

Tennessee's Missing Bridge: 60% of Young Children Have No Child Care Slot. Why Early Childhood Education Is Essential Infrastructure, Not 'Just Babysitting.'

Across Tennessee, a silent crisis is undermining families, businesses, and the economy: the chronic shortage of affordable, high-quality child care. For working parents, the search for reliable care is a relentless scramble. It's waking before dawn, tiptoeing through a dark house to squeeze in a few extra emails before the children wake, and checking your phone at every red light, hoping for word from a waitlist. It's apologizing again for being late to work because coverage fell through and quietly crossing your name off the list for a promotion you know you can't pursue right now. Waitlists stretch for months, costs rival mortgage payments, and peace of mind is a luxury few can afford.

As one Upper Cumberland parent put it, "Child care costs are as high as my mortgage; it feels impossible to balance." Another mom in Northeast Tennessee shared, "Affordability is such an issue. I need three jobs to cover the costs of child care for my three children. I'm barely making ends meet because of my \$1,000 monthly child care bill."

This is not just a family issue. When parents can't find or afford care, businesses lose productivity, absenteeism rises, and talent, especially women, leaves the workforce. The ripple effect stunts economic growth and erodes our state's competitive edge. Child care is economic infrastructure, like highways and utilities that everyone relies on and helps fund. Yet, despite the stakes, child care is still dismissed in public discourse as an afterthought, not the essential infrastructure it is.

Child Care Is Infrastructure

When we talk about infrastructure, most think of roads, bridges, and broadband, the backbone investments that keep society running. But in the 21st century, child care is just as foundational. Every year Tennessee's child care system falls short, our economy loses more than \$1.3 billion in earnings, productivity, and tax revenue. Without it, parents cannot work, businesses cannot thrive, and communities cannot prosper.

The ROI Is Undeniable

The data is clear: for every \$1 invested in high-quality early childhood education, society sees a return of up to \$7 through increased graduation rates, higher earnings, and reduced social costs. Nobel laureate economist James Heckman's research shows these investments yield some of the highest returns in public policy. In real terms, a Tennessee child who benefits from high-quality early learning can expect to earn tens of thousands of dollars more in lifetime wages compared to peers without this foundation. Yet, public funding for early childhood lags behind other infrastructure priorities.

Workforce Participation—Especially for Women

The impact is especially acute for mothers. In Tennessee, lack of affordable child care is a leading reason women scale back or leave their jobs. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2023, nearly 13% of Tennessee mothers with children under five reported not working due to child care challenges. This isn't just a personal setback; it takes a measurable toll on our economy. Lost participation from these mothers means hundreds of millions of dollars in lost wages and economic output each year, dragging down state GDP and hurting every community.

A parent in Northeast Tennessee described the "eligibility paradox": "I can't get subsidies because I don't meet the 30-hour-per-week work requirement, but I can't work 30 hours per week because I can't afford child care."

Tennessee Child Care Desert Data

Research shows the problem is widespread and severe:

- In Tennessee, more than 60% of census tracts qualify as "child care deserts," defined as areas where there are more than three children for every available regulated child care slot. In contrast, a handful of communities, or child care "oases," show what is possible when supply matches need. Some counties have created enough regulated slots so every family seeking care can find it quickly, resulting in shorter waitlists, more working parents, and stronger local economies. This difference shows how much a functioning early childhood system can transform daily life for families and communities.
- In some rural and suburban communities, as many as five children compete for every licensed slot.
- Waitlists are common. As one Northeast Tennessee mom lamented, "We got on the waitlist when I was two months pregnant, and my child still didn't have a spot until they were six months old."

- Provider shortages are especially acute for infants and children with disabilities. One Knoxville parent recounted how their center removed infant care due to regulatory burdens.

The Human Impact

Parents rely on family, Google searches, and community networks to find care. Many were familiar with the Tennessee Department of Human Services' Child Care Locator tool, but wished more centers kept vacancy and waitlist information up to date. One Knoxville parent described scrolling the locator at two in the morning, exhausted, hoping to find an opening, only to discover that every "available" spot had been filled weeks earlier. Seeing outdated listings and getting no response leaves parents feeling like the search for care is endless and invisible.

Quality is also top-of-mind. A Knoxville parent shared, "I judge quality by how my child feels when I pick them up—a happy child tells me they're in the right place."

Parents want low child-to-teacher ratios, open communication, and knowledgeable staff. As one West Tennessee parent put it: "High-quality child care means my child is well taken care of physically and emotionally."

What Parents Want

- Expand subsidies and vouchers to include middle-income families.
- Increase the number of child care seats in underserved areas, support infant care providers, and keep vacancy and cost information updated.
- Attract and retain child care workers through higher wages and training opportunities. As a West Tennessee parent hypothesized, "If child care workers were paid more, they'd be more likely to stay, and that consistency would benefit everyone."

Call to Action

It's time for a new vision. Child care is not a luxury or a private family matter; it is a public good and essential infrastructure. Every month Tennessee delays action, families lose thousands of dollars in wages, businesses lose talent and productivity, and our communities fall further behind. The cost of inaction rises each week, making it urgent to invest now in solutions that can stabilize families and strengthen our economy.

Policymakers must:

- Expand investment in early childhood systems by increasing state pre-K funding by 20 percent over the next two years to create new slots in high-need communities,
- Support the child care workforce with better pay and training so that centers can fill new slots, and
- Modernize subsidy programs to meet today's realities.

Businesses should:

- Champion employer-supported solutions, such as on-site care or flexible work schedules. Take, for example, TriStar Manufacturing in Middle Tennessee, which recently opened an on-site child care center for employees. In the first year, staff turnover dropped by 35 percent, absenteeism fell noticeably, and job applications rose. Employees described a renewed sense of loyalty and peace of mind, knowing their children were safe and close by. As TriStar's CEO said, "Investing in child care is investing in our workforce and our business future."
- Advocate for public investment in child care infrastructure.

Imagine a future with no parent sidelined from opportunity, no talent lost from our workforce, and every child thriving from a strong start. One Tennessee parent said, "Child care is the foundation of our community's future—investing in it benefits everyone." No parent sidelined, no talent lost, every child thriving.

Let's stop treating child care as a side issue. It's time to recognize it for what it is: essential infrastructure for families, businesses, and Tennessee's future.