



Infant-Toddler Child Care Challenges Undermine Arkansas' Strength

Quality child care can help grow the economy, increase public safety, and enhance national security

Quality child care can strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security. However, Arkansas' working parents with infants or toddlers know how difficult it is to find child care that's accessible, affordable, and truly beneficial to their child's development during one of the most crucial periods of life, while Arkansas employers know the negative economic impact of these child care challenges. COVID-19 has exacerbated these challenges.¹

Our 2019 ReadyNation national study found that the infant-toddler child care crisis has an annual cost of \$57 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. These costs impact working parents, employers, and taxpayers. The estimated cost for Arkansas is \$348 million.

The stakes are enormously high for the many Arkansas families who depend on parents' employment, as well as for children, who depend on nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development during the first three years of life.

The infant-toddler child care crisis could cost Arkansas \$348 million each year in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue.

But there are other consequences. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, substance



abuse, and crime currently prevent 74 percent of Arkansas youth from qualifying for service.² Early brain development sets the stage for children's future success. Without improvements to the child care system, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, Arkansas' jails are 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 help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future.

Arkansas lawmakers must protect and expand programs that enhance the affordability and availability of quality child care – particularly for infants and toddlers – and foster continuing innovations at the state and local level that address this problem. A fundamental feature of child care quality is highly-qualified teachers who are well-trained both before and during their service and who need to be adequately compensated.

Most parents of infants and toddlers are in the workforce and need child care

In Arkansas, 70 percent of mothers with children under age 3 work outside the home.³ As a result, many very young children are in child care.

The infant-toddler child care system does not meet the needs of Arkansas' children, families, or employers

Several interrelated challenges render the child care system less than optimal:

- **Access:** Child care availability is especially limited for families who have infants and toddlers, with only 10 percent of these young children having access to high-quality care.⁴
- **Affordability:** Infant care in an Arkansas center averages \$7,498 per year, compared to \$9,070 for public college tuition.⁵ This cost represents more than nine percent of the median annual income of a married-couple family in Arkansas. Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families, particularly those with low incomes, who are disproportionately families of color.⁶
- **Quality:** Two-thirds of Arkansas licensed child care programs participate in Better Beginnings, the state's quality rating and improvement system. Overall, just over one-third of licensed programs are rated at the top level.⁷

Beyond the negative effects on children and families, problems with child care exact a huge economic toll. Our ReadyNation 2019 study of working parents of children under age three found that when families do not have the child care they need, parents' work productivity falls, resulting in costs to parents, their employers, and, ultimately, taxpayers.⁸ These child care challenges inflict an annual cost of \$57 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. The estimate for Arkansas is \$348 million per year.⁹



Research shows that quality child care supports children's cognitive, social, and emotional development

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 age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and had significantly lower levels of behavior problems.¹⁰ These findings are even more important given that many Arkansas children struggle in school. Only 38 percent of third graders meet benchmarks for reading. Children of color

74% of Arkansas youth would not qualify for military service.

are more likely to struggle, with only 22 percent of Black and 28 percent of Hispanic third graders meeting the reading benchmark, compared to 43 percent of White children.¹¹

Policymakers should promote access to affordable, quality infant and toddler care

Arkansas parents, particularly those with infants and toddlers, often have difficulty finding affordable, quality child care. Quality care has long-term benefits for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Conversely, lack of such care has high costs, both for children and families, and for our state's economy. State, federal, and local policymakers must promote families' access to affordable, high-quality child care, particularly for infants and toddlers. Support for high-quality child care is an investment in our future national security, public safety, and economic well-being.

Endnotes

- 1** Grindal, T., Smith, S., Nakamura, J., & Granja, M. (2021, February). Early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic: The experiences of Arkansas educators. <https://www.sri.com/publication/early-childhood-education-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-the-experiences-of-arkansas-educators/>
- 2** Department of Defense. (2017, November). Qualified Military Available (QMA). Data acquired from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. Also see Jordan, M. (2014, June). Recruits' ineligibility tests the military. Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/recruits-ineligibility-tests-the-military-1403909945>
- 3** Zero to Three (2021). State of babies yearbook 2021. <https://stateofbabies.org/state/arkansas/>
- 4** Excel by Eight (2020). Strengthening the grid. <https://www.excelby8.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Strengthening-the-Grid.pdf>
- 5** Child Care Aware (2022). Demanding change: Repairing our child care system. <https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system/>
- 6** Zero to Three (2021). State of babies yearbook 2021. Race, ethnicity, and the health of babies in Arkansas. <https://stateofbabies.org/state/arkansas/race-ethnicity-health/>
- 7** Arkansas Department of Human Services (2021, January 6). Better Beginnings: A decade of investing in our youngest citizens. https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/featured_stories/better-beginnings-a-decade-of-investing-in-our-youngest-citizens/
- 8** ReadyNation (2019, January). Want to grow the economy? Fix the child care crisis. ReadyNation. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/780-want-to-grow-the-economy-fix-the-child-care-crisis>
- 9** ReadyNation (2021, June 2). The infant-toddler child care crisis inflicts economic damage across the nation <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/1552-the-infant-toddler-child-care-crisis-inflicts-economic-damage-across-the-nation>
- 10** Vandell, D. L., Belsky, J., Burchinal, M., et al. (2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? Results from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Child Development, 81, 737-756. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2938040/>
- 11** Excel by Eight (2020). Strengthening the grid. <https://www.excelby8.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Strengthening-the-Grid.pdf>

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

1212 New York Avenue NW / Suite 300 / Washington, DC 20005 / 202.464.7005

