



## Child Care Deserts: Developing Solutions to Child Care Supply and Demand



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### What is a Child Care Desert?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food deserts as “parts of the country vapid of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods.” **Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA) borrows from this important work and refers to areas or communities with limited or no access to quality child care as child care deserts.** In both situations, the identification of deserts is important, because it identifies an absence of an essential commodity that results in limited access, which current child care systems do not address.

We are introducing the concept of “child care deserts” broadly—focusing on the ways in which communities examine supply and demand concerns. As we learn more from the field, we hope to provide a more specific definition of the term “child care desert.” With respect to quality, we recognize that there are many ways in which the field defines levels of quality through classroom observations, accreditations, and quality rating systems.

With the passage of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act of 2014, it is paramount that states and communities understand how to study child care supply and demand, analyze the findings, identify areas of child care deserts, and implement solutions. The law also expects states to meet the needs of certain populations by developing and implementing strategies to increase the supply and improve the quality of child care services for children in underserved areas, infants and toddlers, children with disabilities (as defined by the state), and children who receive care during nontraditional hours (NTH). To serve these vulnerable populations and ensure that children from these families gain access to high-quality early childhood education, states and communities need data on supply and demand of child care services.

At the local and state levels, child care leaders, especially Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs), have traditionally examined child care access, conducted needs assessments, and mapped supply and demand for target populations. It is imperative that expertise and data available through entities like CCR&R are included and leveraged in

a systematic collection of supply and demand. Communities need to understand how the data from these evaluations will aid states in developing strategies to increase accessibility to vulnerable populations.

## Parent Perceptions of Child Care Deserts

The demand for high quality child care has grown significantly in previous decades, and a child care system that is adaptable and responsive to a variety of needs is required. Ensuring all children have access to high-quality and affordable early childhood programs prepares children for school and lends to succeed later in life. However, the supply of such child care is often limited, especially for underserved populations. Some contextual factors contributing to the increasing demand for child care and areas in which supply is lacking include:

**Women as breadwinners.** Families with employed mothers are more likely than families with non-employed mothers to seek quality, affordable child care.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, 40 percent of all households with children under the age of 18 include mothers who are either the sole or primary source of income for the family.

**Addressing Infant Child Care.** Young children need developmentally appropriate care with higher staff-to-child ratios and smaller group sizes than those for older children, which is a key factor to markedly higher costs for infant care. Across all 50 states, the cost of center-based infant care averaged over 40 percent of the state median income for single mothers.

**Unequal access for minority children.** A study revealed that 40 percent of Hispanic and 36 percent of white children were enrolled in center-based classrooms where quality was rated as “high” versus 25 percent of African-American children were in classrooms with the same rating. Furthermore, 15 percent of African-American children attended child care centers where quality was ranked as “low”—almost two times the percentage of Hispanic and white children.<sup>2</sup>

**Desire for culturally and linguistically appropriate child care.** Currently, out of 23 million children under the age of six, 25 percent is made up of children of immigrants and refugees.<sup>3</sup> All child care providers, regardless of background, should

have professional development opportunities that focus on how to best support learning and development of children from diverse backgrounds.

### **Nontraditional hours (NTH) for child care.**

Irregular, unpredictable schedules often require last-minute adjustments to child care arrangements, necessitating extremely flexible child care hours to ensure comprehensive care.<sup>4</sup> This need for flexibility is especially impactful for low-income workers, who are more likely to operate on nontraditional schedules than other workers (28 percent compared with 20 percent, respectively).<sup>5</sup>

**Child care supporting special needs.** Studies have shown the lack of child care slots willing to accept children with disabilities or other special needs, and even once accepted, parents have reported that their children are more likely to be let go by caregivers due to behavioral problems.<sup>6</sup>

In April 2016, CCAoA conducted focus groups with parents to gain a better understanding of how they found solutions to finding child care when seeking child care for a young child with special needs, during nontraditional working hours, and when the parents primarily speak Spanish. Several common themes emerged:

- **Availability is an issue.** Many parents described a cobbled together child care scheme, frequently relying on family and friends to fill in child care gaps.
- **Affordability means compromise.** Parents frequently find themselves having to choose between options that are “must-haves” vs. those that are “nice to have.” For some parents, these compromises were not worth the cost.
- **Building trust between provider and parent is key to parent satisfaction.** Routines and good communication from their provider led to greater trust and better relationships.
- **Quality child care is multifaceted.** Must-haves from quality child care include: a clean, safe, loving environment, and a day filled with structure, routine, developmental learning, and play.
- **The search for child care can be difficult and frustrating.** Parents had varied experiences, noting that it took from a few weeks to months to find or determine their child care situation.





## State- and Systems-Level Examination of Child Care Deserts

We also conducted in-depth key informant interviews with representatives from seven communities (Kansas, Ohio, Maryland, Indiana, North Carolina's Triangle region, Vermont, Florida) to learn more about their studies on child care supply and demand. Although the studies highlighted in this report are by no means exhaustive, we hope these lessons learned will serve as a representation of supply and demand work being done across the country. While the states we sampled for this paper varied greatly in their studies, common themes emerged in their lessons learned:

- **Study outputs should be tailored to your audience.** Make sure you are collecting data and reporting outcomes that are important and relevant to your target audience, and that you are using easy-to-understand, appropriate language in your reporting.
- **Maintaining consistent, quality data is key.** States noted the importance of consistency within data sets, as well as the many benefits to consistency in the data team. Team members who are familiar with the dataset contribute to smooth efficient analysis and reporting.
- **Two heads are better than one.** Collaboration between organizational members, partnerships between statewide organizations, and the use of key stakeholders in data collection can lead to comprehensive data sets and innovative approaches to data collection and reporting.
- **Don't reinvent the wheel.** Review lessons learned from others who have examined child care supply and demand to avoid pitfalls and conundrums others had to problem-solve.
- **Think outside the box when managing resources.** Although some states may receive funding to study supply and demand, consider how you can utilize outside assets to supplement allocated resources.

## Policy Recommendations

Deserts are especially prevalent in low-income communities, rural communities, among families of color, families with infants, and families with irregular or nontraditional work schedules. There is an **overall need to understand supply and demand challenges within a community, ensure the ability to collect data available on supply and demand, create unbiased analysis of data, and generate community solutions.**

Child Care Aware® of America recommends:

- **Increased funding and resources.** Local, state, and national public investment is needed to optimize and leverage CCR&R capacity to support the new requirements under the CCDBG Act of 2014. Public investment is not the only answer to the child care challenge, but it is a major part of the solution on the shortage of licensed child care.
- **Investment in infrastructure and child care facilities.** In order to positively impact supply inequities to meet the demand for child care today and in the future, states and communities must give priority to building the infrastructure necessary to coordinate and manage the functions essential to the success of child care programs.
- **Adequate support for the child care workforce.** In addition to attracting workers, training, coaching, and mentoring is essential for retention and providing workers with the key information and skills needed to support children's growth and development. Well-prepared and supported providers are better able to offer quality care and learning opportunities to children and attract parents to their programs.
- **Support for strengthened community capacity building.** This involves strengthening the skills, competencies, and abilities of people and communities in developing societies so they can overcome the causes of their challenges. Helping communities measure supply and demand and understand potential barriers is key to creating strategies that meet their unique child care needs.

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