

According to research and findings of several organizations, including First Things First, Coconino County ranks last among Arizona's 15 counties in having childcare resources available for working parents. Countywide, there are fewer than 3,150 childcare center-based slots available, while there are more than 5,150 children with all parents in the workforce.

An absence of childcare stability has led to a \$1.7 billion loss annually to Arizona's economy, according to the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation. In a US Chamber survey, 62% of businesses cited childcare as a factor for why they see employees leaving the workforce. 1 in 3 businesses said childcare issues factored into the loss of productivity for employees.

While the number of childcare centers in Flagstaff and Greater Coconino County are very scarce, the number of centers for infants and toddlers are very few, to the point of nearly being absent from the regional picture. Less than 10 % of childcare providers in Flagstaff accept one-year olds. Providers for infants through age 3 is the most difficult to find. The standard of care is often of low quality, and the cost of childcare is equal to in-state college tuition.

A region is typically labeled a "childcare desert" if the ratio of children to childcare slot is 3 to 1 or more. In the Coconino Region, 7.8 times the number of infants exist than available child care slot for infants. For 1-year olds, there is a 3 to 1 ratio for every available slot.

Sending an infant to a licensed center in Coconino is about 15 % of an average family's income. The costs of childcare for young children continue to increase. For infants, the cost of licensed childcare centers increased 25% in Coconino County, 20% for 1- to 2-year-olds, and 15% for 3- to 5-year-olds. In 2022, the median monthly costs for full-time childcare for infants in licensed childcare centers was \$945 a month, \$840 a month for 1-to 2-year olds, and \$735 a month for 3-to 5-year olds.

Some parents are forced to choose whether they must pay an inordinate amount of their income for childcare, or remove themselves from the workforce so they can stay home with their children. In Flagstaff, the city with the highest cost of living in Arizona, this dilemma causes some very difficult decisions and excessive stress for many parents. It impacts some parents' ability to reliably pay rent, utilities, fill gas tanks, and it also impacts a wide array of mental health factors, leading to increased stress, often over financial decisions.

Statistics from First Things First, using 2020 Census data, illustrate that Coconino County has a population of 8,662 children under the age of 5. The total number of households in Coconino County is 51, 320, of which 5,995 have more than one child.

First Things First estimates 90% of young children in Coconino County live in families with at least one parent in the labor force, and 68% live with all parents in the labor force, making it likely that some form of childcare is needed in these working families.

In Coconino County, 57% of children live with two married parents, 36% live with one parent, and 18% live in their grandparents' household. Research indicates that 1,627 children under 18 live with their grandparents. 23% don't have the child's parents in the household. 60% of grandparents housing their grandchildren are 60 or older, and 24% of grandparents have an income below the poverty threshold.

According to the Children's Action Alliance, 16.7% of children in Arizona are living in poverty. In Coconino County, 18.4% live in poverty. 18.5% of Arizona children live in households with food insecurity. In Coconino County, 19% live with food insecurity.

The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) defines quality childcare providers as those with Quality First rating, a national accreditation, or a Child Development Associate Certificate, for family childcare providers. About 77% of children in the region were enrolled at Quality First centers with a 3.5 (out of 5) rating. 4 licensed or registered childcare providers are nationally accredited in Coconino. These providers have the capacity to serve about 9% of the childcare capacity in Coconino.

In Coconino County, 74% of young children are not enrolled in cost-assistance programs with the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES), and 94% of children enrolled in DES programs were placed in quality childcare programs. For families eligible for DES cost-assistance programs, 9.3% of those families don't utilize childcare assistance.

Sources:

First Things First, Coconino Regional Council, Needs and Assets Report, 2024

Children's Action Alliance, Arizona Kids Count Data Book, 2024

US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Employer Roadmap: Childcare Solutions for Working Parents, 2022