



2024

**Early
Child Care
Assessment
Report**

Message from ECHO and Family Center Early Childhood Council



Child care is a vital cornerstone that supports families, fuels the economy, and shapes the lives of young children. Despite its importance, many families across Fremont County struggle to find affordable, high-quality child care. Long waitlists and high costs can create a burden, forcing parents into tough choices. To address this, there's a growing movement to expand access and affordability to quality child care programs through government investment and subsidies.

Investing in child care is an investment in our future. It strengthens families, empowers parents, and lays the foundation for a successful generation of children. By working together, we can ensure all families have access to the child care they need.

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The ECHO & Family Center Early Childhood Council's mission is to promote and sustain a comprehensive high-quality early childhood system to support families and providers to prepare children for success in school and in life.

Contents

- 01. Introduction**
- 02. Fremont County**
- 03. Demographics**
- 04. Benefits of Child Care**
- 05. Birth Rates**
- 06. Preparedness**
- 07. Child Care Priorities**
- 08. Barriers to Access**
- 09. Economic Impact**
- 10. Lack of Qualified Workforce**
- 11. Employer-Based Supports**
- 12. Recommended Solutions**
- 13. Endnotes**
- 14. Acknowledgements**

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the care and education of children from birth to eight years old. It is an important part of a child's development, as it can help them to learn and grow in all areas of their lives. There are many different types of early childhood care and education programs. Some of the most common types include:

- **Child Care Centers:** Child care centers are licensed facilities that provide care for children. They typically offer full-day care, as well as before and after-school care.
- **Home Providers:** Includes licensed home child care providers or family, friend and neighbor care.
- **Preschools:** Preschools are licensed facilities that provide education for children ages three to five. They typically offer a mix of academic and social-emotional learning activities.
- **Head Start:** Head Start is a federal program that provides early childhood care and education services to low-income families.

To get a better understanding of the state of childcare in Fremont County, data from numerous state and county-level reports, and a survey of Fremont County residents that was commissioned by the ECHO and Family Center Early Childhood Council, and conducted online, was taken into consideration. The survey links were shared widely through email newsletters, listservs, social media, and community partnerships. This allowed us to gather both quantitative data (numbers) and qualitative data (written responses) to get a well-rounded understanding of the sentiment of Fremont County families seeking access to affordable child care.

The following report will provide an overview of the current dynamics of childcare with regard to availability, access and funding while identifying opportunities to advance solutions aimed at creating more equitable access to affordable child care.

Fremont County



Demographics

Located approximately 125 miles south from Denver International Airport, and encompassing 1,533 square miles of Colorado's Upper Arkansas River Valley, Fremont County is designated a rural remote mountain community with a total population of 49,570.

Fremont County demographics reflect that 58% of the population is male, and of those males, approximately 10% are veterans. The median age is 48 years old and the three largest ethnic groups represented specifically are White (78.5%), Hispanic (13.9%) and African American (4%).¹ This highlights the diverse pockets of population that vary greatly across the county.

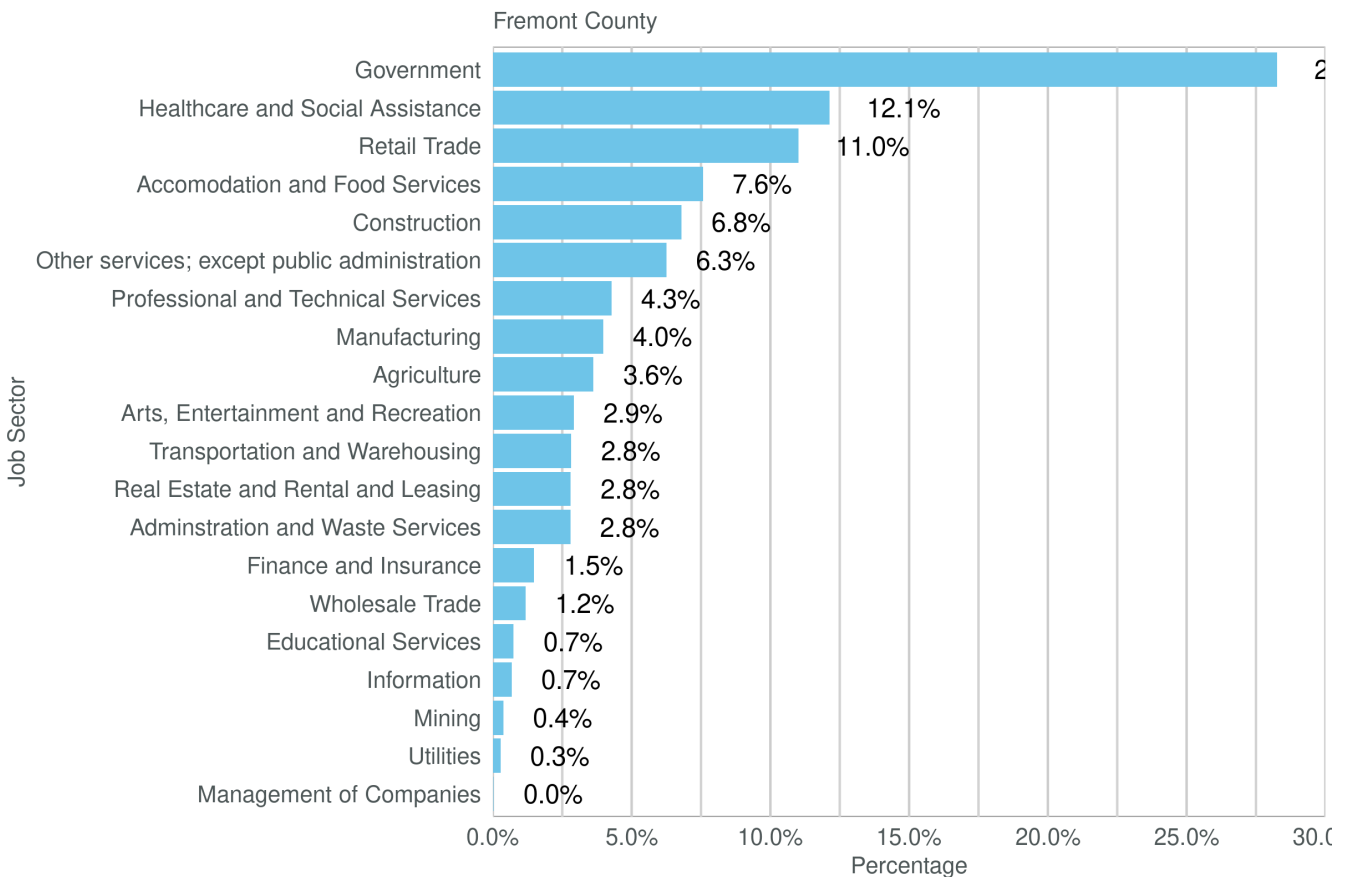
Fremont County's median household income is \$51,165 with 75.4% of residents owning their homes which have a median home value of \$264,300 and property taxes averaging at \$1300/year. Eighty-nine percent of people residing in Fremont County have graduated from high school and 82% of the population have broadband internet subscriptions. Adult females (18 - 75+) in every age range, except the 25 - 34 grouping, are above that poverty line with females ages 45-54 being the highest at 26% of the population.

[It should be noted that Fremont County is home to 10 state and federal corrections facilities, which employ more than 1,600 jobs that stem directly from the Department of Corrections and related industries.]

Fremont County

By understanding these demographics, local governments can make better decisions about how to best allocate resources for addressing Fremont County's child care crisis.

2022 Share of Jobs by Industry



362

Live Births

43.7%

WIC Program Vouchers

4,892

PK-12 Enrollment

52%

of children in Fremont County who qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Known Benefits of Child Care

Access to quality child care provides a safe and nurturing environment that fosters a child's intellectual, social, and emotional growth. Research shows children in these programs tend to have better cognitive and language skills, stronger pre-academic abilities, and fewer behavioral problems.

Child Development

Quality child care programs can help children develop social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills that are essential for success in school and later in life.² They can also provide a head start for children who may come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Socialization

Child care provides opportunities for children to interact with other children of similar ages. This helps them develop social skills, such as sharing, taking turns, and cooperating. It can also help them learn to make friends.



Support for Working Parents

Child care allows parents, especially mothers, to enter or stay in the workforce. This contributes to the financial stability and overall well-being of Fremont County families. Without childcare, parents are often forced to cut back on work hours or leave the workforce altogether.

Peace of Mind for Parents

Knowing that their children are safe and well-cared for allows parents to focus on their work and other responsibilities. This can help to reduce stress and improve overall well-being for the entire family.

Child care is an extension of a child's education. Through play-based learning and exposure to letters, numbers, and social interaction, children develop the skills they need to succeed in school.

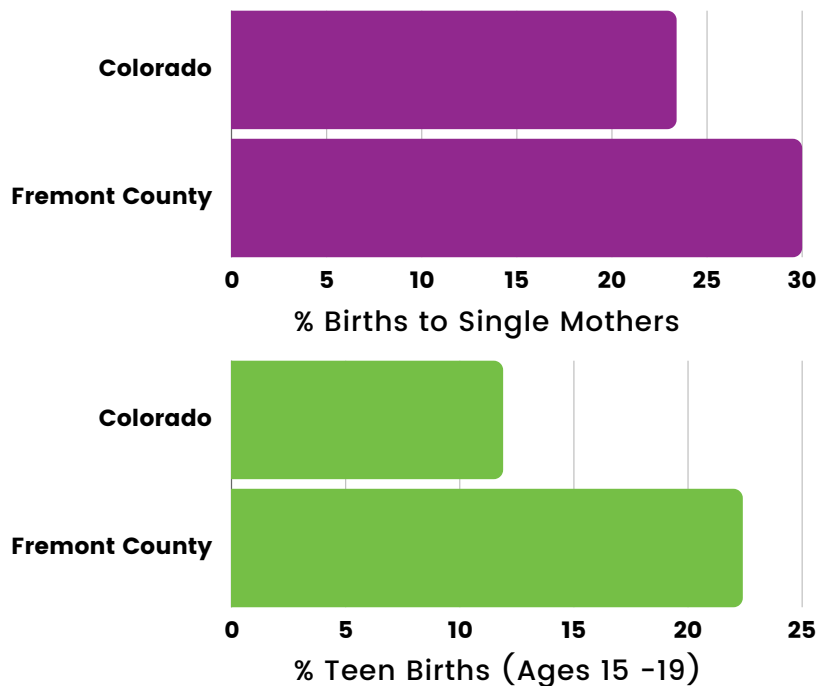
Birth Rates

Birth rates and child care are interconnected.³ By understanding birth rate data, communities are better positioned to meet the needs of a growing population by investing in infrastructure such as transportation, child care centers and schools. However, the future of Colorado's birth rate is uncertain.

After several years of decline, there was a slight increase in 2022, with 62,400 new births being reported compared to 61,976 in 2021. However, this is still significantly lower than the pre-pandemic level of over 65,000 births per year. Among racial and ethnic groups, Hispanic women account for 29.0% of all births in Colorado while Black women only account for a mere 5.2% of all births statewide.

At the county level, predicting the future of birth rates is complex and depends on various factors, including the overall economic climate, government policies, and social attitudes towards childbearing and most importantly, reliable data. According to the 2022 Colorado Kids Count, which is an annual report on early childhood health and education, and family economic security,

Additionally, with birth rates among teens and single mothers outpacing statewide averages, at 22.4% and 30%, respectively, children in Fremont County are especially vulnerable to the challenges facing rural communities.



[Birth rates in rural areas of Colorado trend higher when compared to birth rates of urban areas in the state.]

Preparedness

According to Early Milestones Colorado, we know that the demand for childcare is expected to increase as the total number of children under the age of four is projected to climb 22% by 2026. However, an alarming 70% of ECE directors have reported difficulty in finding qualified staff to meet current demand.

Rural Child Care

While the benefits of child care are well-documented, families in rural communities often face unique challenges when accessing child care. This is especially true in Colorado where approximately 50% of Coloradans live in a childcare desert, which is defined as a census tract with at least 50 children under the age of five, and either has a waiting list to access childcare services with three or more children vying for one spot or no child care center.

At the county level, Fremont County follows national trends with regard to access to child care in rural areas. Geographic distances, limited transportation options, affordability and a scarcity of qualified child care workers hinder the availability of child care options for families in Canon City, Lincoln Park, Florence, Penrose, Cotopaxi, Howard, Brookside, Coal Creek, Williamsburg, Rockvale, and Coaldale.

Infant Toddler Care

While the lack of accessible and affordable child care impacts children of all ages, infants and toddlers, which includes children between the ages of birth and three years old, are disproportionately impacted. This is especially concerning as brain development is particularly rapid during this time so the quality of care they receive can have a lasting impact.

In Fremont County, a search of [Colorado Shines](#) using a central address in Canon City identified 61 child care programs within a 30-mile radius, many of which were based in Pueblo. However, when the search was narrowed to infant toddler care programs within Fremont County, the total number was reduced to eight, with only five licensed child care centers. An additional search of BridgeCare, an online database used by Children First Resource and Referral, revealed a total of three licensed home care providers. Regardless of the total number of programs accepting infant toddler care identified in the area, it's highly likely that Fremont County families will encounter a waiting list in their pursuit of child care.

Child Care Priorities

Through our research, we've identified both the child care priorities of Fremont County families and proposed solutions for increasing access to affordable child care. When asked to rank the following child care priorities in order of importance, with no.1 as the most important priority, to no.5 as the least important priority, respondents chose "Quality" as their top priority suggesting that while accessibility remains a top priority, parents aren't willing to sacrifice quality of care.



01. Quality

Child care that provides a safe and nurturing environment that supports a child's development by helping them learn and grow in all areas.



02. Accessibility

Child care that's easy to find with reasonable effort with enough options (like centers or home providers) to meet the needs of families and the community.



03. Affordability

Child care that is financially attainable for families from all backgrounds and doesn't exceed 7% of household income.



04. Curriculum

Child care that's centered around a well-defined curriculum that aligns with child development milestones and early learning standards.



05. Convenience

Child care options that offer more accommodating hours of operation for those who work late or have non-traditional schedules.

Barriers to Access

Through our research into the accessibility of child care, we have identified the following challenges facing Fremont County families. These barriers can have significant impacts on families, the economy, and the children themselves. For parents, the stress of finding and affording childcare can be overwhelming. It also limits their career opportunities and earning potential. For children, missing out on quality childcare can hinder their social, emotional, and cognitive development.



01. Waiting Lists

Child care waiting lists have a significant impact on families, the workforce, and even the children themselves.⁶ By restricting child care options based on availability, parents are often forced to accept whatever care becomes available rather than finding the best fit for their families. According to our research into this area, we've learned that an astonishing 84% of respondents have encountered waiting lists in their pursuit to access child care.



02. Affordability

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines affordable childcare as costing no more than 7% of a family's income. However, studies show a significant portion of families spend far more than that benchmark, often exceeding 40% of their income.⁷ This is especially true for families in Fremont County where the median household income is \$53,000. This financial burden forces parents, especially mothers, to cut back on work hours or leave the workforce altogether.



03. Qualified Child Care Workers

The shortage of child care workers has a number of negative consequences. It can make it difficult for parents to find child care, which can force them to stay home from work or reduce their work hours. It can also lead to lower quality care for children, as centers may be forced to hire staff who are not qualified or experienced.

89%

of families in Fremont County reported encountering a waitlist when attempting to access child care.

Economic Impacts

The lack of access to affordable child care is an economic issue. When parents can't find affordable child care, it forces them to leave the workforce, limiting their earning potential and hindering the overall economy while denying their child learning and developmental opportunities.

This is especially true for single mothers.⁸ While employment rates among fathers largely remain unchanged by child care availability, single mothers experience a sharp decline in workforce participation when child care is unavailable, ultimately reducing tax revenue and overall economic output. This can limit their ability to pursue promotions, take on additional work hours, or seek educational opportunities.



Financial Instability

Child care can be a significant expense which can strain household budgets and limit spending on other goods and services.



Reduced Hours

Child care can be a significant expense which can force parents to cut back on work hours or leave the workforce altogether.



Career Stagnation

Lack of affordable child care can limit career opportunities for parents. This hinders economic growth.

Beyond supporting working parents, access to quality child care strengthens the economy in several ways. It reduces employee turnover, benefits business productivity, and prepares future generations for the workforce.



Increased Earnings

Reliable child care allows parents to work full-time. The increased income and consumer spending further stimulates the economy.



Economic Activity

Reliable child care reduces absenteeism and employee turnover. This increases the overall supply of labor and boosts economic activity.



Lost Tax Revenue

When parents cannot work full-time due to child care issues, there's a loss of potential tax revenue.

46%

of parents in Fremont County reported turning down a job or educational opportunity because of a lack of child care.

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Lack of Qualified Workforce

The shortage of child care workers has a number of negative consequences.⁹ It can make it difficult for parents to find child care, which can force them to stay home from work or reduce their work hours. It can also lead to lower quality care for children, as centers may be forced to hire staff who are not qualified or experienced.

That's why there must be a concerted effort in Fremont County to create a pipeline of qualified child care workers. This can be accomplished by working with higher education and leaning on Colorado's sector partnership model to create financial incentives and streamline training to accelerate talent acquisition within this space.



70%

of ECE directors have reported difficulty in finding qualified staff to meet current demand.

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CHILD CARE REPORT 2024

Employer-Based Supports

Through this process, we've learned that Fremont County-based employers are actively exploring, and in some cases, implementing creative solutions to assist workers who are struggling to access affordable child care. While the solutions currently being offered vary, providing more flexibility for employees appears to be a top priority among employers.

In some cases, this is all the support parents need. However, those who have more than one child and/or multiple sources of income need a more comprehensive approach such as extending the operating hours of child care centers or tuition assistance.



01. Flexible Schedules

Offering flexible work schedules can be a game-changer for parents with child care needs. It allows parents to schedule work hours around child care drop-off/pick-up times, school activities, or appointments.

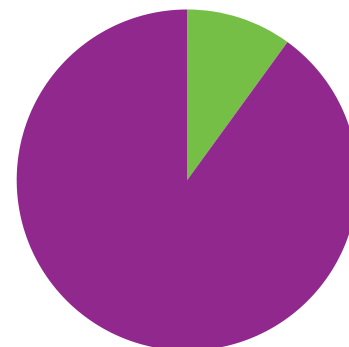


02. Affordability

Centers and programs that provide preschool or child care currently offer employer subsidized or discounted rates for staff.

Oppose employer-provided child care.

10%



Support employer-provided child care.

90%

Through our research into employer-based solutions for child care, we learned that the overwhelming majority of employers in Fremont County support the concept.

Recommended Solutions

Child care is a critical piece of the puzzle for working families. It allows parents to enter the workforce, contribute to the economy, and ensure their children are in a safe and nurturing environment. By implementing these proposed solutions, we can build a stronger child care system that benefits all families and the economy.

Universal Waiting List

Establish a county-wide waiting list that is shared between child care providers, and will allow families to be considered for childcare services. This will help decrease waiting times by coordinating availability between providers while eliminating redundancies, and providing a real-time snapshot of available child care options, and anticipated wait times.

Child Care Tuition Assistance

Explore public funding to offset the cost of child care for working families. This could include an expanded child care voucher program, a standardized fee structure, scholarships, and tax credits.

Personalized Navigation Portal

Creation of a county-wide database that is connected to a user-friendly portal where users can access information concerning tuition assistance, waiting lists and other information that is unique to each family. This will help increase communication with families, and streamline document and information management of records including attendance, menus, and incident reports.

Employer Sponsored Child Care

Work with Fremont County based employers, Colorado Workforce Development Council and Fremont Economic Development Corporation to explore employer-based solutions. This could include subsidized discounts at child care centers, on-site child care options, or dependant care assistance accounts.

Workforce Pipeline

Incentivize recruitment and streamline the hiring process. This could include expanded technical education programs, tuition-free training, certifications, and other credentialing, competitive pay, and housing vouchers to attract qualified personnel to sustain current demand while preparing for the future. Explore partnership opportunities with Fremont RE-1, RE-2 and RE-3 school districts to incorporate child care into the schools' pathway program.

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We thank you for your continued support in our efforts to expand access to affordable child care for Fremont County Families.

Contact

ECHO and Family
Center Early
Childhood Council
490 N. Diamond Ave.,
Canon City, CO 81212
(719) 276-6174

www.echofamilycenter.org

dorothy.day@canoncitieschools.org

facebook.com/echofamilycenter

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