



Headed Up, But Still Behind

Child Care Coverage Rates in Alberta's Top Ten Largest Cities,
2016 – 2021



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Child care coverage rates are an important way to measure the availability of child care, with higher rates generally meaning child care is more available. Coverage rates have increased in every one of Alberta's ten largest cities in recent years, but the increases have been uneven, and all cities remain well below international targets. There are several actions that both municipalities and the Government of Alberta can take to increase the availability of child care in their jurisdictions that mesh well with the goals of the new Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement.

What is a “child care coverage rate”, and why does it matter?

The overarching goal of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreements is to “ensure that quality and affordable regulated child care spaces are available to all families who need it.”¹ But what does it mean for child care spaces to be “available?”²

One widely used measure of availability is the child care coverage rate (“coverage rate” in this brief). A coverage rate is simply the number of child care spaces available divided by the number of children eligible for child care in a given area. This produces a percentage, which is usually then expressed as number of spaces per child. For example, a coverage rate of 30% means there are 3 spaces available for every 10 eligible children.

Coverage rates are relatively easy to calculate if data are available, but there are different types of coverage rates, with each type revealing something different about the availability of child care. This brief uses the latest available public data from the Census of Population and the Government of Alberta to examine the change in coverage rates for licensed child care in Alberta's ten largest cities, and Alberta as a whole, from 2016 to 2021.³

Coverage rates in Alberta's ten largest cities

Table 1 shows the full-day licensed⁴ child care coverage rate for children aged 0-5 (referred to here as the “young child, full day” coverage rate). This coverage rate is highlighted here first because it includes

¹ Government of Canada. (21 April 2021). *\$10 a day child care for Canadian families*. <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2021/04/21/10-day-child-care-canadian-families>

² In this brief, “early learning and child care” and “child care” are used interchangeably. “Child care” is used more often both because it is a shorter term and because this is the term that most readers are used to. Increasingly, however, the preferred term is “early learning and child care”, as it more properly describes what happens in these settings.

³ Data on population and child care spaces were gathered in mid-2021, while Canada was still firmly in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the response rate to the 2021 Census was about 97%, comparable to previous years, and the child care space data from the Government of Alberta in 2021 showed no particular deviation in trends from previous years (that is, spaces increased in 2021 at a similar rate to previous years). Both these observations suggest that despite COVID-19, these data are valid for use in comparing 2021 to 2016.

⁴ This brief only examines licensed child care in Alberta, as there are no consistent, regularly gathered data on the amount and location of unlicensed child care spaces in Alberta.



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the population targeted by the Canada-Wide agreements (younger children who are either not yet in kindergarten, or who are in kindergarten and also attend full-day child care programs) and the type of child care more likely to be used by parents who are going to work or school full-time (full-day care that is licensed and regulated by the provincial government).⁵ Four important patterns can be seen in Table 1:

- 1. Young child, full day coverage rates varied greatly among the largest ten cities in Alberta.** In fact, the gap between the city with the lowest coverage and the highest appears to have widened in the past five years. In 2016, the difference between the city with the highest coverage rate and the lowest was 21.4 percentage points; in 2021, that difference grew to 27.0 percentage points.
- 2. Young child, full day coverage rates increased in every one of the largest ten cities in Alberta between 2016 and 2021.** Moreover, the average coverage rate in the ten largest cities was higher than Alberta as a whole (4.5 points higher in 2016, and 4.2 points higher in 2021).
- 3. The increase in young child, full day coverage rates from 2016 to 2021 among the ten largest cities was uneven.** While the average increase in coverage rate was 8.4 percentage points, some cities experienced double-digit increases (Calgary, St. Albert, Spruce Grove), but others increased only a few percentage points (Grande Prairie, Leduc).
- 4. Even with the increases, young child, full day coverage rates remained under 30% in 6 of the 10 largest cities in Alberta.** In addition, coverage rates remained under 30% in Alberta's three largest cities, which combined include more than half (56%) of all children aged 0-5 in Alberta.

Table 1: Full-Day Child Care Coverage Rates for Children Aged 0-5 in Alberta's Ten Largest Cities and Alberta Overall, 2016-2021

City	Coverage Rate, 2016	Coverage Rate, 2021	Increase, 2016-2021
Calgary	15.4	28.0	12.6
Edmonton	22.3	28.0	5.7
Red Deer	14.1	23.5	9.5
Lethbridge	31.0	37.6	6.5
Airdrie	15.6	25.5	10.0
St. Albert	22.7	37.4	14.7
Grande Prairie	15.9	19.9	4.1
Medicine Hat	34.2	41.8	7.7
Spruce Grove	21.3	32.3	11.0
Leduc	12.8	14.8	2.1
Average for the Ten Cities	20.5	28.9	8.4
Alberta Overall	16.0	24.7	8.6

Cities are listed in order of overall population as of the 2021 Census. Full methods for calculating these rates are described in the Appendix. Increases above the average for the ten cities are shaded green, while increases below that average are shaded red.

⁵ Government of Canada. (no date). *Early learning and child care agreements*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories.html>.



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Table 2 on the next page again shows coverage rates for Alberta’s ten largest cities, with one change: these rates include preschools (which offer part-time spaces only). Calculating this type of coverage rate—the “young child, any type” coverage rate—is useful for understanding child care availability for parents seeking *any* type of child care for their younger children.⁶ Such parents might be seeking child care to support the social, emotional, and cognitive development of their young children, to provide an opportunity for parents to work or go to school part-time, as part of a combination child care solution (for example, preschool in the morning and a nanny in the afternoon), or for other reasons. The “young child, any type” coverage rate can be used to examine child care availability for a broader range of situations and, potentially, a broader range of parental needs and desires for child care.

The patterns in Table 2 are largely the same as the patterns in Table 1, with the predictable difference that adding in preschool spaces increases coverage rates in cities in both years (by an average of 4.9 percentage points in 2016 and 5.7 percentage points in 2021). Using a “young child, any type” coverage rate makes child care appear more available in these cities, and in Alberta overall.

Adding part-time preschool spaces in the calculation does not affect every city in the same way, however. For example, in 2021, adding preschool spaces increased the coverage rate by 9.4 points in St. Albert, but only 2.8 points in Grande Prairie. This variation in coverage rates when preschool spaces are added reflects a difference in the types of programs that exist in the different cities—which in itself adds a useful perspective on understanding child care availability across the province. Some cities tend to have a larger percentage of their spaces devoted to part-time care, while others tend to have a larger percentage of their spaces devoted to full-time care.

Table 2: Full- and Part-Day Child Care Coverage Rates for Children Aged 0-5 in Alberta’s Ten Largest Cities and Alberta Overall, 2016-2021

City	Coverage Rate, 2016	Coverage Rate, 2021	Increase
Calgary	21.4	34.1	12.7
Edmonton	26.4	34.3	7.9
Red Deer	20.2	27.9	7.6
Lethbridge	33.1	44.3	11.2
Airdrie	21.2	31.3	10.1
St. Albert	29.4	46.8	17.5
Grande Prairie	19.1	22.8	3.6
Medicine Hat	37.1	48.7	11.6
Spruce Grove	29.9	37.5	7.7
Leduc	16.5	18.6	2.1
Average for the Ten Cities	25.4	34.6	9.2
Alberta Overall	21.6	29.9	8.4

Cities are listed in order of overall population as of the 2021 Census. Full methods for calculating these rates are described in the Appendix.

⁶ One could also calculate a “young child, part-time” coverage rate as well, and that too would tell us something slightly different by providing a measure of the availability of part-time, centre-based child care in these cities and Alberta. Similarly, one could calculate an “older child, part-time” coverage rate, which would include out-of-school spaces and a portion of family day home spaces (family day homes are allowed to take children age 0-12). “Older child, part-time” coverage rates are not described in this brief, as those rates focus on children not covered under the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2021-2026.



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Another type of coverage rate can be calculated by dividing every licensed space in the province by the total number of children in the province aged 0-12. This is the easiest coverage rate to calculate, but also the least informative. Why? Because it lumps four different types of child care in together and treats them as equivalent:

- Day care programs, which are full day for younger children,
- Family day homes, which are full day for both younger and older children,
- Preschool programs, which are part day for younger children, and
- Out of school programs, which are part day for older children.

This type of coverage rate also lumps all children aged 0-12 together and treats them as equivalent. Calculating a coverage rate in this way would make sense only if every space is available for every child aged 0-12. This is simply untrue in Alberta—a space in a preschool program is not available for an 8-year-old, and a space in an out-of-school care program is not available for an infant. As a result, calculating a coverage rate in this way is largely unhelpful in understanding child care availability in Alberta. Far more useful in understanding child care availability are more specific child care coverage rates like the two described above in Tables 1 and 2.⁷

Why did coverage rates increase between 2016 and 2021?

The increases in coverage rates between 2016 and 2021 were primarily driven by a large increase in licensed spaces in these ten cities, and more generally in Alberta as a whole (see Table 3, below). For full-day spaces, these increases varied widely by city, from a low of 4.3% in Medicine Hat to a high of 67.1% in Airdrie. For full- and part-day spaces, a similar pattern of wide variation emerges, with increases ranging from a low 8.5% in Grande Prairie to a high of 52.9% in Calgary. Worth noting is that adding in part-time preschool spaces actually *lowers* the percentage increase in some cities (like Calgary) while raising it in others (like Edmonton). For Calgary and cities like it, this seemingly odd phenomenon generally means that preschool spaces made up a smaller percentage of total spaces for younger children in those cities 2021 than they did in 2016.

Table 3: Full-Day and Full- and Part-Day Spaces for Children Aged 0-5 in Alberta's Ten Largest Cities and Alberta Overall, 2016-2021

City	Full-Day, 2016	Full-Day, 2021	Increase (%)	Full- and Part-Day, 2016	Full and Part-Day, 2021	Increase (%)
Calgary	14,437	25,252	74.9	20,103	30,747	52.9
Edmonton	16,008	20,789	29.9	18,917	25,470	34.6
Red Deer	1,070	1,564	46.3	1,540	1,852	20.3
Lethbridge	2,090	2,422	15.9	2,230	2,857	28.1
Airdrie	1,029	1,719	67.1	1,401	2,108	50.5
St. Albert	984	1,532	55.7	1,274	1,917	50.5
Grande Prairie	985	1,131	14.8	1,189	1,290	8.5
Medicine Hat	1,499	1,563	4.3	1,629	1,823	11.9
Spruce Grove	703	964	37.1	984	1,118	13.6
Leduc	361	410	13.5	466	513	10.0

⁷ In fact, even more helpful than Tables 1 and 2 would be coverage rates based on the number of spaces available for children of different ages within the 0-5 category—specifically, infants (age 0-18 months), toddlers (19-36 months), and preschoolers (3 years old to school age). Unfortunately these data are not publicly available from the Government of Alberta as of the writing of this brief.



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Total for the Ten Cities	39,164	57,346	46.4	49,731	69,695	40.1
Alberta Overall	51,353	75,468	47.0	69,051	91,598	32.7

Cities are listed in order of overall population as of the 2021 Census.

However, there is a second, and somewhat more concerning, driver of the increase in child care coverage rates in Alberta. Between 2016 and 2021, most of these ten cities—and Alberta overall—saw the eligible population of young children living within their borders *decrease*. As can be seen in Table 4 (next page), the only cities in the largest ten that increased their population of children aged 0-5 were Edmonton (+3.6%) and Airdrie (+2.0%), with decreases in all other cities (ranging from -2.3% in Leduc to -14.8% in Medicine Hat). Alberta as a province saw a decrease of 4.4% in its population of children aged 0-5. These patterns are part of a larger trend of the aging of the population in both Alberta and Canada.⁸

Are these *good* coverage rates?

There is no single, universally accepted coverage rate that is good or correct—or, more precisely, at which child care can be seen as fully and truly “available.” Parental preferences for child care can vary widely between countries, provinces, cities, and neighborhoods. What is a perfectly acceptable coverage rate for one city might be woefully low for another. With that caveat in mind, some suggestions have emerged in recent years.

In Canada, the most well-known coverage rate figure is that used by David MacDonald in his 2018 report on child care deserts in Canada. “Child care deserts” are areas with inadequate access to child care, regardless of the cost of that care; in MacDonald’s report, a child care desert is defined as a “postal [code] where there are at least three children in potential competition for each licensed space.”⁹ Converted to a coverage rate, this means any postal code where the coverage rate is less than 33% could be considered a child care desert. It is important to note that being above 33% does not mean child care could be considered adequately available in that area—it simply means that it does not qualify as a child care desert by MacDonald’s definition.

Table 4: Population of Children Aged 0-5 in Alberta’s Ten Largest Cities and Alberta Overall, 2016-2021

City	2016	2021	Change (%)
Calgary	93,920	90,155	-4.0
Edmonton	71,640	74,190	3.6
Red Deer	7,610	6,650	-12.6
Lethbridge	6,730	6,445	-4.2
Airdrie	6,600	6,730	2.0
St. Albert	4,340	4,095	-5.6
Grande Prairie	6,210	5,670	-8.7
Medicine Hat	4,390	3,740	-14.8
Spruce Grove	3,295	2,980	-9.6

⁸ See Business Council of Alberta. (11 May 2022). *2021 Census population trends: Population by age*.

<https://www.businesscouncilab.com/work/2021-census-population-trends-population-by-age/> and Statistics Canada. (27 April 2022). *A generational portrait of Canada’s aging population from the 2021 Census*.

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-X/2021003/98-200-X2021003-eng.cfm>.

⁹ MacDonald, David. (2018). *Child care deserts in Canada*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

<https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2018/06/Child%20Care%20Deserts.pdf>.



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Leduc	2,825	2,760	-2.3
Total for the Ten Cities	207,560	203,415	-2.0
Alberta Overall	320,225	306,070	-4.4

Cities are listed in order of overall population as of the 2021 Census.

MacDonald’s 33% threshold is derived from the “Barcelona Targets”, which were established in 2002 by the Barcelona European Council with the express purpose of ensuring that women can participate fully in the labor market.¹⁰ These targets are actually different for different ages: for children from birth up to and including age 2, the goal is a coverage rate of 33%, while for children from age 3 to formal school age, the target is 90%. Table 5 (next page) shows how many spaces would be needed for each age range in each of the ten cities—and Alberta as a whole—if the Barcelona Targets for spaces were to be met (based on 2021 Census figures). Table 5 also compares what the overall coverage rate would be for each area if the Barcelona Targets were met to the actual coverage rates for 2021. It should be noted that the Barcelona Targets appear to count part-time and full-time child care spaces equally, so the most relevant table for comparing coverage rates is Table 2, not Table 1. The most obvious takeaway from Table 5 is that none of the ten cities reach the Barcelona targets, with some cities missing by a very large margin. Calgary and Edmonton both miss the Barcelona targets by almost 30 percentage points, with Calgary falling short by over 25,000 spaces and Edmonton falling short by 20,000 spaces. Alberta as a whole would need about 100,000 new spaces for children aged 0-5 to reach the Barcelona Targets.

Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to know from public data exactly how many spaces are actually available for children aged 0-2 in Alberta, and how many spaces there are for children aged 3 to kindergarten, so Table 5—which combines the two—is likely the best we can do with the public data available at the moment.

As noted at the beginning of this section, we should be wary of using any specific, universal coverage rate as the sole indicator of whether child care availability has been achieved. The needs and desires of parents for child care can vary greatly from one place to another. It is useful, then, to examine other potential indicators of child care availability within a city (or any other area) *in combination with* coverage rates. For example, if child care programs in a particular area are full, with long waiting lists, that suggests that child care availability in that area is lower than it needs to be—even if the city has high coverage rates compared to other cities, and even if it has achieved the Barcelona Targets. Unfortunately, there is no consistent source of public information on child care enrollment nor on waitlists in Alberta, much less for its individual municipalities.

Table 5: Young Child, All-Type Coverage Rates Needed to Achieve Barcelona Targets for Children Aged 0-5 in Alberta’s Ten Largest Cities and Alberta Overall (using 2021 Population Numbers)

City	Children Aged 0-2	Children Aged 3-5	Total Children Aged 0-5	Spaces Needed, 0-2	Spaces Needed, 3-5	Spaces Needed, 0-5	Target Coverage, 0-5	Actual Coverage, 0-5
Calgary	42,735	47,415	90,150	14,103	42,674	56,776	63.0	34.1
Edmonton	36,160	38,040	74,200	11,933	34,236	46,169	62.2	34.3
Red Deer	3,070	3,585	6,655	1,013	3,227	4,240	63.7	27.9
Lethbridge	3,055	3,395	6,450	1,008	3,056	4,064	63.0	44.3
Airdrie	3,085	3,645	6,730	1,018	3,281	4,299	63.9	31.3
St. Albert	1,775	2,320	4,095	586	2,088	2,674	65.3	46.8

¹⁰ European Commission. (2018). *Barcelona objectives*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/bcn_objectives-report2018_web_en.pdf



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Grande Prairie	2,755	2,920	5,675	909	2,628	3,537	62.3	22.8
Medicine Hat	1,695	2,040	3,735	559	1,836	2,395	64.1	48.7
Spruce Grove	1,350	1,620	2,970	446	1,458	1,904	64.1	37.5
Leduc	1,280	1,485	2,765	422	1,337	1,759	63.6	18.6
Total for the Ten Cities	96,960	106,465	203,425	31,997	95,819	127,815	62.8	34.6
Alberta	144,750	161,330	306,080	47,768	145,197	192,965	63.0	29.9

Cities are listed in order of overall population as of the 2021 Census. "Spaces Needed" calculations are done by multiplying the number of children aged 0-2 by .33 (the 33% Barcelona target) and the number of children aged 3-5 by .9 (the 90% Barcelona target). "Target Coverage" is the overall coverage rate for children 0-5 that would be achieved if the Barcelona Targets were reached for children aged 0-2 and for children aged 3-5.

What do all these numbers say about child care availability in these cities?

The large increase in spaces combined with the small decrease of eligible young children (in all but two of these cities) has resulted in higher coverage rates. **Do these increases in coverage rates mean that child care has become more available in these cities over the past five years? The answer is a qualified yes.**

That said, however, it is worth considering *why* there has been such a large increase in licensed spaces in these cities in the past five years. On the surface, with fewer eligible younger children living in these cities—fewer "potential customers" for child care programs to enroll—it makes more sense for the number of spaces to have declined, not increased. In fact, though, the opposite has happened, even with a global pandemic depressing enrollment in Alberta's child care programs in 2020 and 2021.¹¹ What is going on? There are at least two potential explanations for this seeming paradox.

First, it is possible that in 2016, demand from parents for full- and part-time child care for young children was overwhelming in these cities, and there were simply not enough such programs to meet that demand. In response, in the past five years child care operators have raced to respond, with the result being that full- and part-time child care spaces for young children increased by 40.1% (46.4% for full-time alone) even as the number of eligible children has generally declined. The increases in child care fees for younger children in Calgary and Edmonton—which have more than doubled the rate of inflation in some cases—offers more support for this idea that demand for full-time child care in particular was simply overwhelming, and programs have responded and perhaps even struggled to keep up.¹²

A second explanation is that Albertan parents living in these cities were hungry for more full-time and part-time *licensed* spaces than were available in 2016, and child care operators have responded by providing more of those specific types of spaces. It should be noted again here that the definition of "spaces" used in Tables 1-3 includes *only* licensed spaces, as those are the spaces tracked and reported by the Government of Alberta. There certainly seems to have been intense demand for these spaces that child care programs have responded to in the past five years. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know whether the demand for licensed spaces has been mirrored by a similar demand for unlicensed child care arrangements, as the use of unlicensed arrangements (such as unlicensed family day homes, nannies, or "friend, family, and neighbor" child care arrangements) is not consistently tracked by the Government of Alberta.

¹¹ For space and enrollment figures, see Government of Alberta. (June 2021). *Children's Services 2020-2021 Annual Report*. <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2371-9168>.

¹² See Buschmann, R. & Fischer-Summers, J. (28 April 2021). *Continuing an unwelcome trend: Rising early learning and care fees in Calgary*. Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications-archive/rising-early-learning-and-care-in-calgary>.



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Finally, **we should remember that the increase in coverage rates in these cities, and across Alberta, in the past five years does not mean that child care availability is actually adequate.** Several of Alberta's largest cities could still be considered child care deserts, even after the increases seen from 2016 to 2021, and no city has reached the Barcelona targets (though some, like Medicine Hat, appear close). And as noted above, there is little public information on enrollment or waitlists for child care programs in Alberta, both of which would aid in better understanding child care availability.

Cautionary note: Things may be worse than they appear

There are two significant limitations to the information that has been presented so far in this brief. Both suggest that licensed child care availability is likely worse than it appears in Alberta.¹³

First, this brief has used data from the Government of Alberta on licensed capacity to represent the number of spaces that are available in these cities and Alberta as a whole. Every licensed program (or day home agency) in Alberta is licensed for a certain number of spaces, which is the maximum number of children that program (or day home agency) can serve. For some—perhaps many—programs, however, this “licensed capacity” number is purely theoretical. These programs cannot actually serve that many children currently, and some programs may *never* be able to serve that many children. There are a number of reasons for this discrepancy, but the most significant seems to be that programs cannot find enough qualified staff to be able to operate at their licensed capacity.¹⁴ This gives rise to a different concept and number, “actual capacity”, that for some programs is well below the program’s licensed capacity. It is this number that better represents the real, on-the-ground availability of child care spaces, rather than the more optimistic licensed capacity numbers used in this brief.

What evidence do we have that licensed capacity is an overestimate of actual capacity? There have been direct statements from organizations such as the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta to that effect.¹⁵ In addition, organizations such as the YMCA—the largest provider of not-for-profit child care in Alberta—have noted recent staff shortages have limited their ability to take on new families.¹⁶ Finally, data from the Government of Alberta itself suggest that, at least at the aggregate level, that licensed capacity is overestimating actual capacity. From 2016 to 2020, aggregate enrollment in child care, as reported by Alberta Children’s Services, hovered around 80% of licensed capacity.¹⁷ Taken at face value, this number suggests that for years there have been many openings at child care programs in Alberta. But during this same time, the total number of child care spaces increased greatly in Alberta, from 108,067 in June 2016 to 138,539 spaces in June 2020—a 28% increase in just four years, which far outstripped the growth in children aged 0-12 in Alberta during that same time (about 2%).¹⁸ In a market

¹³ This section applies only to licensed child care in Alberta, not unlicensed child care. There are certainly families in Alberta who use unlicensed child care—that is, nannies, unlicensed day homes, or other types of care—but because no consistent, publicly available data are available on the amount of such care that is offered and used, it is difficult to know the extent of its use. Statistics Canada’s Survey of Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements (<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/survey/household/5287>) does ask parents about the use of various types of child care but the survey as structured makes it difficult to estimate the total use of unlicensed care in Alberta.

¹⁴ Private communications between the author and several child care providers in Edmonton and in other locations throughout Alberta.

¹⁵ Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta [@AECEA_]. (14 April 2020). *Dear Minister @rebeccaschulz: The statement that the province was at less than 80% child care capacity pre-pandemic is problematic because* [Tweet.] Twitter. https://twitter.com/AECEA_/status/1250219285445672961.

¹⁶ YMCA of Northern Alberta. (14 February 2022). *Staff shortages in child care affect Wood Buffalo families, YMCA calls on government to support.* <https://northernalberta.ymca.ca/Y-Story/News/Staff-Shortages-In-Child-Care-Affect-Wood-Bufferalo-Families>.

¹⁷ Government of Alberta. (June 2021).

¹⁸ Author’s calculations on spaces using Government of Alberta provincial child care data from June 2016 and June 2021, available at <https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/childcareinformation>. Author’s calculations on the increase in children aged 0-12 from 2016 to 2021 used data from Statistics Canada. (27 April 2022). *Table 98-10-0022-01 Age (in single years), average age*



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setting for child care, like Alberta's, these numbers seem to contradict each other—why would there be so much expansion in child care when one out of five spaces is sitting empty? The answer is that “licensed capacity” is not a realistic measure of programs’ actual capacity. This, in turn, makes an 80% enrollment rate a poor measure of what is actually going on in Alberta on the ground; for some programs—perhaps many programs—having an enrollment of 80% of their licensed capacity likely means that they are, in reality, completely full.

For the time being, though, the only firm statement that can be made is that **using licensed capacity to calculate coverage rates presents only the absolute best-case scenario for licensed child care coverage in Alberta.** In all likelihood, using a measure of actual capacity—which is undoubtedly lower than licensed capacity—would more accurately reflect real-life availability of child care in these ten cities, and Alberta. Unfortunately, there is currently no way to calculate “actual capacity” in Alberta, which forces us to use licensed capacity as an overly optimistic proxy when calculating coverage rates. This problem can be remedied, however, with a few well-placed questions on a census of child care programs (as recommended below).

The second limitation is that the coverage rates here do not reflect the availability of child care for families with a variety of special needs or situations. These coverage rates tell us nothing about the availability of child care in these cities, or in Alberta, for families needing child care outside of traditional hours (that is, very early in the morning, late at night, or overnight) or on weekends. Such specialized coverage rates are impossible to calculate—at least using public data—because the number and location of programs that offer care outside of traditional hours are not available. Similarly, other more specialized coverage rates might be calculated to try to understanding child care availability for children with special needs (such as a disability) or for families with specific cultural or language needs, though again there is little public information available in Alberta that would allow for such calculations, and there are no known standards against which those specialized coverage rates could be compared. In short, **this brief does not delve into how to measure and understand child care availability for any family or child that might have needs outside of what might be considered mainstream.** This oversight is largely because much of the data needed to understand that availability at the municipal level—and indeed, at the provincial level—either are not public or do not exist. The Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, however, seems to imply that there may be coverage rate requirements for these children in Alberta: “Alberta commits that new space creation ensures diverse and/or vulnerable children and families ... have equitable access to child care spaces, in proportion to their presence in the population of Alberta.”¹⁹

What happens next?

While coverage rates have increased in the past five years in these cities, and Alberta as a whole, it also seems that child care availability is still inadequate. But should anything be done about this? If the trend has been positive over the past five years, do we have any reason to believe that trend will change? In other words, won't child care continue to become more available without any action needed by governments? Perhaps. But there are several reasons that Alberta governments, both municipal and provincial, should take positive action based on the information in this brief rather than hope that child care availability will sort itself out.

and median age and gender: Canada, provinces and territories, census divisions and census subdivisions.
<https://doi.org/10.25318/9810002201-eng>. Individual year age groups were not available for 2020.

¹⁹ For the text of the agreement, see Government of Canada. (no date). *Canada-Alberta Canada-wide early learning and child care agreement – 2021 to 2026.* <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/alberta-canada-wide-2021.html>. The quote in the text is from section 2.1.1., and the specific groups are named in section 2.2.5: “ ... families more in need such as lower-income families, Indigenous families, lone-parent families, and families in underserved communities, including Black and racialized families; families of children with disabilities and children needing enhanced or individual supports; and families with caregivers who are working non-standard hours. Needs also include having limited or no access to ELCC programs and services in the children’s official language.”



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First, it is obvious that child care coverage varies widely among Alberta's largest cities. This variation in coverage rates means that child care is more available in some parts of the province than others. From a provincial perspective, it is worth asking whether such wide variations in child care availability are tolerable. From a municipal perspective, having a low coverage rate should be concerning, given the role that high-quality child care plays in both the development of young children and in helping parents participate in schooling and the workforce.

Second, small and steady increases in child care coverage rates may not be enough to make child care actually available on the ground, particularly in the near future. As we have seen, it is entirely possible that the increases in coverage rates between 2016 and 2021—despite a small decrease in the number of young children in most cities, and in Alberta as a whole—reflected large increases in demand (or perhaps years of pent-up demand) for licensed child care. As part of the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement signed in November 2021, fees for licensed child care in Alberta have suddenly dropped significantly for many—though not all—families.²⁰ This price drop is likely to result in a spike in demand for child care, such that even reaching the Barcelona targets may not result in adequate child care availability in some cities.²¹ One expert has estimated that lower child care prices in Ontario result in demand for an additional 200,000 to 300,000 child care spaces in the next five years, well beyond the 86,000 spaces that province plans to open.²² It is entirely possible that Alberta will experience a similar increase in demand that will not be met by the 42,500 spaces planned to be opened by 2025-26.

Third, coverage rates do not tell the full story of child care availability, particularly from the perspective of families with children with special needs, families that need care at non-traditional hours, newcomer families, and First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) families. It is entirely possible for coverage rates to increase while child care for certain types of families stagnates, or even decreases. Both provincial and municipal governments should be interested in ensuring that child care is adequately available for *all* families within their respective jurisdictions.

So what, specifically, can municipal and provincial governments do to increase the availability of child care within their respective jurisdictions? Listed below are suggested actions for both levels of government.

Two Actions for Municipal Governments

1. Understand and monitor child care in your municipality. As has been demonstrated here, child care coverage varies in Alberta. If child care is not available in a city or municipality, parents of young children will struggle to contribute to the local economy, and some young children may struggle with emotional, social, and cognitive development. In places with particularly poor child care availability, families with young children may get frustrated and move away. It is in the interest of municipalities, then, to understand and monitor their local child care environment. More specifically:

- At the very least, know your coverage rates. These can generally be calculated using publicly available information from Alberta Children's Services and Statistics Canada (see the methods section of this brief). Alternatively, municipalities can request coverage rates for their area from Alberta Children's Services.

²⁰ Buschmann, R. (December 2021). *Still unaffordable for low-income families? In Alberta's new child care system, out-of-pocket fee reductions are smaller for lower-income families.* Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care.

<https://www.ecelc.ca/publications-archive/still-unaffordable-for-low-income-families-in-albertas-new-child-care-system-out-of-pocket-fee-reductions-are-smaller-for-lower-income-families>

²¹ Gill, J. (01 June 2022). *Happy parents, stressed daycare operators on first day of half-price child care.* Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/50-percent-daycare-spaces-1.6474009>

²² See Cleveland, G. (25 May 2021). *How big will the expansion of child care services need to be in Ontario?*

<https://childcarepolicy.net/how-big-will-the-expansion-of-child-care-services-need-to-be-in-ontario/>.



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- Regularly ask programs in your city or municipality how they are doing. Depending on the size of your municipality, this can be done through phone calls, though for larger jurisdictions a more formal survey or census might be needed. Key information to gather that would help understand availability would include “actual” availability (that is, whether programs are able to take any more children, regardless of their on-paper licensed capacity), the existence of waitlists, and whether programs have been able to fill vacancies for early childhood educators. Such information could be available at the municipality level if the Government of Alberta chooses to conduct a census of programs in the future.²³
- Ask parents what kinds of child care they need. This is particularly important for understanding how available child care is within your jurisdiction for families with children with special needs, newcomer families, FNMI families, and families that might need child care outside of traditional hours.

2. Take proactive steps to increase child care availability in your municipality. Understanding and monitoring child care is an important first step, but cities and municipalities can do more to increase availability within their jurisdictions. Below are some broad categories of actions that municipalities can take:²⁴

- Change zoning to make it easier for child care programs to open in more areas within your jurisdiction.
- Require developers to provide child care spaces as part of new development or major renovation projects (particularly in areas that contain, or will contain, families with young children).
- Offer municipally owned land or building space to qualified child care providers free of rent or at a large discount.
- Provide grants to qualified child care providers looking to locate in your jurisdiction.
- Take advantage of any appropriate space-creation grants that the Government of Alberta might offer in the future.
- Create an overarching child care policy that guides and coordinates all activities related to child care in the city or municipality.

It is critical to note that this list is not exhaustive, and that *none of the above options require cities or municipalities to own and operate child care programs*. Some municipalities may certainly want to consider owning and operating their own programs, and several municipalities in Alberta currently do. But there are many steps that can be taken by cities and municipalities to increase child care availability other than opening programs themselves.

Three Actions for the Provincial Government

3. Provide comprehensive and publicly available information that helps municipalities understand their situations. This brief has shown that coverage rates vary considerably between the ten largest cities in Alberta. But these rates, useful though they may be, are limited in helping us to understand child care availability, particularly because critical information is missing or because coverage rates themselves can only tell us part of the story. The Government of Alberta can help municipalities by making, at minimum, the following data public for every municipality in Alberta:

²³ The Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement makes reference to such a census but the details of what information such a census might gather are unclear.

²⁴ For more options, see Challborn, M. (September 2021). *Why and how cities matter for early learning and care*. Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications-archive/why-and-how-cities-matter-to-elc>, and Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. (7 May 2021). *Recommended actions for the city of Edmonton in support of early learning and care*. <https://www.ecelc.ca/recommendations>.



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- The number of full-time and part-time child care spaces for children aged 0-5 (that is, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten-aged), broken down by type of program (day care, preschool, and family day home)
- Current enrollment rates, broken down by type of program
- Information on child care waitlists (gathered via a program census)
- “Actual capacity” of child care programs (gathered via a program census)
- Programs offering extended hours
- Programs open on weekends
- Programs offering additional assistance to families with children with special needs
- Programs offering services that serve on families with specific cultural, language, or other needs

In addition to helping municipalities understand their own situations, this information could be used by Alberta Children’s Services to track trends in coverage rates across the province, which could suggest areas that require additional provincial assistance and areas that could be models for increasing child care availability. It should be noted that the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement *does not appear to require this information much of the above information to be publicly reported at the municipal level*. Providing such information at the municipal level, however, would be a gesture of good will and make it much easier for municipalities to take the two actions described above.

4. Regularly and meaningfully consult municipalities about child care. Coverage rates are one useful, but limited, tool to understand child care availability. This brief has noted wide variations in coverage rates in Alberta’s ten largest cities, and has offered some possible explanations, but it is crucial for the Government of Alberta to get information from people who fully understand what is happening on the ground—and to do so in a regular, meaningful way. This solution has already been suggested publicly in the “Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta”, a document created through consultations with many members of the Alberta early learning and child care community.²⁵ In practice, these consultations may take the shape of a standing child care advisory group consisting of municipal representatives, a regularly scheduled annual engagement process for municipalities, or some other method. Whatever format is chosen, the spirit of these consultations would be to complement coverage rates with deeper information from cities and municipalities about what is working, and what is not, in improving child care availability within their jurisdictions.

5. Use your own data, and information from engagements, to shape and refine policies to improve child care availability in Alberta. The Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement includes a commitment to create at least 42,500 not-for-profit spaces by 2025-2026.²⁶ It is clear from this brief that child care availability is quite uneven across Alberta’s ten largest cities, and it is likely uneven across Alberta as a whole. Therefore, *where* those new spaces are created will matter, particularly if families across Alberta are to have reasonably equal access to child care. The suggestions above will provide important information to guide policies for improving child care availability, but the province must act on this information for it to be of any real use.

It is unclear what the exact policy solutions for improving child care availability in Alberta—and in its ten largest cities—might be going forward. Depending on what emerges from coverage rate monitoring and municipal consultations, the answers could be as varied as grants targeted to specific cities, the creation of regional entities with the power to plan and fund the creation of child care spaces in particular parts of the province, the creation of a public system of child care across the province (similar to the K-12

²⁵ Canadian Child Care Federation, Child Care Now, Muttart Foundation, and YMCA of Northern Alberta. (November 2021). *Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta*. <https://muttart.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Roadmap-to-a-Quality-Early-Learning-and-Child-Care-System-in-Alberta-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>. See in particular actions 7 and 13.

²⁶ Government of Canada, *Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021 to 2026*.



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education system), or others. In addition, the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement states that “Alberta commits to develop and fund a plan to ensure that vulnerable children and children from diverse populations ... have equitable access to regulated child care spaces, in proportion to their presence in the population.”²⁷ This language suggests coverage rates for these populations will need to be calculated and monitored, though it should be noted that “equitable access” is a concept that is best discussed and defined with cities and municipalities, and the families with “vulnerable children and children from diverse populations” who live there. This latter point means that consultations with cities and municipalities will be all the more important in meeting the Government of Alberta’s commitment under its agreement with the federal government, and its commitment with its own citizens.

Final thoughts

Child care is the responsibility of the provincial government in Alberta, but the availability of child care in the province still varies a great deal from place to place. And there is much that we do not know about the availability of appropriate child care for families with children with disabilities, newcomer families, FNMI families, and other families with diverse needs. As the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement is implemented, it will be critical to better understand, monitor, and act to improve child care availability throughout the province. Municipalities and the Government of Alberta—if they gather the right information, respect each other, and act together in a coordinated way—can create a province where child care is readily available for all families.

This brief is part of a series of documents created by the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care to address current topics in early learning and child care that impact Edmonton and Alberta. Rob Buschmann, PhD, is a Research Associate at the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) in the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta.

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²⁷ Government of Canada, *Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021 to 2026*. See in particular the definition of “inclusion” in Annex 2.



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Appendix: Methods

Each coverage rate was calculated by simply dividing the spaces available by the eligible population of children. As noted above, though, the definition of “spaces available” and “eligible population of children” is critical. These definitions and the estimates of each are described below.

Two types of child care made up a very small proportion of spaces in Alberta in both 2016 and 2021: group family child care programs and “innovative” programs. These programs are left out of this analysis for two reasons: first, in both years, these two types made up about one-half of one percent of all spaces in Alberta, and second, because it is not possible to assign these spaces to a specific age of child with any certainty.

Defining and Estimating the Eligible Population of Children

In this brief, Statistics Canada data were used from the 2016 and 2021 Censuses to calculate the population of children eligible for child care in each city listed, and in Alberta as a whole. Census data are needed to make these calculations, as they provide the number of people in each city and province that are of each age in single-year increments.²⁸ In other words, using these data, it is possible to know how many 3-year-olds lived in Edmonton in 2016, or how many 1-year-olds lived in Calgary in 2021. To calculate the eligible population of children in each city for each year, the number of children in each age category (under age 1, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) in that city was simply summed. The same process was used for Alberta as a whole.

The age range of 0-5 was selected to accommodate the rules around kindergarten attendance in Alberta.²⁹ To enroll in kindergarten in Alberta, a child must be age 5 by December 31 of the year they enroll in kindergarten. This rule means that any given kindergarten class can include children aged 4-6, and that children who are not yet enrolled in kindergarten can be as old as 5. In addition, in Alberta kindergarten is largely offered either as a half-day program five days a week or (in a small number of areas) as a full-day program two or three days a week. This means that many children in kindergarten actually require child care even while they are enrolled in kindergarten, and can therefore be considered “eligible” for child care.³⁰ All told, a reasonable estimate given this somewhat complicated situation in Alberta is to consider the entire population of young children aged 0-5 as eligible for child care when calculating coverage rates in this brief.

Defining and Estimating Spaces Available

Data on licensed spaces in Alberta, and in each of the ten cities examined here, came from the Government of Alberta’s open data portal.³¹ Briefly, these datasets contain, for each licensed program in Alberta, that program’s address, licensed capacity, and category of program. In both 2016 and 2021, the

²⁸ Statistics Canada. (27 April 2022). *Table 98-10-0021-01 Age (in single years), average age and median age and gender: Census metropolitan areas, census agglomerations and census subdivisions*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810002101-eng>, and Statistics Canada. (27 April 2022). *Table 98-10-0026-01 Age (in single years), average age and median age and gender: Canada, provinces and territories and economic regions*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810002601-eng>.

²⁹ Government of Alberta. (2022.). *Early childhood education*. <https://www.alberta.ca/early-childhood-education.aspx>

³⁰ The Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement does allow programs serving children who are also enrolled in kindergarten to receive affordability grants, and those children can receive income-based fee subsidies as well. Given that the Agreement considers children in kindergarten as eligible for child care, it seems reasonable to match that thinking in this brief.

³¹ Government of Alberta. (19 November 2021). *Child care information*. <https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/childcareinformation>.



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number of licensed spaces in June was used to most closely match the months in which the Censuses were conducted (May).

For 2016, calculating the number of full-day spaces for children aged 0-5 in each city was relatively straightforward:

- All spaces for the program type “daycare” were counted. In 2016, daycare programs were by definition full-day programs that only served children of kindergarten age and below.
- 90% of spaces for the program type “family day home agency” were counted. Family day homes can serve children aged 0-12 in Alberta, but recent research by the ECELC found that about 90% of spaces in Edmonton overseen by day home agencies were occupied by children of kindergarten age or below.³² This brief assumes the same percentage for all day homes in Alberta. It should also be noted that this calculation assumes that all day home spaces overseen by a day home agency are in the same city as that day home agency’s address (that is, a day home agency with an address in Edmonton had all its spaces assigned to the city of Edmonton). While this assumption might not be strictly true at all times for all day homes, there is little public information out there that allows for a more accurate estimate, as the addresses of individual day homes are not public information.³³

To calculate full- and part-time spaces, all spaces for the program type “preschool” were counted and added to the numbers above.

Unfortunately, a change in the way child care programs were categorized in Alberta’s public data starting in 2021 makes creating estimates for June 2021 spaces somewhat more complicated. Starting in 2021, all daycare, out-of-school care, and preschool programs were lumped together under the same category: “facility-based” programs. This change makes it impossible to distinguish these three programs—which is problematic for our purposes here, because day care programs are full-day for younger children, preschool programs are part-day for younger children, and out-of-school care programs are part-day for older (Grade 1 to 6) children.

To work around this problem, data from December 2020—the last month that daycares, out of school cares, and preschools were distinguished in the data—were used to create estimates of the proportions of daycares, out of school care programs, and preschools that existed in the new category of facility-based programs.

- First, for December 2020, all spaces in daycares, out of school care, and preschool programs in Alberta were added together. (This is the same as creating a facility-based program category for December 2020.)
- Second, the number of spaces in each type of program in Alberta (daycare, out of school care, and preschool) was divided by the total number of spaces in all three types of program together. This produced the proportion that each type of program made up of the “facility-based” programs. In December 2020, daycares were 48.7% of facility-based spaces; out of school cares were 39.1% of facility-based spaces; and preschools were 12.2% of facility-based spaces.
- The above proportions were applied to the June 2021 number of facility-based spaces in each city (and Alberta as a whole) to estimate how many of each type of program space existed in that city in June 2021. For example, if a city had 1000 facility-based spaces in June 2021, it was

³² Fischer-Summers, J. (28 February 2022). *Exploring licensed early learning and child care in Edmonton day homes: Interviews with family day home agencies*. Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. <https://www.ecelc.ca/whats-new-archive/exploring-licensed-early-learning-and-child-care-in-edmonton-day-homes-interviews-with-family-day-home-agencies>.

³³ Note that in McDonald’s child care deserts map and report, a different technique was used: assuming that, for any given area, day home spaces existed that were proportional to the number of children aged 0-4 living there. That is, if 5% of the population of a province aged 0-4 lived in a particular postal code, it was assumed that 5% of the day home spaces were there as well. Given that there is currently no valid public number to compare these estimation methods, it is unclear which one is more accurate.



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estimated here that 487 were daycare spaces (full-day, for young children) and 122 were preschool spaces (part-day, for young children).

- From this point the same process was used as described above for calculating spaces for 2016.

It is assumed in the calculations used here that the proportions above did not change significantly in the six months between December 2020 and June 2021. In addition, the proportions used to estimate the number of spaces in 2021 for each city were generated using numbers for all of Alberta from December 2020 rather than proportions for each city from December 2020.