



Childcare: What Utahns Need to Know

Setting the Stage

Childcare is an important consideration for millions of American families; 71% of all women with children under 18 are in the labor force,¹ comprising one-third of the total female workforce in the U. S.² Further, childcare costs are becoming increasingly burdensome; in the U.S. generally, and in 33 states specifically (including Utah), the annual cost of childcare is higher than the cost of in-state tuition at a four-year public college.³ Although childcare is a family and community issue, women often bear the primary responsibility for managing childcare, and, in the case of female heads of household, women may carry both breadwinning and caregiving duties with very little support. Considerable data are available surrounding childcare issues in Utah, and yet there are additional, sometimes nuanced, factors to consider when analyzing Utah's childcare landscape.

This research snapshot focuses on three areas:

- 1) An overview of childcare statistics, both within Utah and the nation;
- 2) An analysis of various issues regarding childcare providers; and
- 3) An exploration of childcare options for those seeking higher education.

Childcare by the Numbers

According to a 2016 report from the Kids Count Data Center, 65% of U.S. children under age six had all available parents in the workforce⁴ (up from 58% in 1996).⁵ In Utah, the 2016 percentage was quite a bit lower than the national average, at 52%; in fact, Utah has the lowest ranking in the nation for this indicator.⁶ Still, childcare is a significant concern for more than half the families in Utah with very young children. Despite a lingering perception that most Utah mothers are not employed, Census data show that in Utah, 59% of mothers with children under age 6, 50% of mothers with both children under 6 and between 6 and 17, and 73% of mothers with children between 6 and 17 are in the labor force.⁷ We must not forget that in many households with children, "all available parents" is just one, and that parent is more

52% of Utah children under age six have all available parents in the workforce.

than twice as likely to be a mother than a father.⁸ There are 37,690 households in Utah headed by a woman with no husband present, living with her own children under age 18.⁹

In 2017, there were 152,479 children in Utah under age six potentially needing childcare, yet there were only 41,144 slots in formal childcare programs,¹⁰ and only 22,424 kids in Utah were in programs that were licensed by the state (ensuring minimum health and safety standards, but not necessarily high quality of care).¹¹ This gap between the number of children needing care and the available slots in formal and licensed programs means that a large number of Utah children are being cared for in informal (including unregulated) situations.¹² In cases where children are being watched by family and friends, these circumstances may be satisfactory, but an in-depth study by the Utah Education Policy Center and the Department of Workforce Services' Office of Childcare found that many working parents struggle with a variety of challenges in securing adequate childcare, including finding back-up and after-hours care. Thirty percent of respondents said they had reduced their work hours because of difficulty in finding adequate care, and 44% of parents who did not currently have children in care said they would use such services to pursue work or educational opportunities if affordable, quality care were more available.¹³ Please refer to the [Early Childhood Services Study](#) for greater detail on this and many other childcare issues.

In addition to availability, affordability is also a key factor when considering childcare. An in-depth 2017 national report titled "[Parents and the High Cost of Child Care](#)" includes numerous variables regarding the costs of childcare in the U.S. as a whole and state by state. Recognizing the complexity and variety of factors that determine costs nationally, this study gave an overall average annual cost of childcare in the U.S. as approximately \$8,600 (averaging infant, toddler, and preschool aged care at both centers and family childcare homes). This would cost a median-income family 10.2% of their annual income to pay for one child's care.¹⁴ In state-by-state rankings, Utah fares poorly in several categories. Utah is ranked as the second least affordable state for infant and toddler care in a center

and the third least affordable state for infant care in a family care setting. This report also looks at the cost of school-aged kids' care during summer months. Utah was ranked as the least affordable state in the U.S. for three months of full-time care for a school-aged child.¹⁵ However, variation in factors considered can change a state's ranking considerably. A 2017 report from the Care.com Cost of Care Survey ranked Utah as the second most affordable state overall for childcare center affordability.¹⁶ Clearly, data and rankings from published reports must be examined carefully in order to get an accurate picture of childcare costs.

A 2016 study by the Economic Policy Institute reported that infant care in Utah averages \$8,641 each year, which is \$2,985 (52.8%) more than college tuition and is nearly as expensive as average annual rent (only 8.8% below rent costs). For two or more children, the costs of childcare reach well above housing costs. These averages mean that for a family earning the state median income, childcare for an infant would cost 13.1% of annual income, but for a family earning minimum wage, this rises to 57.3% of annual income.¹⁷ In Utah, childcare subsidies are available to help low-income families pay for care. In 2017, 19,139 children (from 10,266 families) benefitted from subsidies, and the state spent \$60 million on childcare subsidies in the 2017 fiscal year.¹⁸ A family can qualify for childcare subsidies if their income is at or below 56% of the state median income and they meet work requirements. However, many working families who do not meet subsidy requirements can pay 20–30% or more of their annual income on childcare.¹⁹ A recent qualitative study published by the Utah Women in the Economy Commission corroborates these data surrounding the difficulty in finding childcare; focus group participants described childcare to be the biggest challenge regarding Utah women's workforce participation.²⁰

Annual childcare costs for an infant in Utah are 52.8% higher than one year of tuition at a four-year public college.

Utah Childcare Providers

A variety of regulated childcare options exist in Utah, including childcare centers, family childcare homes, and other arrangements, and there are various license, registration, and approval options for each.²¹ A 2017 study showed that there are 41,144 slots available in childcare programs, and of these, 68% are in childcare centers, 30% are in family childcare homes, and 2% are in school-aged care programs.²² Yet these official slots do not tell the whole story of where children receive care. As mentioned previously, there is a large gap between the number of children needing care and the available openings in formal programs. Many caregiving settings (including care by family or friends and other specific situations) do not re-

quire any regulation or licensing, and a substantial portion of childcare in Utah is in this category, especially in some rural areas, where licensed care can be rare or even non-existent.²³

One concern about unregulated childcare is the recognition that childhood learning begins in infancy, and those who are caring for children are also educating them.²⁴ Ideally, all childcare providers would have education and training specific to early childhood development. Currently, 31% of early childhood educators working in childcare programs are participating in Utah's professional development system, the goal of which is to further professionalize the industry and hopefully lead to better pay, benefits, and retention of talented workers.²⁵ This professional program is a step in the right direction toward increasing the quality of childcare. However, the substantial majority of Utah kids receiving non-parental care are not in licensed, regulated programs,²⁶ and the preparation of their caregivers may be inconsistent. A 2010 study that surveyed 339 Utah caregivers in informal arrangements (generally friends and family of the children they cared for) showed that most lacked higher education: 75% had a high school diploma or GED, 11% an associate degree, and only 14% had a bachelor's or master's degree. Most of these individuals had experience in caring for their own children, but many expressed interest in gaining additional training to help them improve as caregivers.²⁷ Further, although many parents desire to have their kids cared for by family members when possible, other concerns remain. For example, a high percentage of family caregivers are grandmothers, and because of changing demographics and labor force trends (fewer women overall post-baby boom and more Utah women working and staying in the labor force longer), the heavy reliance on grandmothers to provide childcare is not sustainable long-term.²⁸

Another important factor to consider is that most caregivers, the vast majority of whom are women, face significant financial hardships. Nationwide, the families of childcare workers are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as other families (14.7% vs. 6.7%).²⁹ In Utah, the annual median wage for childcare workers is far below that for all workers in the state (\$22,290 vs. \$35,650),³⁰ and in four of seven metropolitan areas in Utah, around 90% of childcare workers do not earn enough to maintain a basic standard of living.³¹ One study showed that 27% of Utah caregivers working in informal settings maintain other paid employment and report they could use additional financial support to provide better care.³² Because of the unique tension between the high costs of care for families and the low wages paid to childcare workers, many experts around the country and state agree that additional public support is needed in order to bolster the

availability of affordable quality care while ensuring that those providing the care are able to earn a living wage.

Childcare at Utah Higher Education Institutions

While the primary focus of this snapshot has been childcare for working families, childcare for parents who are pursuing higher education is also a major challenge for both traditional and non-traditional students. Many parents who struggle to afford childcare while working low-wage jobs could improve their economic viability with additional education, but the lack of affordable childcare for students is a deterrent. Some public support is available, as subsidies provided to low-income families can cover childcare for those pursuing higher education/training for up to 24 months (parents must also meet a minimum work requirement).³³ Yet the costs can still be high, and the varied schedules of students (as opposed to the more regular schedules that come with many jobs) can complicate childcare for college students. Many of the public colleges and universities in Utah have a preschool program on campus, with the dual mission of providing both childcare and practicum experience for early childhood education students. However, preschools are for older children, and with specific hours they cannot meet the varied childcare needs of college students who are also parents. Six Utah schools have additional childcare facilities for students and employees. Please see Table 1 for an overview of childcare options in institutions of higher education in Utah.

Table 1: Childcare Facilities at Utah Public Institutions

Institution	Capacity	Ages	Fee Type	Waiting List
SLCC	90	6 weeks +	Income-based	Y
Snow	33	6 weeks +	Varies	Y
U of U	330	6 weeks +	Income-based	Y
USU	70	6 weeks +	Set rate	Y
UVU	110	6 weeks +	Income-based	Y
WSU	13	2+	Set rate	Y

*SUU is creating an on-site childcare facility that is scheduled to open in fall 2019.

Childcare facilities in Utah colleges and universities are crucial in efforts to help women stay in school and graduate after having children, especially since many young parents may already feel anxious about enrolling their kids in childcare. A recent survey of 176 student parents at Utah Valley University showed that feelings of guilt, anxiety, and shame were all associated with putting children

in care. Yet, on a positive note, these same parents also experienced stress-relief, increased confidence, and feelings of empowerment as they found successful childcare solutions.³⁴ Many Utah institutions have taken positive steps to address the need for on-campus childcare, yet each program has a waiting list, and more options are needed to ensure adequate childcare is available for higher education students throughout the state.

Conclusion

High quality, affordable childcare is a critically important issue, and efforts are being made by Utah state agencies, community advocates, and policy makers to address childcare challenges. For example, in 2019 the Office of Child Care will be phasing in a program to evaluate and reward high quality childcare programs that will benefit both parents and participating providers.³⁵ Some legislators are advancing policy options to address childcare issues as well, but increased support is needed to pass workable solutions.³⁶ Other stakeholders, such as employers, institutions of higher education, and childcare providers, must continue to explore options that will serve children and allow for better financial and quality-of-life outcomes for parents (see this [Impact Report](#) for many recommendations).³⁷

As childcare presents complex challenges, Utah has several state and regional offices that provide numerous resources, including support for parents and providers, licensing and oversight, and financial subsidies for families who qualify. Please consult the following websites for additional information:

- [Care About Childcare](#)
- [Office of Child Care, Department of Workforce Services](#)
- [Utah Child Care Licensing Program](#)

Utah has both large families and a tight labor market; childcare is an economic imperative. We must thoughtfully address our childcare needs in order to bolster the state's economy today and in the future, as well-educated children will comprise tomorrow's thriving labor force. As we work to improve the childcare landscape, we will benefit families and strengthen the positive impact of women in their communities and the state as a whole.

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³ Economic Policy Institute. (2016, April). The cost of child care in Utah. Retrieved from <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/UT>

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