

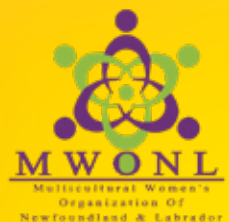
NEWCOMERS AND THE CHILD CARE CRISIS

in Newfoundland and Labrador

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JIMMY PRATT
FOUNDATION



Summary

72% of young children in Newfoundland and Labrador live in childcare deserts, defined as a postal code where there are more than three children per licensed childcare space.¹ These challenges are magnified for newcomers to Newfoundland and Labrador, who face additional barriers as they navigate the childcare system. The stakes of missing out on childcare are high for newcomer children and their parents – more than 1 in 3 immigrant children in Newfoundland and Labrador live in poverty.² As the provincial government expands the Early Learning and Child Care system in Newfoundland and Labrador, it must do so with consideration for the experiences of immigrant families. This is an issue of migrant justice, gender equality, anti-racism, and children’s rights.

About this paper

This discussion paper was developed in partnership with staff and program participants at the Multicultural Women’s Organization of Newfoundland and Labrador (MWONL). It focuses on the experience of parents and caregivers in Newfoundland and Labrador who do not have a childcare spot.

We reviewed recent literature on Early Learning and Childcare and newcomer families in Canada. There is little research specific to childcare and newcomer families in Newfoundland and Labrador, so to provide local context to this discussion paper, we co-hosted a forum for MWONL program participants to share their experiences finding childcare since coming to the province.

18 parents and caregivers participated in our focus group. Participants had arrived in Canada from countries including Lebanon, the Philippines, Armenia, India, Sri Lanka. Most of these parents and caregivers did not have childcare, so our discussion focused on the challenges of finding a spot. All of the parents were based in the St. John’s Metro area, so our discussion did not address the rural newcomer experience. For more information on this session, please see Appendix A.

While MWONL and Jimmy Pratt Foundation staff have heard anecdotally about incidents of racism and discrimination towards newcomer families and children in childcare settings, this did not come up in our forum with parents. Perhaps this is because the participants in our forum, for the most part, did not have a childcare spot yet. There is very little research on newcomer access to ELCC in Newfoundland and Labrador in general, and none to our knowledge that specifically addresses racism and discrimination. That said, an absence of evidence should not be taken as evidence of absence, as incidents of racism and discrimination have been documented in the K-12 school system.

¹ David Macdonald and Martha Friendly, “Not Done Yet: \$10-a-Day Child Care Requires Addressing Canada’s Child Care Deserts” (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, May 2023), 4.

² Statistics Canada, “Table 98-10-0314-01 Individual Low-Income Status by Immigrant Status and Period of Immigration: Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations with Parts,” October 26, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810031401-eng>.

Immigration and the Child Care Crisis

Immigration to Newfoundland and Labrador occurs in the broader context of Canadian immigration. According to Statistics Canada, in 2021, more than 8.3 million immigrants (comprising one quarter of the population) arrived in Canada between 2006 to 2021 and the percentage of recent immigrants who settled in Atlantic Canada tripled from 1.2% to 3.5%.³

In 2017, the provincial government of Newfoundland and Labrador launched a 5-year action plan – The Way Forward on Immigration in Newfoundland and Labrador 2016-2022 – with the goal of attracting 1,700 newcomers to the province.⁴ This goal was achieved early, in 2019. Since then, our province has been actively recruiting immigrants with the primary goal of growing the province’s labour force and stimulating economic activity.⁵

While the numbers of immigrants arriving in Newfoundland and Labrador has increased, around 20% of them leave to settle in other Canadian provinces.⁶ This represents a low rate of retention compared to other Canadian provinces, surpassed only by Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. While the precise reasons that immigrants leave requires further study, many cite a lack of employment opportunities in conjunction with a high cost of living as factors in their decision to relocate.⁷ A lack of affordable, regulated childcare increases the cost of living for caregivers who must resort to high-cost, unregulated childcare, and limits the employment options of caregivers who cannot find child care at all. In our forum, almost all participants were not working – despite being qualified and willing – because they could not find reliable childcare for their young children.

³ Statistics Canada Government of Canada: “The Daily — Immigrants Make up the Largest Share of the Population in over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We Are as Canadians,” October 26, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm>.

⁴ Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, “The Way Forward on Immigration in Newfoundland and Labrador: 2019-2022 Initiatives” (Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism, March 2017), <https://www.gov.nl.ca/immigration/files/ImmigrationInitiatives201920web.pdf>; Goss Gilroy Inc. “Report on the Settlement Outcomes Survey” (Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism, June 2020), <https://www.gov.nl.ca/immigration/files/Goss-Gilroy-Settlement-Survey-Report.pdf>.

⁵ Michael Clair, “Immigration in Newfoundland and Labrador” (St. John’s, NL: The Harris Centre, Memorial University of Newfoundland: April 2021), 50.

⁶ Clair, 65.

⁷ Clair, 65–66; Lan Gien and Rebecca Law, “Attracting and Retaining Immigrants to Newfoundland and Labrador: Voices from Newcomers and International Students” (The Harris Centre, Memorial University of Newfoundland, August 31, 2009), 41–42, http://research.library.mun.ca/8155/3/IR-F_Gien_2009_08_31.pdf; Tony Fang, Jane Zhu, and Alex David Wells, “Employer Attitudes Towards Hiring Newcomers and International Students in the Atlantic Provinces” (The Harris Centre: Memorial University of Newfoundland, April 2021), 7, https://www.mun.ca/harriscentre/media/production/memorial/administrative/the-harris-centre/media-library/ACOA_Immigration_Fang.pdf; Addressing Islamophobia in NL et al., “Addressing Islamophobia in Newfoundland and Labrador: Community Report September 2019,” September 2019, https://www.mun.ca/religious-studies/media/production/memorial/academic/faculty-of-humanities-and-social-sciences/religious-studies/media-library/more/addressingislamophobia/Addressing%20Islamophobia%20Community%20Report_FINAL.pdf.

There is a gendered dimension to the childcare crisis. When families cannot find childcare, women stay home from work to fill the gap. This is the case for newcomer women as well, who are even less likely to have the support of extended family nearby.⁸ News reports on immigrant women in British Columbia suggested that they are putting off taking ESL lessons, continuing education, or getting a professional degree due to lack of childcare.⁹

A lack of childcare can have far-reaching consequences for children and their families. Immigrant families have much higher rates of poverty than their non-immigrant peers. According to census data, 41.9% of immigrant children between the ages of 0-17 in Newfoundland and Labrador live in poverty (compared to 18.0% of non-immigrant children).¹⁰ The percentage is even higher for immigrant children between the ages of 0-5, 64% of whom live in poverty (compared to 20.2% of non-immigrant children). Newfoundland and Labrador stands out in this regard: immigrant children are almost twice as likely to live in poverty than the Canadian average for immigrant children for both age groups.

Additional Barriers to Child Care for Immigrants

The acute lack of childcare spaces in Newfoundland and Labrador is only one part of the picture. A growing body of literature suggests that newcomers face additional barriers posed by culture, language and technology as they navigate the Early Learning and Child Care System in Canada. Many parents expressed in our forum that they were surprised to face this struggle on arrival; many came from countries where Early Childhood Education programs are universal and expected that it would be the same in Canada.

The process of searching for an available childcare spot is burdensome and complicated. Parents need to seek out and contact dozens (sometimes hundreds) of individual operators – a task made more difficult for parents from diverse cultural backgrounds.

While some categories of immigrants receive support through settlement agencies, the rest are on their own. The Association of New Canadians provides part-time, trauma-informed childcare for children whose parents are enrolled in language programs.¹¹ It is the outcome of established partnerships between a settlement agency, multiple levels of government, and ELCC sector organizations.¹² This is listed as an innovative program that responds well to the needs of newcomer families by a recent Canada-wide environmental scan. But these sorts of culturally informed programs are not widely available in the mainstream childcare settings that many newcomer families rely on.

⁸ Marilyn Gladu, “Women’s Unpaid Work in Canada” (Ottawa, Canada: House of Commons, June 2021), 16–18, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/FEWO/report-8/>.

⁹ Johna Baylon, “Lack of Child Care Forces Immigrant Women in B.C. to Put Careers on Hold,” New Canadian Media (blog), December 13, 2020, <https://www.newcanadianmedia.ca/lack-of-child-care-forces-immigrant-women-in-b-c-to-put-careers-on-hold/>.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada, “Table 98-10-0314-01 Individual Low-Income Status by Immigrant Status and Period of Immigration: Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations with Parts.”

¹¹ Nahal Fakhari, Milena Pimentel, and Jessie-Lee McIsaac, “Mobilizing Innovative Models in Early Childhood Education and Care for Newcomer Families and Children,” Report (Mount Saint Vincent University, Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre, 2023), 20, <https://DalSpace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/82746>.

¹² Fakhari, Pimentel, and McIsaac, 15.

These additional barriers amount to systemic discrimination. Systemic discrimination has been well-documented in the K-12 school system.¹³ Racism, structural racism, and discrimination are persistent causes of trauma and stress for racialized and immigrant children and have a role in perpetuating intergenerational poverty.¹⁴

Recommendations

It is an exciting time for young children and their families in Newfoundland and Labrador. Thanks to federal and provincial investment, fees for regulated child care are \$10/day. Our Early Childhood Educators are well-qualified to provide high-quality programs – and the workforce is growing. These recommendations build on these accomplishments with a view to ensure equity in our ELCC system. Indeed, inclusion is a pillar of the provincial and federal strategies.

1. Build multicultural education, anti-racism and inclusion into every part of our expanding childcare system. Many of the barriers that newcomer families face in accessing the ELCC system could be addressed at the provincial policy level.
 - o Ensure newcomer representation on the provincial Early Learning and Child Care Advisory Committee.
 - o Develop strong, ongoing partnerships with newcomer-led and newcomer-serving organizations to identify gaps in the province’s ELCC system based on gender, immigration status, race, culture, and language.
 - o Set targets for the inclusion of newcomer children in ELCC programs, and collect data to determine whether those targets are being met.

2. Consider the needs of newcomer parents in designing an online parent portal.¹⁵ The newcomer parents we spoke with hoped that an online parent portal would act as a common application to the waitlists of all nearby childcare operators – which would take the stress of contacting childcare operators individually off them. Specifically:
 - o Immigration status should not be a barrier to accessing and using the online parent portal.
 - o Require all childcare operators to use common forms and documentation for intake. Currently, parents fill out different forms and prepare individual documents for each operator.
 - o Allow parents to easily check where they are on a given waitlist.
 - o Streamline the application for a childcare subsidy with the online parent portal. Allow parents to be “pre-approved” for a subsidy once they find a spot.

¹³ The Premier’s Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, “Now Is the Time: The Next Chapter in Education in Newfoundland and Labrador” (St. John’s, NL, July 21, 2017), 89, <https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/eap-report.pdf>; Addressing Islamophobia in Newfoundland and Labrador: Community Report September 2019,” 23.

¹⁴ Lana Ruvolo Grasser and Tanja Jovanovic, “Neural Impacts of Stigma, Racism, and Discrimination,” *Biological Psychiatry. Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuroimaging* 7, no. 12 (December 2022): 1225–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bpsc.2022.06.012>; National Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Canada, “Pandemic Lessons: Ending Child and Family Poverty Is Possible” (Toronto, Canada: Campaign 200, 2022), 38, https://campaign2000.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/English-Pandemic-Lessons_Ending-Child-and-Family-Poverty-is-Possible_2022-National-Report-Card-on-Child-and-Family-Poverty.pdf.

¹⁵ Juanita Mercer, “N.L. Government Promises Parents Seeking Childcare an Online Daycare Portal,” *The Telegram*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/news/nl-government-promises-parents-seeking-childcare-an-online-daycare-portal-100852798/>.

3. Ensure that all newcomer families with young children have access to trauma-informed, culturally sensitive early learning programs. Not all families will use childcare, but they must still have safe, supportive places to spend time with other parents and young children.
 - o Provide sufficient funding to Family Resource Programs, which provide free programs to children under 6 and their caregivers across the province. Family Resource Programs must have transportation funding, especially in areas without public transit, since many newcomer participants do not have personal vehicles.
4. Expand the childcare sector to ensure high-quality, not-for-profit, regulated spaces for every child in Newfoundland and Labrador.
5. Newcomers are an asset to the ELCC workforce, especially in their ability to provide culturally-responsive services to newcomer families.¹⁶ That said, across Canada, racialized and newcomer women are overrepresented in the lowest-paying types of care work – and care work is already devalued and undercompensated.¹⁷ Multiculturalism and diversity in the ECE workforce should therefore be approached with intention and care.
 - o Offer tailor-made pathways for newcomers to become qualified as Early Childhood Educators. Although there are newcomers eager to explore a career in ELCC, many find the system of certification and financial support for education difficult to navigate.
 - o Support newcomers to assume leadership positions in the ELCC sector, including as supervisors, consultants, college instructors and policymakers. This will require cooperation with operators, AECENL, the ECEHR Council, and post-secondary institutions.
 - o Require operators under the Operating Grant Program to provide health and dental benefits, pension plans, paid time off and paid professional development time to all ECEs and increase funding to the operating grant to cover these additional costs. Currently, ECEs working in public-sector settings are the most likely to receive these benefits, while their peers working in for-profit settings are least likely.¹⁸ These benefits support retention and advancement for ECEs.

¹⁶ Fakhari, Pimentel, and McIsaac, “Mobilizing Innovative Models in Early Childhood Education and Care for Newcomer Families and Children.”

¹⁷ Statistics Canada, “Women Working in Paid Care Occupations,” January 25, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2022001/article/00001-eng.htm>.

¹⁸ Kerry McCuaig, Emis Akbari, and Allison Correia, “Canada’s Children Need a Professional Early Childhood Education Workforce” (Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, April 2022), 17.

About the Jimmy Pratt Foundation

The Jimmy Pratt Foundation's vision is that Newfoundland and Labrador is a place where all children and youth will thrive, even in the face of adverse circumstances. We know that high-quality, play-based Early Childhood Education can set children up for success in school and in life, which is why it has been our Foundation's focus over a decade. In our advocacy for kindergarten and universal childcare, we are working towards a province where Early Childhood Education is a right that is fulfilled for all children.

One of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation's core values is equity. We recognize that children and their families will face different barriers when it comes to Early Learning and Child Care. The 2021 Census showed a disturbing trend – immigrant children are much more likely to live in poverty than non-immigrant families in Newfoundland and Labrador. This rate was also much higher than the Canadian average. We wanted to understand what role the ELCC system might play in maintaining this inequity in our province.

About the Multicultural Women's Organization of NL (MWONL)

The MWONL is a dynamic women-led organization that empowers and supports women from diverse backgrounds by serving immigrant, newcomer, and visible minority women through a wide variety of supportive and culturally appropriate programs and services that facilitate connection, belonging and participation in the community.

MWONL's core values are:

Women-Centered: A diverse group of women supporting each other.

Empowerment: Strengthening women's voices and choices.

Equity: Enabling opportunities that elevate women.

Cultural Safety: A respectful space for women free of racism and other forms of discrimination.

Acknowledgements

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Why we held this session.

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One of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation’s core values is equity. We recognize that children and their families will face different barriers when it comes to Early Learning and Child Care. The 2021 Census showed a disturbing trend – immigrant children are much more likely to live in poverty than non-immigrant families in Newfoundland and Labrador.¹⁹ This rate was also much higher than the Canadian average. We wanted to understand what role the ELCC system might play in maintaining this inequity in our province.

There is a growing body of research on how immigrant families use Early Learning and Child Care services in Canada, but there is very little recent data on Newfoundland and Labrador.²⁰ Meanwhile, staff at newcomer-serving organizations like the Multicultural Women’s Organization of NL have seen how a lack of childcare affects their participants every day. They suggested that we co-host a session answering questions that their participants might have about accessing childcare – specifically finding a spot and applying for childcare subsidies. We would also provide a forum for the participants to share their experiences finding childcare since coming to the province.

About the Forum

The MWONL recruited participants for this forum from their network of newcomer and immigrant women. MWONL staff developed a registration form (Google Forms) and event poster. They publicized the event in their monthly newsletter and posted about the event on Facebook.

18 participants attended the forum on May 18, 2023. 17 participants identified as women and 1 identified as a man. All participants were caregivers (parents or grandparents) for young children under 5. Participants had come to St. John’s from countries including Lebanon, the Philippines, Armenia, India, and Sri Lanka.

We did not ask participants for their immigration status, though the MWONL’s community includes international students, refugees, permanent residents, and Canadian citizens. Most of the participants had been in Canada for less than 3 years, and several required the support of a translator to participate. Most of the participants did not have childcare, and our discussion therefore focused on the challenge of finding a childcare spot. Finally, all of the participants were based in the St. John’s Metro area, so our discussion did not consider the rural experience.

¹⁹ Statistics Canada, “Table 98-10-0314-01 Individual Low-Income Status by Immigrant Status and Period of Immigration: Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations with Parts.”

²⁰ Alison Brown et al., “Newcomer Families’ Experiences with Programs and Services to Support Early Childhood Development in Canada: A Scoping Review,” *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society* 1, no. 2 (2020): 182–215.

What We Heard

Strengths

The participants had a generally positive perception of regulated childcare services and were eager to enroll their children. They named several benefits that they hoped their children would receive in a childcare program:

- Freedom to play
- The chance to socialize with their peers
- Skills in eating and dressing
- Improved English language skills
- Introduction to Western culture

The participants found the online resources on childcare hosted on the Department of Education's website to be clear and helpful although lacking in some areas (see the discussion below). The participants who attended the focus group did not find language to be a barrier in navigating these resources but noted that they knew some newcomers (especially refugees) who would need the help of a caseworker or system navigator.

Challenges

The main struggle that parents emphasized was the lack of spaces. Many parents were very surprised when they faced this struggle on arrival in Canada; many came from countries where Early Childhood Education programs are universal and expected that it would be the same in Canada. Most of the participants were on multiple waitlists – some on more than two hundred. One mother told us that her daughter had been on a waitlist for three years, and most participants had been on a waitlist for more than six months. This meant that caregivers could not work despite really wanting to. One participant was a grandparent who had come to St. John's and had taken on significant caregiving duties for her young grandchildren – allowing her daughter to work in the healthcare system.

The participants also detailed the work involved in looking for a spot:

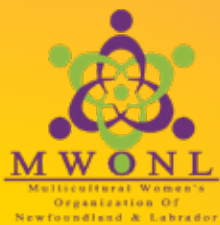
- Each operator has different procedures for adding children to the waitlist. Some would not add parents to a waitlist once it reached a certain length.
- Operators had different enrolment procedures. Each operators had their own forms and required different types of documentation (some required proof of vaccinations, for example, while others did not)
- Parents often did not know if operators had actually added their children to a waitlist, and where their child was located on the waitlist.
- In many cases, parents had to visit the operator to speak with someone about enrolling their child because they did not receive answers to calls and emails. In many cases, they had to travel long distances which was time-consuming and expensive.

Many participants suggested that a common registration process would eliminate most of these issues.



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