wide survey on child care to better understand characteristics of the supply of child care in centres and regulated home child care and in unregulated home child care. The pilot was conducted in 2021, although respondents were asked to provide information for both 2020 and 2021 to examine any differences that might be associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CSPCCS pilot collection primarily served as a test of a pan-Canadian sampling frame for collecting survey data on the supply of child care, the first of its kind. A frame is necessary to be able to identify the respondents that are in scope, in this case, centre and home-based child care and unregulated child care, excluding babysitters and nannies. First, the Canadian Business Register (BR; Statistics Canada 2010) was used to create a comprehensive list of child care businesses in Canada. The BR maintains a complete, up-to-date and unduplicated list of all businesses in Canada that have a corporate income tax (T2) account, a payroll program account, a goods and services tax / harmonized sales tax account, a partnership account (T5013), or a registered charities account, and individuals who report any type of business income on a personal income tax form (T1). Child care is identified on the BR using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS; code 62441 “Child day-care services”). This includes organizations or individuals providing child care in many different settings, including community centres, daycare centres, homes and school facilities. However, the frame excludes kindergarten or other education provided through the school system, nanny and babysitting services, and individuals who may care for children, but do not claim an income on their tax return.

Second, information from publicly available provincial and territorial lists of regulated child care was collected to supplement the BR information in the creation of the frame. These lists include both centre-

based regulated care, and for some provinces and territories, regulated home child care. The provincial and territorial publicly accessible data largely overlapped with child care identified on the BR, although there were cases where child care was classified on the BR within a different NAICS industry code (e.g., those operated by public or private schools).

Thus, the frame included those who were identified using the NAICS code from the (BR) and those identified using the provincial and territorial administrative lists of child care. The difference between these two sources likely reflects three groups: 1) regulated home child care where information could not be verified with publicly available data; 2) individuals who self-identified as providing child care but are unregulated; and 3) misclassifications in the BR. As there is no comprehensive list of unregulated child care in Canada, it is difficult to evaluate the representativeness of the NAICS code without directly asking these individuals and businesses the nature of their reported income (i.e., do they provide non-parental child care). It is also not possible to include other individuals who may be providing unregulated child care but who are not captured by the BR.

Using this frame, the CSPCCS pilot collected survey information on regulated and unregulated child care in all provinces and territories for children aged 0 to 5 years. The survey questions confirmed the type of care (centre vs. home) and critical features such as whether regulated or unregulated care was being provided. Child care providers who did not care for children younger than 6 years and who only cared for school-aged children were excluded from the survey, although providers who cared for children 0 to 5 and older children were included. The survey was completed by the child care director in centre-based care or by the home providers themselves in home-based care.

Questionnaire content was tailored to the type of child care provided. Centre-based care and licensed home (family) child care are regulated by provinces and territories, and thus the content of the questionnaire included aspects that reflect these regulations, such as the number of staff in centre-based programs and staff or provider qualifications. Furthermore, questions about sources of operating funds (fees paid by parents, fee subsidies, operating grants and other funding sources) and the average fees charged to parents were asked. This information may contribute to information gaps on child care costs, particularly given the recent announcements for federal spending on child care, with an objective of reducing the average cost to parents to \$10 per day by 2026 (outside the province of Quebec; Department of Finance Canada 2021).

For the pilot survey, questions about staffing actions taken by centres and home-based child care services because of COVID-19 were also asked, including whether or not they implemented reduced hours or shifts for themselves or staff, increased hours or shifts from themselves or staff, had layoffs or augmented hiring, and the number of staff vacancies (where appropriate). This information could be valuable in identifying instability and actions taken during the pandemic and can contribute to our understanding of recruitment and retention.

In contrast, information on unregulated home-based child care is of interest for different purposes, including questions pertaining to why the individual is not part of regulated care (i.e., licensed), how long they intend to provide child care, and fees charged. The only information that is currently available on this type of child care comes from parent-reported sources focusing on “demand” (Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, General Social Survey on Families). Little is known about the educational qualification of the individuals providing care (early childhood educator or otherwise), reasons for providing child care, or fees. Thus, the CSPCCS data will be the first to provide descriptive information for the unregulated child care sector.

Limitations

Despite the benefits of a national data collection initiative such as the CSPCCS, several limitations based on the pilot collection should be noted. First, the sample focused on child care for children aged 0 to 5, making collected results and data difficult to compare with other existing information, typically reported for those aged 0 to 12 years. Second, the sample size for the pilot survey was limited (4,000 child care providers), resulting in potentially imprecise estimates or counts on the types of child care, number of children served, and characteristics of those providing care. Furthermore, since the available information about whether or not home child care is regulated or not is available only from the provincial and territorial data (i.e., not on the BR) or from survey respondents directly, the availability, accuracy, and recency of this information is essential. For a future CSPCCS, further efforts to investigate these characteristics will be made. In addition, there is no information with which the representativeness of the unlicensed sector can be compared, and thus it is possible that an unknown number of individuals providing care for children are not captured within the frame. Finally, the CSPCCS collects information only from child care centres and regulated child care homes, and individuals who provide home-based care that is unregulated but for a fee. There are other forms of child care that were not included in the CSPCCS and might be considered through other survey mechanisms (e.g., nannies and care provided for free by relatives).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the CSPCCS will not only serve to contribute to a planned data and research strategy for early learning and child care, but may fill existing information gaps, complement existing data being collected by the provinces and territories, and describe both regulated and unregulated child care in centres and child care homes across Canada. Addressing the existing gaps in knowledge about the supply of child care in Canada will be critical given the recent emphasis on child care in Canadian social policy.

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