

Child Care Matters for Every Oregonian

A companion brief to
Oregon
by the
Numbers

Oregon has serious challenges ensuring all of its children have safe and nurturing day-time environment prior to kindergarten. To ensure a better future for our state, we must solve the problem of providing quality, accessible child care, especially for birth to age 5, for every child. Without it, we all bear the costs. Communities and employers have trouble attracting and retaining residents because child care is too expensive or non-existent. Young families fail to thrive because such a large percentage of their budget goes to child care or an adult stops working in order to care for little ones. Many Oregon children do not experience high quality early education because their parents, already trying to manage one of the most financially strained times in their life, can neither find it nor afford it. At every age and in every region of our state, Oregonians are impacted by our state’s child care desert. Even on our college campuses, parents trying to make a better life for their families cannot find the quality child care they need.

What is a child care desert?

Child care deserts are places where the need for child care far exceeds its availability. The box (below) and table (right) is from the 2020 edition of Oregon by the Numbers. The data suggest every Oregon county is a child care desert – bad news for all of us.

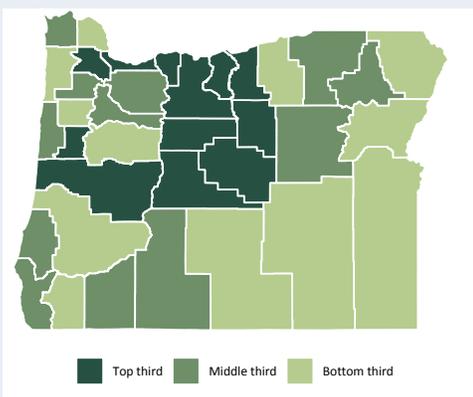
Limiting lives and livelihoods

Without child care, millions of potential workers feel forced to stay home each year. Millions more opt not to pursue training or education to improve their skills and economic standing. This limits their individual earning potential as well as their community’s access to a highly trained workforce. Women are more likely than men to pause their careers to care for their children.

CHILD CARE

Definition: The number of child care slots available per 100 children under 13 years of age.

All 36 Oregon counties are considered child care deserts, which means for every regulated child care slot, there are at least three children who might fill it. As a result, many families across Oregon cannot find child care for their children. The data reported here reflect child care slots found in child care centers or family child care homes. Inadequate access to such care prevents parents from participating in the workforce and young children from receiving the benefits of early education. Not every child needs access to formal child care. Some parents can rely on relatives or neighbors to watch children or work different shifts with no overlapping



hours. Still, there is a tremendous shortage of supply — a challenge made significantly worse by the COVID-19 crisis. — Oregon by the Numbers 2020

Rank	County	Amount
1	Jefferson	28
2	Wheeler	26
2	Benton	26
4	Hood River	23
5	Gilliam	22
6	Multnomah	21
7	Wasco	20
8	Crook	19
8	Deschutes	19
Urban Oregon		17
10	Lane	17
10	Sherman	17
10	Washington	17
Oregon		16
Rural Oregon		16
13	Union	16
13	Lincoln	16
13	Grant	16
16	Curry	15
16	Umatilla	15
18	Jackson	14
18	Clatsop	14
18	Clackamas	14
18	Klamath	14
18	Yamhill	14
18	Coos	14
24	Marion	13
24	Josephine	13
24	Malheur	13
27	Wallowa	12
27	Baker	12
27	Polk	12
30	Columbia	11
30	Harney	11
30	Douglas	11
30	Linn	11
34	Tillamook	10
34	Morrow	10
36	Lake	3

Source: Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, 2018, updated biennially. Released 2018.

Critical Learning Years

We have learned a lot about the human brain in the last 30 years. Research provides undeniable evidence that the most important learning years are the first five. Our brains develop most rapidly during this period, meaning positive and nurturing early learning experiences can make all the difference – everything from physical health to academics to adult success. Early learning equates to critical skills for life: interacting with others, recognizing patterns, forming relationships, understanding emotions, controlling impulses, and so on. What children experience (or not) in the early years can largely determine the trajectory of their lives.

Child care is early childhood education

The infrastructure for supporting young children and their families has not responded to what we have learned about the human brain. Child care takes place in a wide range of settings: in private homes, in large centers, in small pre-schools. Some providers are licensed and some are not. This patchwork of options for nonparental child care comes with varying quality and costs – although all of them are expensive. Most families find the costs completely out of reach, even middle-income families. We need to remember that child care is early childhood education. Under current conditions, Oregon children have a wide range of experiences in their early years. As a result, they enter kindergarten with an opportunity gap that largely mirrors the socioeconomic conditions of their households. This gap only widens over time.

Subsidies and Inequities

A single parent could easily pay 60% of their income on child care – but to what end? Over the years, federal subsidies have been implemented as a tool for improving access. With these child care subsidies (also known as vouchers or fee assistance), the federal government gives the states money to operate their own child care subsidy programs. While these programs help low-income families pay for child care, each state distributes the funds differently and even within a given state, inequities surface. In Oregon, for example, data show that child care subsidies vary considerably from county to county. Low-income families in one part of the state can receive subsidies more than double the amount of those received by low-income families in another part of the state, even though most of the costs associated with providing child care do not vary all that much.

Child care educators

Professionalizing early childhood education has taken decades due to its association with historically marginalized fields predominantly led by women. Child care educators are entrusted with some of the most important work in our democratic society. Some have years of experience and training, while others have

comparatively little. Regardless, theirs is one of the lowest paid professions in the nation – leading to high turnover and difficulty attracting workers. Sadly, many of the most talented and dedicated early childhood educators eventually face the hard reality that they cannot stay in the profession and meet the financial needs of their own family. Likewise, child care business owners, especially in more sparsely populated parts of Oregon, struggle to keep their operations financially viable.

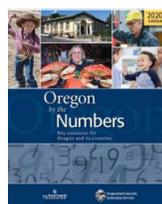
Child care is economic infrastructure

We need to view child care providers as the essential educators and professional business owners they are. Child care is critical infrastructure for our economy -- supporting full participation in the labor force, strong families, vital communities and a healthy start for children. Without it, families continue to face impossible choices between paying too much for questionable quality or losing one income. And most often, women will be the ones to stay home – depriving their families of their income, their communities of their skills, and their state and country of their tax dollars.

Where we go from here

What if there were another way? What if instead of providing money to families to solve the problem on their own, we all worked together to create ways for child care to become affordable, even free, for all who need it. Investments in providing early childhood education to low-income families have been proven to significantly reduce costs associated with other interventions down the road – things like remedial education, special education, counseling, even incarceration. We have many examples of countries that have extended public education to include early childhood. Locally, we also have communities that are taking on this issue. As an example, Yamhill County has launched Project Oasis with this guiding principle: “Making earning a living while raising a family, affordable, possible and meaningful.” While the solution to our child care education problem will require all of us, it is solvable – the sooner, the better.

Digital resources for learning more



No Small Matter – <https://www.nosmallmatter.com/>
Rural Child Care Innovation Program – <https://www.ruralchildcare.org>

Two Moms Return to Work – <https://hbr.org/2020/03/two-new-moms-return-to-work-one-in-seattle-one-in-stockholm>

Oregon by the Numbers 2020 – www.tfff.org/obtn

