

Think Babies™ NC 2021-2025

Prenatal to Age 3 Policy Priorities for Infants, Toddlers, and their Families



Expand Quality Infant-Toddler Child Care Programs

North Carolina is considered a child care desert, a designation made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, 44% of NC's population lived in a child care desert, defined as a census tract with three or more children per available child care slot.¹ Unfortunately, child care deserts have increased in NC since the pandemic, especially in the coastal south, central piedmont and mountain west.² Overall, only about 16% of NC's infants and toddlers are served by the existing supply of licensed programs, and quality programs for our state's youngest children are even more scarce.³

While finding quality care and learning opportunities for infants and toddlers is a struggle for all families, the shortage creates a crisis for working families seeking to maintain or regain employment as the state continues to heal economically from consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. If parents, and especially mothers, are to return to work, they must have care for their children. The Think Babies™ NC Alliance knows that NC's economic recovery and expansion requires a state-level solution to address the acute shortage of quality infant-toddler child care which exists in every county and is especially dire in rural areas of the state.

Why Is This Important to Do Now?

Quality infant-toddler child care is necessary for working families.

About two-thirds of children under the age of six in NC live in households with all parents working,⁴ and just over 60% of NC mothers participate in the labor market.⁵ These parents rely on a stable environment in which to leave their infants and toddlers as they increase the financial viability of their families and contribute to state economic growth. Maternal employment in areas with sufficient child care availability is 3% higher than in child care deserts.⁶ When reliable programs are available, parents can work, but when reliable care and learning arrangements are not available, parents must make trade-offs. Some families may be forced to choose informal, unstable arrangements that often lack important quality components and safety standards that fully meet a child's developmental needs. Other families may forgo employment all together, with 19% of parents nationwide reporting that they cannot work during the pandemic due to disruptions in child care arrangements.⁷

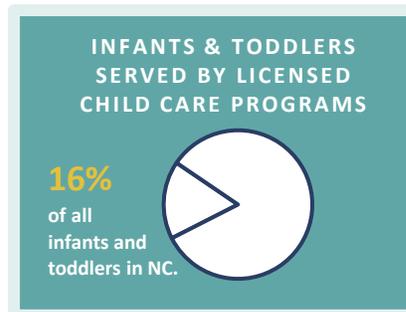
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Quality infant-toddler child care is critical to support healthy development.

A child's brain grows more quickly during the first three years of life than at any other point. Young children, especially infants and toddlers, learn through the relationships they build with their parents and other adults in their lives. Nonparental early educators are key adults facilitating children's learning and development during this critical first period of their development, and high-quality child care has been shown to provide babies with the supports needed to develop social, cognitive and emotional skills that are necessary to thrive. Low-quality care is associated with increased behavioral challenges and decreased communication skills as compared with higher quality settings

Quality infant-toddler child care is scarce across North Carolina.

The supply of infant-toddler care, which was already insufficient, has dwindled since COVID-19. There are now 6.1 infants and toddlers for each licensed child care slot across the state as compared to 5.3 infants and toddlers per slot in 2019.⁸ More than 220,000 infants and toddlers in NC live in families with all available adults working.⁹ Yet less than 60,000 children age 0-3 are currently served by licensed child care programs.¹⁰ Child care deserts can be found in every county in NC and are particularly acute in rural areas. Approximately 35% of babies and toddlers enrolled in child care attend programs with less than a 4-star rating.¹¹ Almost 30 counties have 10 or fewer 4- and 5-star programs that enroll children age birth to three.¹²



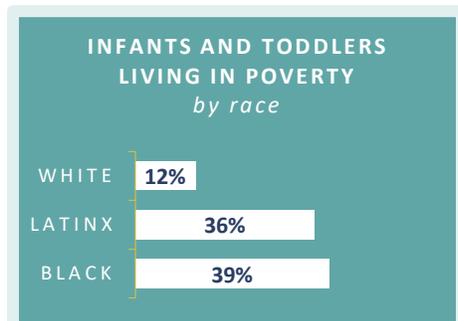
Model infant-toddler programs exist, but few have the resources to expand. For example, Early Head Start programs tend to provide higher quality care due to their higher program standards, including early educator qualifications. NC has only 37 Early Head Start programs, providing less than 5,000 infants and toddlers with evidence-based comprehensive services.¹³ With a two-generational focus, Early Head Start has historically given families of color, made most vulnerable by structural racism, access to critical services. However, only 7% of children eligible for Early Head Start services in NC are served.

Quality infant-toddler child care requires a state-level solution.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how precariously our state's system of care for the youngest children has been operating, as well as how necessary this system is as a critical piece of the economic landscape. The child care market cannot fix the supply crisis alone. Quality infant-toddler programs are expensive because low staff-child ratios and small group sizes contribute to higher personnel costs, even though wages for infant-toddler teachers are very low. The current market is funded by parent fees and/or child care subsidies, which are not sufficient to cover the full costs of the high-quality care that babies need to thrive. Fortunately, NC has a number of policy solutions to support high-quality care for babies and toddlers. Child care subsidy reimbursement rates can be increased to cover the full cost of care, more subsidy slots can be made available to a greater number of eligible children, Early Head Start programs can be funded to serve additional children, and high-quality pilot programs like NC Babies First can be expanded. What is certain is that a state-level solution to the dire need for more quality infant-toddler care will be necessary for NC to meet current and future demand.

Access to child care improves equity for infants and toddlers.

Child care deserts do not affect families equally across NC. Black and Brown communities, which have been consistently under-resourced, are predicted to experience worsening child care desert conditions as a result of the pandemic.¹⁴ Statewide, children of color are more likely to be growing up in economically poorer conditions, with child poverty rates more than 50% higher than the state average. Counties with the fewest high-quality infant-toddler programs have child poverty rates above the state average of 21.1%. Of the eleven counties with five or fewer high-quality programs for infants and toddlers, nine counties report more young children of color growing up in poverty than the state average for their ethnic group, which is already elevated from the state average. Six of the eleven counties are above the state average overall.¹⁵ Communities of color are further disadvantaged when child care options are not available to them. When families have difficulty finding care for the children, mothers are 12% less likely to be employed.¹⁶ A state-level solution to ensure all NC counties have an adequate supply of quality care options for babies has the potential to address economic inequalities wrought through more than two centuries of policy and systemic actions that continue to disadvantage people of color today. Focusing state-level attention and resources on increasing the supply of high-quality infant-toddler care is the right thing to do for babies and toddlers of color and is an opportunity to invest in NC's future.





Think Babies™ NC Alliance

The Think Babies™ NC Alliance seeks to ensure that North Carolina's youngest children, prenatal to age 3, benefit from effective and equitable public policies, programs, and funding so that all children have what they need to thrive: healthy beginnings, supported families, and quality early care and learning experiences.

For more information:

Think Babies™ NC Alliance: Info@ThinkBabiesNC.org

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¹ Jessen-Howard, S., Malik, R., Workman, S., & Hamm, K. (2018). Understanding Infant and Toddler Child Care Deserts. Center for American Progress.

² <https://childcaredeserts.org> (2020). Center for American Progress.

³ Zero to Three. (2021). State of Babies Yearbook, NC state data. And, DCDEE. (September, 2021). Child Care Analysis Summary.

⁴ Zero to Three. (2021). State of Babies Yearbook, NC state data. And, CCSA. (August, 2021). Infant and Toddler Care in North Carolina.

⁵ Zero to Three. (2021). State of Babies Yearbook, NC state data.

⁶ Center for American Progress. (2018). America's Child Care Deserts in 2018.

⁷ EdNC. (2020). While Most NC Child Care Providers are Open, their Status and Future are Still Shaky.

⁸ Zero to Three. (2021). State of Babies Yearbook, NC state data. And, DCDEE. (September, 2021). Child Care Analysis Summary.

⁹ CCSA. (August, 2021). Infant and Toddler Care in North Carolina.

¹⁰ DCDEE. (September, 2021). Child Care Analysis Summary.

¹¹ Child Care Services Association (CCSA). (August, 2021). Infant and Toddler Care in North Carolina.

¹² DCDEE. (August, 2021). 4-and 5-star programs and infant-toddler enrollment by county.

¹³ National Head Start Association. (2017). North Carolina Head Start Profile. And, Head Start-State Collaboration Office. (2018). Data.

¹⁴ Center for American Progress. (2020). The Coronavirus Pandemic will make Child Care Deserts Worse and Exacerbate Inequality.

¹⁵ NC Child. (June, 2021). Data by County, Family Economic Security.

¹⁶ Center for American Progress. (2020). The Coronavirus Pandemic will make Child Care Deserts Worse and Exacerbate Inequality.