

## Child care participation among Indigenous children in Canada

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Article abstract

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## Child Care Participation Among Indigenous Children in Canada

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## Abstract

The release of a Canadian Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework highlights the importance of recent, Indigenous-specific information to describe the landscape of child care among Indigenous children in Canada; however, there has been a gap in identity-specific, national data on child care for Indigenous children. The purpose of the current study was to address data gaps on participation in child care for First Nations children living off reserve, Métis, and Inuit children. Furthermore, two years of data are examined which provide information on child care use both prior to and during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, First Nations children living off reserve (49%) and Inuit children (42%)<sup>1</sup> were significantly less likely to participate in child care compared with non-Indigenous children (60%), although Métis children (60%) were equally likely to participate in child care compared with non-Indigenous children. Only First Nations children living off reserve (40%) were significantly less likely than non-Indigenous children (53%) to participate in child care in 2020. In terms of the type of child care used, Inuit children were more likely to be in a daycare centre (70%) compared with non-Indigenous children (52%) in 2019, although Inuit children's participation in a daycare centre dropped to 46% in 2020. This is likely due to public health restrictions which closed many child care centres during the pandemic, as over one-third of child care in the territories is centre-based. The findings provide important information about patterns of child care use for Indigenous children both before and during the pandemic.

## Keywords

Indigenous child care, child care, children, families, Canada, healthy development

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## Child Care Participation Among Indigenous Children in Canada

Child care is an important issue for families and society at large not only for the developmental benefit of the youngest members of society, but also for the opportunities it provides parents, in particular mothers, to participate in the labour force. Approximately 60% of Canadian children under 6 years of age participated in formal or informal child care in 2019 (Findlay, 2019), although availability of child care and participation rates declined during the COVID-19 pandemic (Findlay et al., 2020; Friendly, Forer, & Vickerson, 2020). However, national reports have not typically provided information disaggregated for the Indigenous population, or by Indigenous group, despite the growing population of Indigenous children who make use of early learning and child care services (Friendly & Beach, 2005; Preston et al., 2011). Moreover, while First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children and families have diverse child care needs, distinctions-based information is lacking (Greenwood et al., 2020; Halseth & Greenwood, 2019). A distinctions-based approach recognizes the different histories, priorities, and interests of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit parents and communities, which will help inform policies and programs geared towards the unique needs of each group.

The histories of Indigenous people are particularly relevant to the discussion of early learning and child care due to their experiences with residential schools. The intergenerational effects of residential schools have caused hesitation among many Indigenous families to enrol their children in structured, “institutional” forms of care as they may be associated with the harmful policies of assimilation practiced at residential schools that have led to trauma and the loss of language, culture, and traditional family structures (Hare & Anderson, 2010; Huber et al., 2018). Instead, culturally-appropriate early learning programming, such as those that include Indigenous languages and Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Greenwood, 2006; Peltier, 2017), are recognized as key to effective early learning experiences for Indigenous children (Preston, 2008). In particular, a holistic approach to early learning, which recognizes the interconnectedness of children’s mental, spiritual, physical, social, and emotional dimensions, is identified as particularly important to the health and well-being of Indigenous children and their early learning environments (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2018a; Gerlach et al., 2021; Preston 2008). Even after controlling for child and family factors (age, sex, health status, household income, number of people living in the household, and living in an urban or rural area), speaking an Indigenous language has been shown to be associated with positive school outcomes for young children aged 6-14 years old (Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012). More specific to young children, previous research has found that Indigenous-led programs that incorporate culturally-appropriate curricula and languages were associated with higher enrollment, retention rates, and satisfaction with the program (Preston et al., 2011) and Indigenous children whose child care arrangements included traditional activities were more likely to demonstrate prosocial behaviours than children whose child care did not include these types of activities (Findlay & Kohen, 2010).

Child care centres in First Nations communities are often seen as community “hubs” which provide programs and services that promote wellness and cultural continuity to the community as a whole, as well as education and social development for Indigenous children in their early years (Ball, 2009; Preston, 2008). A recent review of Indigenous early education and child care programming, which assessed programs located in Indigenous communities as well as in urban centres, supports the notion

that early child care experiences can be associated with improved language and developmental outcomes, acknowledging the importance of child care programs being embedded in and led by their local communities (Elek et al., 2020). Additionally, informal child care, such as care provided by relatives such as grandparents, plays an important role in Indigenous families (Assembly of First Nations, 2017; Halseth & Greenwood, 2019; Manitoba Moon Voices, Inc., 2017; Silvey et al., 2019). Given that traditional approaches to learning in Indigenous communities typically involve elders, extended family, and other community members (Hare & Anderson, 2010), the incorporation of these principles into child care programs for Indigenous children would reinforce their communities' established ways of learning.

Indigenous people are the fastest growing population in Canada and have an increasing demand for child care services, particularly programs that are culturally appropriate for Indigenous children (Halseth & Greenwood, 2019). However, little national-level, distinction-based information exists on child care use among this population. The purpose of the current study is to fill an existing information gap on Indigenous children's participation in child care in the preschool period, prior to age 6, which can better inform the development of child care programs for the specific needs of Indigenous children and families. Moreover, the examination of child care use in both 2019 and 2020 will provide additional insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted the child care use of Indigenous families.

### **Rationale for Child Care Research**

Participation in formal early learning and child care programs are a recent phenomenon for Indigenous people, with increased opportunities and participation in the 1980s and 1990s to support economic and educational goals for parents and children (see Greenwood et al., 2007 for a review of Indigenous child care initiatives in Canada). Yet, little is known at the national level in terms of Indigenous-specific child care opportunities. Three national programs currently exist to support early learning and child care, notwithstanding the various community level efforts to include Indigenous experiences, learning and teachings: the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI), the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR) program, and the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program. Employment and Social Development Canada administers the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) which delivers child care services to First Nations families living on reserve and Inuit families. This program was initiated in 1995 with the goal of creating 6,000 child care spaces on First Nations reserves and in the Territories that were culturally appropriate, affordable, and of high quality. Second, the AHSOR program (supported by Indigenous Services Canada) helps enhance child development and school readiness for children living in First Nations communities on reserve. This program is not child care specific, but rather funds activities that support learning and developmental needs of young children living in those particular First Nations communities. The program focuses on education, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, social support and parental family involvement via community specific programs and services. Finally, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, AHSUNC was initiated in 1995 to provide community-based, culturally-relevant programming for Aboriginal children and families, in particular those living in urban and northern communities (i.e., off reserve; PHAC, 2012). Programming is structured around six key components: culture and language, education, nutrition, social support, parental involvement, and

health promotion. Although it is not a child care program, per se, the goals of the AHSUNC program are to enhance the spiritual, emotional, physical, and social well-being of Aboriginal children under age six and their families (PHAC, 2012). While each initiative has its own objectives and target population, each program funds activities to support early learning and development of Indigenous children and their families, if not child care solely or specifically.

In 2018, the Government of Canada released an Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (IELCC) Framework (Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC], 2018), co-developed with Indigenous leaders, stakeholders, and individuals to reflect the unique cultures, aspirations and needs for child care among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and their families. Nine principles are outlined, including child and family-centred care, culturally appropriate care by Indigenous providers, and the collection of information and data to inform future delivery and funding of child care. The framework includes distinction-based approaches to promote the health and well-being of the youngest members of society vis à vis child care programs that include spiritual, social, and culturally appropriate educational development practices. While the framework is a guide toward a shared vision for Indigenous child care, it will rely on data and information to describe the use of child care, needs, and gaps that will allow for better development and implementation of child care programs for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, as well as to monitor progress as these programs evolve over time. The framework also addresses the need for Indigenous-developed methods for data collection related to Indigenous early learning and child care, as well as ethical means of sharing data and other information (ESDC, 2018).

### **Indigenous Child Care Participation in Canada: What is Known**

The Indigenous population in Canada is young and growing at a faster rate relative to the non-Indigenous population. The 2016 Census of Canada suggested that there were more than 1.6 million Indigenous people living in Canada (a 43% increase since 2006), almost 9% of whom were aged 0 to 4 years (Statistics Canada, 2017a). These early years are a time in which many parents and families seek non-parental child care arrangements in order to work or attend school. Approximately 72% of the core working-age population (25-54 years) of Indigenous people<sup>1</sup> were employed in 2019, consisting of 75% of males and 70% of females (Statistics Canada, 2019; Table 14-10-0364-01); many parents are likely to need support such as full or part time care for their children while working or attending school.

National level data available on patterns of child care use by Indigenous children and families come from the one-time Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS) (Statistics Canada, 2008a) as well as the First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey (FNREEES) (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2018b). Results from the ACS suggested that in 2006, 52% of First Nations children aged 2-5 years living off reserve, 54% of Métis children, and 43% of Inuit children were participating in non-parental child care arrangements, which may include extended family care (Findlay & Kohen, 2010). These participation rates were similar to 54% of non-Indigenous children of a similar age group and point in time (Bushnik, 2006). Additionally, among Indigenous children under the age of 6 who participated in a child care arrangement in 2006, 24% of First Nations children living off reserve,

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<sup>1</sup> These numbers exclude persons living on reserves and other Indigenous settlements in the provinces, as well as those living in the territories.

14% of Métis, and 56% of Inuit children were in arrangements that promoted Indigenous traditions and cultural values (Statistics Canada, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d).

More recent data from the FNREES, collected between 2013 and 2015, suggest that 29% of First Nations children aged 0 to 4 years living on reserve and Northern communities were participating in some form of regular child care (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2018b). This lower rate of child care participation among First Nations children living on reserve and in Northern communities might suggest decreased availability, particularly in rural or remote communities (Preston, 2008), or decreased reliance on this type of care based on preferences or other available care options such as care by family or relatives. Indeed, most primary caregivers (84%) indicated that they did not use child care arrangements as they had no need for regular care (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2018b).

Despite these findings, additional information including more recent as well as other types of data can be beneficial in understanding the needs and preferences of Indigenous families and children to help guide initiatives including those outlined by principles of the IELCC Framework. The current study presents recent information collected in the 2019 and 2020 waves of the Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements that reflect child care use both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many child care centres closed due to provincial and territorial public health measures which resulted in limited care options for the children of working parents. The pandemic was challenging for Indigenous families in particular, who experienced inconsistencies in child care and school availability, as well as precarious work situations (Alhmidi, 2020; APTN National News, 2020; Bleakney et al., 2020). Therefore, the results presented can both serve to inform policies on child care use of Indigenous families prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as determine whether changes occurred as a result of the pandemic.

### **Correlates of Child Care Participation**

The use of child care and the type of care that parents select depend on many different factors, including the hours during which the parent works, the ability to off-shift (i.e., one parent works while the other parent is caring for their child(ren) and vice versa), availability of extended family members to care for children (including siblings or other relatives), ability to work while caring for the child, and other factors. For Indigenous families, the availability of culturally appropriate child care may also be an important consideration, as Indigenous-led and developed programs are associated with higher enrolment (Preston et al., 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic also added another element to child care participation, as public health measures caused many child care centres to close, particularly early in the pandemic.

In terms of the types of care used, recent results from the Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements found that for the general population, 26% of Canadian children aged 0-5 years who were in child care were being cared for by a relative other than a parent, either as their main arrangement or one type of multiple arrangements (Findlay, 2019). It is possible that this type of care is unpaid, such as when grandparents or other family members take care of the child in order for parents to work or go to school. Indigenous parents may particularly select family-based or extended relative care in order to

support Indigenous children's development and learning in the early years if they feel that mainstream child care options do not meet their specific needs, particularly with respect to language and cultural teachings (Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Sims et al., 2012). Traditional views and cultural values may prioritize the role of other relatives and elders in child care, as extended family typically play an important role in the care, education, and socialization of Indigenous children (Fearn, 2006; Halseth & Greenwood, 2019). Moreover, multiple caregivers, including those living in multi-generational households or extended family, may play an important role in Indigenous families whereby different concepts of family may exist (Tam et al., 2017). Finally, distrust of formal education based on the history of residential schools and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system may impact negative feelings toward formal schooling and care (Hare & Anderson, 2010). Thus, it is possible that Indigenous parents may prefer different types of child care options when they need to rely on non-parental child care.

A previous report utilized data from the 2016 Census of Canada to describe child care used by Canadian families (Guèvremont, 2019). This study was unique in that the large number of respondents allowed for a disaggregation of child care use for population groups that had previously been aggregated with the general population due to small sample sizes in population surveys. However, information about the specific type of child care used, or the consideration of culturally-appropriate child care, was not collected. Results from 2016 suggested that Indigenous families were less likely to have used paid child care in order to work or study compared to non-Indigenous families (36% vs. 49%). When paying for child care, Indigenous families reported spending less compared to non-Indigenous families (\$5,479 per year vs \$7,015 per year). In both cases, this reflects reported costs by parents ("out of pocket costs") and may exclude subsidies received by parents. Furthermore, Findlay and Charters (2020) demonstrated that certain characteristics were associated with paid child care. Indigenous families with a greater number of children aged 0 to 5 years, higher income, a higher level of education, and parents who were employed in the previous year were more likely to have paid for child care. Families in which there was an adult other than the parent(s) living in the household (e.g., a multi-generational household) or families with a teenage sibling in the family were less likely to have paid for child care. These trends were similar for the non-Indigenous population. Data allowing for further disaggregation showed that although patterns were similar, different associations existed by identity group for family structure and child care use. Family structure, defined as couples living together, with or without children, or lone parents living with their children, significantly predicted use of paid child care among First Nations families living off reserve, Métis, and non-Indigenous families, whereby lone parents were more likely to use paid child care<sup>2</sup>. However, family structure was not associated with use of paid child care for Inuit families.

### **Objectives of the Current Study**

Despite the findings regarding paid child care for the purpose of working, limited population-based information has been previously available to explore characteristics of child care participation specifically for Indigenous children and families, in particular regarding the type of child care arrangement, number

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<sup>2</sup> The association was in the same direction for First Nations families living on reserve, although it was not found to be statistically significant. The sample for Inuit was too small to perform analyses.



of hours in child care, and whether or not parents had difficulties finding child care arrangements. Thus, there are three main objectives of the current study. First, it will provide updated information compared to the 2006 ACS on participation in child care for First Nations children living off reserve, Métis, and Inuit children.<sup>3</sup> This information can be used to monitor early learning and child care participation that stem from the national Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (IELCC) Framework and, if data collection is repeated over time, to measure change in IELCC program development, family perceptions, and use. Second, this paper will explore the association between family characteristics and child care use for First Nations living off reserve, Métis, and Inuit families, including both formal types of care such as daycare centres and preschools, as well as informal types of care such as grandparents and unlicensed home-based care. It is important to note that the use of child care reported in the present study would be for any purpose (socialization, stimulation, parental education, etc.), not just work or studying as has been the wording on previous questionnaires; furthermore, survey content did not ask about any cultural aspects of care. Third, child care use between 2019 and 2020 will be described, providing greater insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the child care use of Indigenous families. While the results are not based on an Indigenous-specific survey, they provide early information to support the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (ESDC, 2018) in terms of setting the stage for further development of Indigenous-led programming including flexible (i.e., meeting the specific needs of the child and family), accessible (i.e., affordable), and culturally-appropriate child care.

## Methods

### Data Source and Definitions

**The Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements (SELCCA).** The SELCCA was designed to assess non-parental child care use, child and parent or guardian characteristics, and characteristics of care of children under the age of 6 years across Canada and for the provinces and territories. For the 2019 SELCCA, a simple random sample of 15,000 recipients of the Canada Child Benefit was drawn (20,000 for the 2020 SELCCA), and for each recipient, a random child among their children less than 6 years of age was selected. Children living on reserve or in institutions were excluded from the target population. The response rate for the 2019 SELCCA was 53% in the provinces and 41% in the territories, with an overall response rate of 50% and yielding a sample size of 7,548 children (894 Indigenous children). The final 2019 SELCCA sample was representative of approximately 2.3 million children across Canada, which includes more than 118,000 Indigenous children ages 0 to 5 years living in the provinces and territories. The response rate for the 2020 SELCCA was 53% overall, with a response rate of 55% in the provinces and 40% in the territories. The final sample size for the 2020 SELCCA included 10,605 children, 1,008 of which were Indigenous children. This sample was representative of 2.3 million children in Canada, including over 105,000 Indigenous children ages 0 to 5 living in the provinces and territories. It is important to note that the sampling strategy for the SELCCA was not specifically designed to be representative of the Indigenous population and as such the results

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<sup>3</sup> While some information from the 2016 Canadian Census are reported above, these data only address paid child care in relation to the work activities of the parents. In comparison, the 2006 ACS data provided detailed information about the child care arrangements of all First Nations children living off reserve, Métis, and Inuit children.

should not be considered representative of all Indigenous families. The current study was part of a larger program of research to examine non-parental child care use across Canada.

The short survey was delivered through an electronic questionnaire (EQ) or through computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) in English and French. The 2019 survey was collected from mid-January 2019 until mid-February 2019, while the 2020 survey was collected between mid-November 2020 to mid-January 2021. The content for the survey was created in consultation with external subject matter experts on child care in Canada (not specifically Indigenous child care). Information was obtained from a parent, guardian, or person that was knowledgeable about the child<sup>4</sup> and, if it existed, their child care arrangements. Participation was voluntary and the respondent was female in 91% of cases for both years. More information on the survey, including the questionnaire, is available elsewhere (Statistics Canada, n.d.).

**Socio-demographic characteristics.** Parents identified their children as an Indigenous person, that is, First Nations (North American Indian)<sup>5</sup>, Métis, or Inuk (Inuit). Parents/guardians also reported the province or territory of residence as well as the child's date of birth.

**Types of child care.** Child care use was determined by asking parents to report all types of formal and informal child care arrangements they had usually used in the past three months from a list of seven possible responses. Parents could indicate using one or more of the following types of child care: daycare center, preschool or centre de petite enfance (CPE); care by a relative other than a parent<sup>6</sup>; care by a non-relative in the child's home; family child care home (e.g., home-based daycare or home-based child care); before or after school program; other child care arrangement; or "do not use child care". When parents reported multiple types of child care, a subsequent question asked which child care arrangement the parent/guardian considered to be the main one (most hours per week).<sup>7</sup> Parents/guardians were also asked whether their main child care arrangement was licensed, meaning that it was accredited by the province or territory to meet certain standards such as ratio of caregiver to child and safety regulations.

**Reasons for using main child care arrangement.** Respondents were also asked the main reason(s) they chose their main child care arrangement. Options included: location, characteristics of the individual providing care (e.g., credentials, trustworthy), hours of operation, affordable cost, program characteristics (e.g., curriculum, languages spoken), recommendation or own research, their other

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<sup>4</sup> Reference to parents or guardians, or simply parents, in the results section refers to the survey respondent (i.e., parent, guardian, or person that was knowledgeable about the child).

<sup>5</sup> The SELCCA questionnaire did not include a question to determine Registered or Treaty Indian status for First Nations children.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the definition of family among Indigenous groups can be diverse, often including other community members who are connected through social ties (Tam et al., 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Overall, 14% of respondents to the survey reported using multiple types of care to meet their child care needs (Findlay, 2019).

children have gone/go there, to keep all children in the same arrangement, ability to meet child's special needs, only option available, other, or none of the above.<sup>8</sup>

**Time in child care.** Two elements of time spent in child care were explored: the number of hours per week and use of child care in the evenings and on weekends. Parents/guardians were asked "in the past three months, how many hours per week did your child usually spend in child care arrangements." In addition, for each type of child care arrangement, parents/guardians reported if the child attended that type of care: in the evening, on the weekend, both evenings and weekends, or neither evenings or weekends. A dichotomous summary variable was created to identify whether the child attended any arrangement in the evening or on weekends.

**Difficulties finding care.** Whether or not parents/guardians had difficulty finding child care and the reasons for those difficulties were also of interest. Respondents indicated whether or not they had experienced any difficulties, and among those that did, they were asked to indicate whether those difficulties were related to finding: care that was available in their community, affordable child care, care that fit their work or study schedule, the quality of care they require, licensed care, a qualified care provider, care that could accommodate more than one child in their family, care that meets their child's special needs, or other difficulties. In addition, for the 2020 survey, respondents who reported difficulty finding child care were asked whether those difficulties were related to finding care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Analytical Strategy**

Descriptive analyses were performed in order to describe: 1) rates of participation in child care among Indigenous children, and 2) characteristics of child care use among those that were in child care. Where sample size permitted, rates were explored by separate Indigenous identity groups (First Nations living off reserve, Métis, and Inuit identity groups). As the SELCCA was a survey of the general population, results for the non-Indigenous population are also provided as context. Means and proportions are reported, as appropriate. When applicable, statistical comparisons were performed (t-tests or chi-squares,  $p < .05$ ). Survey sampling weights were applied to render the analyses representative of children aged 0 to 5 years living in the provinces or territories. Bootstrap weights were also applied when testing for significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) in order to account for the complex survey design. Statistical comparisons between the 2019 and 2020 SELCCA survey cycles were made using confidence intervals.<sup>9</sup>

### **Results**

Of the entire 2019 SELCCA sample, 12% of the children ( $n = 894$ ) were Indigenous, which was higher than in the Canadian population (8% of 0-4 year olds; Statistics Canada, 2017b). In the 2020 SELCCA sample, 9.5% of the children ( $n = 1,008$ ) were Indigenous.

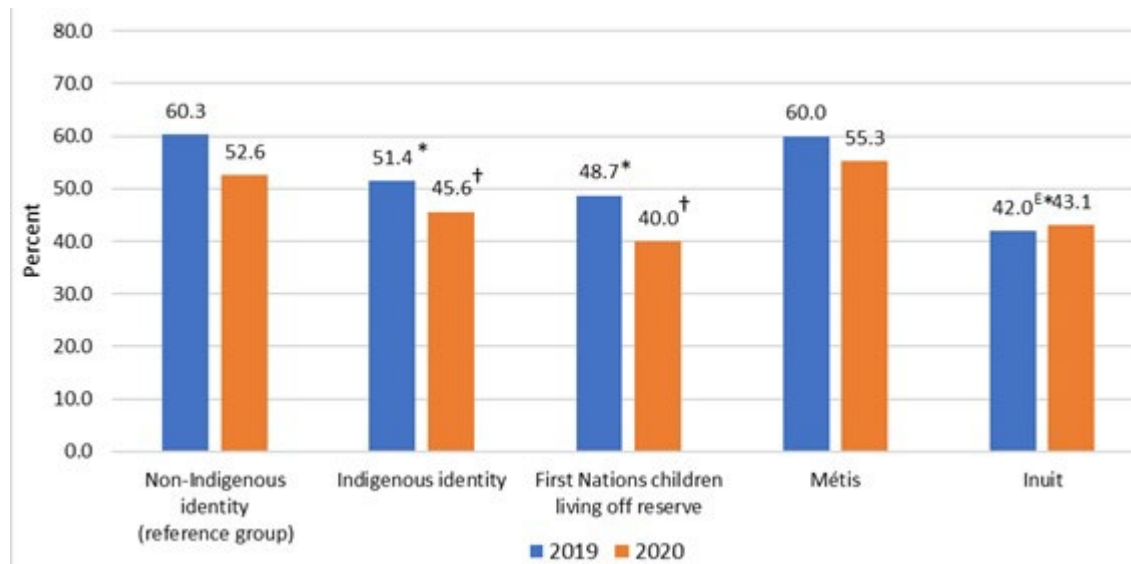
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<sup>8</sup> Parents were not asked whether or not cultural appropriateness of the child care environment was a reason for using that type of care.

<sup>9</sup> Confidence intervals were estimated using SUDAAN.

**Child care participation.** Overall, Indigenous children aged 0 to 5 years were less likely to be in a formal or informal child care arrangement than non-Indigenous children (Figure 1). The proportion of Indigenous children aged 0 to 5 years using child care was 51% in 2019 and 46% in 2020, although this difference was not statistically significant. In comparison, child care use among non-Indigenous children decreased from 60% to 53% between 2019 and 2020. These declines in child care usage are likely attributable to factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which differed by province and territory and related public health guidelines such as business and child care closures as a result of public health restrictions, parents electing to keep their children at home for safety reasons, or changes in parents' working situations.

**Figure 1. Use of early learning and child care arrangements, by Indigenous identity of child, 2019 and 2020.**



**Notes:**

<sup>E</sup> use with caution

\* significantly different than reference group (non-Indigenous children) in 2019 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

† significantly different than reference group (non-Indigenous children) in 2020 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Source: Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019 and 2020.

In 2019, First Nations children living off reserve (49%) and Inuit children (42%) were significantly less likely to participate in child care arrangements compared with non-Indigenous children (60%), although Métis children (60%) were equally likely to participate in child care as non-Indigenous children. Based on parental report of whether or not the child care location was licensed, 64% of First Nations children living off reserve as well as Métis children who were participating in child care were in licensed child care and 75% of Inuit children were in licensed child care (compared to 73% of non-Indigenous children, no statistical differences).

Similar to the 2019 results, First Nations children living off reserve were less likely to participate in child care arrangements in 2020 compared with non-Indigenous children (40% and 53%, respectively). However, child care participation rates for Métis and Inuit children (55% and 43%, respectively) were

not statistically different when compared with non-Indigenous children. Moreover, Indigenous children were less likely to attend licensed child care than non-Indigenous children during the COVID-19 pandemic (58% vs. 67%), with First Nations children living off reserve being the least likely to have used licensed child care in the previous three months (51%).<sup>10</sup> Other survey results have suggested that in some northern communities, licensed child care was less likely to be available during the pandemic; for example, emergency child care for essential workers was not available at the beginning of COVID-19 in Nunavut (Vickerson et al., 2022).

In terms of the type of child care in which Indigenous children participated, Inuit children were more likely to be in a daycare centre, preschool, or centre de petite enfance (CPE) in 2019 (70%; Table 1) compared with non-Indigenous children (52%). Although a smaller proportion of Indigenous children were cared for in non-relative home-based child care and more were cared for by a relative, these and other differences were not statistically significantly different between Indigenous children and non-Indigenous children. The use of multiple child care arrangements also did not differ between Indigenous children and non-Indigenous children in 2019. Daycare, preschool or CPE was also the most reported type of child care arrangement for non-Indigenous (49%), Métis (49%), and Inuit children (46%<sup>E</sup>)<sup>11</sup> in 2020. A smaller proportion of First Nations children living off reserve attended this type of care arrangement (40%) during the pandemic; however, they were more likely to be cared for by a relative other than a parent (46%) than non-Indigenous children (28%). Over one third of Inuit children (35%<sup>E</sup>) and approximately three in ten Métis children (29%<sup>E</sup>) were cared for by a relative other than a parent in 2020.

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<sup>10</sup> Of the children attending child care, 65% of parents of Métis and Inuit children reported their child's main child care arrangement was licensed.

<sup>11</sup> The E symbol indicates that the estimate should be used with caution, in accordance with Statistics Canada's data quality guidelines.

**Table 1. Type of early learning and child care arrangement, by Indigenous identity of the child**

	2019				2020			
	%	95% confidence limits		%	95% confidence limits			
		lower limit %	upper limit %		lower limit %	upper limit %		
<b>Daycare centre, preschool, or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)</b>								
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	51.8	49.8	53.8	49.4	47.6	51.3		
Indigenous identity	52.5	43.3	61.4	44.1	35.9	52.4		
First Nations children living off reserve	50.1	37.5	62.7	40.2	28.4	52		
Métis	52.7	38.8	66.2	48.6	36.2	60.9		
Inuit	70.1 *	50.1	84.6	46.3 <sup>E</sup>	28.1	64.5		
<b>Care by a relative other than parent</b>								
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	25.2	23.4	27	27.6	25.9	29.2		
Indigenous identity	31.1	23	40.6	38.1 *	29.4	46.8		
<b>Care by a non-relative in the child's home</b>								
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	4.9	4.1	6	5	4.2	5.8		
Indigenous identity	F	F	F	4 <sup>E</sup>	1.4	6.6		
<b>Family child care home</b>								
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	20.7	19.1	22.3	19.2	17.8	20.6		
Indigenous identity	14.9 <sup>E</sup>	9.8	22.2	14.7 <sup>E</sup>	8.1	21.4		
<b>Before or after school program</b>								
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	9.4	8.3	10.6	7.4	6.6	8.3		
Indigenous identity	9 <sup>E</sup>	4.8	16.3	6.8 <sup>E</sup>	2.6	11.1		
<b>Other child care arrangement</b>								
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	3	2.4	3.8	3.2	2.6	3.9		
Indigenous identity	F	F	F	F	F	F		

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

<sup>E</sup> use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

\* significantly different than reference group ( $p < .05$ ).

**Source(s):** Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019 and 2020

Parents' reasons for using a specific type of child care arrangement were also largely similar for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children<sup>12</sup> with their top reasons being location, characteristics of the provider, hours of operation, and affordability (Table 2). The top reasons reported for both groups remained the same between 2019 and 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Analyses for each Indigenous identity group were not possible due to small numbers.

**Table 2. Parent reasons for using main child care arrangement, by Indigenous identity of the child**

	2019			2020		
	%	95% confidence limits		%	95% confidence limits	
		lower limit %	upper limit %		lower limit %	upper limit %
<b>Non-Indigenous identity</b>						
Location	61.2	59.2	63.3	55.3	53.5	57.1
Affordable cost	39.8	37.7	41.9	40.7	38.9	42.6
Hours of operation	41.2	39.2	43.2	36.7	34.9	38.5
Characteristics of care provider	52.8	50.7	54.9	47.5	45.8	49.3
Program characteristics	34.7	32.8	36.6	30.8	29.2	32.4
My other children have gone there	20.4	18.6	22.2	18.2	16.7	19.7
Keep all children in family together	19.1	17.4	21	18.8	17.3	20.2
Recommendation or own research	24.8	23	26.7	21.5	20	23.1
Ability to meet child's special needs	3.5	2.7	4.5	2.6	1.9	3.3
Only option available	15.4	13.9	17	17.9	16.4	19.4
Limited availability during COVID-19 pandemic	–	–	–	13.8	12.5	15.2
Other	11.6	10.2	13.2	12	10.8	13.2
None of the above	2.1	1.5	2.9	2.2	1.6	2.7
<b>Indigenous identity</b>						
Location	48.1	39.1	57.2	47.9	39.1	56.7
Affordable cost	48.7	39.3	58.2	32.9	25.2	40.6
Hours of operation	44	35	53.3	30.7	23.2	38.3
Characteristics of care provider	49.4	40.1	58.6	41.6	33	50.2
Program characteristics	35.8	27.5	45.1	27.6	20.5	34.7
My other children have gone there	18.5 <sup>E</sup>	12.3	26.8	15.6 <sup>E</sup>	10	21.2
Keep all children in family together	27.9 <sup>E</sup>	19.7	37.9	18.9 <sup>E</sup>	11.7	26.1
Recommendation or own research	21 <sup>E</sup>	14.7	29.1	20.7 <sup>E</sup>	13.1	28.3
Ability to meet child's special needs	10.9 <sup>E</sup>	6.1	18.5	F	F	F
Only option available	24.7 <sup>E</sup>	17.1	34.3	18.7 <sup>E</sup>	12.5	24.9
Limited availability during COVID-19 pandemic	–	–	–	17.3 <sup>E</sup>	11	23.6
Other	11.5 <sup>E</sup>	7	18.3	13.5 <sup>E</sup>	8.1	19
None of the above	F	F	F	F	F	F

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

<sup>E</sup> use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

– not applicable

**Source(s):** Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019 and 2020.

**Characteristics of child care use.** Indigenous children spent, on average, about 29 hours per week in child care in 2019 (Table 3), similar to the average number of hours in 2020 (30 hours) (Table 3). The number of hours that Indigenous children spent in child care did not differ significantly from non-Indigenous children in both 2019 and 2020. Among Inuit children, the average number of hours spent in child care decreased about 5 hours between 2019 and 2020 (not significant). In 2020, Inuit children spent 25 hours in child care while non-Indigenous children spent 31 hours in child care. Additionally, Indigenous children were more likely to be in child care in the evenings or on the weekend compared with non-Indigenous children in both 2019 (27%<sup>E</sup> vs. 16%; Table 4) and 2020 (24% vs. 14%). Notably, 3 out of 10 (32%<sup>E</sup>) Métis children participated in child care in the evenings or on the weekend in 2019, which was significantly higher than non-Indigenous children. However, there was not a statistically significant difference between Métis and non-Indigenous children who participated in this type of child care in 2020 (13%<sup>E</sup> vs. 14%). The proportion of First Nations children living off reserve who participated in evening or weekend child care in 2019 although higher, was not statistically significantly different when compared with non-Indigenous children (24% vs. 16%). However, during the pandemic, First Nations children living off reserve were significantly more likely to attend evening or weekend child care than non-Indigenous children (32%<sup>E</sup> vs. 14%).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, almost three in ten parents of Indigenous children reported difficulty finding child care (28%), similar to parents of non-Indigenous children (29%) (Table 5). Of the parents with a child who had attended care in late 2020, over a third of each group reported having trouble finding care with the highest proportion reporting difficulty being parents of First Nations children living off reserve (First Nations children living off reserve, 37%; Métis children, 34%; Inuit children, 35%). However, among parents who did not use child care in late 2020, parents of Métis children reported the greatest difficulty in finding child care arrangements (Métis children, 23%<sup>E</sup>, First Nations children living off reserve, 22%; Inuit children, 12%<sup>E</sup>). Results are not presented for 2019 as on this wave of the SELCCA the questions asking parents about difficulties they experienced finding child care arrangements were only asked to the parents/guardians of children who had used child care in the last three months.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Results indicated that among the parents or guardians who had used child care for their child in the past three months, the parents or guardians of Métis children were more likely to report having difficulties finding care in 2019 (54%) than parents of non-Indigenous children (36%).



**Table 3. Average number of hours per week in child care, by Indigenous identity of the child**

	2019				2020			
	Mean	Standard Error of Mean	95% confidence limits		Mean	Standard Error of Mean	95% confidence limits	
			lower limit (%)	upper limit (%)				
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	30.5	0.4	29.7	31.2	30.9	0.4	30.2	31.6
Indigenous identity	28.5	1.7	25.3	31.8	29.5	1.7	26.2	32.7
First Nations children living off reserve	27.6	2.5	22.7	32.5	27.7	2.3	23.2	32.3
Métis	28.8	2.2	24.5	33.1	32.3	2.5	27.4	37.2
Inuit	29.5	3.1	23.4	35.5	24.6*	1.6	21.4	27.7

The estimates are based on children whose parents use child care.

**Source(s):** Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019 and 2020.

\* Significantly different from reference group ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4. Use of early learning and child care arrangements in the evenings or on the weekend, by Indigenous identity of the child**

	2019				2020			
	%		95% confidence limits		%		95% confidence limits	
			lower limit %	upper limit %			lower limit %	upper limit %
Non-Indigenous identity (reference group)	16.0		14.4	17.7	14.2		13.0	15.5
Indigenous identity	26.7	E*	18.8	36.3	23.5	*	15.9	31.2
First Nations children living off reserve	23.9	E	13.9	37.8	32.4	E*	19.6	45.1
Métis	31.5	E*	19.4	46.8	12.5	E	5.2	19.8
Inuit	F		F	F	F		F	F

**Source(s):** Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019 and 2020.

E = use with caution

\* = significantly different than reference group ( $p < .05$ ).

F = too unreliable to be published

**Table 5. Difficulties for parents and guardians in finding child care arrangement for children aged 0 to 5, by Indigenous identity of the child, 2020.**

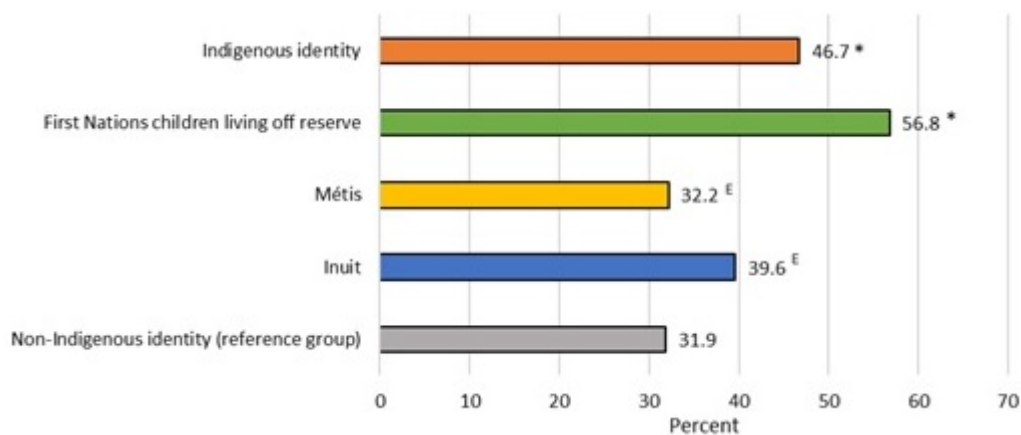
	Among children aged 0 to 5 who had attended child care in the previous three months		Among children aged 0 to 5 who had not attended child care in the previous three months		Total
	%		%		%
<b>Indigenous identity</b>					
Had difficulties finding child care	35.7		21.3		27.9
Did not have difficulties finding child care	54.6		10.5	<sup>E</sup>	30.6
Did not look for child care	9.7	E	68.2		41.5
<b>Non-Indigenous identity</b>					
Had difficulties finding child care	36.6		21.2		29.3
Did not have difficulties finding child care	55.3		16.4		36.9
Did not look for child care	8.1		62.4		33.8

**Source:** Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2020. Results for 2019 are not presented because the 2019 SELCCA did not discern whether or not parents/guardians were using child care when asked about the difficulties they experienced finding child care arrangements.

<sup>1</sup> E = use with caution

Among parents and guardians of Indigenous children who experienced difficulty finding care in 2020, the most commonly reported reason was difficulty finding care in the community (55%), followed by difficulty finding affordable child care (49%), and difficulty finding care due to the COVID-19 pandemic (47%; Figure 2). Parents of Indigenous children were more likely to report difficulty finding care as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to parents of non-Indigenous children (32%). Of note, more than half of the parents of First Nations children living off reserve (57%) reported difficulty finding care due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 25 percentage points higher than parents of non-Indigenous children.

**Figure 2. Percent of parents or guardians who reported difficulty finding child care due to the COVID-19 pandemic, by Indigenous identity of the child, 2020.**



**Source:** Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2020

\*Significantly different from reference group ( $p < .05$ )

E = Use with caution

### Discussion and Conclusions

The current study provides descriptive information to inform the landscape of child care in Canada for First Nations children living off reserve, Métis, and Inuit children. This information aligns with some aspects of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework such as the development of programs and services for Indigenous children and informing potential accessibility issues to early learning and child care programs. Additionally, the results serve as baseline measurements that can inform future data collection to monitor change and improvements over time, as well as inform further developments of policies. However, it is important to note that child care is typically regulated at the provincial/territorial level which could have different implications across regions; it was not possible to examine the results at the provincial/territorial level due to sample size restrictions. New data from the 2020 SELCCA also provide information on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the use of child care for parents and guardians of First Nations children living off reserve, Métis, and Inuit children.

The results suggest that there was not a statistically significant change in the rate of child care attendance for Indigenous children between 2019 and 2020. In both years, Indigenous children aged 0 to 5 years were less likely to be in child care arrangements (51% in 2019 and 46% in 2020) than non-Indigenous children (60% in 2019 and 53% in 2020). In 2019, First Nations children living off reserve (49%) and Inuit children (42%) were less likely to participate in child care, although Métis children (60%) were equally likely to participate in child care compared with non-Indigenous children (60%). These results are similar to those reported from the Aboriginal Children's Survey in 2006 (Findlay & Kohen, 2010), suggesting that First Nations children living off reserve and Inuit children are still less likely to participate in child care than non-Indigenous children. This is an issue that needs further study to understand what barriers or perceived barriers to access may be and how policies and programs for preschool children in these communities can be improved. Similar results were found in 2020 for First Nations children living off reserve; however, there was not a statistically significant difference in use

between Inuit and non-Indigenous children. This is likely due to the nearly 8 percentage point decrease in the use of child care among parents of non-Indigenous children between 2019 and 2020 due to the pandemic.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic a larger share of Inuit children were in a daycare centre, preschool, or centre de petit enfance type of arrangement compared with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. It is possible that these types of child care are more available in the regions in which Inuit children live. According to Friendly et al. (2020) the majority of child care spaces in the three northern territories in 2019 were in child care centers as opposed to homes. Other reports have suggested a large discrepancy in the existence of child care centres across Inuit regions (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2017) yet the availability of child care for those areas is largely unknown. It is also possible that low-income families, more common in Inuit inhabited areas (Anderson, 2019), may qualify for subsidized care which tends to occur in a centre (versus an informal setting such as a home). However, in 2020, Inuit children were equally likely to participate in daycare centres, preschools, or centres de petit enfance type of arrangements as non-Indigenous children. This is due to a substantial decrease in the attendance of Inuit children at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is likely attributable to more than one-third (36%) of child care in the territories being centre-based (Statistics Canada, 2021). During the pandemic, public health restrictions resulted in the closure of formal child care centres which therefore would have had a significant impact on the availability of child care in the territories.

Additionally, about 31% of Indigenous children were in child care with a relative other than a parent in 2019, which was higher than non-Indigenous children (25%), while fewer were in a family child care home (15% compared to 21%). Neither of these differences were statistically different, possibly due to small sample sizes in each of the child care type groups. However, the 2020 results indicate that Indigenous children were more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in child care with a relative other than a parent (38% vs. 28%). Increases were observed for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in this type of child care between 2019 and 2020, as parents and other family members may have been more likely to have been at home during the pandemic. However, the results indicate that parents of Indigenous children were more likely to turn to this type of child care arrangement than parents of non-Indigenous children during the pandemic. This higher use of family-related child care among Indigenous children, in particular for First Nations children living off reserve, may also be related to other factors, including the prioritization of Indigenous-based care among family members, past negative experiences with institutional care (Hare & Anderson, 2010), differences in the public health restrictions implemented between different child care settings, or the financial benefits of being cared for by family members, as family-related child care may not require payment. Further work on the types of child care used, child care preferences, and selection barriers to facilitate future access is necessary.

Among those Indigenous children who were participating in child care, few differences were noted in terms of the characteristics of use prior to the COVID-19 pandemic compared to non-Indigenous children. Indigenous children were equally likely to participate in multiple types of care and spend a similar amount of time in child care in 2019 (29 hours per week on average) as non-Indigenous children, although they were significantly more likely to be in child care in the evenings or on the weekends. Results on the average number of hours spent in child care per week were largely similar in 2020, with

the exception of Inuit children who spent fewer hours in child care on average compared to non-Indigenous children.

Approximately one in four Indigenous children participated in child care during evenings or on weekends in both 2019 and 2020, which may reflect the types of employment in which their parents engage. For example, higher proportions of Indigenous than non-Indigenous people are employed in occupations such as sales and service, trades, and transport (Bleakney et al., 2020) which may include more shift work or non-standard hours work thus necessitating child care on evenings and weekends. Other research has also suggested that licensed child care is not likely to be offered in non-standard hours, with less than 2% of licensed centres offering this type of care (Lero, 2021). Furthermore, previous research using the SELCCA data has suggested that the use of child care in the evenings and weekends is more common among single-parent families (Guèvremont & Findlay, 2022); a higher proportion of Indigenous families are single-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Further research that explores parental work patterns and child care needs and uses during non-standard hours such as evenings and weekends among Indigenous families is required.

Results also indicated that almost three in ten parents of Indigenous children experienced difficulty finding child care in 2020. The most frequently reported reasons for this were related to difficulties finding care in the community, difficulties finding affordable care, and difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents of First Nations children living off reserve were the most likely to report difficulties finding care due to the pandemic. Approximately two in five parents of Indigenous children encountered problems with child care in their community in 2020.

Difficulties finding child care in the community is likely connected to the unique needs of Indigenous families. For example, findings from the FNREEES found that parental satisfaction with child care for children living on reserve is largely related to the perceived quality of care and the frequency of learning traditional teachings at child care (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2018a). Other work has also pointed to the unique preferences of Indigenous parents when looking for child care, such as arrangements that promote Indigenous traditions, cultural values, and languages (Halseth & Greenwood, 2019; Preston, 2008; Preston et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2019). The SELCCA did not ask questions about different preferences or specific difficulties finding culturally relevant child care for Indigenous families. However, future surveys could tailor questions to address these issues, such as questions about elder participation, the inclusion of Indigenous languages in the early learning and child care services used by families of Indigenous children, or whether families are eligible for subsidized child care.<sup>14</sup> Future research might also consider the principles outlined in the Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework (ESDC, 2018) to glean information on the unique needs including culture, language, and the inclusion of Indigenous child care providers as part of child care for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children across Canada.

The findings provide important information about patterns of child care use for Indigenous children, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These results have particular implications in

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<sup>14</sup> Additional information on the child care arrangements of Indigenous children will also be available in the 2022 Indigenous Peoples Survey, such as the language spoken most often at the child's main child care arrangement (Statistics Canada, 2022).

addressing gaps in knowledge on Indigenous child care considering that prior information came from the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey; the child care landscape in Canada has changed significantly since that time (Friendly et al., 2020). In particular, data from the SELCCA can start to address information gaps to help inform the further development and implementation of some of the priorities and goals identified and described in the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (ESDC, 2018). Further, data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic can help to inform policymakers on how the pandemic affected Indigenous families' child care use.

However, some limitations should be noted. First, the SELCCA data were only collected off reserve and thus do not include children living on reserve. Second, as the SELCCA is a general population survey that does not specifically target or oversample Indigenous children, the sample size of Indigenous children is limited and some child care estimates cannot be reported for each Indigenous group separately. For example, due to the sample size, it was not possible to further disaggregate child care estimates by the age of the child, by the characteristics of the parent or guardian, or by province or territory residence. Province or territory of residence is particularly important since while national programs exist for Indigenous child care, most child care programs are under provincial/territorial jurisdiction and as such it is important to describe findings at the provincial/territorial level for the most appropriate policy implications. In addition, the SELCCA did not include information on different levels of geography, such as whether the child lives in Inuit Nunangat or in areas outside of large urban centres, where the realities of accessing child care may vastly differ. Finally, although different characteristics of child care were explored, no information is available to describe the quality of care, in particular elements of quality that might be particularly relevant from an Indigenous perspective rather than based on quantitative research approaches (see Pence et al., 2007). Several studies have suggested that characteristics of care are necessary to understand if one is interested in the impact of child care on child and family well-being (Burchinal et al., 2010; Elek et al., 2020; Romano et al., 2010; Vandell et al., 2010). For instance, findings from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study of child care suggest that participation in high quality early child care<sup>15</sup> is associated with higher academic achievement and fewer behaviour problems in the short term and lasting into the teen years (Vandell et al., 2020).

Future work could also explore the specific elements and attributes necessary for high quality care for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children (Pence et al., 2007), including child care that reinforces Indigenous values, attitudes, and behaviours as recommended by the report on the Royal Commission for Aboriginal Peoples (1996). Finally, as the SELCCA survey was designed for the general Canadian population, the results reflect participation in any type of child care, and thus do not necessarily indicate Indigenous-specific care (e.g., those that include Indigenous culture or language such as Aboriginal Head Start programs) or Indigenous-specific aspects or needs for care. Future studies might consider other means of data collection, such as qualitative approaches in order to address some of these gaps or to provide specific information on research questions that can best be addressed through qualitative work (such as barriers to care, perceived needs for child care, desired attributes, or perceptions of child care in the context of historical distrust of formal education and care). This approach could potentially

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<sup>15</sup> High quality child care was identified through observations of caregiver sensitivity, interactions with the child, and elements of the structure of the child care environment.

address the relatively large number of parents who reported “other” reasons for difficulties with care which may be related to preferences for cultural inclusive care, care that includes Indigenous languages, or Indigenous-specific curriculum frameworks based on Indigenous heritage and ancestry (Hare & Anderson, 2010).

In conclusion, the findings from this work may contribute information to help support the goals of the Government of Canada’s Multilateral Framework for Early Learning and Child Care by describing patterns of child care use for Indigenous children both in 2019 and in 2020 during the pandemic. Both rates of participation as well as characteristics of care, such as the difficulties parents face in finding care, are important descriptive factors that can be used to determine the impact of changes to the child care system, including how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the child care arrangements of Indigenous families. Although the SELCCA was a general population survey and did not include Indigenous-specific content, nor does it provide provincial or territorial specific information, the results do allow for a description of use of child care by identity group, time spent in child care, and use of care outside standard working hours. Future data collection and research might include both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore, explain, and further describe patterns and preferences of child care use among families with Indigenous children, and specifically including aspects of care that might be particularly important to First Nations, Métis and Inuit children, and their families.

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