Identifying Child Care Deserts
A Toolkit for Child Care Advocates, Administrators, and Analysts

By Rasheed Malik and Steven Jessen-Howard  February 2019
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Background

For many families, finding affordable child care is a necessity of modern life. The age of the single-breadwinner household is mostly a thing of the past; the fact is, most children today do not have a stay-at-home parent. However, the American child care system is not adequately equipped—or funded—to care for all these families. Without a doubt, child care and early education are vitally important to the health of our society, both in the present and for the future. Despite this fact, a mere 1 in 6 eligible children receive child care subsidies. And providers are often forced to accept subsidies that do not cover the cost of providing high-quality care.

As a result, most areas across the country suffer from varying degrees of child care shortage. This is no secret to frustrated parents struggling to find care or to providers that are often stretched thin trying to serve as many children and families as possible. Outside affluent urban enclaves and suburbs, where high-income families are able to afford the true cost of care, most child care markets are not able to meet demand. Waiting lists, application fees, and stress are now simply a normal part of the child care scramble.

As one might expect, a number of inequities arise from such a system:

- **Economic**: As mentioned above, a system largely built on ability to pay will favor those with greater resources and access to information.
- **Racial and/or ethnic**: Racial inequities in child care access can arise because housing and neighborhoods are racially segregated in the United States.
- **Geographic**: There are often infrastructure challenges inherent to rural and urban child care provision.

So how can we sort out which families and communities are suffering from a disproportionate undersupply of child care? What can we do to shine a light on this very real problem? The child care deserts analytic framework laid out in this toolkit can give us a more concrete sense of where shortages in child care supply occur.
Fundamentally, the idea behind a child care desert analysis is to compare the number of young children with the number of slots in a given community’s child care market. States are increasingly making data on licensed child care available to download, which is a result of the 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). With a little technical help, it is possible to link demographic and economic data for a particular community with data on the local child care market in order to effectively identify areas with too few child care options.

At the Center for American Progress, the Early Childhood Policy team has developed a working definition for a child care desert. As detailed in Figure 1 below, a child care desert is defined as an area that either has no child care providers or has so few that there are more than three children for every available slot.

According to research published by the U.S. Census Bureau, one-third of children under age 5 are regularly in care with someone who is not a relative. Therefore, in places where there are more than three children for every child care slot, there may be child care waiting lists, unlicensed child care arrangements, or effects on parents’ employment decisions.

Identifying child care deserts is merely one approach to measuring and representing child care shortages. The advantage to the term “child care deserts” is that it gives size, shape, and location to a problem that parents know and understand anecdotally but that has previously lacked a clear definition. The identification of child care deserts allows for more strategic advocacy and helps make the issue concrete and local for policymakers and administrators.
CAP has published several products that highlight child care deserts, including a report focused on infant-toddler child care deserts that discussed lessons learned and identified solutions. This toolkit is intended to share those lessons and solutions in an accessible, modular format that can help you work through the pros and cons of executing a child care deserts analysis and upon which you can produce your own localized analysis. It also outlines some strategies for communicating the results of your analysis to a variety of audiences, from policymakers and other advocates to parents and child care providers.

The toolkit is structured around the phases of a child care deserts project: Project Scoping, which lists fundamental questions that an organization or analyst must answer before carrying out a child care deserts analysis; Identifying Child Care Deserts, which outlines the steps of a successful analysis in detail; and Messaging Strategies, which offers strategies for advocates and leaders on how to frame results in a way that compels others to support real change.
Before undertaking a child care deserts analysis and advocacy plan, you need to answer a few basic questions to define the size and scope of your project.

What child care data are available for my community, county, region, and/or state?

• Most states put some version of their licensed child care providers list on the internet for public use. In many cases, the goal is to help parents locate safe child care options in their area. Most lists will include, at a minimum, an inspection history; an address; a phone number; and the size of the program, usually referred to as the licensed capacity. These data are managed by the office that handles the licensing of child care providers, which is most frequently housed within a state agency such as a Department of Human Services, Department of Job and Family Services, or Department of Children and Families.

• The best-case scenario is that the state website includes a “download data” button, but not all states offer downloadable databases. If this is the case for your state, you may need to call the state agency responsible for child care licensing to ask for a spreadsheet of providers.

• If you’re analyzing a small geographic area with few providers, you may be able to manually enter data into your own spreadsheet.

• For larger projects, an alternative is “web scraping” or “web harvesting.” This takes some expertise, but there are plenty of programmers who offer web-scraping services. In this process, the programmer writes a program that visits every webpage containing information that the user is interested in, then copies that information into a single spreadsheet.
• When possible, ask your state agencies or administrators if they can vouch for the quality of the data. Some states have their own doubts about the quality of the data that they hold, and they may alert you to potential flaws or idiosyncrasies in the data that you may want to know about before conducting your analysis. For example, some states never remove providers but will instead mark the entries as having expired licenses.

• Another question to ask is whether there are more data available than are held by state child care licensing agencies. Some states, for example, ask that family child care providers register voluntarily with the state or their county. If your data don’t include any family child care providers, public preschools, or Head Start providers, you may be looking at only one slice of the licensed child care universe available to families. In this case, you may need to combine data from multiple sources.

• In some states, the child care licensing authority is not allowed to share the addresses of some child care providers or may require an official public records request. If you’re able to get a list of providers but the address line has been wiped out, you can still use the ZIP code as a unit of geographic analysis. However, it’s important to remember that ZIP codes are designed for efficient mail sorting and delivery, not for demographic or economic analyses.

• Child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs) usually keep detailed data about the child care market that they represent. They’re not always able to share their data, but if you have relationships with your local or regional CCR&R, it is worth checking with them regarding their data sharing policies.

Which geographic boundary should I use?

• **County:** A county-level analysis offers many advantages. Almost everyone knows which county they live in, and within states, counties are usually the same physical size. Also, relatively few people cross county lines to find child care. However, counties can vary greatly in terms of their populations, and a county-level analysis will not capture the variation in child care supply within any single county. Generally, this approach is better suited to advocacy at the state level, as state policymakers are accustomed to receiving and interpreting county-level information.
• **Census tract:** These units of geography have roughly the same population, with an optimum size of about 4,000 people living in each tract. The U.S. Census Bureau also provides annual population and demographic estimates for every tract. However, almost no one can tell you which census tract they live in, and parents may search for child care across many census tracts—especially if they live in a densely populated area.

• **Neighborhood:** In metropolitan areas, there may be official or unofficial neighborhoods. While it may be difficult to define neighborhoods on a web-based map, most large city planning offices perform regular neighborhood analyses and make boundary maps available as a public resource. One such example is the list of neighborhood maps found on the Cincinnati city planning website.

• **ZIP code:** While ZIP codes can be used for a child care deserts analysis, there are a few pitfalls to this approach. ZIP codes are drawn by the U.S. Postal Service to create efficient postal routing and delivery, not to align with any municipal or physical features. They can even cross county and state lines in some rare cases. The U.S. Census Bureau does offer data products for ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs), but these can vary wildly in population, from a few hundred to tens of thousands of people.

• **Congressional or state legislative district:** Finally, you might consider mapping and analyzing child care deserts by political boundaries, such as congressional districts or state legislative boundaries. This approach provides advocates with the opportunity to present unique, constituent-level information to policymakers and staff. Making the effects of child care shortages concrete for lawmakers can spur action on behalf of a sufficiently large constituency.

Is there an angle to the story that needs to be told?

• **Specific age groups, such as infants and toddlers:** For an example of this kind of analysis, see CAP’s report, “Understanding Infant and Toddler Child Care Deserts.”

• **Provider quality or quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) participation:** Be careful to provide context for a QRIS with a low participation rate. Just because a program does not participate in the QRIS does not mean it is not a quality program. While some states may require QRIS participation or combine their licensing and QRIS systems, many states do not.
- **Subsidy receipt versus income eligibility:** Research has shown that in recent years, only 1 in 6 eligible families receive child care subsidies. Within certain communities, the availability of child care subsidies may be even lower.

- **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) availability:** Many state child care databases report which child care providers participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

- **Rates of parental employment:** About two-thirds of children under age 6 have a working single parent or two working parents. We can use census estimates of parental employment in a given area to estimate roughly how many children may need child care.

- **Supply changes over time:** If you’re able to get multiple years of child care licensing data, it may be possible to see how child care supply has changed over time.

- **Analyses in urban areas:** In urban areas, you might undertake an analysis of neighborhoods, geographic inequities, public transportation access, the effects of gentrification, or housing affordability.

- **Child subpopulations:** An analysis may focus on dual-language learners, children with disabilities, and other child subpopulations with different needs.

- **Other focus areas:** Other useful analyses might consider hours of operation, tuition prices, or staff wages.

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**How am I going to present this information?**

- Reports are good and can serve as a resource for engaged policymakers, but longer reports should be paired with a summary document that includes the key takeaways.

- With enough resources, a child care deserts analysis can be enhanced by additional qualitative information, such as results from a focus group study, a local parent survey, or a local provider survey. Often, simply describing a local family’s child care challenges can really drive home the findings from your analysis. For more information on this, see the **Messaging Strategies** section of this toolkit.
• Maps can be powerful educational and advocacy tools. As discussed in this toolkit, mapping child care supply can give size, shape, and location to the problem while defining a specific constituency of affected families.

• Simpler is always better when making child care desert maps. You can always make the finer details optional for those who are interested, but the reader should be able to comprehend what your map is showing within a matter of seconds.
A Brief Guide to Identifying Child Care Deserts

Once you’ve asked and considered the questions and made choices in the project scoping phase, you can begin your child care deserts analysis. The first and often most time-consuming step in this type of project is data collection.

Options for collecting and verifying data

• **Download from your state’s website:** This is the simplest way to obtain state child care licensing data and should be the first thing you try. However, only about half the states post complete child care licensing data online with the option of easily downloading it. These data can typically be found on the website of a state agency, such as a Department of Children and Families or a Department of Human Services, under an option to search for child care providers. See the state of Vermont’s [website](#) for an example of exportable child care provider data.

• **Request data from your state child care licensing authority:** You can make this request either in writing or over the phone. See the sample email text in the [Appendix](#) for suggested request language.

• **Web scraping:** If your state’s website contains child care licensing data but does not give you the option to download those data, you may be able to obtain it in a spreadsheet through web scraping. If you do not receive a reply from state officials, consult with your tech team about how to collect the data you are interested in from the website. If your state’s website contains child care licensing data but does not give you the option to download those data—see the Maryland State Department of Education [website](#) as an example—you may be able to obtain it in a spreadsheet through web scraping.

• **CCR&Rs may be able to share data:** You will likely need special permission if these agencies are under contract with the state to collect and retain child care data.
Linking child care capacity to geographic boundaries

The next step in a child care deserts analysis is to link the child care location data to the geographic boundary that you have chosen to study. As discussed in the Project Scoping section of this toolkit, a child care deserts analysis can be done by county, census tract, census block, metropolitan statistical area (MSA), ZIP code, or any other boundary lines that may be useful. The two ways that CAP has linked child care capacity to places are: 1) geocoding addresses and then using geographic software to calculate capacity within boundaries; and 2) using geographies that are already built into the child care data, such as counties or ZIP codes.

Geocoding is the process of translating a location’s street address into GPS coordinates that can be read easily by geographic software. Once the locations are geocoded, analysts can use whichever geographic unit they choose to analyze child care supply. Geographic software can calculate aggregate capacity within any geographic boundary by summing the licensed capacity of providers, whether within a census tract, city limits, ZIP code, or other measure. Geocoding services such as Geocodio allow users to geocode up to 2,500 addresses per day with a free account; a monthly Geocodio account allows users unlimited geocoding. This service also allows you to attach certain geographies to your data automatically, without the need for geographic software.

In some cases, however, geocoding may not be necessary. If your child care location and capacity data already have the county listed for each provider, you may be able to simply sum the capacity of providers within each county or ZIP code, since ZIP codes are usually included with an address. This was the approach that CAP authors used in “Understanding Infant and Toddler Child Care Deserts,” which examined child care capacity for children under 36 months old at the county level.

It is important to understand the trade-offs involved in the choice of geographic boundary. Always remember to consider your audience and your advocacy goals. If your goal is to highlight the lack of licensed providers in a low-income neighborhood in your city, then you’ll want to use a smaller unit of analysis, such as census blocks or tracts. But if you’re trying to show state lawmakers how the rural areas of your state are underserved by the child care market, it might make sense to use counties as your unit of analysis.
How will I estimate child care demand?

Once you have determined how you will aggregate the child care supply in your analysis, the next step is to decide how to estimate child care demand. CAP has developed a working definition for child care deserts that compares the estimated child population with the child care supply, as represented by the cumulative licensed capacity of all licensed child care providers in a given census tract.

Remember that the CAP working definition for child care deserts is meant to be a rough guide, not a rigid standard. If you have more detailed area-specific information about demand for licensed child care, you can tailor a more accurate definition of what constitutes a child care desert. This information may come from a regional CCR&R, a county or city planning office’s population projections, or a survey of families in your locale.

Instead of using the idea that a geographic area is either a child care desert or not a desert, you may consider defining multiple categories or showing child care supply as a continuous variable. For an example, check out this CAP interactive map with the “Desert score” map view turned on for your state.

Depending on the level of detail available in your data, you may be able to use even more precise measures of supply, such as desired capacity or actual enrollment in child care programs.

Merging child care data with census data

At this stage, a child care deserts project involves merging child care data with other demographic data. This means that now, in addition to knowing the total child care supply in your county, city, or census tract, you can compare supply with the population of young children. The data collected and disseminated by the U.S. Census Bureau as local statistical estimates are a tremendous free resource for data analysts and local advocates.

This is a somewhat technical step, but one that any geographic information systems analyst can execute with ease. Alternatively, an academic partnership may help avoid this expense; technical assistance organizations may also be able to help. CAP’s Early Childhood Policy team is experienced in child care deserts analysis and can offer guidance at any stage in your analysis.
Once you’ve combined the demographic and economic data with your child care data, you’re ready to move ahead with your analysis of the data. This is where you can identify areas of child care undersupply or zero in on the inequities that you may be focused on addressing. At this stage, you will be synthesizing and sifting through a lot of information to identify key facts coming out of the analysis, which can be difficult.

Viewing the information on a map can help orient you and your team as you interpret the results. Even an experienced analyst can be overwhelmed by data when they only exist as tables of summary statistics. When these statistics are represented in a map, analysts or advocates can often synthesize the information more easily. Figure 2 shows a child care supply map of Cincinnati that CAP’s Rasheed Malik produced for an organization interested in expanding publicly funded preschool to underserved neighborhoods. As you can see, there are important trends that pop out from the map of neighborhood supply and locations by type. The west side of the city appears to have a preschool undersupply problem but also features many small family child care homes (Type B homes). This exposes an interesting fact: If enough small family child care homes could expand to accommodate more families (Type A homes), these neighborhoods could increase their supply of licensed providers.
With each child care deserts analysis that CAP has undertaken, there have been unforeseen challenges along the way. From states being resistant to data collection to the selection of which geographic boundaries to use, our child care deserts work has been an iterative process that has led us to the recommendations contained within this toolkit. At each step, there are likely to be similar challenges unique to the analysis that you choose to undertake.

• **Data cleaning and imputation**: In many child care databases, there may be entries that are missing information or contain typos. You should always review the data to find missing or obviously incorrect information. Duplicate entries or expired licenses may need to be removed as well. Some providers may be missing an entry for licensed capacity, which is a crucial element of a child care deserts analysis. In such a case, you may have to make assumptions about the capacity of these providers and impute or add data ahead of your analysis.

• **Capacity versus enrollment**: In most cases, licensed capacity will be reported for each provider. However, some agencies or CCR&Rs will have actual enrollment data. Enrollment data can be very useful for understanding the current state of the child care market but do not provide much information about the potential capacity of the market to serve the surrounding population.

• **Excluding school-age before- and aftercare**: Many states will include community centers and camps that offer before- and aftercare for school-age children. Unless you consider these providers as a part of the universe of early child care that you wish to examine, it’s best to remove these providers from your analysis, as they are not licensed to provide child care for young children.
What do we know about FFN care?

Child care that occurs in a home that is not licensed is called family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care. Most of these providers are exempt from state licensing because they are caring for a relative or because the number of children in the provider’s care falls below the state’s licensing threshold. According to an analysis by the National Women’s Law Center, approximately 24 percent of children under age 6 are in home-based child care with a relative, and an additional 13 percent are in home-based care with a nonrelative. The latter group, however, includes children in licensed family child care, making it difficult to ascertain a precise estimate of children in FFN care. However, a sizable portion of families with young children use this type of child care arrangement, and children with disabilities and infants are more likely to be in FFN care.

Parents select FFN care for a variety of reasons. Many families who use this type of child care prefer that their child stay with a trusted relative or friend or seek a setting that provides culturally relevant care. For others, FFN best meets their child care needs. As more parents have nonstandard work hours and require child care in the evenings or on weekends, FFN providers can serve a crucial role, since they are far more likely to provide care when licensed child care programs are closed. In fact, parents who use FFN care cite availability and reliability as top reasons for choosing their provider.

By its very definition, this type of child care arrangement is unlikely to be included in state or local child care licensing databases. Additionally, these child care providers are usually only available to care for children within their existing family or social networks—that is, not in the public marketplace. So while FFN care is a crucial part of the child care equation for many families, providers typically do not report their child care capacity in a way that allows for measurement. However, at the local level, some agencies or child care referral agencies may be able to survey the FFN care providers in their own personal networks.
Messaging Strategies: How to Communicate Findings to Different Audiences

Once you’ve completed all of the technical steps involved in a child care deserts analysis, it’s time to think about how you will communicate the results of your study to various target audiences. These may include business leaders, community advocates, economic development corporations, policymakers, or the major stakeholders in any child care marketplace—parents and child care providers. By presenting your information in a digestible, persuasive, and research-informed manner, you can increase the likelihood that your analysis—and your ideas and recommendations—are heard and considered.

Advocates in your community

• **The child care deserts metaphor is powerful, and many people find it compelling.** The term piques interest from individuals and media who otherwise may not pay much attention to child care supply; builds off the increasingly well-known “food deserts” framework; and adds an emotional appeal to what could otherwise be a technical problem. No one wants children or families to be stuck in a “desert.”

• **Be ready with messaging that gets everyone on the same page.** Research shows that informed voters and policymakers across ideologies understand that: 1) high-quality early childhood experience plays an important role in brain development and its impact on future learning, behavior, and health; 2) parents of infants and toddlers are especially stretched and need support; and (3) a lack of affordable options is keeping parents, especially those of children from birth to age 3, from accessing quality, convenient care.

• **Adapt guidelines and messages to the community.** Every community has unique cultural and economic characteristics that can add more nuance to the data. Community members are best positioned to know how the characteristics of their area can further inform deserts findings. For example, an area with a large Amish population may appear to have far too few child care slots for the number of children
but not truly have a shortage, since fewer community members are seeking licensed child care. On the other hand, an area with a higher proportion of working parents and/or single parents is likely to need more child care slots than the 1 slot per 3 children standard used to classify deserts. Just because a community is not classified as a desert under the 3-to-1 ratio criterion does not necessarily mean that it has an adequate supply of child care. An example of this scenario can be found in CAP’s infant-toddler child care desert report, which explains how commuting patterns affect child care supply across Washington, D.C.

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**Policymakers**

- **Identify key stakeholders and constituencies in your findings.** At what level are you hoping to see policy change, and who has the power to make those changes?

- **Emphasize the widely held belief** that early childhood is a critical window for healthy development and position a child’s first three years of life as foundational to future learning, behavioral development, and health.

- **Acknowledge that parents are a child’s first and most important caregivers,** but parents of infants and toddlers—especially first-time parents, parents in dual-income households, and parents without family nearby—need support during this essential time in their child’s development.

- **Make the issue tangible for policymakers,** emphasizing that the benefits of early care and education are well-documented and produce significant long-term returns on investment. Research has shown a 13 percent return on investment for high-quality, birth-to-age-5 early childhood programs. Women are better able to join the labor force when they have access to affordable child care, and an increase in their labor force participation could boost gross domestic product by an estimated $210 billion. Other benefits of investing in child care, such as increased wages for the early education workforce and better academic and socio-emotional outcomes for children, would also provide substantial economic benefits.

- **Highlight the fact that when there is a shortage of care,** families must make sacrifices:
  - More than three-quarters of parents with young children say that child care considerations have negatively affected their careers.
• In rural areas—which are more likely to be child care deserts—investment in early child care can be framed as part of a regional economic development plan. A good supply of quality child care can attract good companies that will employ working parents and combat the brain drain that some areas face.

• **The economic argument for more public investment in child care resonates with voters.** Emphasize the consistent and bipartisan public support for early childhood programs; this is a winning issue for elected officials.

• **Connect the availability of high-quality child care to an issue(s) of importance to your policymaker audience.** Examples might include building a talented workforce in the state, improving child health, or improving K-12 outcomes.

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**Parents and child care providers**

• Recruit storytellers to explain what it really means to live in a child care desert. The more personal and local these stories are, the more likely they are to resonate with readers. Here are a few examples of such stories:


• **Ask providers to chime in**, as they want solutions that will reduce friction in the market. Family child care providers are often left out of these discussions but are a huge part of the child care market.

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### Anticipate negative solutions and counterarguments

• Some people may see your findings and believe the solution is as simple as constructing new child care centers. While investments in infrastructure are necessary, it’s important to acknowledge that if child care providers cannot provide care at a price that families can afford, they will not be able to stay open.

• Rolling back regulations is another common suggestion to increase child care supply, but it’s important to move the conversation away from regulation toward investment. Make the case that **maintaining low child-to-staff ratios is crucial for child care quality and child safety**; demonstrate how quality child-caregiver interactions directly affect economic, health, and educational returns on investment, as well as child brain development; and show that **other regulations typically compose a small portion of the costs of care and help keep children safe**.

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### Sharing your findings

Attracting media attention is crucial to sharing your findings and driving people to act. Here are some ways in which you can get the message out through the press:

• **Publish an op-ed in a local newspaper or relevant blog.** Some questions to consider when leveraging your personal experiences into an effective op-ed are:
  • Have you or has someone you know experienced barriers to accessing affordable, high-quality child care?
  • Did you or someone you know take time out of the workforce to care for children because of the high cost or unavailability of child care?
  • Have you or has someone you know struggled with the cost of child care?
  • Has your business been affected by you or your employees’ struggles with finding or affording reliable child care?
• **Publish a letter to the editor (LTE).** The same guidelines above apply for LTEs. However, LTEs are typically shorter and easier to get published. If you have less time or are struggling to publish an op-ed, writing a letter could be the best strategy. LTEs are a great way to get a higher volume of stories out there and demonstrate grassroots support for policy solutions to address child care deserts.


• **Social media is an important tool for building awareness about your findings.** Use Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms popular in your communities to share findings with your networks and beyond. It’s best to have some sample social media content to share with your partners ahead of time. This encourages more people to share your content and keeps messaging on the same page.

• Be sure to include a link to your report or interactive, relevant graphics, and/or a coordinated hashtag for tweets. Here are some sample tweets:

  • *XX% of people in [area] live in child care deserts, meaning child care is hard to find and often unavailable.*
  • *XX% of children under age 6 in [area] have both parents in the workforce, yet licensed child care slots are available for just XX% of children.*
  • *Infants and toddlers are in the most important stage of their lives for brain development, yet the least number of child care slots are available for them.*
  • *Finding child care for your baby shouldn’t depend on your ZIP code or income level.*
  • *The lack of child care options for babies means parents have to make career sacrifices when they’re vulnerable financially. We need public investment to change that!*
  • *Do you live in a child care desert? Find out here: [link to report]*
  • *There are XX children for each slot of licensed child care in [area].*

• Get creative! Find ways to tie your social media content to current events and/or local conversations.
Appendix

Examples of state and local child care desert reports

  
  This article paints a more nuanced picture of child care supply in Indiana by taking additional characteristics such as the proportion of working families into account to create four different classifications of child care deserts. This [story map](http://www.incontext.indiana.edu/2019/jan-feb/article2.asp) lays out the article’s findings in the broader context of the need for child care in Indiana in a visually appealing and easily digestible manner.

  
  Advocates of New Jersey and their partners were able to conduct a survey of all of New Jersey’s licensed providers to build an accurate understanding of the state’s child care supply. They also included indicators, such as quality ratings and age groups, that served to paint a more precise picture of the state’s child care supply and demand. In addition, they created an [interactive map](https://acnj.org/downloads/2017_05_30_no_more_room_for_babies.pdf) that could overlay the state’s legislative districts, making it an effective local advocacy tool, as well as [county fact sheets](https://acnj.org/downloads/2017_05_30_no_more_room_for_babies.pdf).

  
  Children at Risk developed an incredibly detailed [interactive map](https://childrenatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CaR-Kellogg-Full-Report-2018.pdf) to display the child care landscape throughout Texas. Layers of the map that can be measured and compared with deserts include quality of centers, elementary school performance, subsidized care, and more. There is also an affordability map along with the deserts map to display the price of child care across the state and compare it with areas in which there are shortages. Children at Risk analyzes its findings in a digestible way through a short analysis page and [city-specific presentations](https://childrenatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CaR-Kellogg-Full-Report-2018.pdf) and also has a longer report explaining the benefits of child care for Texas’ economy.

Vermont’s report contains county-specific data and fact sheets about the supply of infant-toddler child care. The report also contains information on supply by quality and affordability. In addition, this report is a good example of how to explain the importance of infant and toddler child care and provides attention-grabbing graphics throughout.

Sample email text for child care licensing data collection

If you were able to download the data online:
[Attach the file with data that you downloaded.]

Dear [Recipient]:

[Briefly describe your organization and the project for which you’ll be using the data.]

We have downloaded a list of licensed child care providers from your department’s website. I have a few questions before we start geocoding and mapping the data for our report, to be released [date/timeframe].

1. Is the data in the attached file, which we downloaded on [date of download], current information to the best of your knowledge?
2. Is this a complete list of the licensed and/or registered child care providers in [state/area]?
3. Are there any other data not included here but which you are able to share with researchers? In particular, we are interested in understanding how much of the present child care market can serve infants and toddlers; providers’ hours of operation; prices; and [insert other characteristics you’re interested in].

We would greatly appreciate confirmation of the accuracy and completeness of this data set and welcome any questions or next steps for further engagement as we conduct our research. Our team is dedicated to properly representing the current state of the child care market in [state/area], and we could not undertake such a project without dedicated [state/area] agencies such as yours.
Thank you for any assistance you can offer to our research team.

Sincerely,

[Your name]

If the data are available online but not easily downloadable:
*You can use the same first paragraph provided above for this email.*

We see that you have detailed information about [state's] licensed child care providers online, but it is not in a format that allows us to construct a complete list of providers. Can you share the underlying data with our research team as an Excel or CSV file for our next child care deserts report, to be released [date/timeframe]? We are committed to making sure that [state/area] is included in this project and welcome any questions or next steps for further engagement as we conduct our research.

If you are unable to find the data online:
*You can use the same first paragraph provided above for this email.*

We have not been able to find a complete public data set of child care providers in [state/area]. Do you have a current and complete data set that our research team can use for our next child care deserts report, to be released [date/timeframe]? We are committed to making sure that [state/area] is included in this project and welcome any questions or next steps for further engagement as we conduct our research. The primary data categories we need for this analysis are:

- Program name
- Program address
- Program type (center, family child care home, school, etc.)
- Capacity
- Ages served (preferably enrollment by age)
- If necessary, whether the providers are currently licensed or no longer operating
Additional resources

• Center for American Progress, “Child Care Deserts Interactive Map,” available at https://childcaredeserts.org/ (last accessed February 2019). An interactive map including all 50 states and Washington, D.C., that identifies child care supply by census tract


• Child Care Aware of America, “Mapping the Gap: Examining Child Care Supply & Demand Across the Country” (Arlington, VA: 2016), available at http://usa.childcareaware.org/advocacy-public-policy/resources/research/mappingthegap/. Another way of looking at the shortage of child care through various lenses, such as the shortage of care during nontraditional hours

• Heather Sandstrom and others, “Mapping Child Care Demand and the Supply of Care for Subsidized Families” (Washington: Urban Institute, 2018), available at https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/97286/mapping_child_care_demand_and_the_supply_of_care_for_subsidized_families.pdf. A project mapping the supply and demand for child care in specific areas using factors such as work schedules and subsidy eligibility to more precisely examine child care shortages

• Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Kids Count Data Center” available at https://datacenter.kidscount.org/ (last accessed February 2019). A data bank containing a wide range of indicators related to child well-being and demographics at the local, state, and national levels


Our Mission
The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values
As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach
We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.