

No Small Thing: Addressing Systemic Inequities in Early Childhood Education

An Analysis of Early Childhood Education
in the Kansas City Metro Region



Preface

For decades, the early childhood education (ECE) system has been in crisis. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the challenges of the system have only been exacerbated. IFF, along with our local partners in Kansas City, conducted a regional analysis of the ECE system in Clay, Jackson, Johnson, Platte, and Wyandotte Counties to better understand the current landscape and to identify ways that it can be improved.

We learned a lot about local families who struggle to find and afford child care, confusing and complex child care subsidy requirements and application processes, and persistent racial and economic disparities affecting access to high-quality child care.

Our analysis revealed:

- Only about half of children in the region had access to an ECE slot in their county.
- Between early 2020 and late 2021, there was a substantial loss of affordable child care options.
- Access to ECE is inequitable across the region.
- The cumbersome and confusing subsidy process often prevents families from applying and providers from participating.
- Even when families do receive financial assistance, they are still expected to contribute an enormous amount of their income to pay for their share of the cost, which still falls short of covering the true cost of care.

But we have hope.

Too much is at stake.

Child care is unaffordable, applying for programs and assistance is confusing, and the legacy of systemic racism and inequity continues to impact the lives of young children, leaving parents and families stressed to their limits.

This must change.

From 2020-2022, IFF analyzed data and engaged families, ECE professionals, and local stakeholders and advocates to learn about their experiences. This analysis provides a snapshot of a complex regional ECE system that spans five counties and two states and provides insights that can be used to help create meaningful change for children and families.

Acknowledgements

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Grounded in equity and deep sector expertise, IFF is a nonprofit Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) that champions nonprofits to shape more equitable and vibrant communities through community-centered lending, development, real estate consulting, and place-based research. In the ECE sector, IFF has conducted research on topics that include the history of federal and state child care legislation and programs for low-income children, the economic impact of the early childhood care and education industry, and over a dozen statewide, regional, and community needs assessments for child care.

These analyses inform systemic thinking and comprehensive planning about child care and education. IFF's early childhood care and education methodology is distinctive in its spatial analysis of capacity at a neighborhood level. This neighborhood-level approach helps stakeholders focus investments where they will reach the greatest number of underserved children. In other cities where IFF has conducted similar research, the data and analysis have informed such decisions as investment in facilities modernization, program location, and targeted community engagement about child care options.

How We Got Here

In America, caring for young children has often been an individual responsibility with one parent, or another family member (usually a woman), assuming the responsibility. This vital service of caring for and educating young children was mostly a job that was assumed would be handled...by someone.

Societal changes in the past 50 years have created new challenges around caring for young children. Women entering the workforce in greater numbers, increasing numbers of single-parent households, greater racial and socioeconomic disparities, diminishing power of wages (particularly in child care), and fewer quality child care providers have created a child care crisis. The recent COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting constraints and uncertainties it placed on society worsened pre-existing conditions.

For the more than 145,000 children under the age of six in the five-county Kansas City region,

high-quality ECE can have a massive impact on their lives. ECE is integral in the social and emotional development of children, sets the stage for success in grades K-12, and has a lasting impact on overall success. However, access to ECE services is often inequitable and, sadly, ECE is undervalued, and therefore under resourced, as a profession. Declining child care capacity, inequity in the availability of affordable and accessible child care, and confusing and cumbersome application processes for child care subsidies often stand in the way of young children benefiting from this positive and life-changing experience.

GLOSSARY

In this analysis, **early childhood education (ECE)** refers to regulated and/or licensed programs that serve young children between birth and five years old. ECE is often referred to as child care or day care.





“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”
 – Frederick Douglass

RIPE FOR LEARNING

Human brains are constantly changing and rewiring to include new knowledge and experiences.

This is especially true for the brains of very young children when their ability to soak up information is the greatest. Around the age of two, children’s brains have about twice as many synapses – connections among brain cells – as adults. It is in these connections where learning occurs, and, with so many of these connections developing so quickly, learning occurs faster than at any other time of life. That’s what makes high-quality ECE important for providing the brains of young children with enriching and stimulating experiences. Even waiting until kindergarten might be too late.

BRAIN FACTS

- The brain is most flexible and adaptable to learning during the earliest years of life.
- More than one million new neural connections are formed every second in the first few years of life.
- Children are already rehearsing how to produce language at as young as seven months old.
- Even as babies, children are learning the social and emotional skills that determine their future social capabilities.
- A supportive learning environment reduces the risk of children experiencing developmental delays.

Source: First Five Years Fund

WE DID OUR HOMEWORK AND HERE’S WHAT WE LEARNED

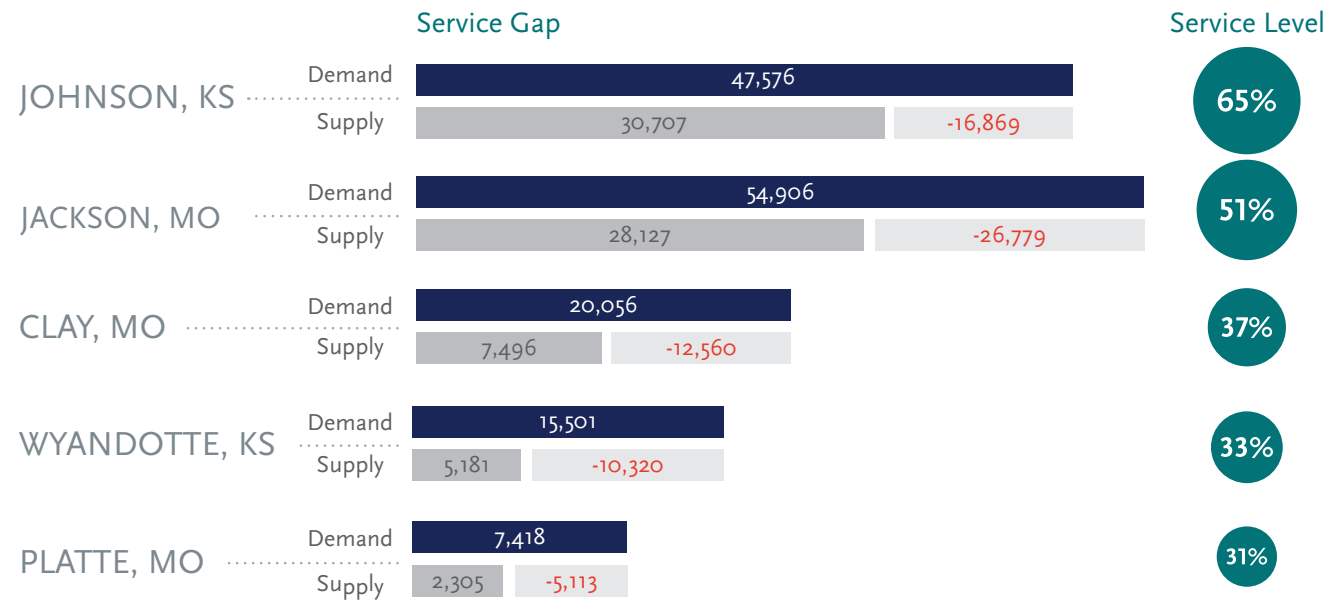
- In fall 2021, **only about half the 145,450 children in the Kansas City region could access an ECE slot in their home county.** In total, there were an estimated 73,815 ECE slots across the region.
- The **largest service gaps were in Jackson County, MO, and Johnson County, KS.** In these two counties, 26,779 and 16,869 children, respectively, lacked access to an ECE slot – nearly 60% of the overall need in the Kansas City region.
- The **lowest service levels were in Platte and Clay County, MO, and Wyandotte County, KS.** In these counties, existing ECE slots only served one out of every three children.
- **Access to the available ECE slots is inequitable across the region.**
- The **need for programs serving children younger than age three was particularly acute** across the region.

GLOSSARY

The **service gap** is the difference between the number of licensed child care slots (the supply) and the number of children under age six (the demand). It provides an estimate of the scale of the unmet need for child care in any area.

The **service level** is the percentage of children under age six that can be served by the existing licensed capacity. It provides an estimate of the degree of service coverage in any area.

ECE ACCESS AGE 0-5 BY COUNTY



COME ALONG WITH US

Through our analysis and outreach to families, ECE providers, and local stakeholders, we picked up on three major themes that we'll explore in this report. First is the burden on women. As mothers, and often the primary caregivers, women have shouldered the burden of caring for our youngest children and the immense challenges faced in finding child care. As educators, women have experienced low wages and stressful job environments that are undervalued and under resourced.

Second is the systemic racial and socioeconomic inequities in access, affordability, and quality of child care options. Historical racial discrimination and redlining practices continue to affect families and their ability to find accessible and affordable child care. Disparities in employment, wages, zoning, and education continue to impact families in under-resourced communities, and in particular families and parents of color. The confusing chore of applying for child care assistance and the broken economics of the subsidy process further exacerbates these challenges.

Third is the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities and families who were already challenged. When stay-at-home orders went out for most of the country in March 2020, many parents were left without child care... even while some were still required to show up for work. And it didn't stop there. Many workers lost jobs that never returned or lost wages from reduced hours. And for child care centers and in-home providers, the lack of business during the shutdown meant many went out of business. For those that did re-open, finding qualified child care workers was next to impossible.

We invite you on a journey through the maze of early childhood education in the Kansas City metro area while we examine the ECE system in three counties in Missouri – Clay, Jackson, and Platte – and two counties in Kansas – Johnson and Wyandotte. With help from key stakeholders who share our eagerness for change, we'll explore the experiences of families and child care providers who share our vision of an ECE system that works for everyone.



The Burden on Women: The Primary Consumers and Providers of Early Childhood Education

Historically, women have borne the responsibility of caring for children. This responsibility has become more burdensome as more women have entered the workforce while also assuming most child-rearing duties—and in many cases—doing so as a single parent. All too often, working mothers must make employment decisions based primarily on child care considerations rather than their financial and career goals.

As is true nationally, most (95%) child care providers in Kansas City are women. ECE providers operate on razor-thin profit margins and often shoulder the true cost of child care. The average annual salary for child care workers in the Kansas City metro area is about \$23,600 (Mid-American Regional Council, 2022). In 2022, the federal poverty level was \$27,750 for a family of four.

THE HIDDEN COSTS

American families experience an estimated \$8.3 billion in lost wages each year due to lack of child care.

Source: Center for American Progress, 2016

WOMEN SHOULDERING THE WORK

For working parents, child care can be essential to being gainfully employed. In 2019, there were nearly 10 million mothers of young children in the workforce. The impact of these mothers leaving the workforce to care for children would result in \$64.5 billion per year in lost wages. During the pandemic, when child care centers and schools were closed and families assumed the primary responsibility for educating their children, approximately 80% of the people who exited the workforce were women. Without accessible and affordable child care options, women have faced challenges entering and remaining in the workforce, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2021).



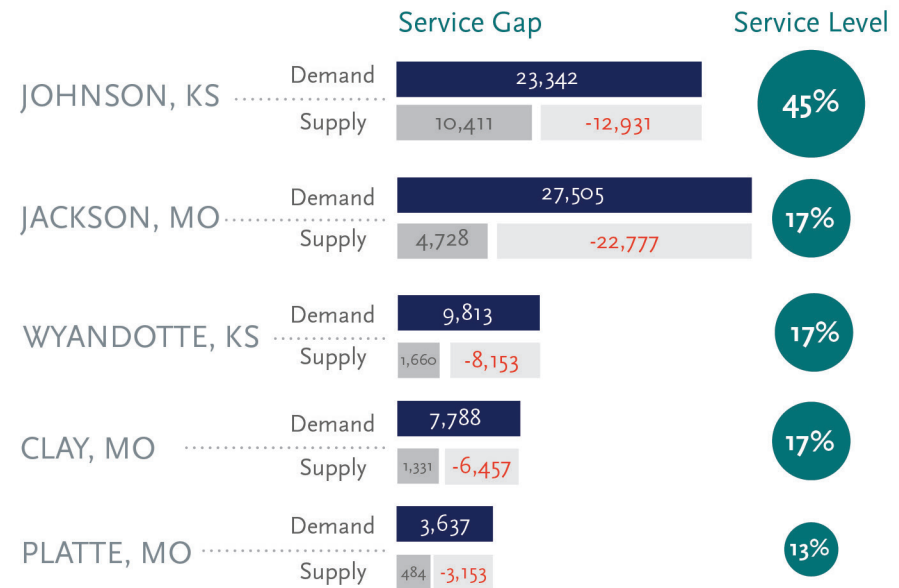
WORKING WOMEN'S CHILD CARE PRIORITIES

- 1. Reliability.** When problems with child care arise, parents must quickly find alternative options or miss work to care for children. This means lost wages which further contributes to the stress of caring for a child. Having a reliable child care provider is essential for working women who often have jobs with limited flexibility and available time off.
- 2. Cost.** Finding quality and affordable child care is not cheap. Child care is one of the biggest expenses families face. The average monthly cost of infant care is \$935 in Kansas (\$11,222/year) and \$837 in Missouri (\$10,041/year)*. This is 12.3% and 4% more, respectively, than the average cost of rent.
- 3. Accessibility and convenience.** Child care that is conveniently located either near home or along a work or school commute is critical for women with young children. Because time is such a precious commodity for any parent, traveling long distances via personal vehicle or public transportation is yet another “cost” of child care.
- 4. Quality.** Knowing that their children are in a safe, clean, and supportive environment is just as important for most parents as the affordability and accessibility of child care.

*Source: Economic Policy Institute, 2020

There is a great need for infant and toddler care throughout the region. This is a persistent challenge. The cost of providing care for children aged two and under is much greater than for children aged three to five. Infant and toddler care is especially critical to keeping women in the workforce.

ECE ACCESS AGE 0-2 BY COUNTY



A BALANCING ACT FOR ONE YOUNG MOTHER

Abrionna is a young mother and nursing student. Before the pandemic started in early 2020, she was co-parenting and attending a high school with onsite child care for her daughter. After school she focused on home, work, and her daughter.

“At first, I was in school and just had my daughter, and I had to miss school because I didn’t have child care and I didn’t know how to get it. So, I had to spend a lot of time finding a school that had a daycare so I could take her to school with me because I had no other help. I had to be on waitlists just to get her into school. I was supposed to graduate in 2019, but I failed my classes because I missed a semester because of child care.”

Through Start at Zero, Abrionna was able to get support applying for assistance and getting her daughter enrolled in Operation

Breakthrough. During the pandemic, however, her provider went virtual for a period of time and implemented attendance rules, that, even in the virtual format, made balancing schedules difficult between Abrionna’s own online classes and those of her daughter.

In October 2021, Abrionna finally got off the waiting list for a Head Start provider closer to her home that’s more flexible to work with. Her daughter had stopped attending Operation Breakthrough about two months prior, so Abrionna had been without child care or help during that time. During those two months, she had to balance attending online classes and caring for her daughter at home.

While the Head Start program is working with Abrionna’s school schedule, she wishes that they offered longer hours.

OPERATING WITH THIN MARGINS

ECE providers often shoulder the true cost of child care. Nationally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the true cost of child care increased about 47% for center-based providers and about 70% for family and group home providers (Center for American Progress, 2020). In Kansas, for family and group home providers, the cost of operating during the height of COVID-19 in summer 2020 increased about 66% from pre-pandemic estimates. For Missouri home-based providers, the cost of operating grew about 69% above pre-pandemic levels. ECE providers, like many businesses during the pandemic, had to consider a multitude of advice, guidelines, and regulations put forth to improve public safety and health during the height of the pandemic in summer 2020. Providers faced additional cleaning procedures and often had to pay higher prices for disinfection supplies – if they could find any.

Reimbursement rates for providers that participate in child care assistance programs only cover a portion of the costs associated with that slot, meaning that the parent is usually responsible for the remaining cost. Because providers operate on thin profit margins, this makes it more difficult to provide quality care to families in their community. In short, the ECE business model that was strained before the pandemic, is broken.

“I do hope that eventually people realize just how essential child care is and how expensive it is and yet how the teachers are underpaid. I hope that people realize we do a lot more than play all day. We’ve been doing this work for years, long before the pandemic hit and people are just beginning to realize just how important child care workers are. So I hope early childhood teachers get the respect due to them.”

– Kansas Child Care Provider



CASE STUDY: COST OF CARE SUBSIDIES

Washington, D.C. acknowledges that market rate surveys may not reflect actual cost of care and, thus, in 2015, transitioned to a more equitable cost estimation model, called the DC Child Care Cost Estimation Model, to inform subsidy rates. The model accounts for the effects of various factors, such as provider and policy characteristics, on provider revenues, expenses, and net revenues. A dual focus on costs and revenues informs subsidy policy, incentive packages, and efforts to strengthen provider business models. The DC Child Care Cost Estimation Model is a Microsoft Excel tool that runs multiple scenarios to estimate actual cost of care and is adapted from the U.S. Office

of Child Care's Provider Cost of Quality Calculator. The new methodology resulted in increased reimbursement rates across all age groups and quality ratings with a focus on increasing the toddler reimbursement rate to match the infant reimbursement rate, as the cost estimation model found that both age groups require the same adult-to-child ratio and represent the most expensive age groups to serve.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the model informed the Public Health Emergency Subsidy Rate, which accounts for the effects of compliance with health and safety guidance on providers' costs and revenues.

WORKFORCE AND STAFFING SHORTAGES

Finding and retaining teachers is a challenge within the ECE system everywhere. ECE teachers often earn minimum wages without benefits while being responsible for the health, safety, and development of our youngest children. According to providers and stakeholder organizations, this is true in the Kansas City region as well. The implications of fewer staff mean fewer slots for children in the community. Overall, both providers and families wished child care providers and staff were paid more, had the respect they deserve for caring for and educating our youth, and that policymakers would implement permanent solutions to address these challenges.

"[We're seeing a] shortage of applicants in general. Specifically, for the Kansas City community I sit in, there is a shortage, and applicants that jump from center to center in our area. So, it is an interesting recycling thing I haven't figured out yet. I do see a shortage of applicants of color. I've tried to look and think beyond that. So where do I find applicants?"

– Missouri Child Care Center on recruiting and retaining staff of color

"The challenge in operating a program is attracting and paying a workforce. It is a double-edged sword. Early childhood educators are not paid well, so it is hard to attract people to the work and hard with the right credentials. We also operate year-round, so you don't get a paid summer off. And we don't follow school calendar, so you don't get vacation around the holidays or paid break. This is what we do for families, because when schools are closed, parents have to go to work. I appreciated it as a working parent that they were open so often when my daughter was here. The salaries can be a challenge, specifically with our year-round calendar. We try to pay a competitive salary."

– Kansas Child Care Center on their biggest challenge

A Legacy of Racial and Economic Disparities

The current racial and economic disparities that exist in Kansas City can be traced back decades, with roots during the era of redlining when banks would not lend to communities where large numbers of Black families and non-white immigrants lived. Specifically, from 1935 to 1940, a federal agency called the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) created color coded maps (redlining maps) for cities across the U.S. that indicated risk levels for long-term real estate investment. The areas that were deemed high risk, or redlined, were areas where predominately Black, Latinx, and non-white immigrants lived. These areas are primarily to the east of the core downtown area of Kansas City.

Because these areas were labeled “hazardous” or “declining,” banks and lenders often did not make loans to people living in those areas. As such, people were unable to purchase homes and begin building long-term wealth. This created a snowballing series of persistent racial disparities for residents in these areas:

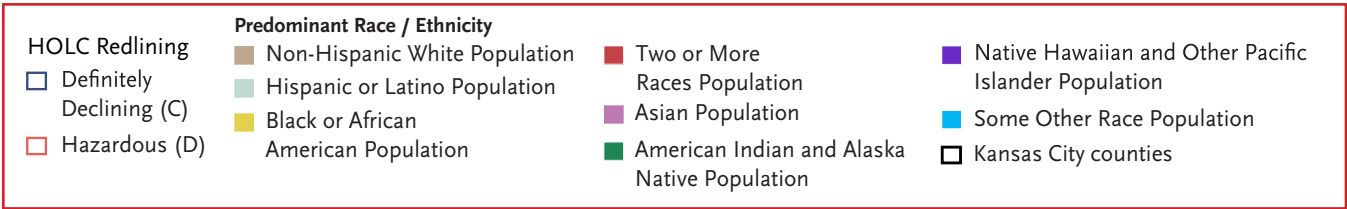
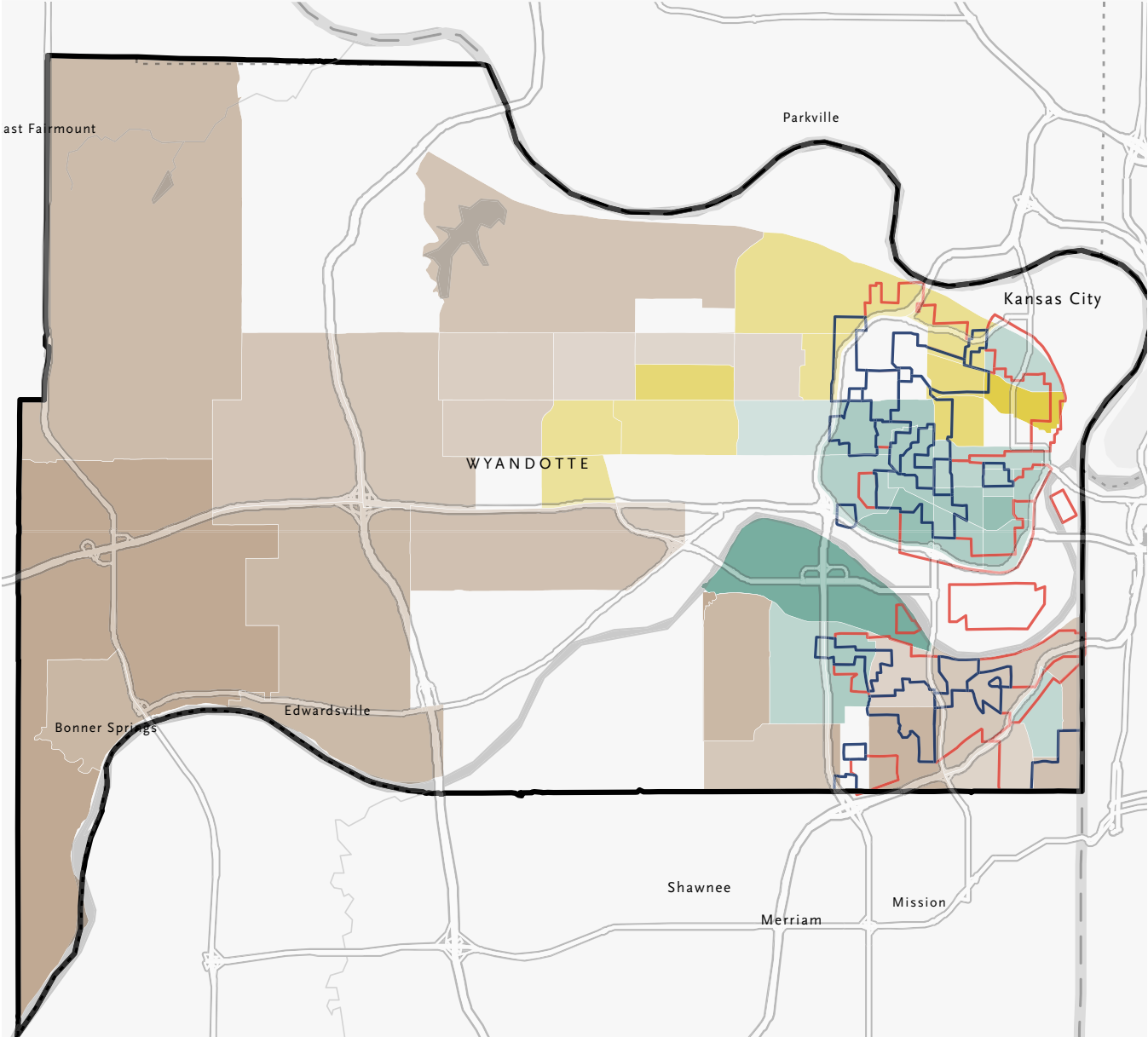
- Because there were very few Black families who owned their homes, they paid monthly rents based on land contracts which effectively extracted wealth without the long-term investment benefit.
- Redlined areas had higher costs for basic home contracting work such as electrical, plumbing, roofing, or masonry work.
- A lack of cultural, entertainment, and dining options that are much more prevalent in white or non-redlined communities.
- Redlined communities are more likely to suffer from health complications due to the presence of hazardous waste or proximity to industrial areas.



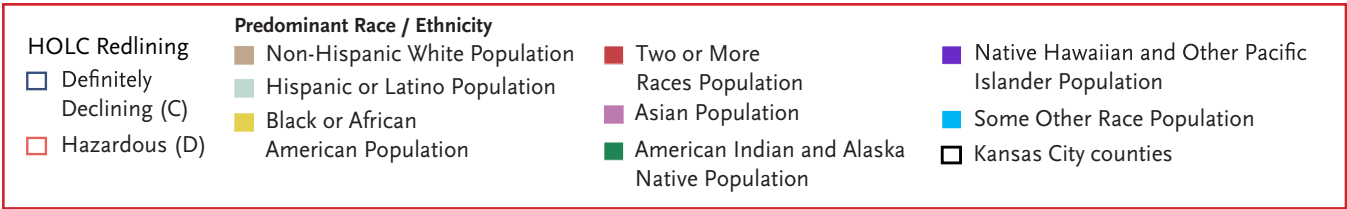
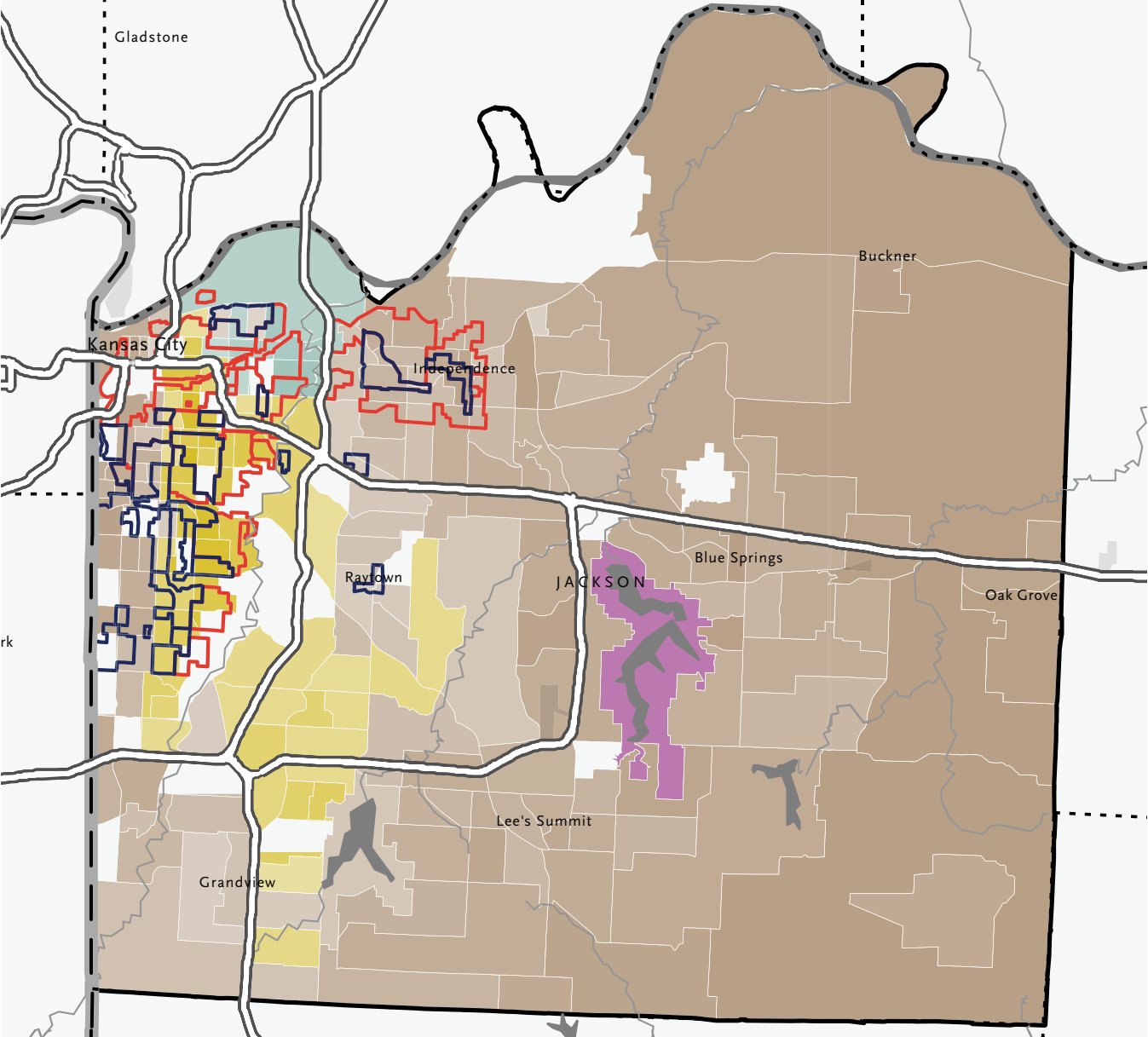
The Division of Community Engagement, Policy, and Accountability for Kansas City, MO, released a public health article in 2017, detailing the history of segregation, redlining, and white flight that resulted in the segregated city today. The HOLC redlining maps on the following pages highlight how housing discrimination and white flight predicted infrastructure and community asset access along racial segregation lines in each state.

The west and southwest areas of Kansas City, MO, divided along Troost Avenue, are predominately Black communities. White flight to the new development on the west of Troost – an area that was redlined so residents who were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) could not purchase homes – resulted in pockets of segregation, perpetuated by racially discriminative covenants by developers. Similarly, in Kansas City, KS, the racial segregating line can be seen along the Kansas River. The north side of the line divides the Kansas City area into predominately white communities to the south and predominately Latinx and Black communities to the north. The river and highway system cuts access to assets to the east and south for families of color.

REDLINING: RACE AND ETHNICITY IN WYANDOTTE COUNTY, KS



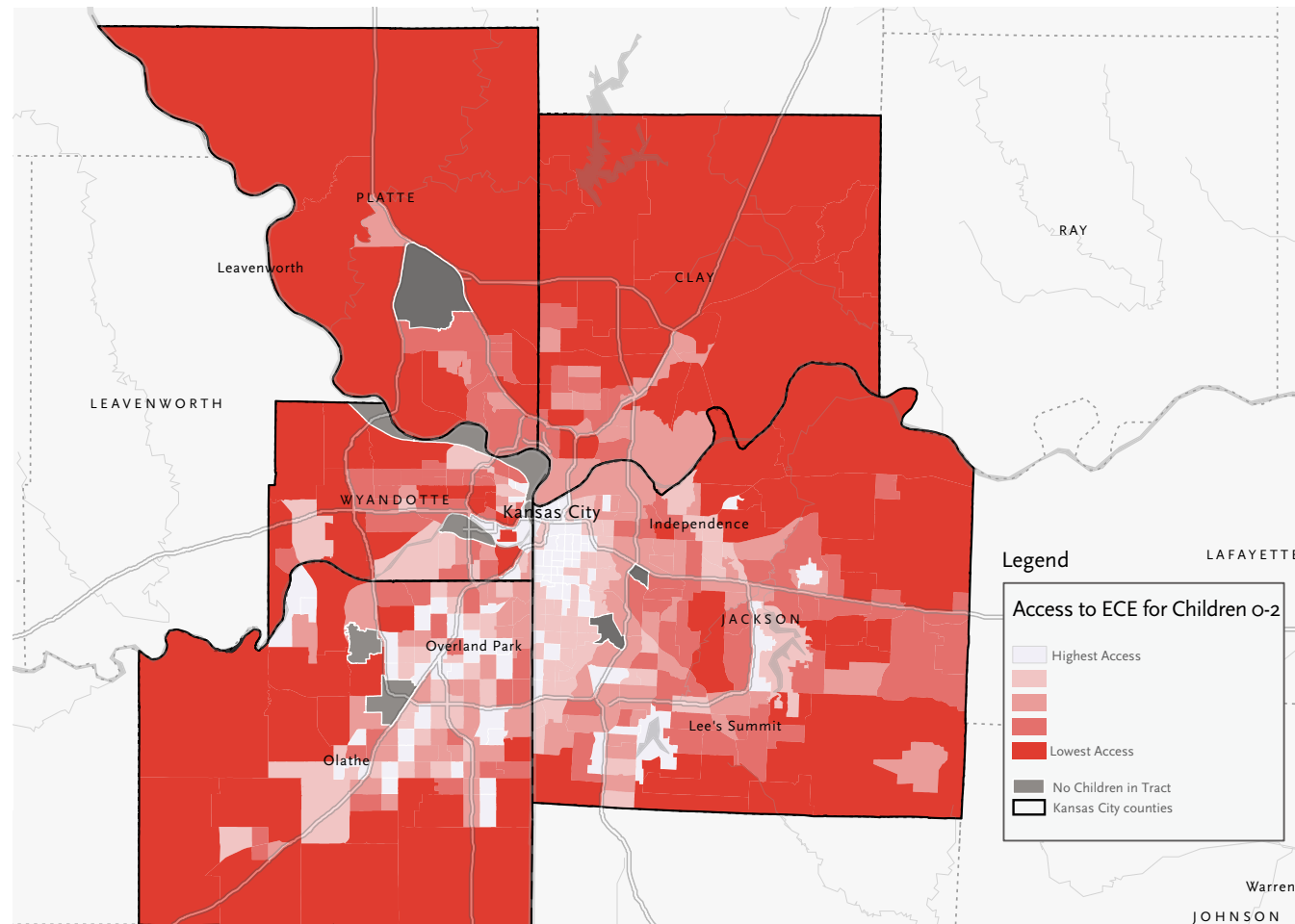
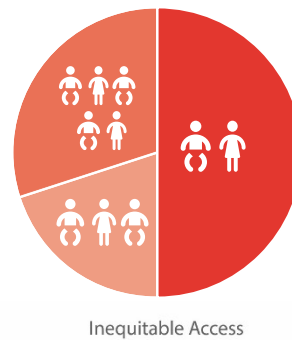
REDLINING: RACE AND ETHNICITY IN JACKSON COUNTY, MO



IT'S NOT FAIR: UNEQUAL ACCESS ON BOTH SIDES OF KANSAS CITY

Neighborhoods with little diversity result in segregated community assets – such as schools, public service facilities and programming, parks and recreation areas, and jobs. Residential segregation is a barrier to accessing health, workforce and job opportunities, and educational programming – including high-quality ECE services.

Show and tell isn't just for school. IFF created a tool called the ECE Access Index to examine access to ECE across Kansas City. It helps illustrate the geographic distribution of child care slots across communities and highlights areas of inequality. On the Missouri side, areas with fewer children and more providers ranked higher on the Access index, such as north Clay County and east Jackson County. On the Kansas side, areas closest to the city core ranked higher in access compared to communities further away, though these communities are underserved overall.



LARGE FOOTPRINT = LARGE HASSLE

Like many major U.S. regions, the Kansas City metro area is spread over a large geographic area, creating a massive urban/suburban footprint. What makes this unique is how quickly and rapidly the urban sprawl has occurred.

The large and sprawling footprint of the Kansas City metro area exacerbates the issue of accessing child care services because it requires residents to travel relatively long distances to drop off and pick up children. This is a problem on many levels. For single parents it creates an enormous strain on time and schedules, particularly with jobs with limited flexibility. For parents with no, or one vehicle, it presents a challenge for finding transportation for school, work, or running errands. For those families who use public transportation, it can be a juggling act to catch a bus or train on time that drops off near a provider location. For those with a vehicle, the extra driving also creates a financial challenge in terms of gas and auto maintenance for all those drop-offs and pick-ups.

Two statistics convey how the population and the land area have diverged from one another:

1. From 1946 to 1964, the city's population grew from 434,000 to about 486,000, an increase of 12%.
2. During that same time, the city's land area grew from 60 square miles to 314 square miles, an increase of 423%.

Source: Herriges, 2020

HUBS OF CONVENIENCE

One possible solution to improve access to child care for everyone is to incentivize providers to locate near “hubs” of common activity. Areas of common activity such as mass transit stations, commercial/shopping complexes, healthcare, and educational settings are prime locations for ECE providers to serve a potentially large number of families. This provides easy access to child care providers for commuters, students, and workers who travel to these locations as part of their daily routine. In some cities and towns, it is not uncommon to find child care centers adjacent to or inside large office buildings or near the entrance to train or bus stations. Increasingly, many colleges and universities have child care centers onsite as well.

NEED FOR MORE SUBSIDIZED CARE OPTIONS

Working class and low-income families often pay much more for child care which can stretch a household budget – often well beyond what families can afford. The result is that ECE is not a financially viable option, which jeopardizes the early social and intellectual development of young children. Advocacy for increased federal funding is critical. Relying on parents to cover the cost of care that subsidy does not cover, copays, or other fees is not realistic for a large majority of working families. The current model pushes parents out of the workforce, requires them to reduce hours to cover care, or to rely on alternative care options through family, friend, and neighbor networks of support. Some families bounce around providers when the copayments become too high.

Why is this?

The problem is that many parents simply don't earn enough money to cover their share of the cost of sending their young ones to child care...even in

cases where the cost is subsidized. Our analysis found that between the five counties we studied, the cost of care averaged between 10-25% of a median household income – more than what is considered affordable for most households. Subsidy programs and federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start are an option for families who qualify, but they are oftentimes overly complicated and time consuming. Interpreting eligibility requirements and navigating the enrollment process can be as frustrating as learning multiplication tables – and probably harder.

The threshold for subsidized child care assistance programs in both states is low. We learned that many Kansas City families are caught in the affordability trap where they make too much income to qualify for child care subsidy assistance and yet make far too little to pay tuition fees – even at a reduced rate. This bind happens to far too many families, even those earning good wages.

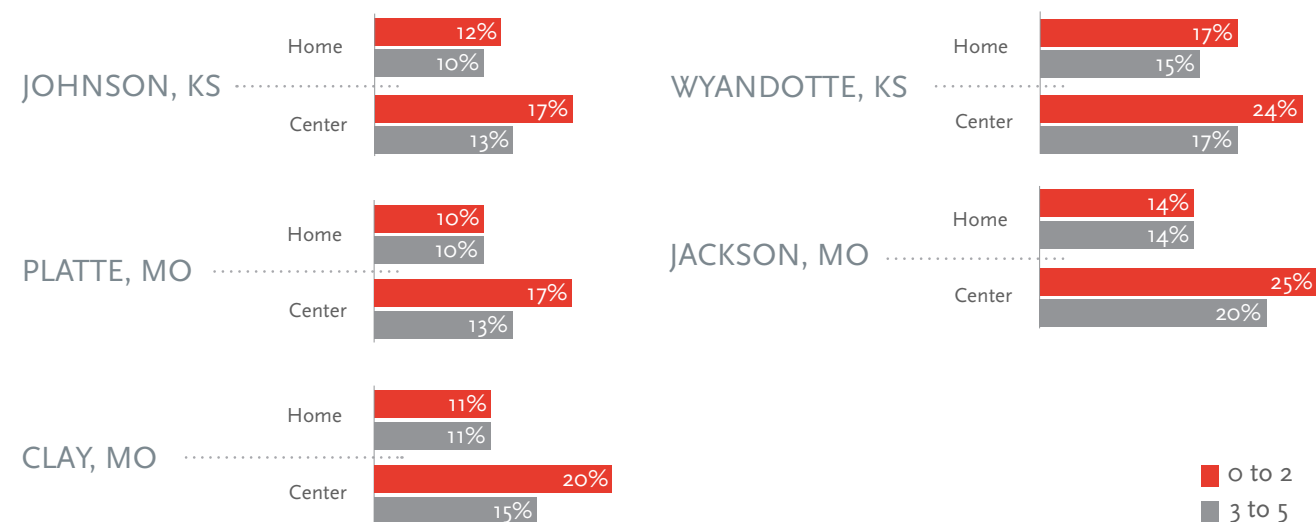
For a person who earns \$11.15 an hour in Missouri, they could expect to pay between approximately \$2,300 and \$4,600 annually for child care. That leaves between \$20,882 and \$18,500 of their yearly income left for groceries, gas, housing, utilities, taxes, and other expenses. At the higher end of the pay scale, a person in Kansas City, MO, with a median household income of approximately \$60,000 would pay between approximately \$6,000 and \$12,008 annually for child care. That would leave between \$54,000 and \$48,000 of their gross income for all other expenses. And that's assuming they only have one young child. While these examples do not account for any subsidy assistance to help reduce the cost of child care, they illustrate the hefty price parents must pay for ECE while they pursue their education, maintain employment, or even better, build a career.

ONE LOCAL ORGANIZATION'S TAKE ON ECE IN THE KANSAS CITY METRO REGION

One of the local stakeholders we spoke with was Start Young, a public-private collaborative designed to improve child care in Wyandotte County and to increase access to high-quality, full-day, full-year child care for working families.

- Subsidized care doesn't cover enough. Even with financial assistance, families are left on the hook for what subsidy dollars don't cover in tuition. Providers may request copays, requiring families to pay the difference between tuition and the subsidized amount. But families are often unable to pay them.
- Subsidy rates are based on what providers charge families – but those numbers are already low in low-income areas, which perpetuates the cycle of low reimbursement rates. Instead, rates should reflect the true operating costs. Operating costs for child care programs have increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Income eligibility is set too low and should be closer to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level to better support working and middle-class families.
- Long waitlist times are big barriers for families who are hoping for subsidy. Confusing subsidy application forms also create barriers.

AVERAGE PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME SPENT ON CHILD CARE

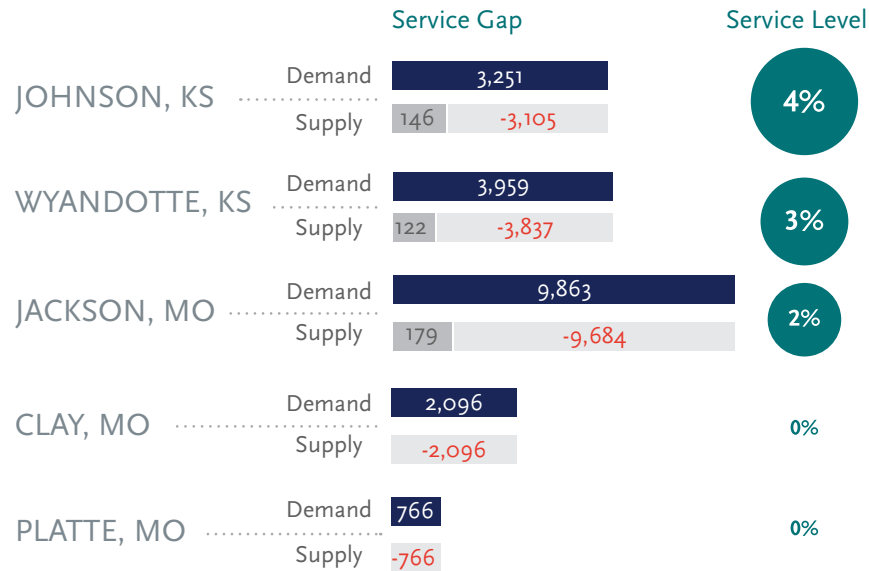


GETTING A HEAD START

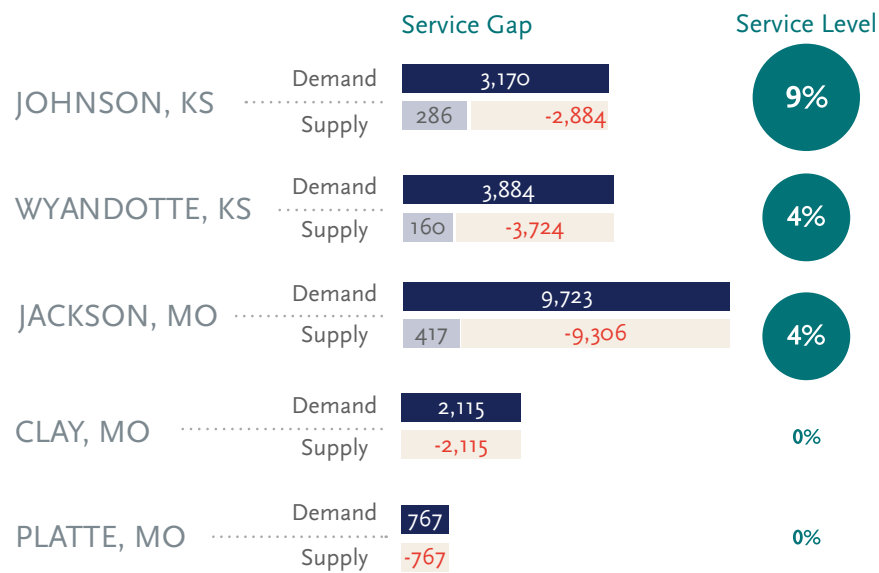
Head Start and Early Head Start programs are federally funded programs designed to promote school readiness for children from low-income families. The programs provide subsidized care that is crucial to parents who live at or below the federal poverty level. In 2019, Missouri received \$174,843,143 in Head Start funding and served about 14,662 slots. Kansas received \$75,832,370 and served about 7,060 slots (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2019).

Low or limited funding for Head Start and Early Head Start programs in neighborhoods and towns can affect much larger areas, such as entire counties or regions. In the Kansas City region, there is strong demand for Head Start and Early Head Start programs, but for communities furthest from the core Kansas City metro area, program options are very limited – jeopardizing the early years of many young children. Of note is that Platte and Clay Counties do not have a single provider offering Head Start programming.

EARLY HEAD START ACCESS BY COUNTY



HEAD START ACCESS BY COUNTY



MONEY LEFT ON THE TABLE

According to the Bipartisan Policy Center state fact sheet, Kansas left roughly 24% of its federal funds dedicated to child care on the table in 2019.

Interviews with Kansas City ECE providers and families highlighted misalignment between subsidy program requirements and public needs, which may result in unused ECE funding.

- The Kansas HOPE Act requires child support cooperation, which does not align with the needs of domestic violence survivors and of parents with informal financial agreements.
- Providers have little incentive to accept children using subsidies because low market rates generate low reimbursement rates, meaning less profit for the provider.
- Subsidies that require U.S. citizenship do not meet the needs of undocumented children or undocumented family members of eligible children who fear deportation.
- The subsidy application process is a complex and financially intrusive process that minimizes the dignity and privacy needs of families.
- Immigrant families face additional challenges if parents speak English as a second language or do not speak English at all.

Locked Down and Doors Closed

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, it didn't just infect millions of people; it also dealt a significant blow to an already compromised child care system in the United States. The result was that the child care crisis became worse for parents and child care providers, exacerbating a history of undervaluation and disinvestment in the child care industry. Even before the pandemic, there was insufficient child care capacity for children in Kansas City. Three years later, the lasting impact of the pandemic on access to reliable, affordable child care is all too clear.

In March 2020, stay-at-home orders were issued, and many businesses deemed non-essential closed their doors and hoped things would blow over

quickly. The pandemic forced ECE providers to shut down, resulting in children without options for learning and enrichment and their families without care options while they attempted to keep working. And the cycle did not stop when COVID-19 loosened its grip on society. Many ECE programs simply didn't reopen, and, as a result, many child care workers—mostly women, and women of color—were out of a job and a paycheck.

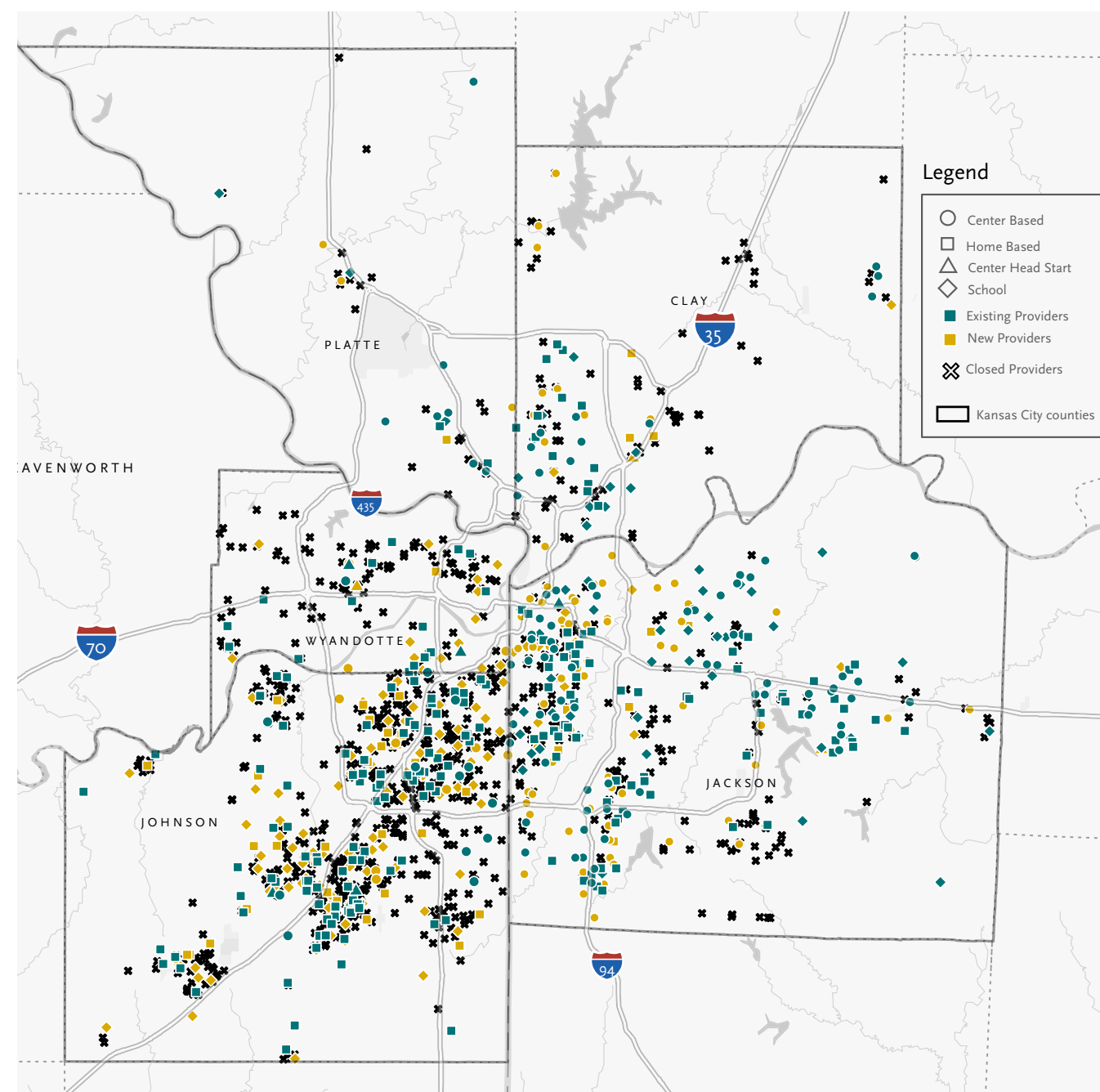
A 2022 JobsEQ Occupation Report presented by Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) for the Kansas City metropolitan area showed that while child care worker employment for the area had been growing since 2017, the field took a steep decline in early 2020, when the pandemic started. The current annual demand for workers was just over 1,000 in order to replace workers who are expected to retire or switch careers, as well as to meet expected growth in demand.

When examined geographically, we can see that more ECE programs were lost between 2020 and 2021 in areas near the Kansas and Missouri Rivers that are predominately Black or African American and Latinx.

“Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the child care industry has struggled against the threat of collapse. The cost of child care to families has risen and can now amount to thousands of dollars per month—equal to and sometimes more than the average mortgage payment, more than twice the average car payment, and nearly 17 times the average electrical bill in the United States.”

— Center for American Progress, 2022

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROVIDERS 2020-2021



EMMANUEL

FAMILY & CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER

LOSS OF AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE

A July 2021 survey of providers by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) found that even with relief funding, child care programs continued to close. About 81% of the nationally surveyed providers said it was the same or more difficult to retain and recruit staff compared to before the pandemic. NAEYC found this was particularly true for programs providing subsidized care. The majority (80%) of providers nationally said they were experiencing a staff shortage and half of providers that had been impacted by staff shortages said,

as a result, they were serving fewer children. Others had reduced their hours or closed classrooms. Many had waitlists.

It was estimated that the pandemic would wipe out about 49% of child care slots across the country and increase true costs of child care by 47% (Center for American Progress, 2020). Child Care Aware of Kansas and Missouri found that since the pandemic began in March 2020, available child care slots decreased while need for care increased in many communities. This change happened despite efforts by the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF)

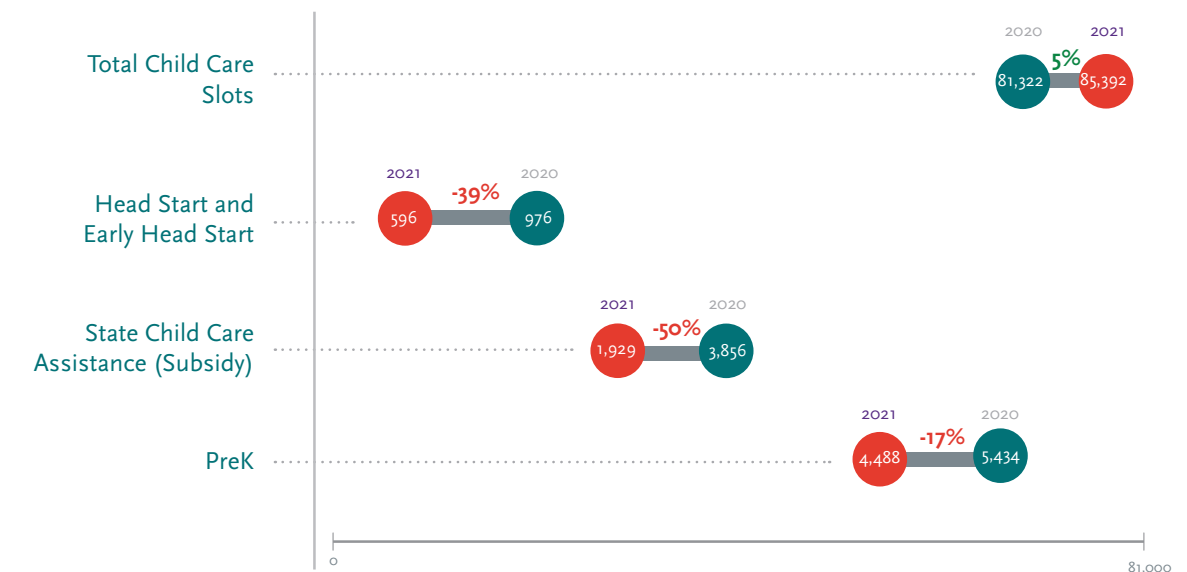
and Child Care Aware of Kansas to offer multiple rounds of stabilization grants for providers. Missouri similarly offered support for Paycheck Protection Program applications, as well as startup, expansion, and enhancement grants.

Between early 2020 and fall 2021, IFF's analysis found a slight increase in licensed child care capacity in Kansas City (5% in Missouri and 1% in Kansas). Despite this relative stability in licensed capacity within the two-state, five-county area, there was a substantial loss in subsidized care options and preschool programming.

CHANGE IN LICENSED CAPACITY 2020-2021 MO STATE



CHANGE IN LICENSED CAPACITY 2020-2021 KS STATE



In Missouri, IFF found that many providers closed and opened new programs during the pandemic and were classified as 'newly opened' in 2021 because of the change in their license number. Child Care Aware of Missouri suggests that besides reopening, some providers were able to transfer or sell their program or lease their space to a new program. For this reason, the exact number of providers lost or newly opened in Missouri was difficult to calculate.



Rebuilding with Equity

The ECE system is an essential service that requires reform to provide equitable access for Kansas City families. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need for reform. All children are deserving of high-quality, affordable ECE in their community. Taking a regional approach to building a more equitable ECE system requires careful planning, centering of the needs of families, and coordinating across multiple governing bodies.

In order to create a system that supports ECE providers and families, both Kansas and Missouri need to put in place additional financial assistance and supportive programming.

A multipronged approach is needed to tackle equity issues throughout the system for both Kansas and Missouri. **Making equity the focus while working to increase the quality of early childhood education for Kansas City families means:**

- **Investing in a strong WORKFORCE** by increasing pay and benefits for early childhood education professionals.
- **Advocating for and targeting programs that improve ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE CARE**, such as universal pre-K, K-12 alignment, true cost of care subsidies, and cost-share models.
- **Improving REGIONAL COORDINATION** through improved collaboration among child care organizations and integrated data systems.

All these strategies should include a focus on targeting resources to underserved communities, a critical examination of current policies that create undue barriers or stressors for low-income families and families of color, a focus on affordability of care, and creating opportunities for providers to reopen or open new programs in communities with a higher need for child care.

A 50,000-FOOT VIEW

Deidre Anderson has long been a leading voice in the Kansas City early education community. She began her career supervising all title programs in the Kansas City school district superintendent's cabinet. Today, she serves as CEO of EarlystART schools, a network of three ECE centers in Kansas City and Pleasant Valley, MO.

EarlystART schools serve more than 300 children across two urban locations and one rural, introducing them to art and self-expression in a variety of ways.

Asked to describe her professional approach, Deidre notes she has long been a “macro-level thinker.”

“I see things from a 50,000-foot view, so I deal with things at a local context, but see bigger things that feed my passion,” she says.

One of the things that Deidre is particularly passionate about is giving back to her profession. That's why, in addition to managing facilities, advocating for the industry, fundraising, and focusing on staff recruitment and retention, Deidre has also created an innovative educational platform to support incoming ECE professionals.

The Starting Early initiative was created to serve two key objectives in advancing ECE.

First, to create early career training and opportunities for high-school aged students interested in becoming the next generation of early childhood educators. These students can see for themselves what goes into the profession and how to build the skills for success.

Secondly, Starting Early is working to consolidate a robust ECE provider network across seven regions in the greater Kansas City area. To date, 10 providers are participating. The network aims to build industry awareness, and provides guidance and mentoring for current ECE professionals who seek to better advocate for the industry and collaborate with elected officials.

According to Deidre, Starting Early is designed to build a cadre of ECE leaders who can help her “advocate for early childhood to improve our system locally, regionally, and across our state.”

At the heart of her efforts is Deidre's belief that today's mental health crisis can be positively impacted when more young children have the opportunity to participate in classes like those offered by EarlystART.

“Ninety percent of your brain is developed by age three, including your ability to emote, to regulate, and not to have temper tantrums,” Deidre says. By introducing more educators and giving them the right tools to advocate and lead, children can benefit from a solid foundation for mental health.

NEAR-TERM STRATEGIES

There are steps that can be taken in the short term that work toward the long-term goal of increasing access to high-quality child care for all children in Greater Kansas City.

Workforce

- Through pipeline and pathway programming, promote teacher preparedness, compensation, and retention to ensure Kansas City families have access to high-quality early childhood programs.
- Support the training and professional development of community-based ECE professionals through shared opportunities and resources.

Affordability

- Evaluate the child care assistance and subsidy programs and resolve areas that create undue burden on families and providers to participate.
- Review the reimbursement rate methodology to align to the true operating costs of child care programs.

Coordination

- Fully staff and fund a regional convening entity (for example, Partners in Quality) to connect and align around investment and advocacy strategies.
- Consolidate state services into a single office for early childhood, like the one Missouri recently moved toward, to help coordinate services and processes and to ease the burden on families and providers.



LONGER-TERM STRATEGIES

Advocating for fair wages and benefits for providers and professionals.

The ECE workforce was in crisis before COVID – facing a lack of qualified teachers, low wages and benefits that prevented professionals from entering and staying in the field, and a lack of support leading to high turnover rates. Child care programs operate on razor thin financial margins, making increasing pay and offering benefits to staff difficult without increasing tuition costs accordingly and therefore passing the financial burden along to families. Coordinated efforts among higher education institutions, policy makers and state representatives, and community advocates are needed to create affordable pathways to credentialing and licensure to attract and retain a high-quality ECE workforce. Increasing reimbursement rates to align with the true cost of care allows providers to slowly increase wages, provide benefits, and fund ongoing professional development for their staff that increases the quality of their programs.

STRATEGY: Align pay scales and benefits with the K-12 system to attract and retain qualified professionals.

Improving affordability to increase access

IFF found that across the five counties examined in this analysis, the average family spends 10-25% of their household income on child care, well above what is considered affordable. Subsidy programs and federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start are an option for families who qualify but pose their own challenges. The eligibility requirements and enrollment process are not always clear or easy to navigate. Working class families often pay much more for child care.

STRATEGY: Raise the maximum income threshold for child care subsidy to 200% of federal poverty level to better serve families left behind in the gap.

STRATEGY: Fund ECE as a public service, assisting providers to remain open and stable during times of crisis.

Coordinating systems to focus on families

In Kansas City, multiple organizations are serving young children and their families, and each of these organizations use different systems and data. To increase efficiency and impact, create an integrated data infrastructure that better coordinates and connects the various systems that impact the well-being of young children and families. Integrated state data systems are needed to mobilize effectively around the needs of children and families. With better data systems, families can navigate resources and systems more efficiently, and have a more accurate picture of the state of the Kansas City child.

STRATEGY: Build an integrated early childhood data system that supports real-time data about child care enrollment and capacity.

- Create shared data definitions and terminology.
- Use unique identifiers to link data across organizations and data systems/platforms.
- Establish data sharing agreements and data governance policies among organizations.

Moving Forward

Congratulations on making it this far!

We've covered A LOT of information, research, and thought-provoking ideas and challenges in early childhood education in the Kansas City region. Truthfully, the picture looks bleak. Especially as the fallout from the pandemic continues to rain down.

But life has a renewing quality and so it is with the complex issue of realigning the ECE system for equity and long-term sustainability.

Throughout this report, several key findings emerged that we believe deserve more attention that begin the process of renewal and change for the greater good of child care in Kansas City.

- Child care is often the primary responsibility of women.
- The pandemic led to a loss of high quality and affordable child care.
- ECE programming is unevenly distributed across the Kansas City region.
- The existing subsidy structure doesn't meet the needs of families.
- The child care subsidy application process is too confusing.
- Child care providers are bearing the burden of increasing costs and staffing shortages.
- Reimbursement rates for providers (both centers and home-based) are at unacceptably low levels.

While this report has focused on child care affordability and access in the Kansas City metro area, the challenges are not exclusively an urban problem. Even in suburban and rural outlying areas the same challenges exist.

We acknowledge that these are complex issues that take time and patience to change. Difficult tasks often do. But this work will help to nurture our young children and ease the stress and strain on families. If change is to happen and young children are to have opportunities to thrive, each of these recommendations and strategies outlined in this report is critical to creating a stronger and more equitable ECE system.

Think back to a test, class, or project that you had in school. Remember studying for hours trying to absorb material? Pursuing something that is important, and that you believe in, often involves hard work and perseverance. It's the same with creating equitable and sustainable change in the Kansas City metro region ECE system. While the challenges are stark, addressing them is of paramount importance. The region's young people deserve a better, more equitable future.

After all, it's no small thing to make a difference that will change our future.



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