

# Child Care Access and Community Well-Being in Nebraska

*Kidsights Data is a groundbreaking initiative designed to generate population-level insights into how children develop from birth to age five using the Kidsights Measurement Tool, the first population-based tool in the nation to measure a core set of early child development skills throughout the early childhood years. Nebraska is home to Kidsights Data, located at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and has served as the pilot site for three statewide rounds of parent surveys, creating a unique and powerful dataset.*

*Through direct input from families with young children, Nebraska now holds one of the most innovative sources of early childhood data in the country, offering new opportunities to uncover what supports children's development and to share meaningful learnings with parents, early childhood educators, funders, and policymakers. Beyond developing the tool and leading data collection and analysis, Kidsights Data is committed to making these insights accessible to the public, and this brief is one way those learnings are being shared.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every family with children, birth to 5, should have access to affordable, reliable child care, regardless of where they live or how much their family earns. When child care systems do not work equally across communities, families face unfair barriers that impede children's early development and family stability.

Findings from a statewide survey of parents of young children in Nebraska, paired with parent interviews, show how child care access supports community well-being by helping parents stay employed, meet basic needs, and create stable home and child care environments where young children can thrive.

**An investment in our future includes supporting families' access to affordable child care.**

The data reveal how child care access shapes parents' ability to work, families' financial stability, and the consistency of young children's early environments. They also surface a clear tension: while many families value and trust their child care providers, the cost of care places significant strain on household budgets and decision-making.

The Key Findings section that follows details how these dynamics show up across employment, family finances, and the lived experiences of parents, including how impacts differ by family circumstance and child care need.

An investment in our future includes supporting families' access to affordable child care. Interviews with parents show that many would like to grow their families, but the high cost of child care is a major barrier. Expanding access to affordable child care is therefore an investment in the long-term well-being of communities, helping families remain in the workforce while also supporting their ability to have the children they want.

## STUDY OVERVIEW & POPULATION CONTEXT

These findings reflect the voices of over 2,500 Nebraska parents of young children, birth to 5 years, who participated in a survey from Kidsights Data at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) in 2025. Families represent urban and rural communities across income levels.

Data are drawn from Kidsights Data and parent interviews, reflecting population-level patterns in child care access, affordability, and impact.

## WHY POPULATION-LEVEL DATA MATTERS

Population-level child development data helps communities and decision makers see patterns that individual stories alone cannot, guiding policy decisions that strengthen systems for all families.

## KEY FINDINGS: CHILD CARE

Child care is a foundation of community well-being. When child care is affordable and accessible, families can work, plan for the future, and provide stable, nurturing environments for young children.

### What the data shows:



21% of parents reported changing employment due to child care challenges, with higher rates among families earning under \$100,000 (25%) compared to those earning over \$100,000 (16%).



More than one-third of parents (34%) reported being unable to pay for necessities (such as food and housing) due to child care costs, rising to nearly half (48%) among families earning under \$100,000.



Many children receive care in centers (54%), followed by preschools (16%) and family members who do not live in the home (14%).



Families pay an average of \$332 per week for child care, with costs nearing \$800 per week for special education care.



Nearly one-quarter of parents (23%) reported needing evening or weekend child care, highlighting a mismatch between family needs and available options.

Together, these findings show that child care directly shapes families' ability to work, meet basic needs, and create consistency in young children's daily lives. The data point to child care as both an economic support and a developmental necessity: when care is accessible and affordable, families are better able to remain employed and provide stable early environments for their children. While many families rely on and value their current care arrangements, affordability and availability remain persistent challenges—particularly for lower-income households and those with specialized or nontraditional care needs. At the same time, cost and availability gaps continue to strain household stability and underscore a system that is essential to community well-being, yet uneven in how well it supports families.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Child care for children from birth to five is expensive and often exceeds what families can reasonably afford. Financial strain and employment instability increase stress for families with young children, making it harder to meet basic needs.

### *Community Voice*

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**“We’re all doing what we can, and like, especially now, we have to figure out how to buy groceries and afford the economy and a place to live, as well as send our children to daycare.”**

—Urban Social Worker

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Families spend a large share of their income on child care, leaving less for savings and other essentials.

### *Community Voice*

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**“We’re just unable to save at all right now. Like we’re living in an apartment and we don’t think we’re ever going to be able to save for the next couple of years while he’s in child care to save up for much else.”**

—Urban Financial Worker

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High child care costs force parents to make difficult tradeoffs, including cutting back on work or delaying decisions about having more children.

### *Community Voice*

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**“We’re not buying groceries and make sure we’re very much buying things as we need them. So we’re constantly running out of groceries and utilizing food resources like food banks or other community places just because we don’t qualify for any kind of assistance. Our finances look good on paper, but our net pay is not so hot, so we don’t qualify for child care, and so we have to scrimp and save in other places.”**

—Rural Social Services Employee

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### *Community Voice*

**“He’s almost four and we’re getting to that time where it’s like, ‘Should we have a second kid?’ Absolutely not. I can’t afford to put two in daycare.”**

—Urban Nurse

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Maintaining and strengthening child care subsidies can reduce financial strain, stabilize employment, and support healthy development for children ages zero to five. Child care subsidies help ensure fairness across places by keeping child care affordable for families, no matter where they live.

### FOR DECISION-MAKERS

*State and local policymakers, child care systems, and community partners*

#### Why it matters:

- Fairness across places ensures all communities can support families with young children.
- Community well-being is supported by stable child care systems.

#### How it works:

- Affordable child care and other forms of financial assistance to families reduce financial stress, support employment, and create nurturing environments for children ages zero to five.

#### What the Data Suggest:

- Continue investing in child care subsidies and system capacity by assessing what levels of funding are needed to sustain and strengthen the child care system, protecting existing supports, and recognizing the demonstrated benefits for parents, young children, and overall community well-being when these resources are expanded.
- Explore economic support strategies that increase financial stability for families with young children, particularly those struggling to afford child care and basic needs, recognizing that broader household resources play an important role in families' ability to access care and provide stable early environments.



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#### **About Kidsights Data**

*Kidsights Data is an initiative to build demand for and generate population-level data that tracks the development of children from birth to five in the United States using the Kidsights Measurement Tool. This tool is the first population-based measurement tool of a core set of child development skills for children birth to age five in the United States. For more information about Kidsights Data, located in the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, visit [www.kidsightsdata.org](http://www.kidsightsdata.org).*