

Trends in long day care services for children in Australia, 1991–99

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Preface

This paper was prepared by Helen Moyle, Seniz Aydinli, Nigel Gill and Edith Gray. Thanks are extended to the Family and Children's Services Division of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services for providing the unit record file from the 1995, 1997 and 1999 Census of Child Care Services and for providing helpful comments on this report.

This publication draws on the AIHW Welfare Division Working Paper No. 18 *Trends in Long Day Care Services for Children in Australia 1991-1995*.

Summary

The period covered by the report has been one of rapid growth in the long day care sector, particularly in centre-based long day care. Between 1991 and 1999, the number of places in long day care centres grew by 150% and the number of family day care places by 51%. The growth in the number of children using services was somewhat lower than the growth in services, an increase of 122% of children using centre-based care and 38% of children in family day care. Although the increase in the number of paid workers in centre-based care was commensurate with the growth in children at 125%, the number of family day care co-ordination unit staff increased by only 14% and the number of family day care providers fell by 9% over the period.

Long day care centres and family day care services were originally funded and/or licensed to provide 'long day care' for children under school age. This report shows, however, that by 1999 a substantial proportion of service providers, particularly private-for-profit centres and family day care schemes, offered a variety of services—long day care, preschool programs (or access to these programs), occasional care and school-age care. In 1999, long day care centres were also more likely to provide care for 'young' children (under 2) than in previous years.

Along with the overall growth in long day care services, there has been an extension of the daily hours that long day care centres operate. For example, 61% of private-for-profit centres were open for 11 or more hours per day in 1999, compared with 31% in 1991. Family day care providers also increased the hours per week they provided care—the proportion of providers working 40 hours or more increased by 56% to 66% over the same period. In contrast, the amount of time that children spent in care decreased over the period 1991 to 1999, with an increase in the proportion using care for less than 20 hours a week and a decrease in the proportion in care for 40 hours or more.

An important trend between 1991 and 1999 was the decline in the affordability of long day care services, due to increases in fees charged by service providers—particularly long day care centres—outstripping increases in government fee relief. Vacancy rates in long day care centres increased between 1995 and 1999, which can partly be attributed to the decline in affordability of care.

In each of the census years, over half or more of all children using centre-based long day care were aged 3–4 years compared with just under a third of children in family day care. The proportion of children who were 'young' (under 2) was lowest in private-for-profit centres, although it increased between 1991 and 1999, from 23% to 33%, reflecting the increase in the availability of places for children of this age. The relatively high proportion of children in private-for-profit centres and family day care services who were aged 5 and older—13% and 29% respectively in 1999—reflects the tendency of long day care service providers to offer care for children of school age.

A major aim of Commonwealth Child Care Support is to provide work-related care, that is, to assist families where both parents (or a sole parent) are in the labour force or studying or training for employment. The proportion of children in work-related care increased for every type of service provider between 1991 and 1999. The Commonwealth also provides specific funding to assist parents and children with special needs (such as children with a disability) to access child care services. Over the period 1991 to 1999, the proportion of children in long day care services who had 'additional needs' increased from 14% to 16%.

In all the census years under review, two-thirds or more of all children using long day care services received Childcare Assistance. Policies introduced in 1997 and 1998 to limit the payment of Childcare Assistance – to a maximum of 50 ‘paid hours’ of care for ‘work-related care’ and 20 hours of care for ‘non-work-related care’ – substantially reduced the proportion of children in ‘work-related care’ who were in more than 50 ‘paid hours’ of care in a week and the proportion in ‘non-work-related care’ who were in more than 20 ‘paid hours’ of care in a week.

The profile of workers in long day care services changed in some respects between 1991 and 1999, reflecting the emphasis in the industry on the importance of qualifications and training. The proportion of workers with relevant qualifications increased over the period, particularly in private-for-profit centres. By 1999, around half of all workers in long day care centres, 70% of family day care coordinators and 21% of family day care providers held ‘relevant’ qualifications. Similarly, the proportion of workers who had undertaken in-service training in the 12 months prior to the census also increased from 1991 to 1999. By 1999, two-thirds or more of workers had undertaken in-service training in the previous 12 months.

Since the 1999 data have been collected, there has been a major change in Commonwealth child care policy with the introduction of the Child Care Benefit and the subsequent improvement in affordability. It will be interesting to measure the effects of these changes once the data from the May 2002 census become available.