

Assessing Childcare Affordability, Access, and Service Needs in Jefferson County

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Childcare is increasingly recognized as essential community infrastructure that supports children, families, employers, and local economies. When families cannot find affordable and accessible childcare, the repercussions extend beyond individual households to workforce participation, employer recruitment and retention, community well-being, and economic development.

This brief provides an objective overview of how: (1) childcare affordability, access, and service needs can be assessed; (2) the data sources and indicators commonly used to understand local conditions; and (3) the ways assessment findings can inform decision-making.



Key Takeaways:

- **Comprehensive understanding of childcare access goes beyond the number of providers or available childcare slots.** Dimensions of access include affordability, availability, accessibility, workforce capacity, service needs, and family experiences.
- **No single data source appropriately captures all dimensions of childcare access.** It is most effective to draw upon multiple data sources, including administrative records, demographic and economic data, geographic analyses, workforce indicators, and stakeholder input.
- **Assessment findings can serve multiple purposes,** including informing strategic planning, priority-setting, funding decisions, and evaluation or monitoring efforts.

Implications for Jefferson County

- **Childcare functions as community infrastructure.** Childcare affects workforce participation, employer competitiveness, family economic stability, and children's development.
- **Geographic conditions matter.** Jefferson County's mix of urban, suburban, foothill, and mountain communities may result in varying childcare challenges across communities.
- **Provider counts tell only part of the story.** Assessments are most informative when they examine affordability, accessibility, workforce capacity, service needs, and family experiences alongside provider capacity.
- **Workforce constraints may limit capacity even when facilities exist.** Staffing shortages, turnover, and compensation challenges can affect service availability.
- **Assessment findings are most useful when linked to decision-making.** Findings can inform planning, resource allocation, partnership-building, policy development, and evaluation efforts.

Question 1: How is Childcare Access Assessed?

Childcare access extends beyond the number of providers or available childcare slots. Researchers have identified multiple dimensions of access,¹ which provide a more complete understanding of where barriers exist and the factors contributing to unmet need:

1

Affordability

Measures: Affordability measures commonly include childcare costs across age groups and care settings, household spending on childcare, subsidy participation, and the extent to which childcare expenses create barriers for families.

Considerations: Affordability must be considered in relation to family resources rather than childcare prices alone. For example, childcare expenses can consume a substantial share of household budgets, even among some families receiving assistance.

2

Availability and Unmet Demand

Measures: Measures often include licensed providers, licensed childcare spaces, infant and toddler capacity, enrollment levels, waitlists, and estimates of the relationship between childcare supply and demand.

Considerations: Estimates of unmet demand may vary depending on how need is defined, including whether analyses focus on all children, working families, or families actively seeking care.

3

Accessibility

Measures: Measures of accessibility may include proximity to providers, transportation considerations, availability of care during nontraditional hours, and alignment between available services and family schedules.

Considerations: Although related, accessibility differs from availability. A childcare slot may exist yet remain inaccessible because of transportation barriers, distance, operating hours, language barriers, scheduling constraints, or eligibility requirements.

4

Service Needs, Quality, and Workforce Capacity

Measures: Access also depends on whether available services adequately meet families' needs and preferences. Relevant measures may include the availability of infant and toddler care, care during evenings and weekends, services for children with disabilities, and culturally responsive programs.

Considerations: Families may also consider indicators related to quality and program fit, such as staff qualifications, accreditation status, quality improvement participation, child-to-staff ratios, and specialized supports. Recruitment, retention, turnover, compensation, workplace conditions, and career advancement opportunities are all factors that influence workforce stability and providers' ability to maintain childcare capacity.

5

Family and Community Perspectives

Measures: Surveys, focus groups, interviews, and stakeholder engagement activities can capture information that may not be reflected in administrative data, including scheduling challenges, transportation barriers, information gaps, cultural preferences, and unmet service needs.

Considerations: Employer and provider perspectives may also provide insight into how childcare challenges affect workforce participation, recruitment, retention, attendance, and productivity.

Question 2: What Data Sources Are Commonly Used to Assess Childcare Access?

No single dataset fully captures all dimensions of childcare access. Assessments therefore draw on multiple sources of information:

Provider Information

- State and local administrative and licensing records may offer data on provider locations, provider counts, licensed capacity, ages served, tuition rates, program type, and hours of operation.
- State and local subsidy program data can offer information about service utilization, participation patterns, and family access to financial assistance.
- Workforce indicators may include vacancies, turnover rates, compensation, educational qualifications, and professional development opportunities.
- Surveys and interviews with families, providers, employers, and community stakeholders can provide additional information about barriers that may not be captured in administrative records.²

Family Demographic and Economic Information

- State and local administrative data, along with US Census data, may provide information on common measures including the number of children under age five, birth rates, population growth, labor-force participation, household income, and poverty rates.¹
- These indicators help estimate potential demand and identify populations that may face affordability challenges.

Geographic Information

Geographic analyses may examine provider density, travel distances, transportation considerations, and availability of care during nontraditional hours.^{1,4}

Other Affordability Information

Looking across data sources, other indicators of affordability may include childcare costs as a percentage of household income, subsidy participation, family copayments, and provider acceptance of subsidies.¹

Question 3: How Can Assessment Findings Inform Decision-Making?

Informing strategic planning.

Assessment findings can identify strengths, gaps, and areas of unmet need. Administrative and program data can also establish baseline conditions against which future changes can be assessed, helping decision-makers monitor trends and evaluate outcomes.

Identifying causes of service gaps.

Examining multiple dimensions of access can help distinguish among different barriers. For example:

- High childcare costs may indicate affordability challenges.
- Long travel distances may indicate accessibility barriers.
- Limited nontraditional-hour care may signal a mismatch between services & family needs.
- Workforce vacancies and turnover may indicate staffing constraints.⁵

Informing resource allocation, funding decisions, and partnerships.

Assessment findings can help decision makers identify which areas need to be prioritized, or where resources may have the greatest impact. Findings can also help support grant applications and collaborative planning efforts by documenting community needs and service gaps.^{6,8} Shared evidence can further support coordination among providers, employers, schools, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies.

Monitoring progress.

Assessment findings may be used to monitor changes in childcare availability, affordability, workforce conditions, subsidy utilization, and family experiences over time.⁸ This can include evaluating the effectiveness of different programs or policy changes made within the county.

Illustrative Examples

Estes Valley, Colorado

Estes Park's [childcare needs assessment](#) examined childcare supply, unmet need, employer experiences, and provider challenges. Findings informed a strategic plan focused on expanding childcare availability and addressing workforce-related barriers.

Santa Barbara County, California

Santa Barbara County's [childcare needs assessment](#) used surveys and interviews with families, employers, providers, and community leaders to identify local needs and system strengths. Findings informed countywide planning and partnership efforts intended to strengthen the local childcare system.

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Methods

Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as reports from non-partisan think tanks. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal statistical methods for summarizing results and exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

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