



Growing interest in early education has led to more infant classrooms in child care centers—but they're mostly for wealthy families.

By: **KENDRA HURLEY**

Parents seeking subsidized child care for babies often hope for a spot at a licensed early education center. But almost inevitably, their babies instead wind up in subsidized home-based programs, known as family child care, where women get paid meager wages to look after neighborhood kids in their homes, and which are far less regulated than child care centers. That's because child care centers citywide have historically had very few slots for children under 2 years old, in large part due to the costs and difficulties involved in meeting stringent safety regulations for infants in centers.

In recent years, that's started to change. As demand for infant care in centers has increased in the City, so have the number of slots available for children younger than 2 years old. But most of the new slots are in centers that serve affluent families. Child care centers for low-income families, on the other hand, have been losing capacity to take in infants and young toddlers. The result is a glut of families on infant-room waitlists and scant child care options for low-income parents.

In the past two years alone, the number of slots for children under 2 years old increased by 10 percent in licensed early education centers citywide—from 9,853 spots in 2015 to 10,806 in 2017, even as total capacity in centers grew by only 2 percent, according to our analysis

of data provided by The City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), which issues licenses to the centers.

Bright Horizons, one for-profit day care provider which in some neighborhoods charges nearly \$40,000 a year for infant care, increased their capacity for infants and toddlers by more than 25%, adding an additional 200 slots.

"We lose a lot of space if we try to incorporate cribs and changing tables, and enrollment numbers go down, and it's not cost-effective."

At the same time, the child care centers that contract with the City to serve low-income families lost capacity to take in infants and toddlers. The number of spots for children under 2 years old in those centers fell by 8 percent—or about 100 lost slots, according to an analysis of data from DOHMH and the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), the agency responsible for City-subsidized child care.

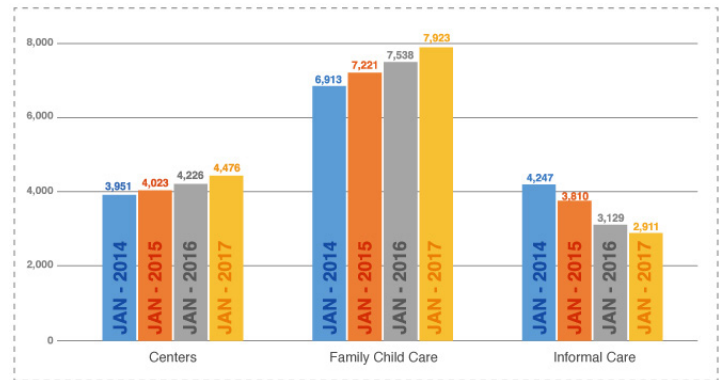
“The capacity has grown, but not for poor people,” says Kathleen Hopkins, vice president of the Family Health Centers at NYU Langone Department of Community Programs that has two centers with infant care. “There are still not a lot of options for poor families.”

The NYU Langone’s center in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn has close to 500 families on its waitlist; its center in the Boerum Hill area has more than 100.

Yvette Cora, who works at at the City-contracted St. Malachy Child Development Center in East New York, also turns down a steady stream of parents asking to enroll babies. “I refer them to home providers, and sometimes after they go visit those homes they come back here and say they prefer it here,” she says.

Families With Young Children Increasingly Choose Licensed Child Care Arrangements Over Informal Ones

Change in Voucher Enrollment by Child Care Setting for Children Ages 0-2



SOURCE: DATA PROVIDED BY ACS

A declining number and percentage of parents who receive vouchers choose informal child care arrangements with friends and families for their young children. That number has declined from 4,247 in 2014—or 28 percent of all 0-2-year-olds enrolled in child care using vouchers—to 2,911, or just 19 percent of all 0-2-year-olds enrolled with vouchers in 2017.

Instead, a growing number and percentage of parents are choosing licensed programs—either center-based programs or licensed family child care programs. Among those who use their vouchers to pay for licensed family child care, the vast majority now choose what’s known as “group family child care,” a form of in-home care where a provider hires at least one other assistant, typically to be able to care for more children at a time.

Group family child care often mimics an early education center classroom and is a fast-growing pocket of capacity for very young children. Today, about 85 percent of children aged 0-2 enrolled in the City’s contracted EarlyLearn family child care are in group-based family child care, according to data provided by ACS. Among families paying for child care with vouchers, about 93 percent of 0-2-year-olds in family child care are in group-based programs.

But most won't get offered a spot until their child is at least 18 months old—it takes six months to a year to get off that waitlist.

This lack of options for low-income families is largely driven by cost. Infants and toddlers are the most expensive age group to serve in centers. Infant rooms must have sprinkler systems, for instance, and be on the ground floor. When New York City reformed its subsidized child care system five years ago (and rebranded it “EarlyLearnNYC”), its vision was that most babies and young toddlers would continue to be placed in the far less-expensive and also less-regulated family child care programs, and that the family child care sites would receive added supports.

But studies nationwide have found family child care to be, on average, of lower quality than center-based care. Over the past few years, ACS and advocates have become increasingly interested in growing the capacity for very young children

in the subsidized centers. In a November 2015 report, Public Advocate Letitia James' office noted that despite ACS's efforts to increase infant and toddler capacity, “center-based child care seats that are subsidized are especially at a premium for this age group,” and called for the City to increase funding for the youngest children in centers.

Some say that Mayor Bill de Blasio's Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) expansion and public awareness campaigns such as Talk to Your Baby added urgency to this discussion by raising awareness of the importance of high-quality care during a child's first few years. Staff at the City's child care resource and referral agencies say they see a growing number of parents from all backgrounds who now believe that licensed programs—and especially early education centers—are better equipped than informal arrangements with friends and family to provide quality care and to prepare young kids for school. “It's a trend of the last five years,” says Nancy Kolben, executive director of the child care resource and referral agency Center for Children's Initiatives.

Early childhood programs that enroll only families able to pay without public subsidies have responded to this demand by charging parents more money to offset the costs inherent in baby care. But for child care centers that either contract with the City or accept a large number of child care vouchers, rising rents combined with flat City funding has led to a dwindling capacity for babies.

Why Are Infants So Expensive for Centers?

Unlike older children, infants and toddlers must be in rooms on the ground floor that are equipped with a sprinkler system. They must have a crib for each infant, a changing table near running water, and space for babies to crawl. Meeting these requirements costs large sums of money upfront. Additionally, infants and toddlers in centers must be looked after in smaller groups than are required for older children, meaning fewer overall enrollment numbers without a reduction in staff. All of this makes infant rooms more expensive to operate than a room for preschoolers, despite less stringent professional requirements that generally make wages lower than for preschool teachers for older kids.

AGE OF CHILDREN	MINIMUM STAFF/CHILD	MAXIMUM GROUP SIZE
under 12 months (infants)	1:4 or 1:3	8 per room/area
12 to 24 months (toddlers)	1:5	10
2 years to under 3	1:6	12
3 years to under 4	1:10	15
4 years to under 5	1:12	20

SOURCE: ARTICLE 47 OF THE NYC HEALTH CODE

“Everything we have seen says it’s a money-losing proposition to do [infant care] as a center-based facility because of the infrastructure you need,” says Jim Matison, executive director of Brooklyn Kindergarten Society, which oversees five early education centers that serve low-income families—none that take babies.

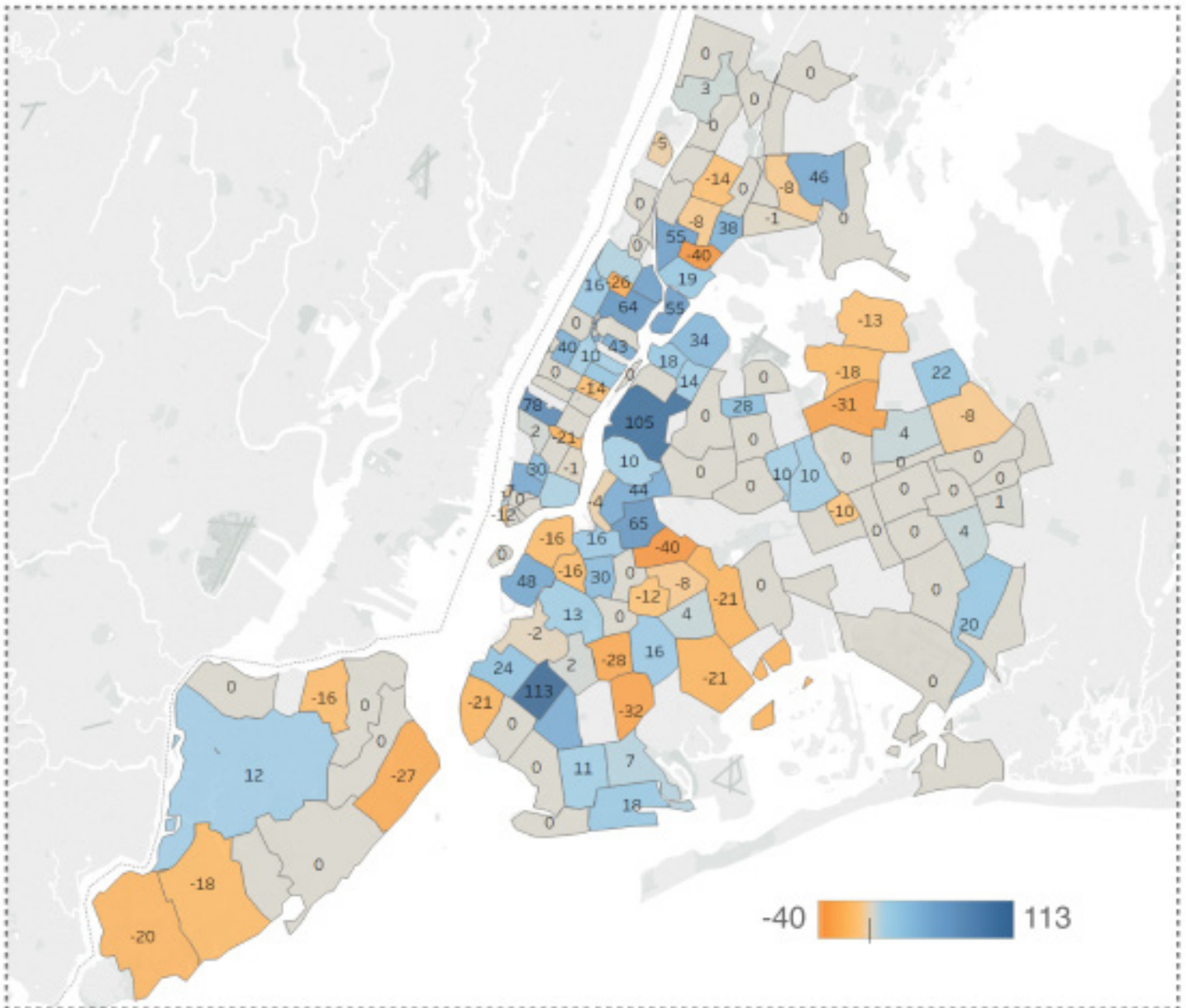
Other directors of subsidized programs say that in neighborhoods with a dearth of child care, providing infant care, which by State regulations has fewer children to a classroom than classes for 3- and 4-year-olds, does not fit with their mission to serve as many kids as possible. “We lose a lot [of space] if we try to incorporate cribs and changing tables, and enrollment numbers go down and it’s not cost-effective,” explains Maria Contreras-Collier, executive director of Cypress Hills Child Care Corporation. Her organization is preparing to open a new state-of-the-art child care facility, but has chosen not to include infant rooms, despite what Collier describes as “a tremendous need” in the neighborhood. Collier says that serving infants is easier at large child care centers that can dedicate a room or two to babies without significantly cutting back on overall enrollment.

Data from DOHMH echoes that assessment; many centers with the most capacity for infants and toddlers are also the largest child care organizations overall. Hanover Place Child Care, a downtown Brooklyn for-profit center located near the borough’s major subway lines, is a case in point. A large school with a total capacity for over 300 children, it accepts more vouchers to care for infants than any other center in the City, according to data from ACS. In recent years, as surrounding neighborhoods rapidly gentrified, it has begun attracting families who pay privately.

For years, it shared a building and some staff with a special-education preschool, an arrangement that likely helped to keep the child care center’s costs down and to develop into a rare bastion of infant and toddler care for Brooklyn families. Then the special-education preschool shuttered around the same time that the State Comptroller’s office alleged, among other things, that the special-education preschool had improperly charged the State for space and staff which were also used by Hanover Place. Soon after the State-funded preschool closed, Hanover Place child care lost a security guard, art teacher, and a nurse. Meanwhile, rents in the neighborhood skyrocketed as new construction crept closer and closer. Some local parents fear that it is only a matter of time before the Brooklyn real estate boom will lead the center to close its doors entirely, or at least close doors to families unable to pay the tuition necessary to keep them open.

Where the New Baby Rooms Are

Change in Center-Based Infant-Toddler Capacity Between 2015 and 2017



SOURCE: DOHMH

Neighborhoods showing the largest growth in infant and toddler capacity between 2015 and 2017 include wealthy Manhattan areas such as the Tribeca/NoHo region, which added over 75 “luxury” slots for children younger than 2, some that cost about \$40,000 a year, as well as the Upper East and Upper West Sides, which together added over 80 slots for private-paying families.

In the Bronx, the affluent Pelham Bay area gained over 50 infant-toddler slots—one of the few Bronx neighborhoods to see any increase. None of these were City-contracted slots, although some of the centers showing growth did accept a number of vouchers for payment.

Significant growth in infant-toddler capacity also occurred in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods such as Manhattan’s East Harlem, which received 60 new private-pay slots, and Long Island City in Queens, which saw an increase of over 100 infant-toddler slots—none of which were subsidized in 2017 and some of which cost over \$2,500 per month a slot.

Though overall the subsidized child care system lost capacity during the years analyzed, there did appear to be pockets of growth in Early Head Start programs, which are available only to families living in poverty. In Brooklyn, a number of the 110 new slots that opened in Bedford-Stuyvesant and neighboring Williamsburg appear to be in Early Head Start programs.

As part of the federal Head Start program, Early Head Start slots come with ample funding from the federal government, making them an important resource for increasing capacity for infants and toddlers from very low-income families. Over the past two years, the Administration for Children's Services has been working to convert empty Head Start slots to Early Head Start ones, and so far is focusing on children between 2 and 3 years old. By the end of the year, 16 new Early Head Start classrooms are slated to have opened, with the combined capacity to serve over 125 children between ages 2 and 3.

These classrooms are helping to build capacity for young children in centers, and have the potential to pave the way for serving even younger kids whose families qualify for Head Start. "We expect this shift to be a critical step in an on-going progression of ensuring that every parent in New York City has access to high quality early care and education," says Lorelei Vargas, ACS deputy commissioner of early care and education.

THIS BRIEF IS PART OF A SERIES LOOKING AT THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF NEW YORK CITY'S SUBSIDIZED EARLY EDUCATION AS IT RELATES TO INFANTS AND TODDLERS. FOR TIPS, THOUGHTS, AND COMMENTS, EMAIL HURLEYK@NEWSCHOOL.EDU

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