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by Leanne Findlay and Simon Hill

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Accuracy of parental perceptions about licensed child care in Canada

by *Leanne Findlay and Simon Hill*

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Abstract

Some parents may not be well informed consumers of child care, including a lack of knowledge of whether or not the child care environment is regulated. This study examines parental accuracy of regulated child care in Canada. Nationally, approximately three-quarters of parents accurately reported whether the care they were using was regulated or not, although parents who reported using unregulated care were more accurate than those who reported using regulated care. Furthermore, sociodemographic characteristics such as income and parental education were positively associated with accuracy of reporting. Knowing the regulated status of care is important for parental decision making, as regulation may be associated with higher quality of care and better outcomes for children and families.

Keywords: regulated child care, quality, licensed and unlicensed care, parent report

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Children's participation in high-quality regulated child care has been linked to positive child outcomes such as lower aggressive behaviour, better cognitive outcomes and academic achievement (Larose et al., 2021; Love et al., 2003; Romano et al., 2010) and is fundamental to providing young children with the opportunity to learn and socialize before formal schooling begins. The regulation of child care centres and home environments benefits children by setting standards for child safety, child-to-caregiver ratios, and caregiver education and training (Stitou et al., 2018)—all key elements in providing high-quality care. By contrast, unregulated child care is of unknown quality and does not necessarily conform to provincial regulations and standards, other than having a maximum number of children in care, which itself is irregularly monitored. Surveys of child care use generally rely on parental reporting of regulatory status; however, the accuracy of parental reports is unknown. The objective of this study is to examine the accuracy of parental reporting of the licensed status of child care, including child care centres and child care homes where the regulatory status may be less apparent.

Child care in Canada

Ensuring that early childhood education and care systems can meet the needs of Canadian children requires an understanding of the child care landscape in Canada. Recently, the federal government committed investments to improve access, availability and quality of child care at a national level (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018; Department of Finance Canada, 2021; Global Affairs Canada, 2018). However, child care is administered through the 10 provinces and 3 territories, each with its own licensing and regulation processes and standards. The regulated sector, often called "licensed child care,"¹ is governed by a regulating body (i.e., the province or territory) that specifies aspects such as child-to-staff ratios, curriculum frameworks and minimal educational training of providers. This sector is monitored regularly. By contrast, the unregulated sector adheres to very basic safety limits, such as having a maximum number of children in a location. It is not monitored, except when complaints are followed up on, and care generally takes place in a home environment (Friendly et al., 2020; Prentice and White, 2019). At a national level, there is very little information on unregulated child care, since it is difficult to locate or track. For example, it is not possible to gather information from administrative data sources since they often exclude these types of care environments.

Within the regulated sector, there are provincial and territorial differences in how child care is organized, particularly for homes that provide child care services. Generally, two models exist: the agency model (an agency is a central organization that provides oversight or management for many different child care establishments) and the individually regulated model (each home is licensed directly by the province or territory; Friendly et al., 2020). At the time of this study, the provinces of Nova Scotia, Quebec, Alberta² and Ontario used an agency model, whereby child care agencies are directly licensed by the province, then agencies approve and manage individual homes. Conversely, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have an individually licensed model in which homes are regulated directly by the respective province or territory. Finally, both models are used by Newfoundland and Labrador, where some homes are regulated directly and others are approved by an agency. The complexity of regulation models may increase the difficulty of gathering information about child care services in Canada, particularly from parents.

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1. Throughout this paper, the term "regulated" will be used; however, the survey asked parents whether their child care arrangement was licensed.
 2. At the time of data collection, Alberta used the agency model but did not license homes or agencies. Instead, Alberta referred to both the agencies and homes as "approved."

Collecting information on regulated and unregulated child care

National child care surveys such as the General Social Survey and the Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements (SELCCA) have collected parent-reported information on child care use, including child care regulatory status. However, some researchers have suggested that parents are not well-informed consumers of child care and are not necessarily aware of the regulatory status. Furthermore, parents may not be aware of caregiver education and training, caregiver ratios, and the philosophical mandate of the child care arrangement their child is attending—aspects known to be related to higher quality of care (Fenech et al., 2011; Howe et al., 2013; White et al., 2019; Vermuza et al., 2019). There is also some evidence to suggest that parental ratings of child care may differ based on parental characteristics such as age, gender and education (Fenech et al., 2011). For example, greater parental knowledge of child care centre philosophy (which may be related to child care quality) was found to be associated with higher parental education (Howe et al., 2013). Assuming that regulated care is available, knowledge regarding whether a child care location is regulated would allow parents to make more informed choices about the quality of care their child is receiving.

Although research is sparse on whether parents know if their child care service is licensed or not, one small study of 37 parents using a licensed child care facility suggested that while the majority of parents (95%) knew the location was licensed, 62% did not know the relevant details of that licensing (Shpancer et al., 2002). However, this study was limited to parents using licensed child care, rather than the general population of child care users (i.e., parents using licensed and unlicensed care). Nevertheless, the accuracy of parental reporting is important not only for selection of child care but also because parental reporting forms the basis of information gathered from national surveys to estimate the use of licensed, unlicensed and other types of child care arrangements.

Use of regulated and unregulated care in Canada

Participation in both regulated and unregulated child care has increased over the past several decades in Canada, particularly for children living in Quebec (Findlay, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2021). Recent results from the national SELCCA suggest that 60% of Canadian children aged 0 to 5 years participate in child care (with an approximate 10% decline during the COVID-19 pandemic). However, licensed child care spaces are available for only approximately one-quarter of children in Canada (Friendly et al., 2020; Prentice & White, 2019), suggesting that the remaining three-quarters of children aged 0 to 5 years participate in unregulated care or are not in care at all. Quebec's publicly funded system has created the highest proportion of regulated child care spaces in Canada (42%, Friendly et al., 2020), though many children still do not have access to these spaces because demand far exceeds availability (Japel & Friendly, 2018). Information on the proportion of regulated spaces for children living in other jurisdictions is also available (e.g., 41% in Prince Edward Island and Yukon), but use of unregulated care is necessary for many families.

Social and economic scholars alike have supported child care policy to create a national, publicly funded system that includes high-quality care (Davey & Stepic Lue, 2021). Research suggests that regulated child care arrangements are more likely to be of higher quality (Japel et al., 2005; Bassok et al., 2016), while quality in unregulated homes is more variable (Goelman & Pence, 1988). For example, Japel and colleagues found that licensed centres and homes in Quebec were three times more likely to be of good quality, although overall quality standards remained relatively low (Japel et al., 2005). Parents' ability to discern regulated versus unregulated care is important because they may use regulated status as a proxy to assume that the quality of child care is higher.

The notion that parents will choose a higher quality of care (assuming it is available) rests on the assumption that parents are savvy users of child care and can discern high-quality from lower-quality care. Previous research suggests that one of the key decision-making factors that parents report relying

on is whether or not care is regulated (Davidson et al., 2021). If so, it might be expected that parents would drive the demand for higher-quality or regulated care. According to economic theory related to public and private social services, consumers of a product or service will be more likely to influence the market when they are able to adequately monitor the quality of the product or service (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997). However, in the case of child care—an environment in which the purchaser (the parent) is not the direct consumer (the child)—this is a complex task because parents may not be easily able to judge the quality of the service provided (Blank, 2000). One might expect that parental knowledge of child care regulatory status would be a basic tenet of information of the service acquired when initiating a relationship with the child care provider. However, to date, there is little evidence that parents are accurately able to identify regulated status because most studies have not been able to determine accuracy. While daycare centres might be assumed to abide by provincial or territorial regulations, the regulatory status of other types of care is less well established, and parents may have difficulty identifying whether they are regulated.

Purpose and hypothesis

There is a substantial gap in knowledge regarding the use of regulated vs. unregulated child care in Canada, and what is known is based on reports by parents, making the accuracy of such reports significant. It is important to estimate the accuracy of parental reports for both regulated and unregulated care, and for different types of care arrangements. It would also be useful to understand the characteristics of accurate vs. inaccurate reporters. The purpose of the current study is to (1) examine whether parents are accurate reporters of regulated and unregulated child care using SELCCA data and compare that with publicly available administrative lists of regulated child care locations across the country; (2) explore whether accuracy varies by type of care arrangement; and (3) examine characteristics related to accurate reporting of child care licensed and regulatory status, including age of the child, education level of the parent and household income. The SELCCA asked parents to report information on whether their child was enrolled in a licensed child care facility (regardless of whether it was a centre or home). By comparing parents' reports of their child care regulatory status with a confirmed list of publicly available regulated child care centres and homes in Canada, the accuracy of parental reporting on use of regulated child care can be determined.

Methods

Data source and definitions

The SELCCA was designed to assess non-parental child care use; parent and child characteristics; and the characteristics of child care for those younger than 6 years across Canada, and for provinces and territories. The survey consisted of 25 questions delivered via multiple choice, open response format (i.e., text response) and drop-down menu response options, which were drafted in consultation with external subject-matter experts. The survey was conducted through an electronic questionnaire or through computer-assisted telephone interviewing in both official languages, from mid-January to mid-February 2019, with randomly sampled people with knowledge about the child care arrangements (mainly a parent) who lived in the same household as the child, in all provinces and territories. Participation was voluntary and respondents could choose not to answer any questions. The final sample represented approximately 1.3 million children across the country.

To assess the accuracy of parental knowledge of regulated child care use, several variables from the SELCCA were used. Child care use was determined by asking parents to report all types of child care arrangements they had normally used in the past three months from a list of seven possible responses. Parents could indicate using one or more types of child care (daycare centre, preschool or *centre de la*

petite enfance; care by a relative other than a parent; care by a non-relative in the child's home; family child care home; before- or after-school program; other child care arrangement), or that they "do not use child care." Parents who reported not using child care were excluded from subsequent analyses and will not be discussed further in this report. The main child care arrangement was confirmed by asking parents to select their main child care arrangement among those they had previously reported. If only one child care arrangement was reported, it was considered to be their main arrangement. From the list of possibilities, two summary variables were created: centre care (daycare centre, or before- and after-school program) and home care (care by a relative or non-relative in the child's home or family child care home). This is similar to other research on child care quality (Bigras et al., 2010). Child care by a relative represented approximately half of home care arrangements, which is expected to be unregulated.

Parents' perception of whether their child care was regulated or not was ascertained by asking parents to indicate if their main child care arrangement was licensed ("yes," "no," and "don't know"). The definition for licensed care ("by the government or approved by a family daycare agency") was provided to aid parents in their response. Parents who reported that they did not know whether their child care arrangement was licensed, or chose not to answer the question, were grouped together and labelled "other." Parents were placed into one of three parent perception groups (regulated, unregulated or other) based on their belief as to whether they were using regulated child care.

Next, to verify parents' perceptions of regulated child care use, the name and address of the main child care provider were requested via an open-response question (name of the child care provider, address [number and street], city, province and postal code). Approximately 74% of parents agreed to provide the name and location of the child care provider.³ Of these parents, approximately 84% believed that their child was in regulated care.

Parents' highest level of education completed was reported from a list of seven response options (less than a high school diploma or its equivalent; high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate; trades certificate or diploma; college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma; university certificate or diploma below the bachelor's level; bachelor's degree; university certificate, diploma or degree above the bachelor's level). These options were collapsed into three broad education groups: (1) less than a high school diploma, (2) at least a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree and (3) a bachelor's degree or higher.

Date of birth was used to determine the age of each child, which was then categorized into three different groups: (1) children aged younger than 1 year, (2) children aged 1 to 3 years and (3) children aged 4 or 5 years. These age groups were chosen specifically to approximately represent children whose parent might be on parental leave, children who were too young to be in formal schooling but were older than an infant, and those who may have entered formal schooling.

Finally, income information was available via a linked SELCCA file that included combined recipient and spousal total income to create a total family income variable (see Statistics Canada [2019] for more information). Parents were then grouped into one of five total family income groups: (1) less than \$30,000 per year, (2) \$30,000 to \$49,999 per year, (3) \$50,000 to \$79,999 per year, (4) \$80,000 to \$99,999 per year and (5) \$100,000 per year or higher.

3. Personal information on the location of child care is available only on a master version of the 2019 SELCCA data file and is not available in the public file available through Statistics Canada's Research Data Centres.

Analysis

For the purpose of addressing the first objective, a qualitative analysis was done to assess the accuracy of parents’ knowledge about whether their child care was regulated. A list of regulated child care locations was created from publicly available web-based information for each province and territory (June 2019). Public information suggested that there were 19,771 regulated child care locations across Canada at that time; a visual review of the public list suggested that the majority (88%, $n = 17,309$) was regulated centres. Not all provinces provided information on regulated child care homes. Of the nine provinces and territories that use the individually licensed homes model, seven provided a list of licensed homes, and none that use the agency model published licensed home child care data. The analyses of the accuracy of parental knowledge about whether child care was licensed were conducted twice—once for all provinces and territories, and then only among those that had available licensed home information (Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut).

Next, the name and location of the child care service reported in the SELCCA were manually compared with the list of regulated child cares centres and homes from the publicly available web-based information for each province and territory, resulting in two child care regulated status groups: (1) regulated (i.e., confirmed to be on the regulated list) and (2) unregulated (not confirmed to be on the regulated list).

Finally, the accuracy of parents’ knowledge about regulated child care was determined by matching the perception of parents using regulated care to the child care regulated status group. This matching resulted in six subgroups: (1) perceived regulated and status regulated, (2) perceived regulated and status unregulated, (3) perceived unregulated and status regulated, (4) perceived unregulated and status unregulated, (5) perceived other and status regulated, and (6) perceived other and status unregulated. Accuracy was assumed when perceptions by parents matched the regulated status (see Table 1 for a visual depiction of the subgroups). National estimates include all possible subgroups—regulated, unregulated and other (centres and homes combined). At the provincial level, only parents who perceived that they were using regulated care (i.e., subgroups 1 and 2) could be reported because there were too few parents in the remaining groups to determine accuracy.

Table 1
Parental perception of child care licensed status

Parental perception	Licensed status	
	Licensed	Unlicensed ¹
Licensed	Accurate	Inaccurate
Unlicensed	Inaccurate	Accurate
Other ²	Inaccurate	Inaccurate

1. Licensed homes may inadvertently be classified as unlicensed when they are licensed because of a lack of information on licensed homes in some provinces and territories.

2. Other includes parents who did not answer or reported they did not know if their child care arrangement was licensed.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.

In support of the second and third objectives, accuracy was compared across the main type of child care arrangement, child age group, highest education level completed and household income group. For this portion of the analysis, accuracy was determined only among parents who reported that their child care arrangement was regulated (the majority of parents who reported that they were using unregulated care were correct, and there were too few parents in the other group to determine accuracy). Furthermore, these analyses were repeated for provinces and territories with home-based regulated child care information to describe the accuracy of centres and homes.

Results

The primary objective of this study was to examine the validity of parents' reports about whether their child care arrangement was regulated, by comparing their reports with publicly available information on regulated care. In Table 2, parental reports of regulated child care use are shown. For the entire SELCCA sample, 69% of parents reported using regulated child care, 27% reported using unregulated child care and 5% did not know. Of the 74% of parents for whom individual child care location information was provided, 84% reported using regulated care, 11% reported using unregulated care, and 5% did not know or did not answer. Among the provinces and territories, Yukon had the highest proportion of parents who reported using regulated care (93%). Furthermore, more than 85% of parents in Quebec, the Northwest Territories and Ontario reported using regulated care. By contrast, 65% of parents in Saskatchewan and less than 75% of parents in Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador reported using regulated care.

Table 2
Parent-reported license status of child care at the national, provincial and territorial levels

Province or territory	Parent-reported license status											
	Licensed				Unlicensed				Don't know or did not report			
	Weighted number	%	interval		Weighted number	%	interval		Weighted number	%	interval	
			low er	upper			low er	upper			low er	upper
Labrador	7,104	74.7	67.4	82.0	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Prince Edward Island	4,078	81.9	76.8	87.0	578	11.6 ^E	7.2	16.0	321	6.5 ^E	3.4	9.5
Nova Scotia	18,156	78.8	73.3	84.2	3,232	14.0 ^E	9.5	18.6	1,661	7.2 ^E	3.8	10.6
New Brunswick	15,289	82.8	77.7	87.9	2,108	11.4 ^E	7.1	15.7	1,067	5.8 ^E	2.9	8.7
Quebec	317,544	88.0	85.5	90.5	22,003	6.1	4.2	8.0	21,213	5.9	4.0	7.7
Ontario	278,600	85.6	81.8	89.5	36,323	11.2	7.7	14.7	10,362	3.2 ^E	1.4	5.0
Manitoba	26,061	83.5	78.1	88.9	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Saskatchewan	19,219	65.2	58.5	71.8	7,479	25.4	19.2	31.6	2,793	9.5 ^E	5.1	13.8
Alberta	86,989	74.5	68.7	80.3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
British Columbia	87,888	83.2	78.0	88.3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Yukon	1,132	93.0	89.3	96.7	F	F	F	F	x	x	x	x
Northwest Territories	1,215	87.0	82.0	91.9	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Nunavut	792	77.8	67.0	88.5	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Canada	864,067	84.0	82.1	85.8	117,822	11.5	9.8	13.1	46,930	4.6	3.6	5.5

^E use with caution

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

F too unreliable to be published

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.

The accuracy of parental reports is provided in Table 3. Overall, 72% of parents accurately reported the regulated status of their child care arrangement, although a higher percentage of parents were accurate when reporting the use of unregulated care (92%), compared with regulated care (70%). Because only some provinces and territories had publicly available information on regulated centres and homes, the accuracy of parental reports of regulated child care use was reassessed only among provinces and territories with complete, publicly available lists of regulated care (see Table 4). For the provinces and territories that provided this information, results suggest that 82% of parents accurately reported the regulated status of their child care arrangement. Again, a higher percentage of parents were accurate when reporting the use of unregulated care (92%), compared with parents reporting use of regulated care (80%).

Table 3
Comparison of parent reports of licensed child care use with published licensed child care facilities in Canada

Parent report	Licensed status							
	Licensed				Unlicensed ¹			
	Weighted number	%	95% confidence interval		Weighted number	%	95% confidence interval	
low er			upper	low er			upper	
Licensed	602,581	69.7	67.5	72.0	261,487	30.3	28.0	32.5
Unlicensed	9,924	8.4 ^E	4.7	12.1	107,898	91.6	87.9	95.3
Other ²	12,353	26.3 ^E	15.6	37.0	34,577	73.7	63.0	84.4
Total	624,858	60.7	58.4	63.0	403,962	39.3	37.0	41.6

^E use with caution

1. Licensed homes may inadvertently be classified as unlicensed when they are licensed because of a lack of information on licensed homes in some provinces and territories.

2. Other includes parents who did not answer or reported they did not know if their child care arrangement was licensed.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.

Table 4
Comparison of parent reports of licensed child care use with published licensed child care facilities in Canada, among provinces and territories with both centre and home child care licensing data available

Parent report	Licensed status							
	Licensed				Unlicensed ¹			
	Weighted number	%	95% confidence interval		Weighted number	%	95% confidence interval	
low er			upper	low er			upper	
Licensed	103,217	79.6	75.7	83.6	26,395	20.4	16.4	24.3
Unlicensed	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Other ²	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Total	106,838	65.9	61.7	70.0	55,401	34.1	30.0	38.3

F too unreliable to be published

1. Licensed homes may inadvertently be classified as unlicensed when they are licensed because of a lack of information on licensed homes in some provinces and territories.

2. Other includes parents who did not answer or reported they did not know if their child care arrangement was licensed.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.

Overall, there were provincial and territorial differences in the accuracy of parental reporting of regulated care (see Table 5).⁴ Specifically, parents in Prince Edward Island had the highest rate of accuracy in reporting regulated care (90%). This was followed by Yukon (88%), New Brunswick (86%), British Columbia (82%), Manitoba (80%) and the Northwest Territories (80%). Interestingly, these provinces and territories use the individually licensed home model, where homes are licensed directly, and not the agency model. By contrast, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia and Nunavut had the lowest rates of accuracy in reporting regulated care (that is, parents thought their child care arrangement was regulated when it was not).

Table 5
Comparison of parent reports of licensed child care use with provincial and territorial license information

Province or territory	Parent-reported licensed status	
	Licensed	Unlicensed
	percent	
Newfoundland and Labrador ¹	74.0	26.0
Prince Edward Island	90.3	9.7 ^E
Nova Scotia ¹	69.4	30.6
New Brunswick	85.7	14.3 ^E
Quebec ¹	55.3	44.7
Ontario ¹	79.4	20.6
Manitoba ¹	80.4	19.6 ^E
Saskatchewan	63.1	36.9
Alberta ¹	73.1	26.9
British Columbia	81.7	18.3
Yukon	88.1	11.9 ^E
Northwest Territories	80.0	20.0 ^E
Nunavut	69.6	30.4 ^E
Canada	69.7	30.3

^E use with caution

1. Home child care licensing information was not available from public sources. Thus, some licensed home child care may be misclassified as unlicensed care.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.

The second objective of this study was to describe the accuracy of parental reports about regulated child care use by parent or child characteristics (see Table 6). For this portion of the analysis, accuracy in reporting was considered regardless of whether child care was regulated or unregulated. Parents were considered accurate if they reported that their child care arrangement was regulated and this was confirmed through public information, and if they reported their arrangement as unregulated and it was not found on the regulated care lists (i.e., assumed to be unregulated).⁵ Results suggested that 80% of parents accurately reported the regulated status of centre-based child care, compared with 49% of parents who accurately reported the regulated status of home-based care.

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4. The sample size was too small to report province- or territory-level accuracy for parents who reported unlicensed care or who reported “did not know” or did not report.
5. Because of the small sample size of inaccurate reports by parents about unlicensed child care use, it was not possible to examine licensed and unlicensed care separately for this part of the analysis, so the two groups were combined into “accurate” and “inaccurate” groups.

Table 6
Accuracy of parental reporting of licensed child care use, by main child care arrangement, type of arrangement, age of child, parental education level and income

	Accurate		Inaccurate	
	Weighted number	%	Weighted number	%
Main child care arrangement				
Centre	575,914	80.3	140,956	19.7
Home	118,639	49.0	123,443	51.0
Age of child				
Younger than 1 year	30,992	67.2	15,094	32.8 ^E
1 to 3 years	423,471	75.5	137,580	24.5
4 or 5 years	253,288	68.4	117,125	31.6
Parental education				
Less than high school	18,002	54.4	15,103	45.6
High school to less than a bachelor's degree	315,186	68.7	143,701	31.3
Bachelor's degree or higher	377,245	77.2	111,658	22.8
Total income per year				
Less than \$30,000	126,608	68.6	57,951	31.4
\$30,000 to \$49,999	70,060	67.2	34,132	32.8
\$50,000 to \$79,999	120,169	66.4	60,691	33.6
\$80,000 to \$99,999	105,202	75.7	33,683	24.3
\$100,000 or more	288,440	77.2	84,953	22.8

^E use with caution

Note: For some provinces and territories, home child care licensing information was not available from public sources. Thus, some licensed home child care may be misclassified as unlicensed care.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.

Parents with a child aged 1 to 3 years were the most accurate in reporting the regulated status of their child care arrangement (76%). By comparison, parents of children aged younger than 1 year were less accurate in reporting the regulated status of their child care arrangement (67%). Next, higher parental education was associated with increased accuracy of reporting. Specifically, 77% of parents with a bachelor's degree or higher, and 69% of those with at least a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree, correctly reported the regulated status of their child care arrangement. By contrast, approximately half (54%) of parents with less than a high school diploma accurately reported regulated status. Finally, parents with a total income of at least \$100,000 were the most accurate in reporting the regulated status of their child care (77%), while parents with a total income of \$50,000 to \$79,999 were the least accurate (66%).

Not all provinces and territories had publicly available information on regulated centres and homes, so the accuracy of parent-reported regulated child care use by parent or child characteristics was reassessed among provinces and territories that included home-based care on their lists of regulated care (see Table 7). This subsequent analysis takes into account that in some provinces and territories, no information was available for potentially regulated homes, and considers the potential bias caused by a lack of information for home child care. Parents using centre-based care (83%) were more accurate than parents using home-based care (78%). Regarding child age, parents of 1- to 3-year-olds (84%) were more accurate than parents of 4- and 5-year-olds (79%). Higher education was also associated with increased accuracy. For example, 86% of parents with at least a bachelor's degree accurately reported

the regulated status of their child care arrangement, compared with 79% of parents with at least a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree. Finally, the results again suggested that household income was positively associated with increased accuracy. More than 85% of parents with a total income of at least \$100,000 accurately reported the regulated status of their child care arrangement, compared with 76% of parents with a total income of \$80,000 to \$99,999.

Table 7

Accuracy of parental reporting of licensed child care use, by main child care arrangement, type of arrangement, age of child, parental education level and income, within provinces and territories where licensed home information was available

	Accurate		Inaccurate	
	Weighted number	%	Weighted number	%
Main child care arrangement				
Centre	96,115	83.1	19,563	16.9
Home	28,033	77.7	8,060	22.3 ^E
Age of child				
Younger than 1 year	x	x	x	x
1 to 3 years	67,299	83.8	12,989	16.2
4 or 5 years	54,218	79.4	14,044	20.6
Parental education				
Less than high school	F	F	F	F
High school to less than a bachelor's degree	53,527	79.4	13,886	20.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	67,845	85.5	11,516	14.5
Total income per year				
Less than \$30,000	25,891	77	7,732	23 ^E
\$30,000 to \$49,999	10,166	77.9	2,878	22.1 ^E
\$50,000 to \$79,999	23,028	82.8	4,788	17.2 ^E
\$80,000 to \$99,999	13,306	75.9	4,215	24.1 ^E
\$100,000 or more	54,215	85.8	8,939	14.2 ^E

^E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

Note: Licensed home information was available for the following provinces and territories: Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to fill a gap in knowledge about the accuracy of parental reports of regulated child care use. In the sample of parents who provided information about the location of care, 84% of parents reported using regulated care, 11% reported using unregulated care and 5% did not know or did not answer. For the entire SELCCA sample, which includes parents who did not provide the location of their child care arrangement and could not be examined for accuracy, 69% of parents reported using regulated care, 27% reported unregulated care and 5% did not know. The proportion of parent-reported use of regulated care is higher in this study than in earlier research from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Kohen et al., 2008; Bushnik, 2006), but is comparable to findings from the 2017 General Social Survey (16.6% of children between the age of 12 months and entry to school were in unlicensed home child care; Vermuza et al., 2019). These findings coincide with an increase in the supply of regulated care spaces that has occurred over the past 30 years (Friendly et al., 2020), but demonstrate that use of unregulated care is still common in Canada. According to previous findings from the 2020 SELCCA, more than one-quarter of parents who had difficulty finding child care stated that the difficulty was in finding regulated child care (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Approximately three-quarters of parents accurately reported whether the care they were using was regulated or not. However, parents who reported using unregulated child care were more likely to be accurate than parents who reported using regulated care (92% vs. 70%). An important limitation is that not all provinces and territories provide regulated home information publicly. In provinces and territories where such information was public, approximately 82% of parents accurately reported whether their child care arrangement was regulated or not. Parents who reported using unregulated care were more accurate than parents who reported using regulated care.

While previous research indicates that parents might not be well informed regarding specific aspects of child care—such as caregiver education and training, or caregiver ratios (Fenech et al., 2011; Howe et al., 2013; White et al., 2019)—the majority of parents tend to know whether they are using regulated or unregulated care. However, 30% of parents overestimated; they reported using regulated care but were in fact using unregulated care. Even in provinces and territories where both regulated home and centre data were available, one-fifth of parents who believed their child was enrolled in regulated care were actually using unregulated care. These findings are relevant because parents may have chosen a different child care arrangement had they been aware that the provider was not regulated by any governing body (assuming availability and affordability), and it confirms that child care is a sector in which parents may not be savvy consumers (Blank, 2000). It is also possible that parents overestimate and report that their child care arrangements are regulated to avoid cognitive dissonance about their choice (see Harmon-Jones & Mills [2019] for a review)—that is, when reporting parents want to confirm that their child care service abides by minimum regulatory standards and practices to maintain safety for the child.

In general, parents living in provinces or territories that license homes directly (i.e., Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut) were more accurate than those in provinces where the agency model is used and homes are approved by the agency as opposed to licensed directly (i.e., Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta). This finding may be related to the way information is disseminated and possibly the lack of publicly available information on agency-approved homes. Findings from the current study support this hypothesis because parental accuracy for home-based care was much higher (78%) among provinces and territories where home licensing data were available (using the individually licensed home model), compared with the overall sample that included provinces and territories where home-based data were not available (44%). Alternatively, because of the more complex structure of the agency model, some parents may assume a home is regulated through an agency when it is not; it is also possible that the home was affiliated with an agency in the past but is no longer. A further understanding of these

findings would require a comparison of parent-reported regulated locations with a comprehensive list of agency-approved homes and regulated homes from all provinces and territories (not presently publicly available).

The secondary purpose of this study was to determine whether type of care arrangement or parent characteristics (which may indicate selection factors for child care) are related to parents' knowledge about whether the care they use is regulated. Given that daycare centres, preschools or *centres de la petite enfance* (CPEs) in Canada are generally regulated (regardless of province or territory), it is not surprising that parents using centre-based child care were the most accurate. In fact, Shpancer et al. (2002) similarly found that a majority of parents with a child enrolled in a regulated child care centre knew that the centre was regulated. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research that assesses the accuracy of parental reports about child care homes to compare the current results with.

Parents of younger children were less likely to accurately report the regulated status of their child care arrangement. This may be related to different distributions of children of various ages across the different types of arrangements or caused by the more limited availability of regulated care for infants. In a previous report (Findlay, 2019), approximately 60% of children aged 1 to 3 years and almost 50% of children aged 4 or 5 years were in a daycare centre, preschool or CPE. By contrast, 22% of children younger than 1 year were in a daycare centre, preschool or CPE. Accuracy in reporting licensed care was highest for parents using daycare centres (85%), and older children are more likely to be enrolled in daycare centres compared with younger children, so it could be expected that parents of older children would be more accurate.

Next, parents with higher education levels were more likely to accurately report the regulated status of their child's care. This finding might be related to the distribution of reporting regulated versus unregulated child care use in this study. That is, despite the increased accuracy among parents who reported using unregulated care, the majority of parents in this study reported using regulated care. Higher accuracy among parents with a higher education could be explained by differences in the actual type of care used or knowledge and affordability of regulated care rather than unregulated care. Indeed, previous research from Quebec has indicated that a high level of maternal education was associated with an increased use of regulated child care (Geoffroy et al., 2012). Therefore, the increased accuracy found among parents with a higher level of education in the current study may indicate that more highly educated parents are more knowledgeable about child care. They may be more likely to investigate what constitutes regulated child care, or they may be more adept at accessing regulated care (Kohen et al., 2008).

In general, parents with higher income were more accurate than those with lower income. It is possible that this is, in part, related to the parents' education. Because higher education is generally associated with higher income, and regulated care may be more expensive than unregulated care, it is possible that these parents are more likely to be able to afford regulated child care. It is also possible that higher-income families are those in which two parents are working full time and require formal types of care that are more likely to be regulated (e.g., centre-based care compared with family child care homes); the employment of mothers has been strongly linked to child care use in Canada (Zhang et al., 2021).

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, as mentioned previously, information on individually licensed homes, as well as those approved by licensed agencies, was not publicly available for some provinces. Only Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut had publicly available licensed home information. When these provinces and territories were assessed separately, parental accuracy about the regulated status of their child care arrangement increased for all parent and child characteristics. It is

possible that parents also use these lists to identify and locate regulated child care information, showing the importance of provincial or territorial public lists being up to date and accurate. Findings from this study should be considered preliminary as they likely underestimate the accuracy of parents reporting regulated family home child care in the provinces and territories that do not provide this information.

Second, not all parents and guardians provided the name and location of their child care arrangement in the survey, excluding just over one-quarter of the participants from the present study. Preliminary analysis suggested that parents who did not provide this information were significantly less likely to be using regulated child care; 90% of parents who reported using licensed care provided location information, compared with 32% of those who reported using unlicensed care. In addition, providing information for licensed care varied by type of care; 93% of parents using centre-based child care or a before- or after-school program provided the information. This compared with 79% of those using a family child care home, 63% of those using care by a non-relative in the child's home and 11% of those using care by relatives. Further examination of this group suggested that parents who provided this information were more likely to have higher education (78% of those with a bachelor's degree provided information vs. 69% of those with a high school diploma or less) but were not significantly different in terms of income, Indigenous or immigrant identity, a lone- vs. dual-parent family, or rural vs. urban residence. These results suggest that parents who are willing to provide information on location are more likely to be users of centre-based care but are not so different in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, other than education.

Conclusions

The current study suggests that while many parents are knowledgeable about whether their child is participating in regulated child care, approximately 20% to 30% of parents believe their child to be in regulated care when they are not. This suggests that the majority of parents, but not all, accurately report on the regulated status of their child care arrangements. It could also allude to the importance of improving the visibility of such information so parents can be well-informed users of regulated child care. Moreover, factors influential in parental selection of child care may be associated with regulated status accuracy. That is, parents who use home-based child care, parents of a 4- or 5-year-old child, and parents with a lower education level and household income report less accurately about the regulated status of their child care arrangements than their counterparts in centre-based care, with younger children, and of higher education and income level. This information will be important for reporting statistics on regulated child care in Canada, especially when based on parent-reported surveys, and for policy makers looking to increase participation in regulated child care. (For a review of unregulated child care in the context of other regulated sectors, see White et al. [2019].) As an effort to move in this direction, it would be valuable to have a public, complete and up-to-date list of regulated child care homes for all provinces and territories to enable further validation of parental reports. Clear indications of licensed status are needed particularly for home-based child care.

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