



Help Wanted!

Child Care Staffing Crisis Means *Still* No Room for Babies

By Diane Dellanno and Cynthia Rice

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought long overdue national attention to the essential role that child care providers play in enabling parents to work. Our economic recovery is unequivocally linked to the availability of quality, affordable child care, but the ongoing pandemic has also made it more challenging than ever to recruit and retain early childhood educators, particularly for infant-toddler classrooms. This is largely due to the historically low salaries and poor benefits associated with the early childhood workforce, as well as the increased stress of working with very young children, which intensified during the pandemic.

As of July 2022, child care employment in the United States was still 8.4% below what it was in February 2020 with nearly 90,000 child care professionals leaving the workforce for higher-paying and less stressful jobs.¹ Although New Jersey's child care employment has been rising, the numbers have not reached pre-pandemic levels, which is troublesome, considering staffing shortages existed even before COVID. This ongoing child care workforce crisis has left programs understaffed, preventing them from operating at full capacity, thereby limiting child care options for working families, especially those with infants and toddlers.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) wanted to better understand the magnitude of this problem that is making it so difficult for working parents to find care for their youngest children. Through the distribution of a survey to all child care centers licensed to serve infants and toddlers in New Jersey, ACNJ was able to elicit from the responses why there is *Still No Room for Babies*. This report, highlighting those findings, makes it clear that solving the child care crisis warrants new policies to address workforce compensation.

Early Childhood Educators in High Demand But Poorly Compensated

Despite the critical role early childhood educators play in ensuring that young children receive nurturing and enriching care, and being deemed “essential” at the beginning of the pandemic, compensation for this important work remains low, with many child care educators earning little more than minimum wage.

When ranked by annual pay, child care workers -- with women, predominantly women of color, making up 96.7% of this workforce -- remain nearly at the bottom of all U.S. occupations.² The average child care teacher in the United States earns less than \$30,000 each year, barely above the federal poverty line for a family of four.³ In New Jersey, as of May 2021, the annual mean wage of a New Jersey child care teacher was \$31,450, or \$15.12 per hour.⁴

Infant-toddler caregivers are generally the lowest paid among caregivers and have higher staff turnover rates than those caring for older populations. On average, infant-toddler teachers are paid \$6.21 per hour less than those in preschool-age classrooms.⁵ This wage gap makes it even more challenging to find educators to work in the infant-toddler rooms.


Due to their near poverty salaries, many child care workers qualify for public assistance programs. In a study by the Center for Study of Child Care Employment, 53% of child care workers or their family members are enrolled in at least one public support program, compared to 21% of the U.S. workforce as a whole.⁶ In addition, only about one-third of full-time early childhood teachers have health insurance through their workplace, far lower than the 52% of workers across all sectors who participated in employer-sponsored health insurance programs in 2019.⁷

Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Why Is There **Still** No Room For Babies?

The availability of a robust supply of quality child care for infants and toddlers is vital for New Jersey families, particularly since 68% of children under age three live in a household where all parents are in the labor force.⁸ Of the more than 304,000 children under the age of three living in New Jersey,⁹ nearly 207,000 babies are likely to need some form of child care while their parents work.

Despite a slight increase over the last five years in the number of child care centers licensed to serve infants and toddlers, finding child care for babies has become even more challenging for New Jersey families with very young children.



WHY ARE FEWER BABIES BEING SERVED?

Child care providers cited they cannot find enough classroom staff to work in their infant/toddler room as the number one reason (75%). Programs struggle to compete with rising wages and can barely afford to pay the minimum wage.

In order to better understand the current state of licensed center-based child care for infants and toddlers in New Jersey since the pandemic, this past spring ACNJ conducted a statewide survey. Programs were emailed a link to the survey. Centers that did not have an email address or did not respond to the survey were contacted by phone to gather the information.

Survey respondents were asked to report on several measures of capacity, including: licensed capacity (the maximum number of slots allowed per N.J. licensing standards); desired capacity (the number of slots a provider is willing to serve); as well as the number served on a typical day. They were also asked to share reasons why they were not serving up to the desired capacity.

Among the 1,785 centers licensed to provide infant-toddler child care,¹⁰ 836 (47% of all centers licensed to serve infants and toddlers) completed the survey. All counties, except for Hudson County (24%), had more than 30% of the total number of centers licensed to provide

SHORTAGE IMPACT ON FAMILIES

Fewer parents, particularly mothers, can return to work because of New Jersey's infant/toddler child care shortage. This affects them, their children and our economy. There is not enough room in licensed child care centers for New Jersey's 206,908 (68%) babies two and younger that live in households with all available parents in the labor force that could potentially need child care.

68%
of NJ babies potentially need child care.

infant toddler care respond to the survey. Of those responding, 696 centers completed questions regarding desired capacity and typical enrollment. (See Table 1)

Findings revealed that although child care centers from across the state reported that they have the space to serve more babies, they simply can't find enough staff to work in the infant-toddler room:

- On average, child care programs reported serving ten fewer infants and toddlers than they would like to serve.
- Among the survey respondents that reported serving fewer infants and toddlers than desired, 75% identified staffing as the primary reason.
- The infant-toddler child care staffing shortage in New Jersey is widespread, with the majority of centers in 20 of the 21 counties that responded to the survey identifying problems hiring staff as the primary reason they are unable to enroll more babies.

PROVIDERS SERVE FEWER BABIES THAN DESIRED

Collectively, providers reported serving a total of 6,813 fewer infants and toddlers than they would like to serve.

Programs are serving on avg.
10
fewer babies than their capacity

Progress Made Since 2017 **No Room For Babies** Release

Since the release of ACNJ's [No Room for Babies](#) report in 2017,¹¹ several positive changes have happened on the state level, especially regarding reimbursement rates for centers serving children in the state's child care assistance program.

Policy and programmatic changes by the New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS) included:

- separating the infant child care subsidy rate from the toddler rate, recognizing the increased cost of care for infants with its lower staff to child ratio (4:1);
- [raising subsidy reimbursement rates for infants by 70%](#); ¹²
- establishing tiered reimbursement for quality improvements, with the highest increase for infant care;
- placing an infant-toddler specialist in each child care resource and referral agency to better respond to center technical assistance needs, as well as infant-toddler educator professional development; and
- creating an infant-toddler quality expansion initiative.

Most recently, as part of the FY23 budget, Governor Murphy signed into law [Thriving by Three](#), a \$28 million legislative initiative to develop more quality child care for and toddlers, targeted to low-income communities and/or child care deserts.

“We don’t take infants and only take toddlers just before 18 months due to the staff to child ratio. It is not profitable for the space we need to use and the tuition we receive.”
 -Response from survey

The Federal Commitment to Child Care Falters

While all of these steps are encouraging, most states, including New Jersey, had hoped for another federal COVID package that would move beyond addressing the COVID-related emergencies in child care and begin to solve the long-standing issues of this beleaguered system. President Biden’s Build Back Better bill had proposed significant investments in both child care and preschool in order to address quality, access and affordability. This final iteration of the bill, however, now titled the [Inflation Reduction Act](#), recently signed into law, completely left out child care funding, leaving hopes for a stronger system of early care and education in jeopardy.

Table 1. Infant-Toddler Child Care Centers Responding on Desired and Current Enrollment, 2022 (N=696)

County	# of Centers Licensed to Serve Infants/Toddlers 2022	# of Centers that Responded on Max and Typical Enrollment	Max # of Infants and Toddlers That Centers Reported They Are Willing To Serve*	# of Infants and Toddlers That Centers Reported They Currently Serve*	Average # of Fewer Children Served by Each Center	% of Centers that Reported Serving Fewer Children Due to Inability to Find Staff for Infant/Toddler Rooms
Atlantic	45	15	509	394	7.6	72.73%
Bergen	181	68	2,767	2,200	8.3	72.22%
Burlington	71	39	1,671	1,398	7	96.30%
Camden	102	38	1,409	1,065	9	82.86%
Cape May	16	8	239	220	2.4	50%
Cumberland	26	7	412	250	23.1	80%
Essex	201	78	3,298	2,492	10.3	67.80%
Gloucester	56	30	1,147	810	11.2	80.77%
Hudson	206	39	1,456	1,152	7.8	38.46%
Hunterdon	21	4	106	81	6.3	100%
Mercer	75	32	1,173	842	10.3	62.96%
Middlesex	133	67	2,564	1,863	10.5	74.14%
Monmouth	107	35	1,326	935	11.2	85.19%
Morris	112	59	2,433	1,776	11.1	83.33%
Ocean	94	36	1,567	1,286	7.8	76.67%
Passaic	112	57	2,151	1,623	9.3	65.91%
Salem	11	3	59	59	0	0%
Somerset	87	49	2,234	1,559	13.7	78.95%
Sussex	25	2	74	55	9.5	66.67%
Union	84	25	1,043	794	9.9	90%
Warren	20	5	85	56	5.8	66.67%
TOTAL	1,785	696	27,723	20,910	9.78	74.39%

*Number includes total for all centers responding.

Conclusion

Without a robust supply of well-trained and compensated infant-toddler educators, the staffing crisis will continue. Compensating providers fairly and supporting workforce development would help programs recruit and retain qualified caregivers who can afford to remain as early childhood educators. Providing adequate funding would help both increase the supply of programs and ensure quality because, as overwhelmingly suggested by existing research and data, consistent and stable caregiving is beneficial for child development.

Solving the long-standing staffing issues affecting the education and care of our youngest children must be a “team” effort, which includes a renewed commitment from the federal government and a continued commitment from our state. Child care for the children of working parents is as “essential” now as it was at the beginning of the pandemic, and our federal and state commitment to this system should reflect its importance.

"Staffing is our biggest challenge—paying competitive rates and benefits compared to other industries such as retail. A lot of the applicants are in need of child care themselves. Our rates and the subsidy from the state must adjust to be able to make payroll, benefits, insurance and other business expenses. Training new staff is also a challenge."

"Compensation and salaries is way too low! Their salary has to be offered at a competitive range so there are more people that want to enter the early childhood education profession and join the workforce. We have a hard time to retain staffing because they go to other fields or public school districts for better compensation and benefits."

"This age bracket is the hardest to find staffing for. We can not compete salary wise."

-Responses from survey

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/brief/child-care-sector-jobs-bls-analysis/>

² [Still Underpaid and Unequal - Center for American Progress](#)

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes399011.htm#st>

⁵ [Still Underpaid and Unequal - Center for American Progress](#)

⁶ Early Childhood Workforce Index — 2020 | Center for the Study of Child Care Employment | University of California, Berkeley

⁷ [Still Underpaid and Unequal - Center for American Progress](#)

⁸ Number and Percent of Children Ages Two and Under who are Living with Resident Parents and All Available Parents are in the Labor Force, by County, 2015-2019 American Community Survey, Public Use Micro-data Sample.

⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), Bridged-Race Population Estimates, Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/bridged-race-v2020.html> on Feb 25, 2022.

¹⁰ The number of centers licensed to provide child care for infants and toddlers, as was reported by the N.J. Department of Children and Families, Office of Licensing as of March 2022.

¹¹ [2017 05 30 No More Room for Babies.pub \(acnj.org\)](#)

¹² [Department of Human Services | Murphy Administration Announces \\$83 Million Additional Investment in Child Care & Support for Working Families \(nj.gov\)](#)



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