

What Is a Child Care Desert?

A child care desert is a geographic area lacking available child care options for families. This can refer to a lack of child care centers or a lack of spaces in existing centers. Child care deserts often occur in areas with a low population density, making it difficult for child care providers to operate sustainably. These areas can also have high costs of living, which can make it difficult for families to afford child care even if it is available. Child care deserts can have negative impacts on families, as parents may have to miss work or make other arrangements to care for their children.

How Are Child Care Deserts Measured?

There are several different ways to measure child care deserts, and the choice of method may depend on the specific goals of the analysis. Some of the commonly used methods include:

1. **Distance-based measures:** These measures look at the proximity of child care providers to families in need of child care. For example, a child care desert might be defined as an area where there are no licensed child care providers within a certain distance, such as a half-mile or a mile.
2. **Capacity-based measures:** These measures look at the number of child care slots available relative to the number of children in need of care. A child care desert might be defined as an area where there are not enough licensed child care slots to meet the demand of families.
3. **Affordability-based measures:** These measures consider the cost of child care relative to family income. A child care desert might be defined as an area where families cannot afford to pay for child care, or where there are no low-cost or subsidized child care options available.
4. **Quality-based measures:** These measures consider the quality of child care providers in an area. A child care desert might be defined as an area where there are no high-quality child care providers available.

Each of these methods has its own strengths and weaknesses, and choosing the most appropriate method may depend on the specific research questions being asked. There may be differences between child care methodologies, but they are all still estimates. An organization just needs to pick a methodology that works for the communities they serve, and then remain consistent over time.

The most well-known methodology was developed by the Center for American Progress (CAP) in 2018. According to the CAP,

“Specifically, this analysis defines child care deserts as neighborhoods or communities that are either lacking any child care options or have so few child care providers that there are more than three children for every licensed child care slot. According to research published by the U.S. Census Bureau, one-third of children under age 5 are regularly in nonrelative care; therefore, in places where there are more than three children for every child care slot, there may be child care waiting lists, unlicensed child care arrangements, or effects on parents’ employment decisions.”

How Does CCAMO Measure Child Care Deserts?

The Center for American Progress methodology makes use of census tracts to determine population and child care providers. Census tracts are smaller geographic areas than zip codes, and there may be several census tracts within a zip code or that cross over zip codes. So, they get very granular to get to a big-picture number. Some census tract data may not be reliable for small populations or areas with a high degree of variability, which can make it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions or make accurate predictions. And, of course, people don’t recognize census tracts in their daily lives.

CHILD CARE DESERTS

CCAMO uses zip codes and counties in our desert analysis because they are recognizable population segments, and people understand them. As such, our child care desert numbers may not match the CAP’s numbers for the state since people may not live in a particular census tract but do live in a particular zip code that encompasses that census tract. Further, people will freely cross census tracts within the same zip code for child care.

CCAMO defines a child care desert as either:

- A county with greater than 50 children under age 5 that contain either no child care providers, or
- So few options that there are more than 3X as many children as licensed child care slots.

In the near future, we plan to revisit our child care desert methodology, perhaps using the number of under-6-year-olds with parents in the labor force and comparing that to the capacity figures for each zip or county. We might even consider breaking out deserts for infants and toddlers. Our overall goal is to deepen the understanding of where and why child care deserts exist.

