

Omaha Metro Child Care Gap Assessment

February 2026

RESEARCH BRIEF



The Child Care Landscape in the Omaha Metro

Nebraskans are hard workers—75% of young children across the state have working parents.

In the Omaha metropolitan area, that translates to roughly 56,000 children from birth to 5 who live in households where all adults work.

Child care is foundational for working families, who need reliable, affordable care so they can show up for work every day. When child care isn't easily accessible, parents may miss shifts, cut back their hours, or, in the case of women especially, drop out of the workforce altogether.

This analysis from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute details the current child care landscape in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area—the potential need among working families, the current supply of child care providers, the gap that exists between the potential need and supply, and where child care shortages are most pronounced.

The data shows the need for child care is spread across the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area, not concentrated in any one city or local community. That's because of one important factor: how families frequently move across city and state lines to work and seek child care.

While most of the child care supply in the Omaha metro is located in the City of Omaha proper, that capacity cannot support the overall needs of families in neighboring towns and cities in the metro area. Reducing the child care gap in the Omaha metro will require a regional approach.

This analysis is based on a new, distance-based methodology that quantifies the child care gap by factoring in the actual distance between existing child care spots and the homes of the children and families who need care.

Quantifying the child care gap involves more than simply calculating supply and demand due to parent movement and proximity to child care. We know, based on surveys and human behavior, that parents do not necessarily stay within the neat confines of their neighborhood, city council district, or census tract to find child care.

Programs are not equally distributed across communities. Some parents prefer child care programs close to their homes; some prefer locations closer to their work. Some choose in-home programs; others want a larger center-based program. And of course, some opt for more informal friends-and-family arrangements involving grandparents or neighbors.

The distance-based methodology accounts for the added complexity of parent choice and preferences regarding commute.

Glossary

Potential Need: The number of children from birth to 5 with all available parents in the labor force

Supply or capacity: The number of legally operating child care spaces

Gap: The number of children needing care whose families lack reasonable access to formal child care based on distance

Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area: Five counties in Nebraska (Douglas, Sarpy, Washington, Cass, and Saunders) and three in Iowa (Pottawattamie, Harrison, and Mills)



Key Findings for Omaha

- The child care gap in the Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is 7.9%, which translates to 4,454 children who potentially need care but whose families can't easily access it. Broken down by region, the gap is:
 - 20.1%, or 1,284 children, on the Iowa side of the MSA surrounding the City of Omaha (Pottawattamie, Harrison, and Mills Counties)
 - 7.5%, or 1,711 children, on the Nebraska side surrounding the City of Omaha (Douglas, Sarpy, Washington, Cass, and Saunders Counties)
 - 5.4%, or 1,459 children, in the City of Omaha
- There are 1,068 legally operating child care providers in the metro area. The majority of child care spots—54%—are located in the City of Omaha.
- In the Omaha MSA, the potential need for child care spaces is 56,106, but the actual number of spots available within reasonable driving distance is 51,745*, with concentrated need in North Omaha, South Omaha, Bellevue, and Council Bluffs.
- In the City of Omaha, the potential need is 26,886, with a supply of 28,176 spots. The number of children in need of care in the areas surrounding the City of Omaha is so great that it strains the city's supply of child care, resulting in increased gaps.
- The potential economic losses over 10 years could range from \$221 million to \$335 million in the Omaha metro, stemming from reduced labor participation, lower productivity, decreased household earnings, impact on business earnings, and tax losses.

*Licensed capacity frequently exceeds the actual operating capacity.

The Omaha Child Care Gap

Existing Child Care Supply

There are more than 1,000 legally operating child care providers in the Omaha metro. They represent a mixed-delivery system that includes child care centers, preschools, and Head Start, military, and in-home programs.

FIGURE 1. LEGALLY OPERATING CHILD CARE PROVIDERS IN THE OMAHA METRO MAP

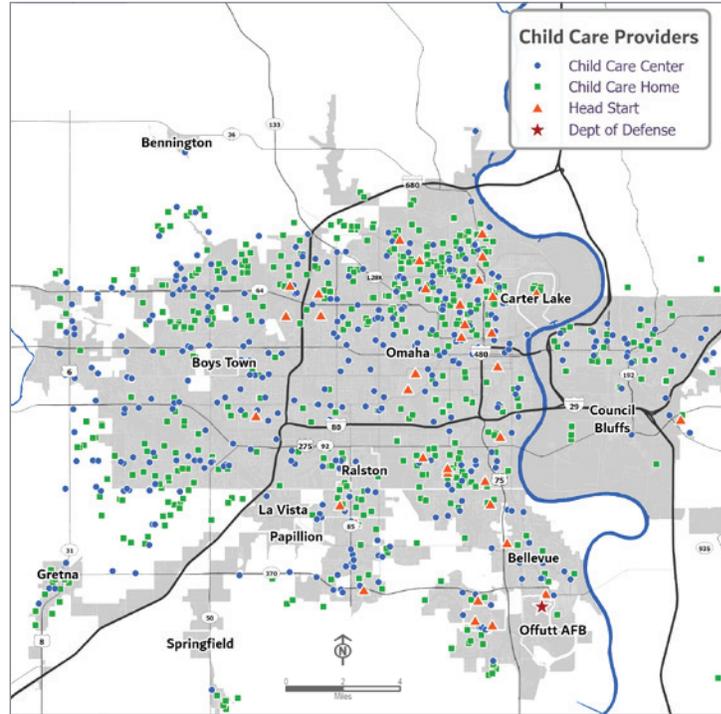


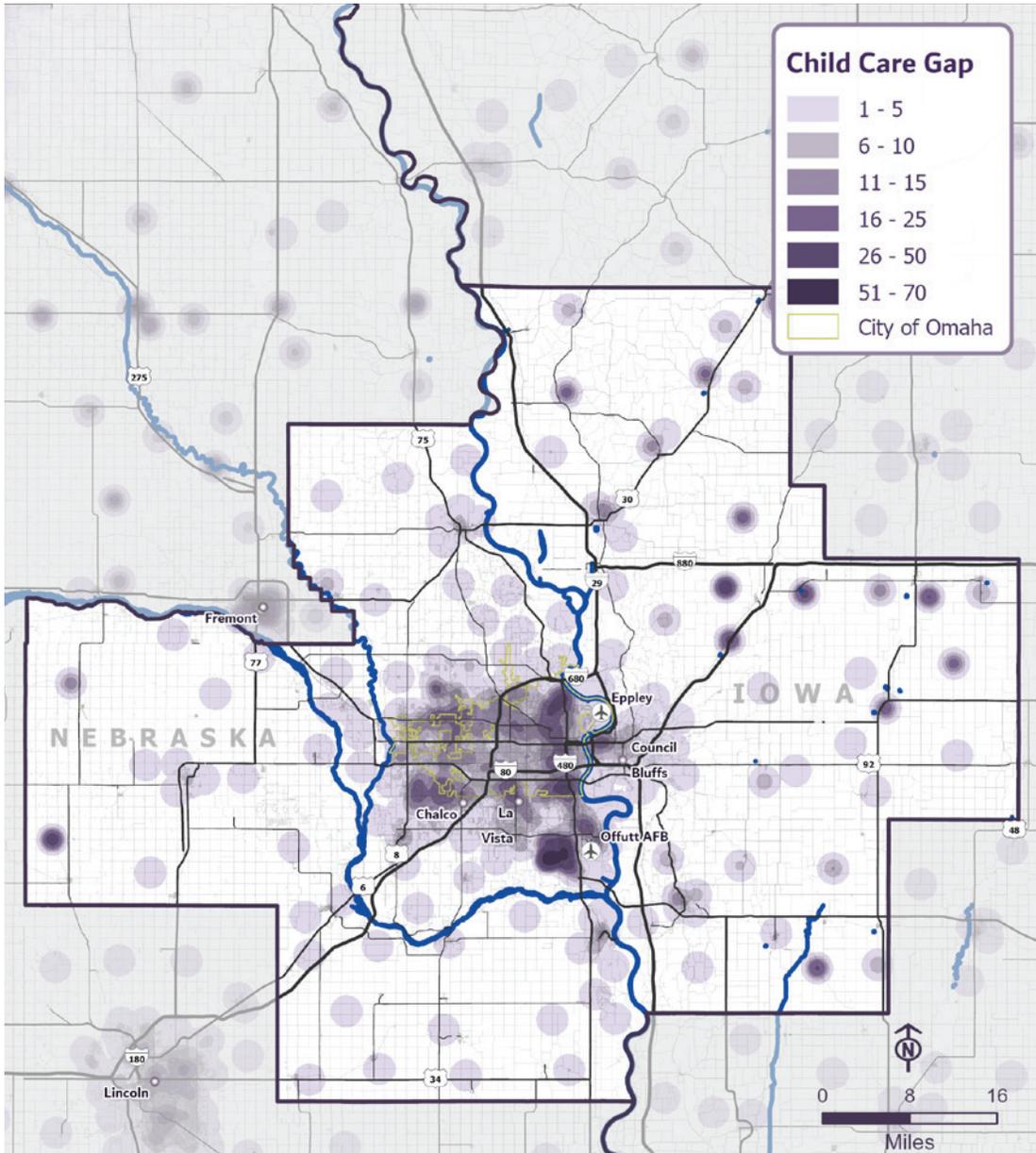
TABLE 1. LEGALLY OPERATING CHILD CARE PROVIDERS IN THE OMAHA METRO BY FACILITY TYPE AND CAPACITY

	Facility Type	Count	Capacity
Nebraska Licensing Category	Child Care Center	336	35,884
	Department of Defense	1	458
	Family Child Care Home I	339	3,325
	Family Child Care Home II	125	1,412
	Head Start	36	947
	License-Exempt Child Care Home	1	3
	Preschool	26	1,145
	Provisional Child Care Center	31	3,391
	Provisional Family Child Care Home I	35	345
	Provisional Family Child Care Home II	14	152
	Iowa Licensing Category	Exempt from Licensing	3
Head Start		3	96
Licensed Center		51	3,838
Non-Registered Child Care Home		1	5
Registered Child Development Home A		9	72
Registered Child Development Home B		28	336
Registered Child Development Home C		13	208
Registered Child Development Home C1		16	128
TOTAL		1,068	51,745

Where Child Care Gaps are Concentrated

Using the most recently available data, the Buffett Institute mapped the child care gap in the City of Omaha and the Omaha metro, finding that 4,454 children in the metro area potentially need child care but lack reasonable access. That gap is 7.9%.

FIGURE 2. CHILD CARE GAP CONCENTRATIONS IN THE OMAHA METRO



Potential Need for Child Care and Supply by Omaha City Council District

Families and children living in the City of Omaha represent 48% of the potential need in the Omaha metro area. The remaining 52% reside outside the city in the surrounding metro area.

Inside Omaha, the areas with the highest potential need for child care include the city council districts representing North Omaha, South Omaha, and west Omaha.

While Omaha families account for only 48% of the child care need in the metro area, child care providers located in the City of Omaha represent 54% of the child care capacity.

TABLE 2. POTENTIAL NEED AND SUPPLY OF CHILD CARE

District/Region	Potential Need Number of children age birth to 5 with all parents in the labor force	Child Care Supply Number of slots offered by legally operated and state-recognized child care providers	Child Care Gap Number of children needing care whose families lack reasonable access to formal child care based on distance	Child Care Gap % Percent of children needing care whose families lack reasonable access to formal child care
District 1: Pete Festersen	3,391	3,771	183	5.4%
District 2: LaVonya Goodwin	4,671	5,814	254	5.4%
District 3: Danny Begley	2,688	2,345	146	5.4%
District 4: Ron Hug	4,212	2,777	242	5.7%
District 5: Don Rowe	3,591	4,190	189	5.3%
District 6: Brinker Harding	3,946	4,399	209	5.3%
District 7: Aimee Melton	4,387	4,880	236	5.4%
Omaha City Council Total	26,886	28,176	1,459	5.4%
Omaha-Council Bluffs MSA Remainder	NE	22,837	18,883	7.5%
	IA	6,383	4,686	20.1%
Total Omaha-Council Bluffs MSA (NE-IA)	56,106	51,745	4,454	7.9%

FIGURE 3. POTENTIAL NEED HIGHLIGHTED BY OMAHA CITY COUNCIL DISTRICTS

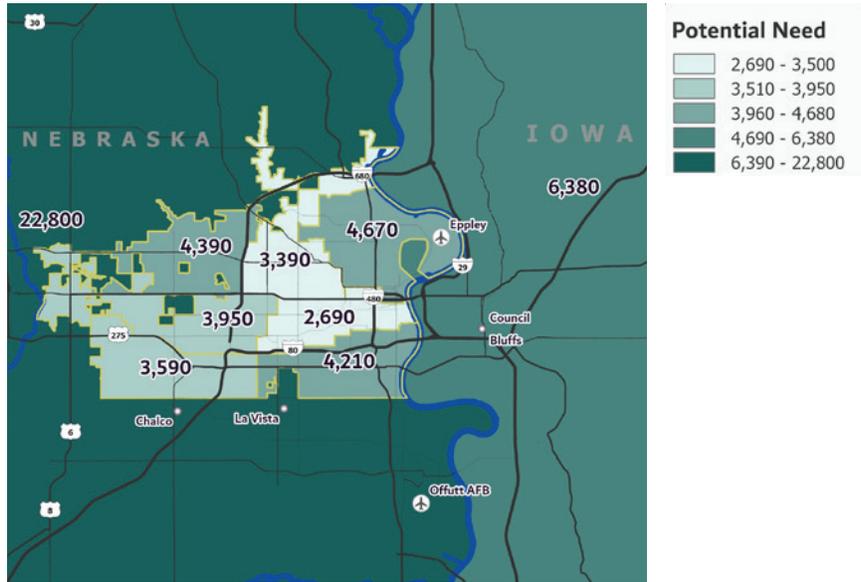
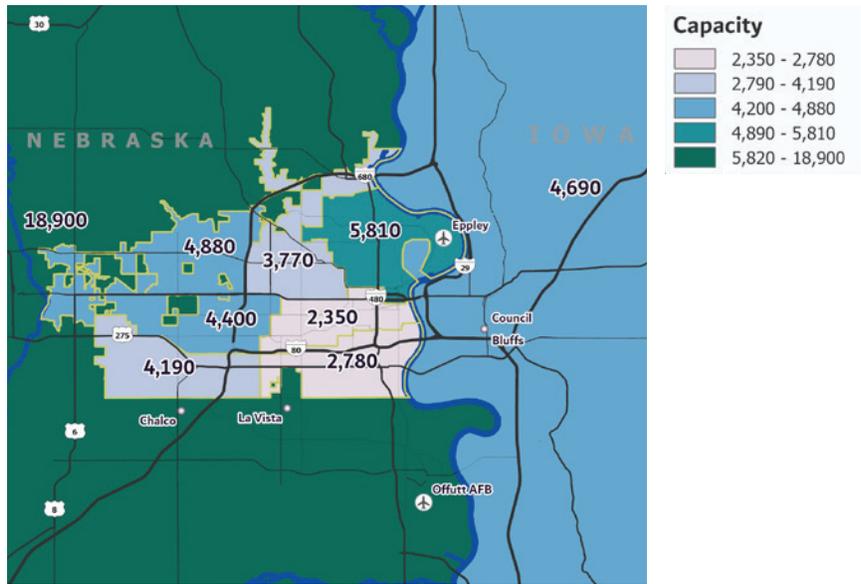


FIGURE 4. SUPPLY HIGHLIGHTED BY OMAHA CITY COUNCIL DISTRICTS



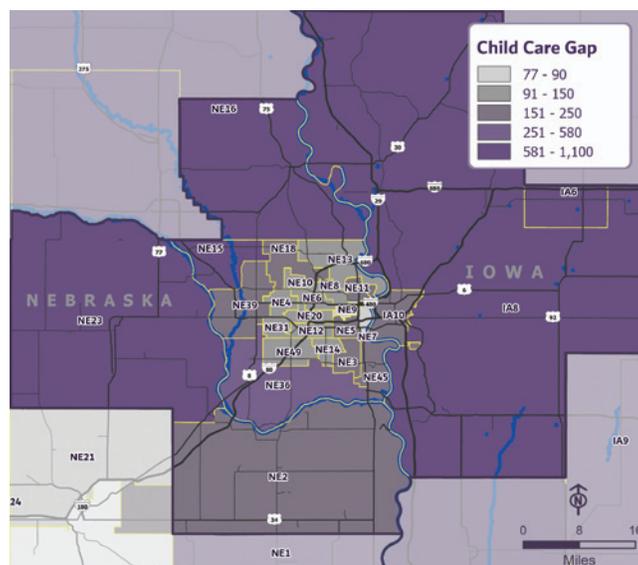
Legislative Districts with the Highest Gap

Among the legislative districts that make up the Omaha metro, the largest child care gaps exist in Iowa State Senate Districts 6 and 8 (Pottawattamie, Mills, and Harrison Counties); Nebraska Legislative District 15 (northwest Douglas County and parts of Dodge County); Nebraska Legislative District 16 (Washington County); and Nebraska Legislative District 23 (Saunders County).

TABLE 3. POTENTIAL NEED FOR CHILD CARE AND SUPPLY BY OMAHA METRO LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS

State	Senate District	Potential Need Number of children age birth to 5 with all parents in the labor force	Child Care Supply Number of slots offered by legally operated and state-recognized child care providers	Child Care Gap Number of children needing care whose families lack reasonable access to formal child care based on distance	Child Care Gap % Percent of children needing care whose families lack reasonable access to formal child care
IA	District 8	3,404	1,664	1,104	32.4%
IA	District 6	3,177	2,234	913	28.7%
NE	District 15	2,600	1,676	708	27.2%
NE	District 16	2,288	1,381	620	27.1%
NE	District 23	2,419	1,663	581	24.0%
NE	District 3	1,729	1,769	215	12.4%
NE	District 45	2,296	1,910	244	10.6%
NE	District 36	3,421	2,787	280	8.2%
NE	District 2	2,321	1,904	152	6.5%
NE	District 5	2,805	2,126	162	5.8%
NE	District 7	1,345	1,371	77	5.7%
NE	District 6	1,855	2,517	102	5.5%
IA	District 10	3,078	3,133	169	5.5%
NE	District 8	2,141	1,743	117	5.5%
NE	District 13	2,690	2,357	146	5.4%
NE	District 14	1,920	2,724	104	5.4%
NE	District 11	2,948	4,389	159	5.4%
NE	District 9	1,677	1,233	90	5.4%
NE	District 10	2,623	1,791	140	5.3%
NE	District 18	3,290	2,003	175	5.3%
NE	District 39	3,008	3,181	160	5.3%
NE	District 49	2,369	2,354	126	5.3%
NE	District 31	2,670	2,050	142	5.3%
NE	District 4	2,278	3,073	121	5.3%
NE	District 20	2,553	2,870	135	5.3%
NE	District 12	2,198	2,094	116	5.3%

FIGURE 5. OMAHA METRO LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS





Recommendations and Next Steps

As communities continue to struggle with the lack of child care, it is vital that local and state leaders understand the real need for child care and where it makes sense to target efforts.

Recommendations include:

- Address child care planning as a regional issue, similar to initiatives that support long-term housing and transportation planning (MAPA, Metro Transit, Heartland 2050).
- Undertake a regional, cross-city approach to increase the overall number of child care spots across the Omaha metro.
- Gain a greater understanding of family proximity and mobility in the Omaha metro area and families' specific child care needs through geospatial mapping and other tools.
- Build data systems that track child care supply and utilization, similar to the one recently built in Iowa at iachildcareconnect.org.
- Study solutions adopted by peer cities and metro areas, such as the Tri-Share financing model in Rapid City, South Dakota highlighted in a recent [Buffett Institute report](#).

This analysis helps decision-makers pinpoint where to invest resources most strategically—down to the census block group—to expand child care spaces and achieve the greatest return on investment. It can also support future scenario-building and testing to determine potential impacts in different neighborhoods and cities.

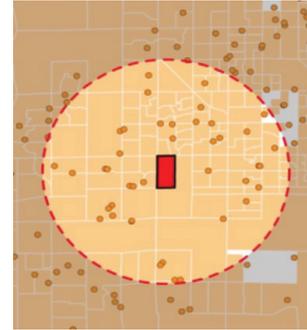
Any solutions must include conversations with the parents who use child care and the businesses that need employees. Targeted strategies—when combined with partnerships with parents and businesses—can produce significant impacts on the quality of life and economic health of communities like Omaha.

Methodology

This analysis defines the potential need for child care by using the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 2018-2022 estimates of population under age six with all available parents in the labor force. Then, using supply data from state government sources combined with Head Start data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and military child care data from the U.S. Department of Defense, we can further refine the gap in child care need and supply.

Using this unique method of data analysis helps visualize all available child care facilities in a region and their distance from populations in an assigned “block group” area.

“Block groups” are assigned a “service area” of accessible child care. Service area distance is calculated within a 3.5-mile radius in urban areas and a 10-mile radius in rural areas, and represents how far child care providers can be from a block group and still be considered within reasonable driving travel.



Depending on the available data, the distance can be adjusted for state or local circumstances. Potential child care need within each block group is proportionally allocated to the child care facilities within their service area. Often, service areas from neighboring block groups overlap. In these cases, providers are allocated children from all available block groups until the provider capacity is filled up, without exceeding facility capacity.

In cases of large metropolitan areas such as Omaha, where families live in areas that cross state boundaries, the mapping method allows us to include data from those bordering states to ensure a complete picture.

This work attempts to build a more cohesive picture of the long-term economic outcomes of child care gaps on households, businesses, and tax revenues by using:

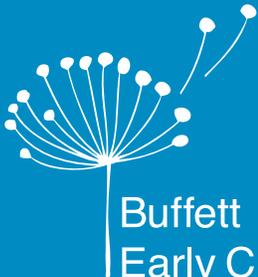
- ▶ the immediate one-year impact of child care gaps.
- ▶ the residual burden they produce over the next 10 years.
- ▶ the impacts under more and less conservative assumptions (high and low estimates).

Acknowledgments

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To view more data, please visit childcaregap.org.

Photo credits: The Educare program at Indian Hill Elementary School in South Omaha allowed the Buffett Institute and Chris VanKat to photograph the students and educators who appear in this brief. David Radler contributed an additional photo.



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