

# THE CHALLENGE OF RURAL CHILDCARE IN CANADA

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*ABSTRACT:* Childcare is underdeveloped in Canada even though the country is a rich federation. Unlike many better-developed social policies, childcare services are delivered primarily through voluntary, non-profit or commercial markets rather than by governments. This policy framework is disadvantageous for all children and families, and has particularly severe consequences for rural, remote and northern Canadians. This article provides an overview of childcare services outside of towns and cities, considering how Canada's political system of federalism and its liberal social welfare policy architecture work against high quality and equitable childcare services.

*Keywords:* Canada. Federalism. Liberal welfare regime. Women's equality. Rural and aboriginal childcare.

## *O desafio do atendimento à criança rural no Canadá*

*RESUMO:* No Canadá, o atendimento à infância é pouco desenvolvido, apesar de o país ser uma federação rica. Ao contrário de muitas políticas sociais bem desenvolvidas, os serviços de atendimento à infância são principalmente ofertados por meio de mercados voluntários, comerciais ou sem fins lucrativos, em vez de iniciativas governamentais. Essa estrutura política desfavorece todas as crianças e famílias e tem consequências severas, particularmente para canadenses de áreas rurais, remotas e do norte do país. Este artigo fornece

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DOI: 10.1590/CC0101-32622017176122

uma visão geral dos servidos de atenção à infância fora das cidades, considerando (a) como o sistema político canadense de federalismo e (b) sua arquitetura política liberal de bem-estar social trabalham contra a alta qualidade e equidade dos serviços.

*Palavras-chave:* Canadá. Federalismo. Regime de bem-estar social liberal. Igualdade feminina. Atendimento à infância rural e aborígene.

## INTRODUCTION

Canada is a rich country with many well-developed social programs, yet childcare services are not among them. For Canada's 4.8 million children under the age of 12 years, there are just 1.2 million licensed childcare spaces in group centres and licensed family homes (FRIENDLY *et al.*, 2015). This means just 25% of Canada's children have access to a regulated early learning and childcare space. Access to childcare worsens when the region is taken into account, as childcare services are mainly found in cities and towns. Rural, northern and remote regions of Canada are particularly under-served, as are Aboriginal communities<sup>1</sup>. Although Canada's children can be found all over the map, few who live outside urban areas have access to quality early childhood education and care<sup>2</sup>.

Regulated childcare services in Canada include licensed centres and family homes: centres provide 92% of all spaces, and private homes offer the remaining 8%. Centres and homes may be voluntary, non-profit, public, or commercial facilities. Relying on a mixed market economy of childcare is disadvantageous for all children and families, and has particularly negative consequences for rural, remote and northern Canadians. Comparing with cities' areas, in non-metropolitan Canada, childcare services are even more scarce, inaccessible and weakly suited to parent needs; and the quality of care is questionable, in large part because few trained early childhood educators work in rural and northern centres and homes.

Overall, childcare spaces are so lacking in Canada that parents who are in the system talk about their good fortune in “winning the lottery”. Families who can find and afford a childcare space perceive they have good fortune, rather than believe they have a right to childcare. Albanese and Farr (2012) explain that Canadian mothers regularly “invoke the notion of luck when they describe how they have found and managed their daily child care arrangements”. In the absence of quality childcare, work-family balance, women’s equality, children’s rights, Indigenous reconciliation, and other important social goals are severely compromised.

Canada is a big country, with a landmass of almost 10 million km<sup>2</sup>, stretching 5,187 km from the Pacific to the Atlantic oceans. Yet most of its 35 million residents (an estimated 90%) live within 160 km of the US/Canada border. This densely populated belt, mapping onto the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, contains nearly every major urban centre of Canada. Despite popular images of Canada as a wilderness, 81% of Canadians live in an urban area, and Canada has been a predominantly urban country for nearly a century (STATISTICS CANADA, 2011a). Nevertheless, more than 6.3 million Canadians still live in rural areas, defined by the national statistical agency as “areas with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants and a population density below 400 people per square kilometer”<sup>3</sup>. At one in five, the proportion of people living in rural areas in Canada is among the lowest of the G8 countries (STATISTICS CANADA, 2011a). In the words of one Canadian overview, the rural, remote and northern communities are a “kaleidoscope of diversity that includes changing demographics, non-standard employment patterns, large geographic distances, cultural and linguistic differences and service delivery challenges” (CCAAC, 2005, p. 5).

For parents and children in rural, remote and northern parts of Canada, childcare services are problematic. Services are inadequate, leaving families with little access to quality, regulated early learning and childcare programs with qualified early childhood educators. Yet rural families reliably have access to good public schools, to public healthcare, and to other important services. Why are childcare services so under-developed? This article provides an overview of the state of rural Canadian childcare services, describing the distribution of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs and explaining why access is a matter of luck and

the roll of market dice, rather than entitlement. It argues that Canada's political system of federalism and its liberal social welfare policy architecture work against high quality and equitable childcare services for all children, resulting in even more adverse effects for women and children in rural, northern and remote regions.

## FEDERALISM AND LIBERAL SOCIAL WELFARE ARCHITECTURE

Canada was founded as a country 150 years ago, although Indigenous people had lived on the land now called Canada for thousands of years. Since its founding in 1867, Canada has been a federation with a division of power between the national government and the country's ten provinces and three northern territories, as well as with First Nations. A series of legal documents specify the political responsibilities of the various levels of governments, and each of these has posed challenges to the development of comprehensive childcare services. Equally important, Canada's political culture and history has been markedly "liberal", in Esping-Andersen's (1990) use of the term. Like other liberal welfare regimes, Canada provides many services through the family or the market, instead of the state, and this has also profoundly marked the development of childcare services.

Federalism shapes all aspects of social policy in Canada. This complex federal and institutional structure means national and sub-national government power is formally stratified by legislation, as well as informally as successive federal governments have sought variously to strengthen or weaken national leadership. In practice, this division of power has often meant long squabbles in which the provinces and the central government each identify the other as being responsible for policy failings, or in which First Nations and the national government dispute whose responsibility it is. Childcare has particularly suffered in this respect (FRIENDLY & PRENTICE, 2009; FRIENDLY & WHITE, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

Canada's *Constitution Act* of 1867 assigns legislative responsibility for all social services, including childcare and education, to the

provinces. The federal government has no formal power to regulate a provincial social service. When it comes to childcare, provinces set standards for health and safety, staff qualifications, curriculum and other quality measures. Still due to the federal government's having greater taxation powers — and hence has larger revenues than provinces — it often uses its purse, *i.e.* its financial power, to influence provincial action. It does so by transferring funds to provinces to help finance their social services. Ottawa can, and usually does, set conditions and terms on these transferred funds (CAMERON, 2009).

A particularity of Canadian federalism is how it deals with Indigenous people (PEACH & RASMUSSEN, 2005). Under the much-criticized *Indian Act*, the federal government has legislative responsibility for First Nations. This is contradictory, because Aboriginal peoples are recognized as one of the founding nations of Canada. In fact, Canada's 1982 *Constitution Act* recognizes the "inherent right of Aboriginal self-government". In social services, this aspect of federalism has generated considerable negative outcomes: while other residents of a province receive social services under provincial regulations, on-reserve First Nations' services are generally organized through Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada<sup>5</sup>. The federal government has systematically neglected its duty to First Nations, chronically under-funding social services for Aboriginal people (FIRST NATIONS CHILD AND FAMILY CARING SOCIETY OF CANADA, 2015).

Most of Canada's cherished social programs began before the mid-1970s; unlike healthcare and pensions, however, the real growth in childcare services began later, as women's labour force participation began its steep climb (STATISTICS CANADA, 2011b). This history means that childcare services were not incorporated into the core arrangements of federalism, and instead had to seek awkward fit into existing programs (FRIENDLY & PRENTICE, 2009). Canada is a country entirely without a national vision or plan for childcare, and with no secure national funding arrangements to support provincial spending. This is a big part of why Canadian childcare scores so poorly on international comparisons. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), for example, ranks Canada at the bottom of its list of 25 advanced countries, in part

because it fails to spend the recommended minimum 1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on ECEC services (UNICEF, 2008; WHITE & FRIENDLY, 2012).

In addition to federalism and institutional arrangements, Canada performs poorly on childcare for another reason: it is a liberal welfare state<sup>6</sup>. Liberalism is one of the “three worlds of welfare” identified by Esping-Andersen (1990), and liberal welfare regimes are characterized by an approach that is neither woman-friendly nor child-friendly (HERNES, 1987; PRENTICE, 2009). All welfare regimes organize a particular pattern of relationships among and between individuals and families, the market, the state, and civil society — the four points forming a “welfare diamond” (EVERS *et al.*, 1994). As Jane Jenson (2015) explains the metaphor, each point of the diamond is simultaneously a source of well-being and an instrument for risk-sharing. Markets, for example, allow people to purchase what they need — but they require cash, which is earned through paid labour in the market.

Childcare in liberal welfare states is typified by an organization that stresses market delivery. This means they are characterized by mixed economies, and almost inevitably rely on demand-side funding mechanisms and private delivery (OECD, 2006; WHITE & FRIENDLY, 2012). Studies show that, when compared to other liberal regimes, Canada’s approach to childcare is at the “maximum private responsibility end of the continuum” and state intervention is clearly subordinate to the market and the family (O’CONNOR *et al.*, 1999, p. 81). As a result, Canada is characterized by residualism (services only go to those who have exhausted every other possibility), with its focus on eligibility testing rather than universality. Even more than other liberal regimes (such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand or the United Kingdom), Canadian childcare provision is characterized by a high reliance on parent fees, targeted rather than universal services, fragmented policy silos between care and education, and enthusiasm for for-profit and unregulated childcare services. One clear illustration of what liberalism means in practice is that the market provides over 90% of Canada’s childcare spaces, whether by not-for-profit associations or commercial businesses: a scant one-tenth is directly and publicly owned and operated (FRIENDLY *et al.*, 2015).

The commitment to market provision in liberal regimes might be less troubling if it were paired with strong regulatory frameworks that ensured quality, regardless of the provider's auspice as not-for-profit, for-profit or public. A mixed economy of childcare providers with strong oversight could mitigate the weak regulations and standards characteristic of markets with a high degree of commercial service. For example, strong controls on price ceilings, child-staff ratios, and staff training could temper the market's tendency to profit maximization. Liberal regimes, however, have resisted such protective oversight when it comes to childcare (MORGAN, 2003; WHITE & FRIENDLY, 2012). Moreover, rent-seeking (defined as the practice of manipulating public policy as a strategy for increasing profits) also characterizes the childcare sector in liberal regimes — the commercial sector successfully lobbies for its financial self-interest (PRENTICE, 2000; BRENNAN, 2007).

The liberal model of social provision has ideational characteristics, as well as policy preferences. Among other things, gender equality assumes low importance. Canada has failed to meet its international obligations to ensure childcare services, even though it became a signatory to the United Nation (UN)'s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981. The latest review by the UN of Canada's compliance with CEDAW expressed concern with Canada's failure to ensure services and urged the adoption of a rights-based national childcare framework, calling on Canada to "intensify its efforts" to provide sufficient numbers of affordable childcare facilities (CEDAW, 2016). Likewise, although Canada has signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, little is done to actualize the Convention's nominally binding promises (FRIENDLY, 2006).

A combination of policy and ideational factors has created a series of contradictions in Canadian childcare. White and Friendly (2012) argue the incongruence between policy goals and policy implementation is troublesome in three ways. First, public spending is too low to finance services at equitable levels. Second, demand-side delivery of public funds (primarily through subsidizing parent fees) does not allow for quality services. Finally, targeted services mean that many families fail to benefit.

Overall, Canada's complex system of federalism, with its tangle of political responsibility and political division of power, is

a major factor explaining the path that childcare policy and provision has taken. Equally important, welfare regime theory illuminates how liberal social provision has resulted in a particular kind of mixed economy of childcare. In combination, these forces have shaped the distribution of childcare all across the country. In rural areas, however, these factors have compounded in particularly troublesome ways, resulting in childcare milieu that are markedly inferior to those of urban Canada.

## RURAL CHILDCARE

Canada has a patchwork of childcare services, meeting the needs of just one in four children for the country as a whole. Rural Canadians have even less access — and “rural Canada is in trouble” (REIMER, 2007, p. 3). A combination of depopulation and population aging characterizes most rural areas. The best estimate is that the population of rural Canada will continue to fall, as it has been dropping over recent years (MOAZZAMI, 2015). A small uptick between the last two censuses gives little reason to think otherwise: between 2006 and 2011, Canada’s rural population increased by just 1.1% compared to Canada’s overall growth rate of 5.9% — meaning the rural share of Canada is in decline (STATISTICS CANADA, 2011a). Rural, remote and northern regions rarely attract new immigrants, who tend to settle in urban centres (REIMER, 2007). Nevertheless, more than half of the country’s 1.4 million Aboriginal people (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) live in rural and northern areas (MOAZZAMI, 2015).

Rural economies have their own characteristics — they are seasonal, for example, in a way urban economies are not. A common characteristic of rural areas is their relatively high unemployment rates, including higher unemployment rates for women (MOAZZAMI, 2015). Rural women are more likely to work part-time and seasonally than their urban counterparts are, and their earnings are lower because their job options are more restricted. In many agricultural areas, an off-farm income is essential to family finances: although just 31% of farm women in 1982 had a paid job off the farm, the figure jumped to 50% in 2001 (ROPPEL *et al.*, 2006), and has likely climbed since then. An earn-



ing gap characterizes rural men and women's wages: on average, earnings in remote rural areas are about 30% lower than earnings in urban centres (MOAZZAMI, 2015). The size of the rural population varies greatly, from a low 14% in Ontario to a high of well over 50% in Prince Edward Island and the Territories (STATISTICS CANADA, 2011a) (Table 1). Yet, most rural areas are not agricultural: only 7% of rural Canadians are involved in farming (FRIENDLY *et al.*, 2016).

Friendly *et al.* (2016) argue that rural families need and value child care for many of the same reasons that non-rural Canadians do: to support parental employment; to provide early childhood education and socialization; to strengthen their communities; as well as the particular reason of addressing safety. Farms are one of the few workplaces where

**Table 1**  
Childcare access in rural Canada.

	<b>Percentage of population living in rural areas, 2011</b>	<b>Percentage of children aged 0-12 for whom there is a childcare space, 2012</b>
Newfoundland	41	11.2
Prince Edward Island	53	20.8
Nova Scotia	43	15.1
New Brunswick	48	22.9
Québec	19.4	37.4
Ontario	14.1	15.4
Manitoba	28	16.3
Saskatchewan	33	7.6
Alberta	16.9	15.3
British Columbia	13.8	18
Yukon	39	26.8
North West Territories	42	21.7
Nunavut	52	11.8
Canada	18.9	20.5

Source: Friendly *et al.* (2013; 2015), Statistics Canada (2011a) and <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo62a-eng.htm>>.

children are regularly present. Farm children are exposed to greater dangers than are non-farm children. The proof is the fact that injuries and fatalities among farm children are much higher than in the general population. A main cause of injury and death among farm children is related to riding on farm machinery, or being present at a worksite. Very young children are at even higher risk. Close to half of fatalities and over a third of child injuries involve children aged 1-6 years. This is a testament to the vulnerability of young children on farms (WATSON, 2001; PRENTICE, 2007b).

It is clear from this quick overview that rural Canada is far from homogenous. And, yet, the childcare realities across rural and northern Canada share remarkable similarities<sup>7</sup>. Two main factors are at play: low population density and the prevalence of non-standard hours and seasonal work. Together, these intensify market failure.

## SPACES AND ACCESS

Rural areas have lower access to childcare. In 2001, for example, the prairie province of Saskatchewan, over 50% rural, had a childcare space for just 4.2% of the province's children, and access had risen to just 7.6 by 2012 (Table 1). In their study, Friendly and team (2016) found that low density and large geographic distances make it hard for parents to access childcare, which is best consumed locally. Most data is reported at a provincial level: more granular figures are rare. In addition, some studies of small regions have found even more troubling access figures. In and around Humboldt, Saskatchewan, for example — one of the “most economically vibrant rural regions in the province” — there is a childcare space for just 1.9% of the region's areas (MARTZ & BAUER, 2005, p. 2). In northern Manitoba, the access rate is 7.3%, and in the rural Parkland area, 6.3% (PRENTICE, 2007a; 2007b). Many regions are even worse off. American researchers have recently examined access at very small unit levels (using zip codes), and have discovered many Americans live in “childcare deserts”: 55% of children in rural areas live in a childcare desert (MALIK *et al.*, 2016). Canadian patterns are likely similar or worse (WHITE, 2002).

One consequence of the lack of regulated childcare is that rural Canada relies heavily on informal care: care outside the home by a relative is more popular for children who live in a rural community compared to children who live in an urban setting (BUSHNIK, 2006), even though parents prefer regulated services (MARTZ & BAUER, 2005; SQUIRES, 2006).

Transportation is a key issue for parent access. While schools ensure access through busing, this solution is unavailable for most childcare programs. Solutions to the problem of distance will require flexibility and creativity. One community group suggested a possible solution could be “mobile childcare facilities,” especially for seasonally-intensive periods of need such as harvesting (CALHOUN *et al.*, 2005, p. 4).

## PARENT FEES AND SUBSIDIES

Because wages are lower in rural than in urban areas, rural parents find childcare costs a particular challenge. Fees vary widely across Canada and are based on the age of the child everywhere, except Québec, and often differ between centres and licensed family homes. Urban infant childcare costs range from a high of \$ 1,649 a month (\$ 19,788/year) in Toronto to a low of \$ 164 per month (\$ 1,968/year) — a difference of ten times (MACDONALD & FRIENDLY, 2016). Fees in rural areas have not been studied, but are likely similar. Importantly, rural fees are also likely following the national pattern, and rising much faster than the cost of living. Between 2014 and 2016, childcare fees across urban Canada rose 8% (compared to a 2.5% inflation rate) (MACDONALD & FRIENDLY, 2016).

Quebec, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island (PEI) governments set a provincial childcare fee and offer base funding to providers: childcare in these three provinces is considerably more affordable than elsewhere. All ten provinces, however, have at least some measures to partially offset childcare fees through subsidies for low-income families. Recent studies find that even with these subsidies, many parents pay “considerable sums” to be in regulated childcare (MACDONALD & FRIENDLY, 2016, p. 5). Where childcare supply is low and demand is

high, providers can charge higher fees. Even in the three highly regulated provinces, providers may be willing to forego provincial funds in order to charge what the market may bear. In Manitoba, for example, many rural family home childcare providers charge more than the base fee (PRENTICE *et al.*, 2016).

## QUALITY AND STAFFING

As Friendly *et al.* (2016) summarize: “finding and retaining qualified staff... is significantly harder in rural, remote and northern areas due to financial pressures keep wages low and to limited career options.” One national overview of rural childcare declares that after child safety, this is the most important issue for the field, since “rural, farm and seasonal workers’ children should have an equal right to quality child care as any other children” (WATSON, 2001, online).

Retention and turnover are a major problem for both home and centre-based providers in rural areas. One reason for this is that training opportunities in post-secondary institutions are scarce, and are not offered in a way that adequately meets the needs of rural residents. Even in 2017, Internet services or distance education supports are not readily available in many communities. There are often language or cultural barriers to training that makes it difficult to recruit new students to available programs. Transportation to education programs is also a challenge. While these are barriers for all potential rural ECEs, they are particularly complex for Aboriginal people who may wish to enter childcare (BALL, 2005; PRESTON, 2014).

In particular, training for family home care is unavailable even though “individuals operating family child care homes would access training if it were offered in a more flexible manner” (WATSON, 2001, online). Some research has suggested that “caregivers may need to be trained locally since it may be difficult to recruit from outside the community for these jobs, and the local labour pool may not have the requisite skills” (CALHOUN *et al.*, 2005, p. 4).

A risk in many rural areas is that graduates of ECE programs regularly move into the education or health sectors, in which they are able

to receive better wages, working conditions and benefits (CCAAC, 2005). Without increased wages, the loss of trained ECEs is likely to continue.

## FACILITY VIABILITY

The market model (financed by parent fees and delivered by private non-profit and for-profit providers) makes initiating and maintaining childcare a particular challenge for rural service providers. Some provinces adjust their funding formulae to account for higher operating costs in rural areas. For example, Ontario's 2013 childcare funding formula includes a Rural and Small Community Measure (RSCM) to guide its specific allocations, and New Brunswick has a specific funding program that makes grants available to start up rural childcare programs (FRIENDLY *et al.*, 2016). Other provinces, such as Manitoba and Saskatchewan, have no special programs to help rural childcare, although Manitoba has a Small Centre Grant that may help some rural facilities and Saskatchewan has a program designed for northern centres.

Rural realities are often not addressed in provincial policy and funding programs. A rural childcare report from Saskatchewan stressed the importance of obstacles such as “dependable transportation, reliable snow removal, geographic isolation, limited resources for assistance and training, low fees, seasonal unemployment of working families and a general lack of a strong support system” as barriers to establishing regulated child care centres in rural settings (MARTZ & BAUER, 2005, p. 15).

Higher costs for budget items such as supplies and training, as well as consideration for specific issues inherent in rural life (such as flexible attendance and multi age groupings), are not reflected in present urban-based funding policies. Concerned communities have stressed that “rural and remote childcare may be more expensive” and so funding formulae must be developed accordingly. Without recognition of these costs, rural childcare programs will continue to be less viable than urban programs. A British Columbia study found that rural childcare centres and homes are 10% more likely to close within four years than urban facilities (KERSHAW *et al.*, 2005, p. 430).

## ABORIGINAL FAMILIES AND CHILDCARE

Nearly half of all Aboriginal Canadians live in rural areas. When Aboriginal families live on reserves, the federal government is responsible for the costs of social services such as childcare. This jurisdictional division of powers haunts Indigenous communities, since the federal government has long discriminated against First Nations Children (FIRST NATIONS CHILD AND FAMILY CARING SOCIETY OF CANADA, 2015; CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS TRIBUNAL, 2016; GALLOWAY, 2016). Canada's colonial history of cultural genocide is now officially acknowledged, and discriminatory treatment is being challenged as Canada seeks reconciliation and to redress past wrongs. The magisterial report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) included a call for the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments "to develop culturally- appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families." (TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA, 2016, p. 152). This would include, among other aspects of curriculum, the teaching of Indigenous languages and cultural practices.

Services for Aboriginal children must acknowledge the "direct and indirect, continuing and insidious, multi-generational impacts arising out of the trauma of the Residential School system" (NWAC, 2005, p. 5) which saw young children forcibly removed from their families. The Native Women's Association of Canada bluntly claims that "we have an acute need for more early learning and child care than any other group in Canada" (NWAC, 2005, p. 5). Aboriginal people have the lowest standard of living of any group in Canada, and poverty among Aboriginal children causes a cascade of harmful outcomes. The scale of Indigenous poverty is appalling: half of First Nations children live below the poverty line, and the number grows to 62% in Manitoba and 64% in Saskatchewan (BRITAIN & BLACKSTOCK, 2015).

The TRC observed that "Aboriginal families continue to suffer from a general lack of early childhood education programs" (TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA, 2016, p. 152). According to the report, nearly four in five (78%) of Aborig-

inal children up to the age of five have no access to regulated childcare services, even though “such programs are vital to support the development of young children and, by extension, address some of the deficit in parenting skills that is the legacy of residential schools” (TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA, 2016, p. 152).

## ADVOCACY FOR RURAL CHILDCARE

Rural communities have organized to promote their interests. One of the most effective groups was Rural Voices, an advocacy group that helped rural communities learn from each other’s experiences setting up care programs<sup>8</sup>. Another was Communities Achieving Responsive Services (CARS). CARS was a project designed to increase the participation of mothers in the development and delivery of local services in rural, remote and northern communities across Canada. The project trained at least two young mothers in every province, equipping them with skills and confidence to improve services and supports for children and families in their home community. The Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) has consistently called for services for all Canadians, wherever they live. The Native Women’s Association of Canada has recommended for a national Aboriginal Early Learning and Child Council (NWAC, 2005).

One national summit on rural childcare ended with a call for action, based on the principle that

communities take great pride in their individuality and the creation of their own solutions to community needs. It is unlikely that one service model will respond to the needs of all communities, especially rural based communities. Community members should actively participate in policy development and program design of childcare options for children and families living in rural, remote and northern communities across Canada so that their childcare needs will be met in the development of a national childcare strategy (CCAAC, 2005).

In the past decades, most advocacy initiatives that relied on non-profit organizations and volunteers fell victim to the familialist and conservative vision of recent national governments, which used austerity logic to defund and delegitimize equity-seeking groups. The Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015) eroded the capacity and effectiveness of many civil society organizations. Sadly, Rural Voices and CARS have shut down (and their websites no longer function). The CCAAC has been hobbled by lack of funding as well. One review of rural childcare concluded that, despite many promising pilot studies and innovative model development, “little of permanence had been achieved” (BROWNELL, 2000, p. 7). Nevertheless, advocates continue to promote a national childcare framework that will be responsive to needs of all Canadians — including rural and northern Canada and Indigenous communities (CCAAC *et al.*, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Outside urban centres, rural and northern Canadian children and families face major challenges finding childcare. Services are inaccessible and often fail to meet the scheduling needs of rural families; fees are high; and the quality is low as qualified early childcare educators are scarce. While this scenario is disadvantageous to all Canadians, the impact on Aboriginal children and families is especially troubling. The explanation for why this crisis persists lies in the architecture of Canadian federalism, and the country’s political history as a liberal welfare regime. Across the country, advocates and stakeholders have experimented with a range of pilot models and explored flexible and innovative delivery systems, yet the challenge of rural and northern childcare remains. Despite reams of research on the importance of childcare services to rural people and their economies, rural Canadians, like all Canadians, lack the services they need.

All the evidence leads to the inevitable conclusion that rural families — like other Canadian families — “will benefit most from a planned, publicly-financed child care system that is both evi-



dence-based and flexible enough to meet the needs of all” (FRIENDLY *et al.*, 2016). Yet the deeply rooted arrangements of federalism, and the legacy of liberalism, pose nearly insurmountable barriers. Nevertheless, there is reason to hope that the policy architecture can be shifted. As women continue their unstoppable participation in paid labour and as reconciliation efforts with Aboriginal people assume new urgency, provincial and national governments will face increasing pressure to act.

The pressure is being felt. Newly elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s first budget declared that “for Canadian families, high quality, affordable child care is more than a convenience — it’s a necessity” (GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2016, p. 101). Explaining that the Government recognizes the “deep connection between child care and the economic security of families,” it committed significant new funds (GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2016, p. 101). The Liberal government — after years of inaction and cutbacks under Conservatives — dedicated \$400 million in 2017-2018 to childcare services, with an additional \$100 million for on-reserve Aboriginal childcare. Even more importantly, the federal government has said it will “work with provinces, territories and Indigenous peoples to establish a National Framework on Early Learning and Child Care that meets...the needs of Canadian families wherever they live.” (GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 2016, p. 101). Canadian children and families must hope this government lives up to its promise.

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## NOTES

1. Nomenclature for Indigenous peoples is complex. Following the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (BRITAIN & BLACKSTOCK, 2015), the following definitions are used in this paper: Aboriginal is a constitutional term, used to describe persons and groups identifying as First Nations, Inuit or Métis. First Nations describes persons and collectivities who self-identify as First Nations (and who may or may not have Indian Status under the *Indian Act*, administered by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada). Indigenous is used as umbrella term, as a synonym for Aboriginal.
2. The vast majority of Canadian children receive non-parental care in unregulated settings, due the scarcity of licensed spaces: these may include care by kin or older siblings, neighbours, private nannies, self-care, as well as unregulated formal and informal settings. This paper focuses exclusively on regulated and licensed care.
3. The definition of “rural” is contested. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, defines rural as an area with a population density of less than 150 persons per square kilometer (OECD, 2011). In this paper, it is used Statistic Canada’s definition, while also including a discussion of northern issues.
4. In six of the 10 provinces of Canada, childcare is under official responsibility of the Department of Education. In the other four, this is a responsibility of the Ministry of Families and Social Services, or the province’s equivalent.
5. The name of this federal agency changes frequently.
6. The province of Québec, one of the largest provinces (and the one which is officially francophone), is an exception, sharing more similarities with social democratic models. Québec’s social policy is markedly different from the rest of Canada, and childcare is the principal exemplar of this difference. For an overview, see Albanese and Farr, 2012 and Jenson, 2001. This paper focuses on provinces outside Québec.

7. This section indebted to the Childcare Resource and Research Unit's Occasional Paper no. 30: (FRIENDLY *et al.*, 2016).
8. See, for example, [https://ccaacacpsge.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/rural\\_eng.pdf](https://ccaacacpsge.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/rural_eng.pdf).

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*Received on February 20, 2017.*

*Approved on June 20, 2017.*