

Child Policy Brief



Child Care: Georgia and the Region

Issue

Georgia leads the southeastern region in population growth and economic development, but lags significantly behind other states in supporting child care for families whose children are at highest risk of poor outcomes, and in setting standards that could improve the quality of child care services.

Recommendation

Much can be done to strengthen the child care system in Georgia. Regulators need to review and update licensing standards to reflect current knowledge about the conditions required to achieve high-quality care. Georgia should lower the child-to-staff ratios of licensed providers and raise requirements for child care worker training. In addition to serving families leaving welfare, Georgia should prioritize all working poor families for child care subsidies, eliminate or minimize co-payments and draw down all available federal Child Care and Development Funds to ensure that every child eligible for a child care subsidy receives it.

Comparing Georgia to its Neighbors

We recently performed an analysis comparing Georgia to other southeastern states across a range of demographic and child care system indicators. No single measure can represent the complicated array of factors that influence child care programs, and the comparisons generated through this analysis serve only as estimates for the impact of the child care environment on young children. However, our findings identify key areas of concern for policy makers and highlight measures that can serve as benchmarks for Georgia over time. "Comparison states" for this report included Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

Population

Georgia is a rapidly growing state with a larger population of young children and working mothers, and more rural residents, than its neighbors. The 2000 Census shows that Georgia's population grew at the greatest rate, 26.4%, of any southeastern state.

Change in Population, 1990 – 2000



Georgia exceeds the national average for percentage of women in the labor force who have children younger than age 6, and ranks third in the Southeast.

Women in the Labor Force with Children Under Age 6



Cost

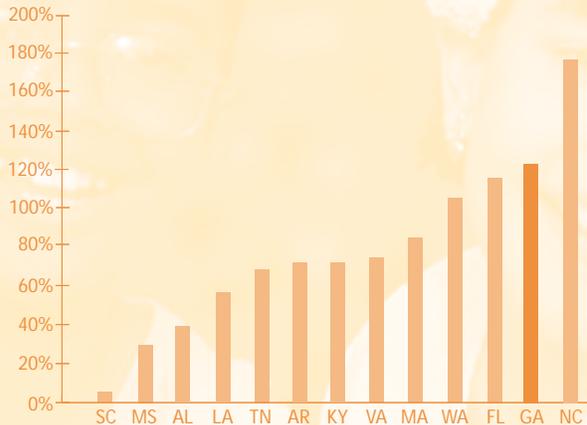
The cost of child care is often compared with public college tuition to provide an indication of relative state support for different forms of education. Families generally must pay for child care earlier in their careers, during a period of their lives when their income is more likely to be low, and yet there are few public supports to assist them.



Georgia and the Region

Meanwhile, college students, whose parents have had time to save and increase income through established work histories, find state-supported universities and publicly-funded loans and scholarships. For every state in our study, child care center costs are greater than state colleges, and Georgia still exceeds all the comparison states but one in the degree to which child care costs outpace public college tuition.

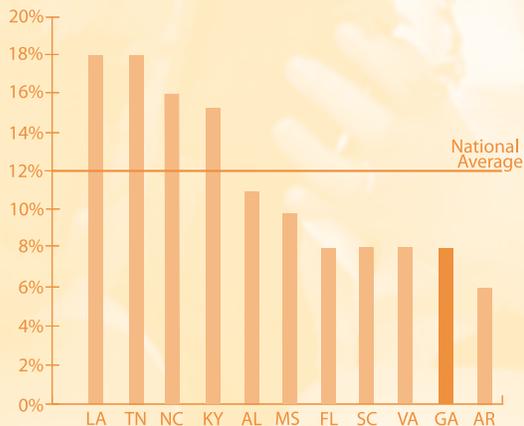
Percent by which Child Care Cost Exceeds Public College



Tuition Assistance for Low-Income Children

Georgia, like the majority of states, sets its annual income eligibility standard for child care subsidies considerably lower than the amount of income allowed by federal authorities. Georgia has average performance for the region in the number of low-income families that it makes eligible for child care subsidies, but poorer than average performance on actually providing subsidy assistance.

Percent of Low-Income Children Served through Subsidized Child Care



Quality

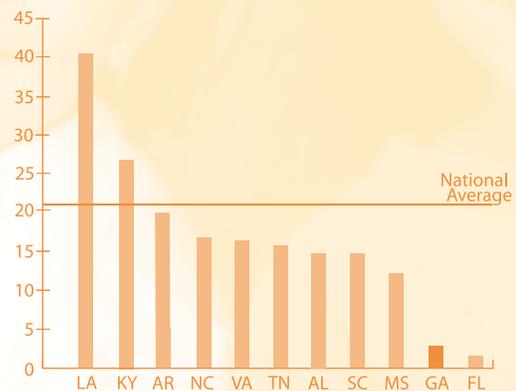
One of the most common and important predictors of high-quality child care is a low child-to-staff ratio in centers and homes. The state's child care licensing standards allow many more children per staff member than are recommended by the National Association

for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). For 9-month-olds, Georgia allows six infants per caregiver, compared to the national quality standard of four per caregiver, which places Georgia in the worst-performing group among southeastern states. For 2-year-olds, Georgia allows 10 per caregiver, compared to the national quality standard of seven. Georgia ranks in the middle of the comparison group for this measure.

Availability

Licensed child care facilities, both centers and group homes, are more difficult to find in Georgia than other southeastern states. There are only 72 facilities for every 1,000 children in our state, making Georgia second to last in the Southeast.

Licensed Facilities Per 1,000 Children Under Age 5



Conclusion

In almost every area, there is cause for concern about the condition of Georgia's child care system. While Georgia is a southeastern leader in many areas, its performance is average or worse on most measures of child care. Child care has an important impact on both children, who thrive when they receive high-quality services, and their parents, who are able to work and provide for their families when child care needs are met. Through welfare reforms, many states have found that child care is an integral part of promoting sustained independence and employment. While the benefits are clear, child care remains an often overlooked public policy issue in Georgia compared to other southeastern states. Much work remains to be done by government, providers, advocates and families to secure a stable, high-quality child care system that will ensure child well-being and support working families over the long term.

This policy brief was adapted from the article, "Regional Child Care Trends: Comparing Georgia to its Neighbors" by Lauren Waits, Malina Monaco, Lisa Beck and Jennifer Edwards, Georgia Health Policy Center, September 2001. For more information, read the full report at: www.gsu.edu/~wwwghp/children/Publications/statesrpt.pdf