

AN UNSTABLE FOUNDATION

Low Pay and Inadequate Funding Are Roadblocks to Building the Universal Child Care and Early Education System Chicago Families Need



Right now child care in Chicago is in crisis. Workers can't afford to stay in the field due to low wages and lack of benefits. Meanwhile, parents can't find and afford child care. These dual crises are rooted in a common cause: the failure to invest the resources our child care and early learning system requires to deliver this essential service. This leaves children without the child care and early learning they need, forces child care workers to leave the profession they love, and leaves parents without critical support required to stay in the workforce.

The child care workforce in Chicago, largely Black and Brown women, has long struggled with low pay that is nowhere near enough to support a family in this city, inadequate staffing and support in the classroom, and no voice to advocate for better jobs. These unsustainable conditions have driven many dedicated child care workers out of the field to take higher paying jobs so they can support their families.

The failures of our current system are felt by families and workers of all demographics and economic backgrounds; however, they hit women, low-income communities, and communities of color the hardest. The crisis we're facing now has been building for decades and was worsened by the pandemic. Now, new data show the extent of the problem—low wages are forcing centers in Chicago to close classrooms—which, in turn, magnifies the problem for Chicago parents who already struggle to find child care slots. Given all these factors, it's not surprising that addressing the child care crisis is a critical priority for Chicago families—as evidenced by public opinion research showing that 2 of every 3 voters in the city support increased funding for child care and early learning programs.¹

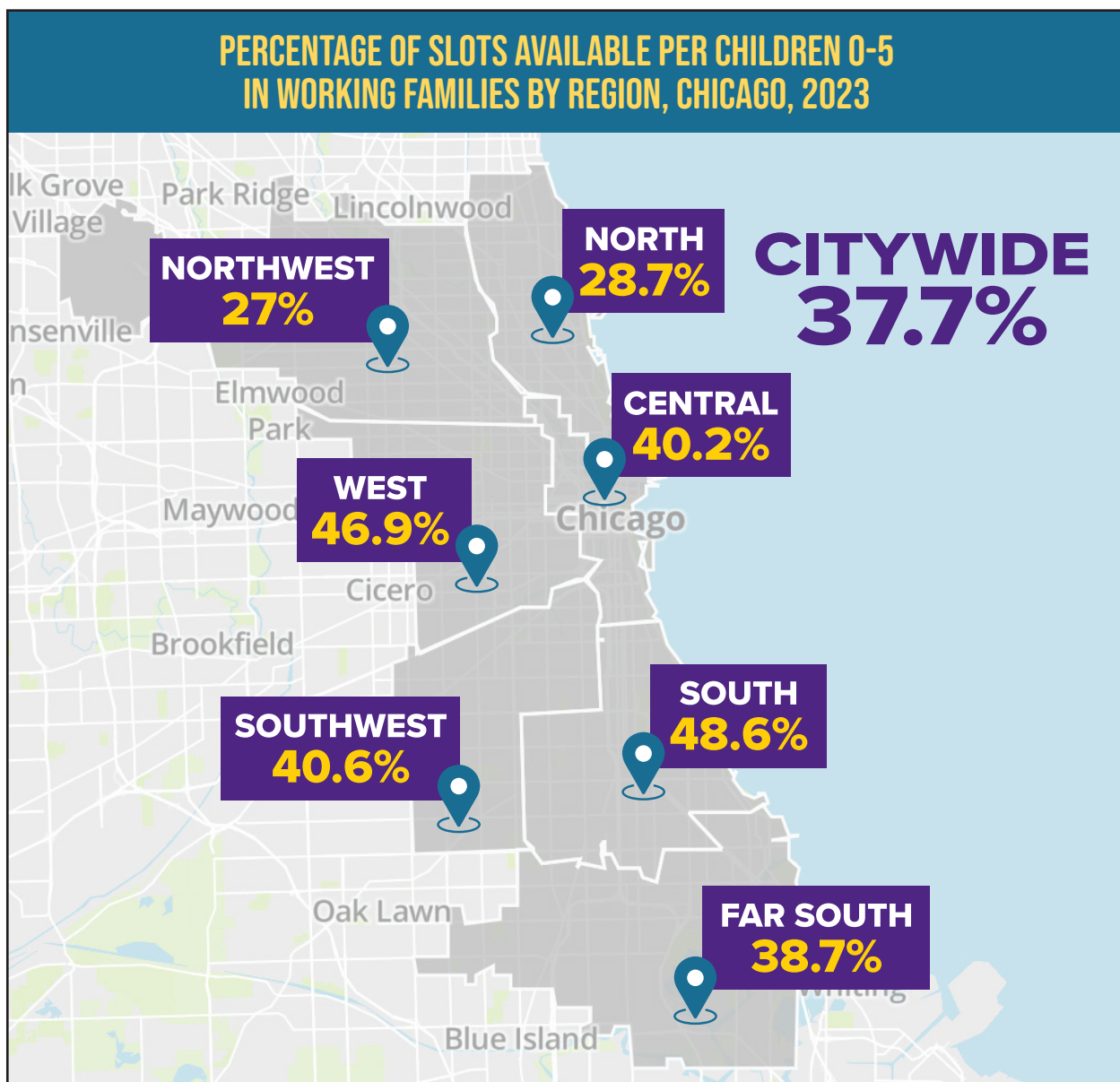
We can't build the child care and early learning system Chicagoans deserve on a broken foundation. As federal COVID-19 funding end and the limitations of the state's important but insufficient efforts to address the crisis become apparent, clearly, Chicagoans need their city to take responsibility and step up to help create the child care and early learning system they need and deserve. Tackling this crisis requires addressing a fundamental cause—the workforce shortage created by unsustainable working conditions for child care workers who underpin our child care system. To do this, Chicago must stabilize and grow the child care workforce by increasing pay and making child care jobs better jobs. This will lay the foundation for improving access and affordability for families.



These workforce investments are an essential step to building a universal, affordable child care and early learning system. The city can leverage federal and state funding and add city funding to implement the changes Chicago families and workers need. It's the only way child care centers will be able to keep classrooms open and expand operations—a necessity to address the shortage of child care slots in the city. Addressing the workforce shortage will also pay dividends for our city by ensuring that every child in Chicago has the best start in life and enabling parents without child care to go back to work.

CHICAGO'S CHILD CARE SHORTAGE LEAVES MORE THAN 78,536 CHILDREN WITHOUT ACCESS TO LICENSED CARE

The chart below tells a grim story. No matter who you are or where you live, there simply aren't enough child care providers to care for the children who need it. Even just looking at licensed capacity available to families, every region of the city has fewer than 50% of the licensed child care and early learning slots needed for children under 5 who have working parents.²



Source: IECAM, <https://db.iecam.illinois.edu/search.asp>

On the community area level, we see the same trend. The chart below shows a breakdown of some of the slot availability per selected community areas.

PERCENTAGE OF AVAILABLE SLOTS PER CHILDREN 0-5 IN WORKING FAMILIES, SELECTED COMMUNITY AREAS, CHICAGO, 2023	
Chicago Community Areas	Percentage of slots available
Albany Park	24.3%
Avondale	21.7%
Englewood	53.4%
North Center	24.6%
South Lawndale	27.6%
West Garfield Park	33.2%

Source: IECAM, <https://db.iecam.illinois.edu/search.asp>

To care for children who currently don't have access to the child care and early learning they need, Chicago needs an additional 16,500 to 19,000 early childhood teaching staff and providers.³

Despite the lessons of the pandemic that laid bare the critical role of child care workers in keeping our communities safe and healthy, these gaps in the availability of care persist and continue to disproportionately impact communities of color.⁴

THE UNSTABLE FOUNDATION THAT UNDERPINS CHICAGO'S CHILD CARE CRISIS: BAD JOBS ARE FORCING CHILD CARE WORKERS OUT OF THE PROFESSION



While the child care crisis has garnered significantly more attention in recent years, much of the national conversation focuses on what's easy to see: that families are struggling to find and afford child care and early learning. But what's often overlooked is the unstable foundation fueling the crisis—low wages and the lack of benefits make it impossible for child care workers to stay in the profession. These challenges are compounded by stressful working conditions and severe understaffing. These challenges are compounded by stressful working conditions and severe understaffing caused largely by people leaving due to low wages. It's not surprising that in recent years child care providers have been leaving in droves for jobs in other industries that pay more yet require less in terms of training and licensing—or for pre-K jobs in the Chicago Public School system.

As a result, it's difficult for child care centers to retain or replace staff because the low wages and benefits don't come close to covering the cost of living in one of the most expensive cities in the country. And it's not hard to find jobs that pay more than child care and early learning. In fact, as the chart below demonstrates, child care workers and preschool teachers make even less than other jobs in the Chicago area that are also underpaid—like bus and truck drivers, retail, and warehouse jobs—according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

AVERAGE WAGES BY OCCUPATION, CHICAGO METRO REGION (IL-IN-WI), 2023		
Occupation	Average hourly wage	Average yearly wage
Bus Drivers	\$32.52	\$67,640
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	\$29.36	\$61,060
Warehouse Worker	\$19.63	\$38,580
Stocker/Order Filler	\$18.76	\$39,020
Retail Worker	\$18.65	\$38,790
Packer/Packager	\$17.63	\$36,670
Childcare Worker	\$16.71	\$34,750

Source: BLS Occupational and Wage Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/>

In 2022, according to the Census, Chicagoans with a bachelor's degree made an average \$73,000 per year, or about \$35.10 per hour.⁵ A 2022 study indicated that center-based preschool teachers with a bachelor's degree in Head Start programs made as little as or less than \$21.13-\$30.29 per hour, not even reaching the average for workers with the same educational level. In the case of workers with either an associate's or bachelor's degree, registered nurses were making 46%-60% more than infant-toddler teachers despite both positions requiring similar qualifications.⁶



WAGE COMPARISON, TEACHER POSITIONS IN HEAD START PROGRAMS AND CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CHICAGO, 2021

Position	Early Education Lead Teacher	Early Education Lead Teacher
Employer	Chicago Public Schools	Head Start Center
Credential	BA	BA
Hourly Wage Range	\$34.78-\$46.40	\$23.13-\$30.29

Source: Policy Equity Group, Supporting the Recruitment and Retention of Head Start Staff: A Wage and Benefits Comparability Study for Chicago Head Start Grantees, Jan 2022.

WAGE COMPARISON, REGISTERED NURSE AND HEAD START INFANT-TODDLER TEACHING ASSISTANT, CHICAGO, 2021

Position	Nursing (RN)	Infant-Toddler Teaching Assistant at Head Start Center
Credential	AA or BA	AA or BA
Hourly Wage Range	\$26.44-\$40.87	\$15.18-\$26.90

Source: Policy Equity Group, Supporting the Recruitment and Retention of Head Start Staff: A Wage and Benefits Comparability Study for Chicago Head Start Grantees, Jan 2022.

On top of low wages, poor working conditions make it even harder to recruit and retain child care providers. Understaffing is common, which doesn't just shortchange the kids in their care. It makes an already demanding job harrowing and fraught with risk given that child care workers aren't just responsible for young children's education—they are responsible for their care and safety.

A 2021 study found that early childhood workers serving high-needs children faced higher demands and stress than the average working American and were less satisfied with their jobs, but that those who reported better working conditions (including being treated with respect, taking part in making decisions that affect them, having clarity on what is expected of them, and having healthy and safe working conditions) had significantly higher job satisfaction.⁷ And research has repeatedly documented the connection between poorer working conditions and higher turnover in child care and early learning. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that early childhood employers often fail to implement best practices in this area, and workers and families pay the price.⁸

The resulting churn in critical staff makes it difficult to operate child care centers. The most recent data on staff turnover at centers indicates that teaching staff had a two-year turnover rate of 41%, while teaching assistants (many of whom make minimum wage) had a two-year turnover rate of 69%.⁹

These numbers support what many parents see in their children's centers: few staff stick around, and many workers come and go as better opportunities elsewhere appear or they give up on pursuing a career in child care and early learning.

HOW THE WORKFORCE CRISIS AFFECTS CENTERS AND FAMILIES

The child care workforce crisis doesn't just undermine the quality of child care and early learning that children receive at understaffed, high-turnover centers. Importantly, it also worsens the already dire shortage of child care for families. Due to the inability of centers to recruit and retain enough workers, many centers are closing classrooms, meaning fewer families have access to child care and early learning spots that would otherwise be available to them.



Based on new data from the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS), which summarizes information requested of the 451 child care centers in Chicago that received COVID-relief grants (72% of the licensed centers in the city), at any given time throughout 2023, dozens of classrooms were closed in child care centers across Chicago.

These numbers fluctuated between a high of 110 classrooms and a low of 81—with 81 remaining closed at the end of 2023. This means that among participating centers, roughly 810-2,200 children who could have been served if these classrooms were open, instead did not have access to child care and early learning. Since more than one-fourth of centers in the city did not participate in the program, the actual citywide numbers are likely higher.¹⁰

NUMBER OF CLOSED CLASSROOMS AND ESTIMATED AFFECTED CHILDREN IN CENTERS THAT RECEIVED COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDING, CHICAGO, 2023			
	Feb-Apr 2023	May-Sept 2023	Oct-Dec 2023
Total number of classrooms that were closed at any time during the reporting period	110	92	81
Total number of classrooms that remained closed at the end of the reporting period	97	90	81
Range of children affected by classroom closures	1100-2200	920-1840	810-1620

Source: Illinois Department of Human Services, FOIA Request Response, March 2024

While there was some improvement in the number of closed classrooms during 2023, in the final period for which we have data—October to December 2023—all 81 classrooms that were closed at some point during the three-month period remained closed at the end of December, suggesting that the improvements have plateaued despite the extra funding coming to these centers.

Daycare centers and providers were also asked to report the reasons for classroom closures and the 2023 data shows that, not surprisingly, the inability to hire staff was among the top two reasons. The other key factor driving many classroom closures was low enrollment, a problem fueled by high tuition costs which make care unaffordable for many parents and the challenges families face in accessing assistance. The chart below details these and the other reasons cited for classroom closures.

REASONS FOR CLOSED CLASSROOMS BY CENTERS RECEIVING COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDING, CHICAGO, 2023			
Reason for classroom closure (Centers could choose multiple options)	Feb-Apr 2023	May-Sept 2023	Oct-Dec 2023
Unable to hire staff	64%	66%	49%
Low enrollment	66%	66%	56%
Other	5%	5%	7%
Classroom needs repair or modification	2%	7%	7%
COVID-19	0%	2%	5%

Source: Illinois Department of Human Services, FOIA Request Response, March 2024

Recent research suggests this problem extends far beyond Chicago. The National Head Start Association surveyed Head Start programs around the country in fall 2023 and found that 15% of staff positions were vacant (with compensation the top reason for vacancies) and 14% of classrooms were closed (with staff vacancies the top reason for closures.)¹¹

According to a January 2024 survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 53% of child care program leaders nationwide reported that they were experiencing a staffing shortage, and 56% were serving fewer children than they were licensed to serve, with the top two reasons they were serving fewer children being staff shortages (89%) and low pay (77%). In Illinois, the numbers were even more dramatic, with 61% of program leaders reporting staffing shortages and 64% reporting serving fewer children than their licensed capacity.¹²



CHICAGO CAN BECOME A LEADER IN PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING

Chicago is facing a dire child care crisis and we cannot afford to wait for the federal or state governments to make the necessary investments to solve this crisis. Chicago must act now to prevent the child care crisis from getting worse and to create the building blocks of the universal child care and early learning system our city's children need and deserve. The city already plays a central role in child care and early learning in Chicago, administering over \$150 million in federal and state funding. This funding includes Head Start/Early Head Start funding from the federal government; contracted child care through the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program, which is funded through both federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) dollars and state funding; and the Preschool for All/Prevention Initiative grant from the state's Early Childhood Block Grant. Chicago needs to make the most of its role in administering existing and future state and federal dollars and add additional city funding to make the changes Chicagoans need and deserve.

Other cities and local governments across the country have taken concrete steps to solve the child care workforce shortage, developing strategies that can inform the path forward in Chicago.

To tackle the workforce crisis, cities like New York City, San Francisco, Washington, DC, New Orleans and counties like Alameda County, CA, have either leveraged federal, state, and/or local funding or created new taxes to fund wage improvements and in some cases established wage floors for child care workers.

To help make child care and early learning more affordable, local governments in Seattle and Montgomery County, MD, have funded assistance for families that have incomes higher than their state's child care assistance eligibility thresholds.



LAKISHA MCFADDEN

CEO, Centers for New Horizons

“Our organization has been serving children on the south side of Chicago for over 50 years. Our Bronzeville Early Learning Center was designed and constructed in 2008, purpose-built to serve 150 children. But right now, we are turning families away—we are only able to serve half as many children as we could be serving. Half of our classrooms are closed. And that is because we cannot recruit and retain the classroom staff we need. We know we are not alone—this is a common problem discussed amongst center administrators. We are at a breaking point and it's the families that are losing. If this problem doesn't improve, we could be forced to close our doors completely.”



RUBY YABER, Parent

“I have 5 kids—14, 13, 9, and 4 years old, and a 9-month-old. I can't find care for my two youngest children while I try to find a steadier job as a home care worker. For my youngest, I looked into three different centers and none of them had openings! One center had me on a waitlist for a year—I went while expecting, hoping that being early would help get him in but I never got the call.

I've been relying on my family for help, but they also have small kids of their own. My current child care arrangement is not practical for the long term, and the hours I can work every day are limited to the time my family can take care of my children.”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

CLAIRE PITTINGER

Child Care Center worker

“Earning \$17.50 an hour is very hard with the cost of living in Chicago. I also wasn’t eligible for healthcare because I was only working 30 hours a week. I didn’t feel able to work 40 hours a week because the days are so mentally, physically and emotionally exhausting. Due to severe understaffing at my center I was commonly left alone with the children—sometimes out of ratio. On multiple occasions near-emergency situations arose in these moments when I was left alone and out of ratio. The way the system is currently set up, you’re not only doing your job, you’re doing a job and a half. It’s not some job that you can just clock in, sit at your desk and leave. It’s really intense.

I probably won’t be going back. The amount of work that I was putting in compared to the low wage was way off balance.”



DOMINEQUA COOPER, Parent

“My daughter is 4 years old and we are lucky to have a spot in a child care center. However, the frequent changes in staff have become an issue that it is affecting my child. She doesn’t want to go to school like she used to. There are more behavior concerns within her classroom because of short staffing and lack of quality and experienced teachers. Because they don’t have enough staff, they often combine classrooms where other teachers don’t know my child and vice versa. There have been so many substitute teachers I can’t even remember! The teachers are not staying because of working conditions, the pay, and the way they are treated. This is absolutely unacceptable for my child and the thousands of children who experience this across Chicago.”



HOW WE CAN START TO CREATE UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE IN CHICAGO?

It’s time for Chicago to take the lead in Illinois. Given the scale of the child care crisis, the city must take urgent action to meet the needs of thousands of children and working parents by investing now in building a universal child care and early learning system. This investment should focus on three core goals:

- 1. Stabilizing the child care workforce** by improving wages and working conditions and creating the conditions for workforce growth;
- 2. Making child care and early learning more affordable** and accessible for more working parents; and
- 3. Creating a teacher pipeline** to address the workforce shortages that will recruit, support, and create a career pathway for Black and Brown teachers in underserved communities.

Chicago should build upon efforts by the state, which has recognized and prioritized the urgent need to address the child care workforce crisis and has taken important but insufficient first steps through the Smart Start program to modestly increase wages for some of the state’s child care workers. Chicago now has the opportunity to learn from and expand on the best practices of cities and states across the country by making the investments necessary to build a universal child care and early learning system that can be a model for the nation.

END NOTES

1. Normington, Petts & Associates, Poll number NPA3576, conducted January 2023.
2. These numbers don't include the many low-income families that rely on a family member, friend, or neighbor to care for their children either through the state's child care assistance program or informal arrangements. Many families rely on this type of care due to shift work, unpredictable work schedules, or working nights. These informal providers generally do not receive adequate compensation or support for their work, and while some families select them by choice, others have no other option due to the lack of available, affordable licensed care. All Chicago families should have the option of licensed child care for their families. As Illinois Action for Children pointed out in its 2023 report on child care in Cook County, despite the number of slots overall being stable between 2019 and 2022, "...they may not reflect availability of care. Centers continue to struggle with hiring and retaining a qualified workforce. With fewer workers, programs might have reduced the number of children they serve or shortened their hours of operation, making it more challenging for parents looking for care." <https://www.actforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ReportOnChildcareCookCounty2023.pdf>, p. 3
3. Based on average staffing ratios across different types of licensed care settings (family child care in homes and centers) for children ages 0-5, if care were available to all those children. We estimate 16,500 to 19,000 teaching staff and providers are/would be needed to offer full-time care to all those children, depending on the proportion of different types of licensed care settings. If all those children went to centers with an average staffing ratio of 4.8 children per staff based on state licensing requirements, it would require 16,348 classroom staff to care for those children. For staffing ratio averages, we calculated ratios based on max class size per age (0-14 months, 15-23 months, 2 year olds, preschoolers) divided by the number of required teaching staff. We then averaged out the four different staffing ratios and came up with one overall average ratio. If all those children went to a mix of centers and licensed family child care homes (60% and 40%, respectively), it would require 19,626 providers and assistants to provide care for those children. For the staffing ratio average for FCC homes, we assumed a home with 8 slots would have 80% enrollment and would require 2 staff to care for all enrolled children.
4. Based on Illinois Action for Children series of reports on child care in Cook County on availability by region and data on young children with all parents working. See reports at <https://www.actforchildren.org/about/research-data/reports/annual-report-archive/>
5. https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2022.B20004?q=Income%20and%20Earnings%20by%20educational%20attainment&g=050XX00US17031_060XX00US1703114000. Hourly amount established by dividing yearly wage by 52 weeks of 40 hours of work each.
6. Policy Equity Group, Supporting the Recruitment and Retention of Head Start Staff: A Wage and Benefits Comparability Study for Chicago Head Start Grantees, Jan 2022.
7. Farewell CV, Quinlan J, Melnick E, Powers J, Puma J. Job demands and resources experienced by the early childhood education workforce serving high-need populations. *Early Childhood Education Journal* (2021).
8. See for example Farewell CV, Quinlan J, Melnick E, Powers J, Puma J. Job demands and resources experienced by the early childhood education workforce serving high-need populations. *Early Childhood Education Journal* (2021); Grant AA, Jeon L, Buettner CK (2019) Relating early childhood teachers' working conditions and well-being to their turnover intentions. *Educational Psychology* 39(3): 294–312; Jeon, L., Wells, M.B. An Organizational-Level Analysis of Early Childhood Teachers' Job Attitudes: Workplace Satisfaction Affects Early Head Start and Head Start Teacher Turnover. *Child Youth Care Forum* 47, 563–581 (2018); Russell, E. M., Williams, S. W., Gleason-Gomez, C. (2010). Teachers' perceptions of administrative support and antecedents of turnover. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 24(3), 195-208; Wells, M. B. (2015). Predicting preschool teacher retention and turnover in newly hired head start teachers across the first half of the school year. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 30(Part A), 152–159.
9. IL DHS. Illinois Salary and Staffing Survey of Licensed Child Care Facilities Fiscal Year 2023, https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27897/documents/EC/SalaryStaffingSurvey/FY23SalaryStaffingSurvey_A11Y.pdf, p. 37, 59
10. This range is based on the rules determining the maximum number of children allowed per classroom, which is capped at 12 for infant classrooms and 20 for children ages 3-5. However, given that many infant classrooms have closer to 8-10 children, the low end of the estimate is based on 10 children per classroom.
11. <https://nhsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023.10-Workforce-Brief.pdf>
12. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/feb_2024_brief_wearenotok_final_1.pdf

