

A Profile of Young Children in Canada Who Aren't in Childcare



What this research is about

In 2021–2022, the Government of Canada signed agreements with each province and territory to create the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care system. This system aims to improve access to childcare for children not yet attending school. Some parents do not use childcare because it is not affordable or accessible to them, while others prefer to stay home to care for their children. The best use of resources would be to target families who would use childcare if it better met their needs. In 2019, low-income families, immigrant families, two-parent families, families with a less educated parent or a non-working parent (e.g., unemployed or on parental leave), and families with children younger than one year old were less likely to use childcare. This suggests that these families may have unmet childcare needs.

Previous research has tended to focus on childcare use, that is, on families and children in childcare. Thus, little is known about the population of children not in childcare. This study aimed to explore the unmet needs of this population by analyzing parental reasons for not using childcare, and creating profiles of childcare non-use based on parents' main reasons.

What the researcher did

The researcher analyzed data previously collected as part of the 2019 and 2020 Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements (SELCCA). The SELCCA is a cross-sectional survey representative of children under six years old in Canada (excluding those living on reserves). The survey samples Canada Child Benefit (CCB) recipients with at least one child under six years of age. For recipients with more than one child, the survey asks about one child under six years old. The SELCCA collects information about the selected child,

What you need to know

This study examined profiles of childcare non-use among families in Canada with children under six years old. Using survey data from 2019 and 2020, it highlights reasons for not using childcare and the demographics of those families. The researcher found seven profiles of childcare non-use, including staying at home by choice, on parental leave, accommodated by school, unemployment, financial barriers, pandemic constraints, and other reasons. The researcher concludes that stay-at-home parents have different implied demands for childcare.

their early learning and childcare arrangements, and the survey respondent (i.e., parent/guardian). It uses demographic information on province, Indigeneity, and the child's age to weight the survey data and generate child population estimates.

The 2019 SELCCA surveyed 7,548 participants before the COVID-19 pandemic in winter 2019. The 2020 SELCCA surveyed 10,605 participants during the pandemic in fall 2020 and winter 2021. The researcher analyzed data from only those who responded that their child did not attend childcare in the past three months.

Both surveys included a list of reasons for not using childcare. There were 14 reasons on the 2019 SELCCA and 2 additional pandemic-specific reasons on the 2020 SELCCA. Participants could select one or more reasons. If more than one was selected, they were asked to rank their reasons in order of importance.

What the researcher found

The researcher identified six profiles of childcare non-use, as well as one profile unique to the 2020 participants.

Volitional stay-at-home parents (29% of the 2019 sample and 21% of the 2020 sample) were likely from two-parent households, or families with two or more children under six years old. They were least likely to have used childcare in the past and to report difficulties in finding childcare.

Employed parents on leave (23% in 2019 and 18% in 2020) often selected only one reason for not accessing childcare (i.e., on parental leave). They were least likely to be from a low-income household, a household with older children, or, in 2019, from an immigrant household.

Cost-averse parents (about one-fifth of both samples) cited high cost as the main reason for not accessing childcare. They were most likely to have previously used childcare and to have faced difficulties in securing childcare.

Parents accommodated by school (12% in 2019 and 8% in 2020) seemed to not need childcare because their child was attending school. They were least likely to be under 35 years old and have children under the age of 3, and most likely to be employed and have sought childcare previously.

Parents with alternative reasons (less than 10% of both samples) were more likely to be working and to have sought childcare previously.

Out-of-work parents (6% in 2019 and 8% in 2020) were most likely to be unemployed and less likely to be from a two-parent household or to have post-secondary education. They were most likely to be Indigenous, from an immigrant household, or from a low-income household.

Pandemic-constrained parents (17% in 2020) were less likely to be from a two-parent household or live in an area with limited access to services. They were more likely to have used childcare previously, have difficulties finding childcare, and have worked in the past three months.

The researcher estimated the unmet childcare demand as 201,858 children under six years of age (9%) in 2019 and 394,881 children (17%) in 2020.

How you can use this research

This research can inform researchers, policymakers, economists, childcare providers, and support networks. The researcher suggests further investigation into other important factors in childcare non-use. These factors include parental attitudes, beliefs, values, or preferences related childcare, as well as parental labour market and work characteristics.

About the researcher

Karine J. Lavergne is an independent research consultant in Gatineau, Quebec.

Citation

Lavergne, K. J. (2025, February 10). Why are young children not in child care? Typologies of child care non-use among Canadian children under six years. *Canadian Public Policy*, 51(1), 35–60.

<https://doi.org/10.3138/cpp.2023-065>

Study funding

This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canadian Institute for Health Research, the Canadian Foundation for Innovation, and Statistics Canada through the Canadian Research Data Centre Network.

Research Snapshot by Dawn Abraham

About the Vanier Institute of the Family

The Vanier Institute of the Family has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots.

The Vanier Institute is a national, independent, think tank committed to enhancing family wellbeing by making information about families accessible and actionable. The Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations, and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on, and are affected by social, economic, environmental, and cultural forces.

Learn more about the Vanier Institute by visiting vanierinstitute.ca or emailing info@vanierinstitute.ca.

