

Early Childhood Programs' Scarcity Undermines Nebraska's Rural Communities

Quality early care and education can bolster public safety, the economy, and national security



Acknowledgements

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16% of children in rural Nebraska live in poverty

Poverty is a significant challenge to children's healthy development, wherever they happen to live in Nebraska. While this issue is frequently associated with families in urban centers, it is no less a problem for Nebraska's rural communities. In fact, poverty is slightly more prevalent among children living in Nebraska's rural communities (15.7 percent) than those living in the state's major metropolitan areas (13.4 percent). At the same time, children in rural communities often lack resources and supports, including quality early childhood care and education. We must organize our investments in children strategically, wherever they happen to live in our state. Our investments in children living outside major metropolitan areas should be organized to address the infrastructure challenges specific to rural communities. The talents of all of our state's residents, rural and metro, are needed to build a strong workforce that will contribute to a vibrant Nebraska economy, contribute to our public safety, and enhance national security in the long run.

“Quality early childhood care and education are critical for communities like Scottsbluff to thrive. They provide safe learning environments while parents are at work and teach children the skills necessary for success in life.”



Kevin Spencer

Chief of Police, Scottsbluff
Police Department

Children and families in rural Nebraska face many challenges

Poverty

Nebraska's rural children have a poverty rate of 15.7 percent, compared to 13.4 percent for urban children.¹

Declines in population and employment

From 2010 to 2014, 62 of Nebraska's 93 counties lost population, with many rural residents moving to the "Big 3" counties.² Only 13 nonmetro counties (16 percent) added population over the past twenty years.³ Not surprisingly, employment growth in Nebraska's rural areas has been lower than in its metro areas.

Health Issues

Population loss, in turn, brings other problems, such as a decrease in services such as health care and hospital closings.⁴ Although only one rural hospital has closed in Nebraska in recent years, 29 of the state's 71 rural hospitals operate at a deficit, and many others are struggling.⁵ In 13 Nebraska counties, there are no primary care doctors.⁶

Not surprisingly, this has an impact on health. Nebraska ranks fifth in the nation in the rate of early childhood (ages 2 to 4) obesity, with children in rural areas more likely to be obese than children in the state's urban areas.⁷ Factors implicated in these higher obesity rates include less access to fresh and nutritious foods in rural areas (i.e. food deserts) and higher rates of food insecurity.⁸ COVID-19 has also had an impact, as some of Nebraska's rural areas were hit hard early in the pandemic, and, in others, cases increased substantially in the fall.⁹

Challenges in rural areas can impact our state's strength

The talents of all of our state's residents, rural and metro, are needed to build a

strong workforce that will contribute to a vibrant Nebraska economy. Similarly, our national security relies on a large, robust pool of potential recruits, including from rural areas (about nine percent of enlisted service members come from rural areas).¹⁰ Law enforcement agencies in rural areas typically recruit locally, making out-migration of young people problematic. For these and many other reasons, we must organize our

What is "rural?"

There are different definitions of what constitutes a rural community. The U.S. Census Bureau defines as rural locations with fewer than 2,500 residents. Census data (2018) places Nebraska's counties into five categories:

1. The "Big 3": Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy. More than half (56.4 percent) of Nebraska children live in these counties.
2. Other metropolitan counties (10): Cass, Dakota, Dixon, Hall, Hamilton, Howard, Merrick, Saunders, Seward, Washington. 10.4 percent of NE children live in these counties.
3. Micropolitan central counties (9): Adams, Buffalo, Dawson, Gage, Lincoln, Madison, Platte, Scotts Bluff. 15.6 percent of NE children live in these counties.
4. Non-metropolitan counties (20) with a city of 2,500-9,999 residents. 9.6 percent of NE children live in these counties.
5. Non-metropolitan counties (51) that do not have a city with more than 2,500 residents. 8 percent of Nebraska's children live in these counties.

Counties in the latter two non-metropolitan categories are considered rural and are home to 17.6 of Nebraska's children and 19 percent of its overall population.

Sources: <https://voicesforchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Full-Book-Final-3-4.pdf>

investments in children strategically, wherever they happen to live in our state. Our investments in children living outside major metropolitan areas should be organized to address the infrastructure challenges specific to rural communities.

Quality early childhood care and education can help address challenges in Nebraska's rural communities

Early care and education (ECE) can strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security. More than two-thirds (71 percent) of Nebraska children under age 6 have all available parents in the workforce.¹¹ Of Nebraska children under age 6 with working parents with low incomes, about 35 percent—more than 12,000 children—live in nonmetro areas.¹² Working parents depend on ECE so they can go to work, remain productive, and build successful careers to better support their families. Children, meanwhile, need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development during the first five years of life, both at home and in ECE while their parents work. Further, early childhood is a time when children acquire the foundation of many skills needed for 21st-century jobs, including both cognitive and character skills.¹³ Quality ECE can help build these skills and contribute to educational success.

A growing body of evidence from around the nation points to the benefits of high-quality programs. For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At

“ We must ensure young Nebraskans in rural communities can access high-quality early care and education. Setting young people up for success is critical to the future of our state and our national security.”



William F. Kuehn

Brigadier General,
U.S. Army (retired)

age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.¹⁴ A large study of children in rural counties found that children who participated in higher-quality child care had better language skills at age 3, which, in turn, resulted in better academic and social skills in kindergarten.¹⁵ Research has also shown that preschool can increase rates of on-time high school graduation among participants.¹⁶ An economic analysis of Head Start found that the program increases high school graduation, college attendance, and the chances of receiving a postsecondary degree or certificate.¹⁷ Quality ECE supports the workforce and helps build a strong economy, both now and into the future.

The considerations around high-quality ECE transcend even impressive educational outcomes. Our national security relies on



qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits (lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam), behavior problems (crime and substance use), and health issues (particularly obesity) currently prevent 71 percent of Nebraska youth from qualifying for service.¹⁸ Early development sets the stage for children's future success, and the foundation of lifelong health is established early in life. In addition to its educational benefits, ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity. For example, a study of the Abecedarian ECE program found that girls who participated were less likely to become obese as adults, and boys had fewer risk factors for heart

disease, stroke and diabetes.¹⁹ In addition to providing early education, Head Start offers preventative health care, including immunizations and dental care, and connects families to other services. This comprehensive approach is invaluable, given the health care shortages often found in rural areas. Without access to high-quality ECE, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, our state's correctional system is full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing children with high-quality early learning opportunities can set them on the path to success in school, so they will be ready for the workforce, and less likely to later engage in criminal activity.²⁰ The aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.²¹ Students who participated in Alabama's pre-K program were about half as likely to have a behavioral infraction in school as those who did not receive First Class Pre-K.²² Further, the differences between the two groups were larger in middle school and high school, when the rates of infractions increase.

Children who live in Nebraska's rural areas have less access to quality early care and education

Despite the proven impact of high-quality ECE on various child outcomes, rural communities often have fewer options for child care programs of any kind. While 28 percent of Nebraskans live in a child care "desert," where there are more than three

Ladybug Crossing Early Learning Center North Platte

The Ladybug Crossing Early Learning Center serves children ages six weeks to 13 years and their families who live in or near the small town of North Platte. The center aims to provide caring interactions in a positive, safe environment, while supporting academic and social-emotional growth.

Through a partnership with the North Platte public school system, Ladybug Crossing exemplifies principles of accessibility, affordability, and quality. The program recently grew to 100 children with no waitlist when it partnered with a local elementary school to rent out classroom space at a discounted rate. This public-private partnership now enables Ladybug Crossing to have five classrooms for various age groups and reduces barriers for families who no longer need to leave work for mid-day pickups. Discounted rent allows for lower tuition, increasing affordability for families. Accordingly, 40 percent of children enrolled live under the poverty line, mirroring community demographics. Finally, Ladybug Crossing provides high-quality care, holding itself accountable as a participant of the Nebraska Step Up To Quality (SUTQ) rating system. Once Ladybug Crossing graduates reach kindergarten, teachers often notice they score higher and are more likely to possess the social-emotional skills they need to succeed as compared to kids who attended lower quality child care.

Source: <https://ladybugcrossingelc.com/>

children under age 5 for each licensed child care slot, the figure is 36 percent in rural communities.²³ Across the nation, families in rural areas more frequently use home-based child care options (which, in Nebraska, typically refer to licensed child care programs operated in homes), which serve smaller numbers of children than child care centers.²⁴ This is

36%
of rural Nebraskans live
in a child care “desert”

particularly true for preschool-aged children, with 40 percent of rural preschoolers attending home-based child care, versus 31 percent of non-rural preschoolers. It is also true for families who access child care using subsidies.²⁵ The number of family child care providers dropped 21 percent in Nebraska from 2010 to 2017, contributing to the shortage of child care in rural areas.²⁶ Still, in 2018, nearly half (44 percent) of the licensed child care slots in rural areas were in family child care homes.²⁷

While 72.5 percent of Nebraska’s Sixpence early care and education programs are in rural areas, the program reaches less than one-third (27.5 percent) of the state’s rural counties.²⁸ Nebraska’s state preschool



Humpty Dumpty Daycare

Wakefield

Since 2011, Humpty Dumpty Daycare has aimed to serve the needs of local families by providing quality child care, which focuses on the individual needs of children, and on nurturing a greater sense of community. Recently, it boosted its quality of care further when it began participating in the selective Rooted in Relationships Pyramid Program. This program provides professional coaches to child care centers, who help the teachers implement strategies for building stronger relationships with the children and families served. Coaches also guide teachers in helping children develop the social-emotional coping strategies that will continue to serve the kids in elementary school and beyond.

Humpty Dumpty Daycare is located in Wakefield, a town near Sioux City with under 2,000 residents, many of whom require child care services. As the major child care center in town, Humpty Dumpty is licensed for 45 children and operates at capacity, with a large waiting list. In light of capacity constraints, in 2019, The Gardner Foundation, prominent local employer Michael Foods, the City of Wakefield, and community members gave significant donations to pay off all debt and provide a significant expansion to the Humpty Dumpty building. Among other things, the expansion will increase capacity by 20 children and allow for teachers to provide more targeted care with the addition of two more rooms for different age groups.

program, the Nebraska Early Childhood Education program, is available in 90 percent of school districts; however, the program serves just one-third of four-year-olds and 15 percent of three-year olds.²⁹ Head Start is spread across Nebraska, with most counties having Head Start programs.³⁰

Nebraska state and local policymakers must enhance early childhood care and education programs for children in rural areas

As this report details, families in rural Nebraska have less access to early childhood care and education. State policymakers always

have difficult funding decisions to make, but it is vital to families in both rural and urban communities that we sustain our investments in early childhood programs.

Local leaders have a role to play as well in ensuring more families have access to high-quality early care and education programs. They should understand their current capacity and what specific needs are for their community, and develop a plan on how to meet the needs of families and businesses. That process can help create a roadmap for bringing together state, local, and private investments to meet the needs of the community.

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood care and education programs can help ameliorate the challenges faced by Nebraska children living in rural communities. These programs also strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security in the long run. Policymakers must support tailored investments for children in rural communities to help ensure the future strength of our state.

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