

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, which can result in long waiting lists, high costs, and limited options for care. 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 living costs, making it difficult for families to afford child care even if it is available. Child care deserts can negatively impact 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 with 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 no low-cost or subsidized child care options are 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 with no high-quality child care providers available.

Each of these methods has its 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.

How Does CCAMO Measure Child Care Deserts?

Our analysis defines child care deserts as neighborhoods with no options or with more than three children for every licensed slot. This approach, based on children under age 5, was developed by the Center for American Progress (CAP) in 2018. U.S. Census Bureau research shows that one-third of these children are in nonrelative care, leading to potential waiting lists and impacts on parental employment.

We reevaluated our methodology and decided to focus on children under age 6 with parents in the labor force, defined as at least one parent employed or actively seeking work (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey definition). This method allows for a targeted analysis of child care needs linked to employment, aiding effective policy responses and highlighting the economic importance of accessible care. Additionally, it is fully aligned with the State of Missouri and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in its official "Targeted Needs Assessment."

In the near future, we plan to revisit our methodology to consider further breaking out deserts for infants and toddlers. Our overall goal is to deepen the understanding of where and why child care deserts exist.

CHILD CARE DESERTS

CCAMO defines a child care desert as either:

- An area with greater than 50 children (under age 6 with parents in the labor force) that contains either no child care providers, or
- So few options that there are more than 3X as many children as licensed child care slots.

