

BY THE NUMBERS: EARLY CHILDHOOD IN NEBRASKA

Updated February 2024

The Need for High-Quality Early Care and Education

- Early childhood is regarded as the period of time in a young child’s life from birth through age 8. The brain is developing more rapidly during these early years of life than at any other time.¹
- Parents are children’s first teachers, but most young children are not with their parents for many hours of the day. In Nebraska, more than 74.3% of children under age 6 live in homes where all adults work, which is higher than the national average of 68%.²
- Who is caring for children and how they are doing it matters greatly. The safety, relationships, and interactions between young children and their parents, caregivers, and teachers are the most important elements of a high-quality experience.⁸
- Ninety-one percent of counties in Nebraska do not have enough available licensed child care slots to meet the current demand.³
- Eleven counties in Nebraska have no licensed child care facilities.³
- Eighty percent of mothers with children under the age of 6 are in the labor force in Nebraska.⁴
- Teacher turnover is as high as 26% in some early care and education settings.⁵
- Forty-one percent of children in Nebraska age 5 and younger are considered at risk of failure in school (62,729 children).⁶

Nebraskans’ Views on Early Care and Education⁷

- Nebraska voters see a child care crisis—and they want it fixed.
- Three-quarters (74%) of Nebraska voters believe that the lack of quality, affordable child care and early learning is a serious problem in Nebraska.
- Over 80% of Nebraskans say the lack of child care in the state is a problem that will not solve itself, want Nebraskans to come together to solve the problem, and believe Nebraska should support child care and early learning like it does K–12 schools and higher education.
- The lack of quality, affordable child care and early learning is deemed to be a serious problem by nearly three-quarters (74%) of Nebraskans and is on par with housing and crime.
- Most Nebraskans (92%) believe affordable, quality child care and early learning is an important part of keeping Nebraska a great place to live and raise a family.
- 84% of Nebraska voters say that low wages for child care workers, early childhood teachers, and preschool teachers is a serious problem.
- Nebraska voters recognize that the lack of access to quality, affordable child care impacts our economy and workforce.
- Nearly one-third (31%) of parents with children 5 and under said that they have left the workforce because they couldn’t find affordable child care, and 34% said they refused a job opportunity, promotion, or change because it would increase child care expenses.
- Over half (58%) of Nebraska voters have either experienced or know someone who has had to miss

work because of lack of child care.

- Many (78%) Nebraska voters say it will be hard for Nebraska to attract new business to communities that don't have access to quality, affordable child care and learning, and 74% say the lack of child care options is making it hard for Nebraska businesses to hire new employees and grow.
- The vast majority of Nebraska voters (90%) agree that ensuring working families have quality child care and early learning will strengthen Nebraska's economy.

Status and Compensation of Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce

- Nearly half of Nebraskans (48%) believe that teachers and caregivers are paid too little.⁷
- In 2015, the median annual salary for early childhood professionals was \$25,980 for those providing in-home early care and education, \$18,706 for center-based teachers, \$36,000 for PreKindergarten teachers, and \$41,000 for Kindergarten–Grade 3 teachers.⁹
- The median annual pay for center-based teachers is half that of school-based PreKindergarten teachers, even though the age and developmental needs of children being served are the same.⁹
- The median annual pay for center-based teachers falls below the poverty line by almost \$1,400 for a family of three.⁹
- More than 11% of home-based providers have a second job and nearly 20% of center-based teachers, public PreK teachers, and K–3 teachers report holding a second job.⁹
- One in four (24%) home-based providers and center-based teachers depend on some form of public assistance. For home-based providers alone, that segment is nearly 30% and for center-based teachers alone, 20%.⁹
- More than 13% of home-based and center-based child care providers report that their own school-aged children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.⁹

Return on Investment

- Ensuring all families and children have equitable access to affordable high-quality care is key not only to the healthy growth and development of Nebraska's children but also to the economic vitality and prosperity of the state.¹⁰
- Nebraska's lack of sufficient child care is a burden on working parents, employers, and state revenues, resulting in "nearly \$745 million annually in direct losses."¹¹
- A dollar spent for high-quality early care and education yields an average return of \$4; in circumstances where children are extremely vulnerable, the return can be as high as \$13.¹²
- Return on investment (ROI) includes money saved on special education, health care, social services, and the criminal justice system, as well as money earned from greater educational attainment, increased earnings, and improved productivity.¹²

COVID-19 Impact on Nebraska's Early Care and Education Providers (2020–22)

- One in four providers reported their income reduced by over 50%.¹³
- Almost all providers have experienced decreased enrollment, with greater enrollment reductions for center-based providers.¹³
- In the event of illness resulting from COVID-19, less than 1 in 4 providers had paid sick leave.¹³
- Most providers experienced symptoms of stress, such as changes in sleep, difficulty concentrating, social isolation, and anxiety about the future.¹³
- The majority of providers (51%) reported that without financial assistance they would likely close if the pandemic continued or worsened.¹³
- Most providers (87%) would apply for financial assistance, if offered. Less than 1% say they would

not seek additional financial assistance.¹³

- The majority of providers (59%) reported using the temporary child care subsidy rule allowing providers to bill when enrolled children are absent.¹³
- Nine in 10 providers employing staff had difficulty hiring for open positions, citing a lack of applicants and inability to offer sufficient pay.¹⁴
- Two-thirds of child care employers experienced staff turnover, with nearly 7 in 10 providers saying staff were leaving the field of early childhood entirely.¹⁴
- Three in 10 providers experienced food insecurity, reporting that in the last year their household would sometimes run out of food before they were able to purchase more.¹⁴
- From February 2021 to February 2022, more than half of providers had to close their program due to COVID exposure and/or infection.¹⁴
- More than half of providers had COVID-19 at least once and almost half of providers who have contracted COVID-19 exhibited post-COVID conditions, or symptoms that last longer than four weeks.¹⁴
- More than half of providers employing staff indicated that staff experienced post-COVID conditions, and half of those reported that it impacts their staff's ability to care for children.¹⁴
- Two in five providers reported experiencing burnout.¹⁴

-
1. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Eds. J.P. Shonkoff and D.A. Phillips. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
 2. The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. Table: "Children under age 6 with all available parents in the labor force in the United States" and "Children under age 6 with all available parents in the labor force in Nebraska." Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/8112-percentage-of-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=29&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36/any/21456,15571> and Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/8112-percentage-of-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=29&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36/any/21456,15571> and <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=1&loct=1#detailed/1/any/false/1095,2048,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868/any/11472,11473>
 3. Voices for Children. (2022). Kids count in Nebraska 2021 report. Retrieved from: https://voicesmain.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Final_KidsCount2022_.pdf
 4. American Community Survey (2022) 1 year estimate, Table B23003. Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/table/ACS1Y2022.B23003?t=Children:Employment:Employment%20and%20Labor%20Force%20tatus&g=040XX00US31&d=ACS%201-Year%20Estimates%20Detailed%20Tables>
 5. Roberts, A. M., Gallagher, K. C., Sarver, S. L., & Daro, A. M. (2018). Early childhood teacher turnover in Nebraska. Retrieved from: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/-/media/beci/docs/early-childhood-teacher-turnover-in-nebraska-new.pdf?la=en>
 6. First Five Nebraska (2017, Jan 12). U.S. census: 41% of Nebraska's children ages 0-5 are at risk. [Blog Post]. Retrieved from: <https://www.firstfivenebraska.org/blog/u-s-census-41-of-nebraskas-children-ages-0-5-are-at-risk/>
 7. We Care for Kids and Nebraska Extension 2023 Nebraska Statewide Survey. A statewide public opinion survey of registered voters in Nebraska gauging public support for early childhood education in Nebraska. (2023, March 22). Retrieved from: <https://nebraskacaresforkids.org/2023-statewide-survey/>
 8. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>.
 9. Roberts, A.M., Iruka, I.U., & Sarver, S.L. (2017). Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey: A focus on providers and teachers. This statistic is based only on those who responded to the survey and is not necessarily a representative sample of the state.
 10. Karoly, L. A. (2017). The case for investing in disadvantaged young children. In B. Falk (Ed.), *Defending Early Childhood* (pp.235-242). New York: Teachers College Press.

11. Bureau of Business Research, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (2020). The Bottom Line: Economic Impacts of Inadequate Child Care Access in Nebraska. Report prepared for First Five Nebraska. August 4, 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.firstfivenebraska.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Bottom_Line_Report-FINAL.pdf
12. Heckman, J., Pinto, R., & Savelyev, P. (2013). Understanding the Mechanisms Through Which an Influential Early Childhood Program Boosted Adult Outcomes. *American Economic Review*, 103(6), 2052-2086.
Heckman: The Economics of Human Potential. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://heckmanequation.org/>
13. Daro, A. & Gallagher, K. (2020). The Nebraska COVID-19 early care and education provider survey II: Experiences, economic impact, and ongoing needs. "Things are starting to take a toll." Retrieved from: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/-/media/beci/docs/provider-survey-2-080420-final.pdf?la=en>
14. Daro, A., Gallagher, K., & Cunningham, K. M. (2022). The Nebraska COVID-19 early care and education provider survey III: Holding it together – and hanging by a thread. Retrieved from: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/resources/covid-19>