



How Canadian Childcare Became Politically Untouchable

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This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

Introduction

In November 2021, Canadians witnessed an unusual spectacle: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney making a joint policy announcement. The Liberal Prime Minister and Conservative Premier had long been political enemies, yet there they were, giving a COVID-era “elbow bump”¹ and (nearly)² putting aside their political differences to sign a \$3.8 billion agreement to bring \$10-a-day childcare to Alberta.

By March 2022, every province and territory signed a bilateral childcare agreement with the federal government, which earmarked \$27 billion over five years to achieve \$10-a-day childcare across the country. In 2025, every province and territory except³ Alberta and Saskatchewan agreed in principle to sign on for five more years. Federally subsidized childcare has become part of the Canadian policy architecture, having already outlived the political tenures of Trudeau and Kenney.

More than four years after the first bilateral agreement⁴ was signed, this study explores these agreements’ effect on the Canadian childcare landscape. While fees have been reduced for families lucky enough to secure a regulated space, the agreements have contributed to swelling waitlists as most jurisdictions have failed to meet their space creation targets. By favouring credentialized workers and not-for-profit providers, the federal government’s childcare policy has contributed to policy inflexibility and accelerated the shift away from home care and towards centre-based care. As the promise of \$10-a-day care has collided with limited supply, the price tag for governments will only increase.

¹ CTV News, “Trudeau and Kenney announce affordable childcare deal for Alberta,” November 15, 2021, News video, 8:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhsL7xleWps&t=328s>.

² The Canadian Press, “Alberta Premier Jason Kenney snipes at Trudeau as province signs on to Ottawa’s \$10-a-day child-care deal,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/alberta/article-alberta-to-announce-child-care-deal-with-ottawa/>.

³ Louis Blouin and Peter Zimonjic, “Trudeau announces \$37B in child care deals with 11 provinces and territories,” *CBC News*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-announces-20-billion-child-care-deal-provinces-1.7476199>.

⁴ “Canada announces historic first early learning and child care agreement,” Statement from the Prime Minister’s Office, July 8, 2021, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2021/07/08/canada-announces-historic-first-early-learning-and-child-care>.

The Slow March to a National Childcare Framework

For decades, Canadian activists and childcare scholars (often the same people) persistently⁵ but⁶ unsuccessfully⁷ sought a national childcare policy. Yet due to provincial jurisdiction over childcare, the federal government's role was, until recently, primarily limited to indirectly funding childcare through block grants⁸ like the Canada Social Transfer, tax credits⁹ for childcare expenses, and directly¹⁰ sending¹¹ "child benefit" money to parents.

The victory of child benefits over a national childcare system was cemented in the 2006 federal election, when Liberal Director of Communications Scott Reid apologized after saying¹² the Conservatives' proposed child allowance would allow parents to "blow" the money on "beer and popcorn." Although childcare policy "experts" uniformly supported the Liberals' plan for a national childcare program, Stephen Harper's rebuttal¹³—"there are already millions of childcare experts in this country. Their names are Mom and Dad"—effectively settled the debate for a generation. After winning the 2015 election, the Trudeau government moved quickly to expand Harper's cash benefits into the Canada Child Benefit¹⁴ while dragging its feet on a national childcare policy.

The Trudeau government's policy changed—first slowly,¹⁵ then all at once—around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Freed from the (already limited) pre-COVID fiscal restraints, between 2021 and 2022, the Trudeau government signed bilateral agreements with every province and territory to create the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care framework (CWELCC, pronounced "kwelk").

⁵ Canada, Ontario, Status of Women Canada, *Report of the Task Force on Child Care* [Ottawa, ON], 1986. <https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/CHILD%20CARE.pdf>.

⁶ Susan Prentice and Linda A. White, "Childcare deserts and distributional disadvantages: the legacies of split childcare policies and programmes in Canada," *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* 35, no. 1 (2019): 59–74.

⁷ Rosalie Silberman Abella, Ontario, *Equality in Employment* [Ottawa, ON], 1984. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2014/rhdcc-hrsdc/MP43-157-1-1984-1-eng.pdf.

⁸ Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada Social Transfer*, Department of Finance, Ottawa, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/programs/federal-transfers/canada-social-transfer.html>.

⁹ Canada, Government of Canada, Line 21400 – *Child care expenses*, Taxes, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/tax/individuals/topics/about-your-tax-return/tax-return/completing-a-tax-return/deductions-credits-expenses/line-21400-child-care-expenses.html>.

¹⁰ Evan Dyer, "3 things to know about the UCCB payments' impact," *CBC News*, July 21, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/3-things-to-know-about-the-uccb-payments-impact-1.3161108>.

¹¹ Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada child benefit (CCB)*, Taxes, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/child-family-benefits/canada-child-benefit.html>.

¹² "Liberal apologizes for saying Harper day-care bucks may buy beer, popcorn," *CBC News*, December 11, 2005, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/liberal-apologizes-for-saying-harper-day-care-bucks-may-buy-beer-popcorn-1.534811>.

¹³ Jane Taber, "When Liberals slump in the polls, they go hunting for moles," *The Globe and Mail*, January 7, 2006, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/when-liberals-slump-in-the-polls-they-go-hunting-for-moles/article727140/>.

¹⁴ Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada Child Benefit (CCB)*.

¹⁵ Canada, *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*, 2017, https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/programs/early-learning-child-care/reports/2017-multilateral-framework/MEL_and_CCF-EN.pdf.

In 2024, Parliament passed¹⁶ *An Act respecting early learning and child care in Canada*, which set out principles to maintain long-term childcare funding for provinces and Indigenous peoples. Then, one week before he left office, Trudeau reached agreements¹⁷ with every province and territory except Alberta and Saskatchewan to spend an additional \$36.8 billion to extend CWELCC for five more years (Ontario signed an in-principle extension but has not yet¹⁸ formally signed its agreement).

The federal government has modelled¹⁹ its desired policy on Quebec's childcare system, which has had fixed fees for publicly-subsidized childcare since the 1990s (initially \$5/day, now \$9.35/day). Because Quebec's system was deemed to have already accomplished the goals in CWELCC, Quebec's initial "asymmetrical"²⁰ agreement with the federal government involved an unconditional²¹ transfer of \$6 billion, and it will receive²² an additional \$9.8 billion over the next five years. For the remaining provinces, the bilateral agreements are conditional on working towards targets related to fees, spaces, and credentialization.

¹⁶ Bill C-35, *An Act respecting early learning and child care in Canada*, 1st sess., 44th Parliament, 2024, <https://www.parl.ca/legisinfo/en/bill/44-1/c-35>.

¹⁷ Blouin and Zimonjic, "Trudeau announces \$37B in child care deals with 11 provinces and territories."

¹⁸ Dave McGinn, "Most Canadians support publicly funded child care, YMCA and YWCA survey says," *The Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-most-canadians-support-publicly-funded-child-care-ymca-survey-says/>.

¹⁹ Canada, Government of Canada, *Budget 2021: A Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan*, Department of Finance, Ottawa, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2021/04/budget-2021-a-canada-wide-early-learning-and-child-care-plan.html>.

²⁰ Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada-Quebec – 2021 to 2026 Asymmetrical Agreement on the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Component*, Early Learning and Child Care Agreements, Ottawa, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/quebec-canada-wide-2021.html>.

²¹ Ian Bailey and Kristy Kirkup, "Ottawa, Quebec reach child-care agreement ahead of anticipated federal election," *The Globe and Mail*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-ottawa-quebec-reach-child-care-agreement-ahead-of-anticipated-federal/>.

²² Blouin and Zimonjic, "Trudeau announces \$37B in child care deals with 11 provinces and territories."

The Impact of CWELCC: Fees, Spaces, and Credentialization

Federal and provincial childcare policies relate to three types²³ of pre-Kindergarten care: **centre-based care**, primarily daycare centres and preschools; **licensed home care**, where a caregiver provides for children in their home in accordance with provincial regulations; and **unlicensed home care**, where the caregiver is subject to more minimal standards (in Ontario,²⁴ these mainly concern the number of children in the home). In 2023,²⁵ 56 percent of children aged 0 to 5 were in some form of licensed or unlicensed childcare, an increase from 2020 (52 percent) but still below pre-pandemic levels of 60 percent in 2019.

With respect to childcare, governments in Canada tend to do three things: run it (rarely), fund it (increasingly), and regulate it (almost always). Canadian childcare is not typically run by governments: in 2022,²⁶ 51 percent of childcare centres were private, while 49 percent were “not-for-profit or government-run.” While Statistics Canada does not provide a breakdown between the “not-for-profit or government-run” category, most²⁷ of these centres have traditionally been run by non-profits, not governments (unlike in Sweden²⁸ or France²⁹).

The CWELCC bilateral agreements have shifted the way childcare is both *funded* and *regulated*. Under CWELCC, the federal government contributes funding to provincial childcare systems, as provinces send³⁰ funds to childcare centres, home care providers, home-care agencies, and municipalities. For licensed (regulated) childcare centres and home care providers, parents pay a fixed fee, with the rest of the cost subsidized by government. CWELCC does not apply to unregulated home care providers, to whom parents must pay the full (unsubsidized) cost.

²³ Thomas J. Charters and Leanne C. Findlay, *Characteristics of child care centres serving children aged 0 to 5 years in Canada, 2021 to 2022*, Economic and Social Reports Ser. 36-28-0001, Ottawa, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2023003/article/00001-eng.htm>.

²⁴ Ontario, *Child care rules in Ontario*, Child Care, 2025, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/child-care-rules-ontario>.

²⁵ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Child care arrangements*, 2023, Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X, Ottawa, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231205/dq231205a-eng.pdf>.

²⁶ Thomas J. Charters and Leanne C. Findlay, *Child care centre workers serving children aged 0 to 5 years in Canada, 2021 to 2022*, Economic and Social Reports Catalogue no. 36-28-0001, Ottawa, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/36-28-0001/2024012/article/00004-eng.pdf>.

²⁷ Kelly Erica Pasolli, “Comparing Child Care Policy in the Canadian Provinces,” *Canadian Political Science Review* 9, no. 2 (2015): 63–78.

²⁸ Ritwick Dutta, “Sweden’s Universal Subsidized Daycare for Children 1–5 (1975–ongoing),” *Inequality Solutions*, November 7, 2024, <https://www.sdg16.plus/policies/universal-childcare-model-sweden/>.

²⁹ Scotland, *Early Childhood Education and Care Provision: International Review of Policy, Delivery and Funding*, Publications, 2013, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/early-childhood-education-care-provision-international-review-policy-delivery-funding/pages/11/>.

³⁰ Andrea Hannen and Andrea Mrozek, “Is Canada’s child care program terminating child care spaces by design?” *The Hub Canada*, May 16, 2024, <https://thehub.ca/2024/05/16/andrea-hannen-and-andrea-mrozek-is-canadas-child-care-program-terminating-child-care-spaces/>.

By virtue of this funding, CWELCC has enabled the federal government to create goals that influence how provinces regulate childcare. After analyzing the many federal³¹ frameworks,³² backgrounders,³³ and³⁴ bilateral agreements,³⁵ I have identified six distinct goals that inform the CWELCC framework:

- 1. Affordability:** Bring the costs of childcare down to \$10-a-day
- 2. Accessibility:** Increase the number and percentage of children in childcare
- 3. Flexibility:** Make childcare available to parents working non-traditional hours and tailored to different provincial and territorial needs
- 4. Inclusion:** Make childcare available to children with varying abilities and who are experiencing vulnerability
- 5. High-Quality:** Ensure learning is delivered by a qualified and trained workforce
- 6. Indigenous-led:** Ensure Indigenous childcare is led by Indigenous peoples and informed by Indigenous knowledge, culture and languages

The most prominent goal of the bilateral agreements is affordability, by bringing parental fees for regulated care down to \$10-a-day by 2025/26. The federal government claims that eight of the thirteen³⁶ provinces and territories had met this goal as of February 2025 (though one childcare research agency pegged the number at six,³⁷ not eight), while “all other jurisdictions have reduced parent fees by at least 50%.”

³¹ Canada, Government of Canada, *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care*, ESDC programs and policy development, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-early-learning.html>.

³² Canada, *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*.

³³ Canada, Government of Canada, *Budget 2021: A Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan*.

³⁴ Canada, Government of Canada, *Toward \$10-a-day: Early Learning and Child Care*, ESDC Campaigns and promotions, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/campaigns/child-care.html>.

³⁵ Canada, Government of Canada, *Early Learning and Child Care Agreements*, Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers responsible for Early Learning and Child Care, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories.html>.

³⁶ Canada, Government of Canada, *Toward \$10-a-day: An Early Learning and Child Care Backgrounder*, Employment and Social Development Canada, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2025/03/toward-10-a-day-an-early-learning-and-child-care-backgrounder0.html>.

³⁷ Martha Friendly, Jane Beach, Gayaththiri Aruran, Alexie Cossette, Lu Hu, Jade Lillace, and Barry Forer, *Interim space statistics 2024: Early childhood education and care in Canada*, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Ottawa, 2024, https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Interim-Space-Statistics-2024-ECEC-in-Canada_0.pdf.

As the table below shows, Ontario's \$22/day rate—which, full disclosure, I am currently paying—is the outlier among provinces with a fixed rate (Ontario's Auditor General estimated³⁸ it would cost an extra \$2 billion a year to get down to \$10/day). CWELCC has almost certainly contributed to a reduction in the average fees parents pay for full-time childcare, which, according to Statistics Canada,³⁹ decreased from \$649 to \$544 a month between 2022 and 2023.

Table 1: Provincial Fees as of February 2025

PROVINCE/TERRITORY	Fee	Fixed or Average
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$10-a-day	Fixed
Prince Edward Island	\$10-a-day	Fixed
Nova Scotia	50% fee reduction	Average
New Brunswick	50% fee reduction	Average
Quebec	\$9.35/day*	Fixed
Ontario	\$22/day	Fixed
Manitoba	\$10-a-day	Fixed
Saskatchewan	\$10-a-day	Fixed
Alberta	\$15/day	Average
British Columbia	50% fee reduction	Average
Nunavut	\$10-a-day	Fixed
Northwest Territories	\$10-a-day	Average
Yukon	\$10-a-day (or less)*	Fixed

* Quebec and Yukon already had fees below \$10-a-day prior to CWELCC.

Source: Employment and Social Development Canada.

The CWELCC agreements also specify jurisdiction-specific “space creation targets” for more than 250,000 new childcare spaces by March 2026. While individual agreements make allowances for some for-profit spaces, they tend to emphasize that spaces created should be “predominantly”⁴⁰ or “primarily”⁴¹ in not-for-profit centres or licensed home care.

³⁸ Dave McGinn and Laura Stone, “Ontario needs almost \$2-billion to make \$10-a-day child care a reality, A-G says,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 1, 2025, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ontario-10-a-day-child-care-2026-auditor-report/>.

³⁹ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Child care arrangements*, 2023, The Daily, Ottawa, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231205/dq231205a-eng.htm>.

⁴⁰ Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada – Ontario Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021 to 2026*, Early Learning and Child Care Agreements, Ottawa, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/ontario-canada-wide-2021.html>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Earlier this year, the federal government provided an update⁴² on the “spaces announced” since 2021. With the caveat that the government’s figures rely on shifting definitions—this number only includes “announced measures to create” new spaces, which does little good to a parent on a waitlist—the table below compares these announced spaces to each jurisdiction’s space creation target. Because these data were from February 2025 (47 of 60 months into the federal timeline), any jurisdiction above 78 percent is, in theory, on track to meet its target. However, as of February 2025, only Yukon and New Brunswick had met their space announcement/creation goals, with Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, PEI, and the Northwest Territories below 50 percent of their target.

Table 2: Childcare Spaces Announced and Creation Target

PROVINCE/TERRITORY	SPACES ANNOUNCED: MARCH 2021 – FEBRUARY 2025	SPACE CREATION TARGET (MARCH 31, 2026)	% MET
Yukon	405	110	368%
New Brunswick	3,400	3,400	100%
Quebec	26,983	37,000	73%
Nova Scotia	6,542	9,500	69%
Newfoundland and Labrador	3,706	5,895	63%
British Columbia	18,526	30,000	62%
Saskatchewan	16,265	28,000	58%
Nunavut	128	238	54%
Alberta	31,400	68,700	46%
Manitoba	10,050	23,000	44%
Ontario	33,000	76,700	43%
Prince Edward Island	516	1,725	30%
Northwest Territories	85	300	28%
TOTAL	151,006	284,568	53%

*While the federal government initially lists Quebec’s target as 30,000, a footnote notes the correct March 2026 target as 37,000.

Source: Employment and Social Development Canada.

⁴² Canada, Government of Canada, *Toward \$10-a-day: An Early Learning and Child Care Backgrounder*.

Through the bilateral agreements, the federal government has clearly linked the goal of “high-quality” care to credentialized staff such as Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and Child Care Assistants (CCAs). The agreements include targets to train and hire more childcare workers through aspects⁴³ such as a minimum wage grid employees, funding for curriculum re-development, and tuition reimbursement.

Critics⁴⁴ have noted how this credentialization of childcare has crowded out the supply of non-credentialled childcare, further contributing to a cramped labour market for childcare providers. Statistics Canada data⁴⁵ from 2024 show that more than 86 percent of child care centres reported “experiencing difficulties when trying to fill vacant positions”; the most common difficulties were “applicants’ lack of skills required for the job (66.7%), having few or no applicants to choose from (62.3%) and applicants’ lack of related work experience (53.3%).”

⁴³ Canada, Government of Canada, Canada – Manitoba Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021 to 2026, Early Learning and Child Care Agreements, Ottawa, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/manitoba-canada-wide-2021.html>.

⁴⁴ Ginny Roth, “Housing is going through a supply-side revolution. Can we do the same for childcare?,” *The Hub Canada*, June 21, 2024, <https://thehub.ca/2024/06/21/ginny-roth-housing-is-going-through-a-supply-side-revolution-can-we-do-the-same-for-childcare/>.

⁴⁵ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Canadian Survey on the Provision of Child Care Services*, 2024, The Daily, 2025, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/nl/daily-quotidien/250319/dq250319b-eng.htm>.

The Shift Towards Centre-Based Care

Although CWELCC subsidies are available for licensed centre- and home-based care, the post-CWEELCC era has coincided with a shift away from home care. The table below, using Statistics Canada data⁴⁶ from 2024, shows that the vast majority of children in childcare (83 percent) were in a centre rather than a home. Of those in home-based care, 63 percent were in licensed care, with 37 percent in unlicensed care. While unlicensed homes are ineligible for CWEELCC funding, it is unclear precisely how many licensed homes received funding; according to Statistics Canada,⁴⁷ only 36 percent of licensed homes across Canada had confirmed receiving CWEELCC funding compared to 36 percent who had not, with 29 percent unknown.

Table 3: Number of Children in Childcare and Types of Providers in Canada, 2024

	CHILDCARE CENTRE	LICENSED HOME CARE	UNLICENSED HOME CARE
Children Enrolled (% of total)	909,158 (83%)	115,506 (11%)	68,674 (6%)
Providers (% of total)	14,523 (31%)	17,800 (38%)	14,663 (31%)

Source: Statistics Canada

The table below shows that there has been a steady decrease in the number of regulated (licensed) childcare homes since 2012, well before CWEELCC began. Part of the drop between 2019 and 2021 was due to the COVID-19 pandemic; during those years, there were⁴⁸ “477 fewer centres and 3,673 fewer active family child care homes.”

However, the post-pandemic (and post-CWEELCC) period has seen a movement away from all forms of home-based care. Between 2019 and 2023, Statistics Canada reported⁴⁹ a growth in the proportion of children aged 0–5 who were in centre-based child care, from 31.0 percent to 34.3 percent. By contrast, during this same period, the proportion of children in home-based care declined from 12.2 percent to 9 percent—a drop of more than one quarter. This period also saw a large decline⁵⁰ in the proportion of children who were cared for by a non-relative in the child’s home (such as a nanny), from 3.0 percent of all children to 2.1 percent.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Proportion of centre-based and licensed home-based child care providers receiving funding from the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement*, April 2024, Canada, Table 42-10-0081-01

⁴⁸ Friendly et al., *Interim space statistics 2024: Early childhood education and care in Canada*.

⁴⁹ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Child care arrangements*, 2023.

⁵⁰ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Archived – Type of child care arrangement, children aged 0 to 5 years, inactive*, Table 42-10-0031-01, Ottawa, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=4210003101&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.1&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2019&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2023&referencePeriods=20190101%2C20230101>.

Table 4: Total Number of Active Regulated Family Child Care Homes in Canada

YEAR	NUMBER
2004	26,088
2006	27,333
2007	27,805
2008	26,109
2010	25,712
2012	27,715
2014	26,623
2016	23,445
2019	21,513
2021	17,840
2023	20,221

Source: CRRU

CWECC's desired "flexibility" has also not come to fruition. On the one hand, unlicensed home care providers were the most likely to provide "flexible care" (overnight, evenings, and weekends) for parents, with 17 percent compared to 11 percent of centres and 5 percent of licensed homes.

On the other hand, much of this "flexible care" will soon be disappearing⁵¹: nearly 43 percent of unlicensed home care providers "reported not intending to continue providing child care services in their home in three years," compared with just over 16 percent of licensed home care providers. While CWECC may not be the sole cause, its emphasis on credentialized care has coincided with a growth in childcare centres and a decline in home-based childcare, especially unlicensed care.

Finally, the CWECC era has also seen a sharp rise in the number of parents on childcare waitlists. The supply of childcare spaces has failed to keep up with CWECC's subsidy-induced demand: in 2023,⁵² among parents of children aged 0-5 who were not using childcare, 26 percent had their child on a waitlist, compared to only 19 percent in 2022. For parents of infants under 1, the number was a staggering 47 percent, with reports of parents putting unborn children⁵³ on waitlists. Statistics Canada's 2024 survey⁵⁴ of childcare providers found that 77 percent of centres had a waitlist, compared with 62 percent of licensed homes and 38 percent of unlicensed homes. Most venues were operating at maximum capacity, including 60 percent of centres, 81 percent of licensed homes, and 76 percent of unlicensed homes.

⁵¹ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Canadian Survey on the Provision of Child Care Services*, 2024.

⁵² Canada, Statistics Canada, *Child care arrangements*, 2023.

⁵³ Breanna Marcelo, "'Put your unborn child on a wait list now,' Many Toronto parents are very frustrated over lengthy waitlists for daycare programs," *now Toronto*, May 21, 2024, <https://nowtoronto.com/news/put-your-unborn-child-on-a-wait-list-now-many-toronto-parents-are-very-frustrated-over-lengthy-waitlists-for-daycare-programs/>.

⁵⁴ Canada, Statistics Canada, *Canadian Survey on the Provision of Child Care Services*, 2024.

Canadian Childcare Policy's Shifting Overton Window

My undergraduates are often surprised to learn that there are serious debates about whether the federal government should be involved in childcare policy. I believe there are two reasons why. First, most prominent Canadian⁵⁵ childcare⁵⁶ scholars⁵⁷ and policy⁵⁸ experts⁵⁹ are themselves strong advocates for a more expansive federal role in the funding, regulation, and provision of childcare. One of the main sources of childcare data, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, describes its mandate⁶⁰ as working "towards an equitable, high quality, publicly funded, inclusive early learning and child care (ELCC) system for all Canadians." There is little sustained criticism of a national, subsidized childcare system outside of *The⁶¹ Hub*,⁶² the *National Post*,⁶³ or Cardus⁶⁴; there is essentially none within Canadian academia. With advocacy and scholarship so intertwined, Chrystia Freeland's claim⁶⁵ that "early learning and childcare is an investment in social infrastructure that pays for itself" is often taken as a given by students and professors alike.

Second, childcare activists have decisively won the political debate. CWELCC agreements were signed with every province, including those governed by conservatives; while Alberta, Saskatchewan, and (formally⁶⁶) Ontario have held out on signing new agreements, it is difficult to see them turning down additional federal money in the long run. The 2025 federal Liberal platform⁶⁷ vowed to "protect and strengthen" the CWELCC system and to "Require provinces, territories, and municipalities to expand child care in public infrastructure." Federal Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre has criticized⁶⁸ the program's implementation and promised⁶⁹ to loosen restrictions on for-profit funding, but has said he would honour⁷⁰ existing agreements. Perhaps most importantly, Canada's national childcare policy remains popular, with a YMCA-commissioned survey⁷¹ finding 68 percent national support just last month.

⁵⁵ Susan Prentice, *Changing Child Care: Five Decades of Child Care Advocacy and Policy in Canada* (Fernwood Publishing, 2001).

⁵⁶ Prentice and White, "Childcare deserts and distributional disadvantages: the legacies of split childcare policies and programmes in Canada."

⁵⁷ Petr Varmuza, Michal Perlman, and Linda A. White, "Ontario as a case study for modernizing Home Child Care licensing and support," *Canadian Public Administration* 64, no. 3 (2001).

⁵⁸ "About Martha Friendly, CRRU Executive Director," *Childcare Resource and Research Unit*, <https://childcarecanada.org/about/martha-friendly>.

⁵⁹ Susan Prentice and Lisa Pasolli, "No good reason for Ontario to delay signing child-care agreement," *Policy Options*, February 11, 2022, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2022/02/no-good-reason-for-ontario-to-delay-signing-child-care-agreement/>.

⁶⁰ "About CRRU," *Childcare Resource and Research Unit*, <https://childcarecanada.org/about/about-CRRU>.

⁶¹ Andrea Mrozek, "National childcare is going to cost more than you think—Especially in Ontario," *The Hub Canada*, May 22, 2023, <https://thehub.ca/2023/05/22/andrea-mrozek-national-childcare-is-going-to-cost-more-than-you-think-especially-in-ontario/>.

⁶² Roth, "Housing is going through a supply-side revolution. Can we do the same for childcare?"

⁶³ Matthew Lau, "Poilievre's sensible solution to Liberal daycare nightmare," *National Post*, March 27, 2025, <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/matthew-lau-poilievres-sensible-solution-to-liberal-daycare-nightmare>.

⁶⁴ "Research & Policy Library," *Cardus*, https://www.cardus.ca/research-library/?_sft_research-theme=child-care.

⁶⁵ Chrystia Freeland, "Foreword," April 14, 2021, <https://www.budget.ca/2021/report-rapport/intro-en.html>.

⁶⁶ McGinn, "Most Canadians support publicly funded child care, YMCA and YWCA survey says."

⁶⁷ Liberal Party of Canada, *Canada Strong*, Ottawa, Ontario, 2025. <https://liberal.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/292/2025/04/Canada-Strong.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Geoff Russ, "With repealing national child care not 'credible,' Conservatives set their sights on fixing it," *The Hub Canada*, July 12, 2023, <https://thehub.ca/2023/07/12/with-repealing-national-child-care-not-credible-conservatives-set-their-sights-on-fixing-it/>.

⁶⁹ Lau, "Poilievre's sensible solution to Liberal daycare nightmare."

⁷⁰ The Canadian Press, "Poilievre suggests he would 'protect' dental care, child care programs as PM," *CBC News*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/poilievre-social-programs-1.7493270>.

⁷¹ McGinn, "Most Canadians support publicly funded child care, YMCA and YWCA survey says."

At the political level, there is no longer a question of whether the federal government should be involved in childcare funding and standard-setting. Instead, political debates primarily concern *how much* and *to what extent*, such as whether more CWELCC funding can be given to for-profit centres. And although critics⁷² have convincingly⁷³ argued that a flat \$10-a-day fee disproportionately⁷⁴ helps wealthy parents (who are more likely to work 9–5 jobs and have the resources to navigate the waitlist bureaucracy), Alberta's⁷⁵ pleas⁷⁶ for a more means-tested system have fallen on deaf federal ears. The goal of \$10-a-day childcare appears politically untouchable for now.

In this policy context, there are nevertheless potential reforms that could realistically increase the supply of childcare spaces. One reform would be to reduce the reliance on labour credentials that have been so ingrained into CWELCC agreements. As Ginny Roth⁷⁷ has noted in *The Hub*, it has never been adequately explained “why Early Childhood Educator, a designation that didn’t even exist in Ontario until 2007, is the pinnacle of quality care.”

A second reform would be to permit more funding to for-profit centres. CWELCC frameworks prioritize non-profit space creation and typically lock in⁷⁸ a maximum proportion⁷⁹ of funds for for-profit spaces. This squeezes⁸⁰ out⁸¹ (primarily female) entrepreneurs and further constrains supply. However, because CWELCC agreements do fund some for-profit spaces—as well as licensed home care providers, who profit from their labour—the expansion of for-profit spaces under new agreements should be politically feasible (indeed, even the Quebec government has funded more⁸² for-profit daycares in recent years).

A major sticking point for both these reforms is that childcare activists vehemently⁸³ oppose⁸⁴ for-profit⁸⁵ care nearly as much as they support childcare credentialization (and, unsurprisingly, unionization⁸⁶). However, sustained pressure from governments such as Alberta⁸⁷ and Ontario, particularly concerning for-profit care, could help bring about reform and increase supply. Most parents would agree that a spot at a for-profit centre—or with a non-credentialed caregiver—is certainly better than a spot on a waitlist.

⁷² Andrea Mrozek, “Quebec’s child-care system isn’t what you’ve been told it is,” *The Line*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.readtheline.ca/p/andrea-mrozek-quebecs-child-care>.

⁷³ Peter Jon Mitchell and Andreea Sennyah, “Memo: Federal Consultation on Early Learning and Child Care,” *Cardus*, September 12, 2024, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/family/policy-memo/memo-federal-consultation-on-early-learning-and-child-care/>.

⁷⁴ Roderic Beaujot, Ching Jiangqin Du, and Zenaida Ravanera, “Family Policies in Quebec and the Rest of Canada: Implications for Fertility, Child-Care, Women’s Paid Work, and Child Development Indicators,” *Canadian Public Policy* 39, no. 2 (2013).

⁷⁵ Matt Jones (@MattJonesYYC), “The Canada-Alberta child care agreements are underfunded, unfair to the majority of providers, and should target support to parents that need it most,” X, February 11, 2025, <https://x.com/MattJonesYYC/status/1889403869605797986>.

⁷⁶ Robson Fletcher, “Alberta holds out as 8 other provinces sign on to receive \$37B under new federal child-care deal,” *CBC News*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-wont-sign-new-child-care-agreement-deal-1.7476380>.

⁷⁷ Roth, “Housing is going through a supply-side revolution. Can we do the same for childcare?”

⁷⁸ Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada – Ontario Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021 to 2026*.

⁷⁹ Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada – New Brunswick Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021 to 2026, Early Learning and Child Care Agreements*, Ottawa, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/new-brunswick-canada-wide-2021.html>.

⁸⁰ Shelby Kramp-Neuman, House of Commons, *Supporting Women’s Economic Empowerment in Canada*, 1st sess., 44th Parliament, 2024, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/FEWO/Reports/RP13102687/feworp11/feworp11-e.pdf>.

⁸¹ Hannen and Mrozek, “Is Canada’s child care program terminating child care spaces by design?”

⁸² “Quebec,” *Childcare Resource and Research Unit*, 2023, <https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/ECEC-2023-Quebec.pdf>.

⁸³ “Expanding for-profit ELCC provision is a risky business,” *Building Canada’s Child Care System*, <https://buildingchildcare.ca/public-and-non-profit-provision/>.

⁸⁴ Prentice and Pasolli, “No good reason for Ontario to delay signing child-care agreement.”

⁸⁵ Martha Friendly, “Deconstructing “fake non-profit” child care in Canada,” *Childcare Resource and Research Unit Occasional Paper* 37 (2025).

⁸⁶ Shani Halfon, “Canada’s child care workforce,” *Childcare Resource and Research Unit Occasional Paper* 35 (2021).

⁸⁷ Fletcher, “Alberta holds out as 8 other provinces sign on to receive \$37B under new federal child-care deal.”

Key Takeaways

Several conclusions can be drawn about the implementation of Canada's national childcare framework:

- The framework has received widespread buy-in from provincial and territorial governments, notwithstanding the current reluctance of Alberta and Saskatchewan to sign on to another five years.
- Fees have come down for parents who can get their child into a regulated space.
- Almost every province and territory is behind on their space creation targets.
- The agreements have sped along the credentialization of childcare, producing labour shortages and accelerating a shift away from unlicensed care, home care, and for-profit care towards a regulated centre-based model.
- This combination of capped fees, increased demand, and limited supply has led to growing waitlists.

This, for better or worse, is the new childcare policy status quo in Canada. How did we get here? I identify three main reasons. The first is sustained advocacy from the childcare community. Scholars and activists—often the same⁸⁸ people⁸⁹—have spent decades championing a federally-funded childcare system that prioritizes not-for-profit care by credentialed workers. After decades⁹⁰ of frustration,⁹¹ these scholar-activists changed the hearts and minds of policymakers, entrenching their vision and achieving widespread political consensus among federal, provincial, and territorial governments. Regardless of whether one agrees with its policy prescriptions, the perseverance of the childcare lobby has been impressive.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus for more comprehensive government intervention in childcare. The combination of employment disruptions during lockdowns, families avoiding childcare to limit their exposure, and closures of childcare facilities brought the issue of childcare to the national agenda. Increased federal spending during the pandemic also removed expectations that the federal government would ever balance its budget, which made \$27 billion over five years look like a drop in the bucket.

⁸⁸ Prentince, *Changing Child Care: Five Decades of Child Care Advocacy and Policy in Canada*.

⁸⁹ "About Martha Friendly, CRRU Executive Director."

⁹⁰ Emma McKenna, "'The Freedom to Choose': Neoliberalism, Feminism, and Childcare in Canada," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37, no. 1 (2015).

⁹¹ Prentince and White, "Childcare deserts and distributional disadvantages: the legacies of split childcare policies and programmes in Canada."

The third and final factor is the Trudeau government's approach to federalism and spending more broadly. Justin Trudeau's willingness to expand the use of the federal spending power into further areas of provincial jurisdiction, alongside his abandonment of any pretense of fiscal restraint once COVID began, made it possible to continue the (\$31.5 billion annually⁹² and growing) Canada Child Benefit and create a national childcare framework. Likewise, Trudeau's decision to seek individual bilateral agreements with provinces and territories in 2021 and 2022, rather than seek a unified comprehensive agreement, made it increasingly difficult for the holdout provinces⁹³ to refuse the money, even when those governments didn't agree with the strings attached.

In the end, a national, federally-funded childcare framework—even one clearly failing⁹⁴ with respect to flexibility and accessibility—looks like it is here to stay. While there was once debate about whether the federal government should fund child benefits or childcare, a new political consensus has emerged that it should do both, regardless of the cost. Even in the forthcoming age of fiscal austerity,⁹⁵ childcare will remain yet another area of provincial policy where federal requirements loom large.

⁹² Canada, Government of Canada, *Canada child benefit statistics (July 2024 – June 2025)*, Benefit Statistics, Ottawa, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/child-family-benefits/benefits-statistics/ccbstats2024-2025.html>.

⁹³ The Canadian Press, "How the \$10-a-day child-care deals will work in your province or territory," *CBC News*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/childcare-agreements-canada-provinces-territories-1.6400123>.

⁹⁴ Mitchell and Sennyah. "Memo: Federal Consultation on Early Learning and Child Care."

⁹⁵ Daniel Béland, "Eyebrows Up: Mark Carney's Budget and the 'A-Word' Controversy," *Policy Magazine*, September 10, 2025, <https://www.policymagazine.ca/eyebrows-up-mark-carneys-budget-and-the-a-word-controversy/>.

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