



Describing utilization of child care centers in GSA facilities

What is the GSA priority?

COVID-19 had a profound impact on both work patterns and access to child care. As the federal workforce adjusts to post-COVID-19 conditions, providing access to quality child care remains a high priority for the GSA Child Care Program, whose mission has recently been championed in an [Executive Order](#) intended to increase access to high-quality care and support caregivers.

Historical data gathered by GSA's Child Care Program can inform strategic decision-making about child care resources for federal employees and the communities where they live and work. Pairing GSA's data with publicly available location data offers an opportunity to better understand utilization of child care centers over time and to outline future efforts to further study factors such as location and staffing.

What did we evaluate?

The GSA Child Care Program oversees independent child care centers in all 11 GSA regions, serving almost 9,000 children at its enrollment peak in 2010. The program ensures that its facilities are safe, healthy learning environments in updated facilities.¹ The purpose of the study is to leverage existing data to better understand trends in child care utilization and to support

decision-making about organization and management of child care services.

How did the evaluation work?

In this descriptive study, we utilized two data sources: 1) GSA Child Care Program quarterly reports from October 2001 to April 2023, which consist of enrollment counts for federal and non-federal employees, along with overall center capacity; and 2) car commuting times from the US Census' American Community Survey and transit usage from the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Smart Location Database (v3.0).

Using the GSA Child Care Program data, we 1) described the number of open centers and children enrolled over time; 2) calculated the percent of federal children enrolled and the percent of available seats utilized; and 3) described the number of children on waitlists. Using the commuting and transit data, we rank car-friendliness of GSA child care centers and show how utilization rates vary across ranks.² With most centers located in cities, this allowed us to differentiate between urban locations.

What did we learn?

Since 2001, both the number of operating GSA child care centers and the overall number of children served by the program

¹ Enrollment is open to federal employees and broader community members, with priority given to federal employees.

² Locations least friendly to car commuting are those where commuters are more reliant on public transportation and live in a metro area with longer average commute times.

have declined. Although the COVID-19 shutdowns resulted in a sudden dropoff in open centers and overall enrollment, declines began much earlier, albeit slowly.

In April 2023, 79 centers reported enrollment data (a proxy for open status)—a 44% decrease from the program high of 114 centers in 2005. The total number of children served in April 2023 was 4,622, a 46% decrease from the high of 8,616 in April 2010. Declines in center capacity and enrollment correlate with the decline in open centers, as observed in Figure 1.

In April 2023, the average center operated at 82% of capacity, and 32 of 79 centers operated below average. National trends, however, mask wide variation across GSA regions, as explained below.

Figure 1. A COVID-19 rebound is still underway, but slow declines predate COVID-19

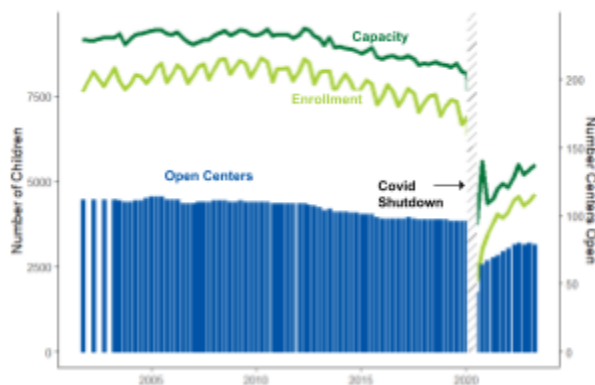


Figure 2 shows that nationally, the ratio of federal to non-federal enrollment in child care centers has shifted in favor of non-federal children. That is, children whose parents work for the federal government constitute a smaller share of the GSA Child Care Program’s total national enrollment, which appears primarily due to COVID-19 closures. Note that the data points pulling

the trend line down occurred after center reopenings.

However, the decline in the proportion of federal children is not uniform across regions. For example, child care centers in Region 11 (NCR) enroll over 80% federal children and have done so consistently over time. Accounting for nearly one third of national enrollees, Region 11 also has a disproportionate impact on national trends.

Figure 2. Federal and non-federal enrollments converge after COVID-19

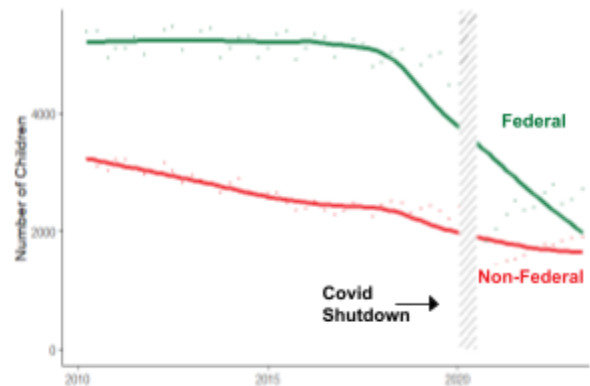
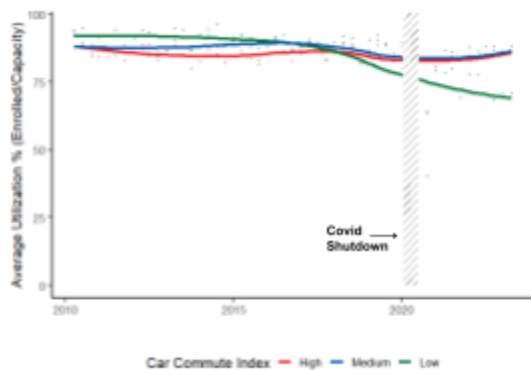


Figure 3 shows that on average the least car-friendly child care centers are the least utilized as of April 2023.³

Figure 3. On average, the least car-friendly centers have become less utilized



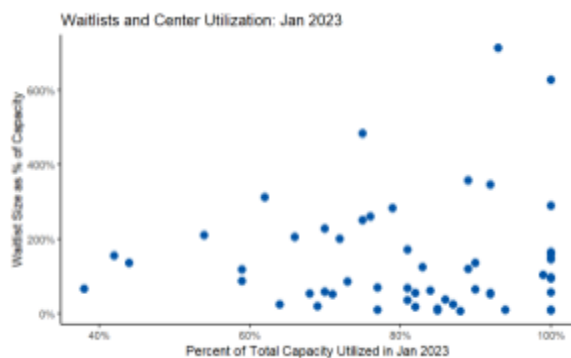
³ Analysis conducted using only the 79 open centers with up-to-date geocoded addresses.

The shift away from the least car-friendly centers marks a reversal of the years between 2010 and 2015, when those centers were the most highly utilized. Unlike the shift in federal enrollment declines that were sharper after COVID-19 (Figure 2), the decline in utilization of the least car-friendly centers began two years before COVID-19, in 2018. These centers have also seen less of a post-Covid recovery compared to the other categories.

Again, averaged national trends mask local variation. Declines in utilization of the least car-friendly centers are most pronounced in some regions (e.g., 9 & 10), and not all regions house centers in the least car-friendly category. Moreover, some centers in the category continue to have robust enrollment levels.

55 of 79 GSA child care centers reported waitlists of varying sizes in 2023. Figure 4 plots these 55 centers' waitlists as percentages of their capacity across utilization rates, revealing that 1) most highly enrolled centers have waitlists that exceed their capacity by more than 100%; and 2) several dozen under-enrolled centers still reported lengthy waitlists.

Figure 4. *January 2023: Some under-utilized centers have long waitlists*



Separating centers' federal from non-federal waitlists and examining them at the regional level reveals that at several centers, waitlists are composed nearly entirely of non-federal children.

What do we recommend?

Recent child care enrollment trends capture a snapshot of the post-Covid return-to-office for federal employees. In 2023, federal employees are still returning to in-person work at rates that depend on many variables— including federal directives, agency policies, and the personal and locational attributes that inform a preference for in-person or remote work. These variables also inform the demand for onsite child care. Enrollment trends, therefore, should be monitored regularly as the return-to-office continues. Ongoing monitoring will be especially important as nearly \$24 billion in federal child care stabilization funds expire on September 30, 2023.⁴

Preliminary results from a national survey of federal workers interested in co-working opportunities indicate that a much higher percentage of employees preferring remote work arrangements cite child care as an important factor for their preference compared to employees interested in in-person work. These preferences may relate to child care shortages that vary across places—as reflected in waitlists, which may indicate the need for locally-focused partnerships with agencies and/or efforts to market GSA child care centers to the broader community.

4 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/occ/CCDF-ACF-IM-2021-03.pdf>

Results from this study suggest that more data and future evaluations are needed to understand the need for onsite childcare at federal workplaces. We recommend gathering more data about how childcare and center needs vary across regions, types of locations, and government agencies, which entails gathering more information about federal employees, center enrollees waitlisted children, and staffing levels. We advise that future efforts focus on staffing because low enrollments coupled with long waitlists may be evidence of staffing shortages.