

JULY 2020

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDCARE & EARLY EDUCATION IN WHATCOM COUNTY

PORT OF BELLINGHAM
REGIONAL ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA ADO

COMPLETED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



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ABOUT THE REGIONAL ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

The Regional Economic Partnership (REP) at the Port of Bellingham is the associate development organization (ADO), a state Commerce designation, for Whatcom County. REP is funded by Washington State Department of Commerce, Whatcom County, the City of Bellingham, and the Port of Bellingham.

REP GOALS

The goal of REP is to retain and attract livable wage jobs and to assist businesses, entrepreneurs, and local organizations to thrive. We aim to work with our partners to create a resilient community and economy for all. We have expertise in financing, planning, research, real estate, and technology to help businesses start, develop, and grow throughout Whatcom County, Washington.

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COVID-19 impacts on childcare and early education needs in Whatcom County

I. Survey Results Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many industries throughout Whatcom County and the Lummi Nation. While data continues to unfold and the COVID-19 situation rapidly evolves, survey data gathered to date suggests a sustained downturn in many parts of Whatcom County’s local economy throughout the spring and summer 2020. Additionally, in order to fight the pandemic and reduce transmission on March 13, 2020 all Washington State schools were ordered to close. After school programs, early childhood education programs, and childcare facilities soon followed. For caretakers who have essential jobs and for caretakers who now have to work from home, this has presented serious challenges for families and children.

Furthermore, prior to COVID-19, Whatcom County’s childcare situation was already in a critical situation with the closure of one of the largest programs in 2019. The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County scrambled to save over 500 childcare spots. At the time it was also estimated that Whatcom County still needed close to approximately 4000-4500 more spots to meet local demand. Therefore, prior to COVID-19 the childcare and early education situation in Whatcom was critical. As with many social and economic issues, such as access to broadband in rural areas, COVID-19 laid bare the problem.

In order to better understand the childcare needs of Whatcom County residents as the state and local economy reopens, the Mount Baker Foundation, Opportunity Council, United Way of Whatcom County, and the Port of Bellingham’s Regional Economic Partnership developed a survey, available in Spanish and English, to assess childcare needs throughout the county. As of June 24, 2020 the surveys received 655 responses (649 in English, six in Spanish). All questions were optional and the survey was anonymous.

The survey was widely distributed throughout Whatcom County and was shared via email with all of the Whatcom County School Districts, the Mount Baker Foundation, the YMCA, and the Opportunity Council. It was also shared with REP’s Team Whatcom partners who distributed the survey through their newsletters and email lists, including Sustainable Connections, Downtown Bellingham Partnership, Western Washington University (WWU), the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at WWU, TAGNW, Whatcom Community College, Bellingham Technical College, and Northwest Innovation Resource Center, the

Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, and Whatcom County Tourism. It was also distributed to the Lummi Nation, City of Bellingham and six Small Cities (Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, and Sumas).

II. Before COVID-19 Childcare

a. Before COVID-19 how were your childcare needs met?

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak in mid-March, 319 of 655 respondents (49%) indicated that they used a local childcare center for their childcare needs. 243 respondents (37%) used friends and family for childcare and 57 (9%) used in home licensed caregivers or nannies. For 62 respondents they noted this question did not apply to them. Multiple respondents indicated that they used a combination of services to meet their needs, including friends and family, childcare centers, babysitters, nannies, day camps, public schools, and after school programs.

b. Which childcare centers?

For respondents who indicated that they used a childcare center prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent shutdown in March 2020 more than 40 options were written in. In order to categorize centers

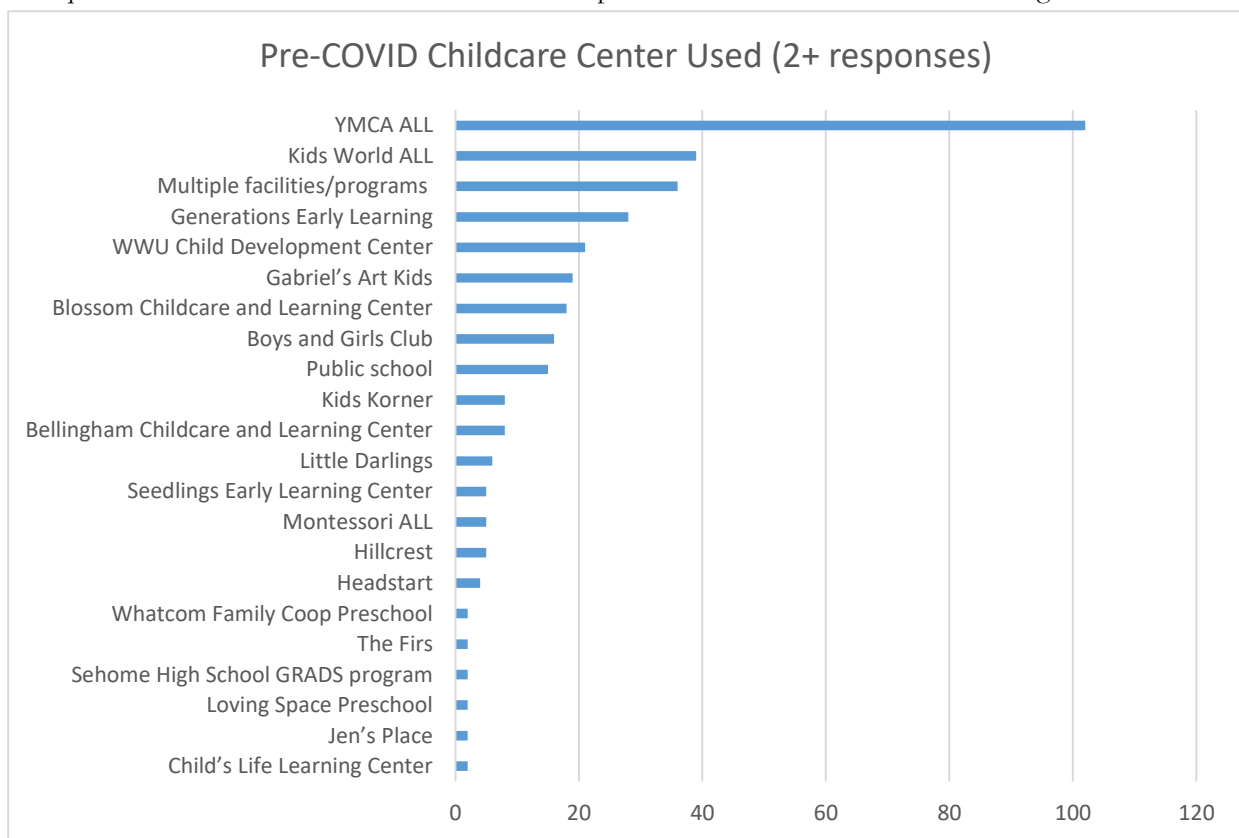


Figure 1: This graphic shows a count of the programs that respondents identified as using prior to the COVID outbreak.

that were used and in order to standardize the responses, all responses for Montessori schools, Kids World, and the YMCA were consolidated into single categories. This is partially due to the fact that some respondents provided full program names and locations (e.g. Kids World Frontiers, Kids World Northwest or Cedar Tree Montessori) whereas others only provided the umbrella organization (e.g. Kids World).

Figure 1 above illustrates the responses provided when respondents were asked what childcare center they used. In order to create a space efficient graphic, only programs that received two or more responses are

shown here. YMCA programs were the most used prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, with 102 respondents (32% of those reporting using childcare centers) indicating that they had at least one child in a Y program. 39 respondents indicated that they used Kids World programs, with 36 reporting the use of multiple programs. Based upon the comments, many that use multiple programs either have multiple children who require different facilities or programs (mostly due to age) or the program that they are using is limited and requires supplemental help.

III. During COVID-19 Childcare

a. Do you currently need childcare and where do they go?

213 or 33% of the survey respondents indicated that they were essential workers and currently still need childcare. 38 respondents noted they did not need childcare currently because they had been laid off. 156 (25%) indicated that they currently had other help, whereas 132 (21%) respondents noted that they were working from home but could still use assistance. 157 respondents (24%) respondents indicated that they currently did not need childcare because one or more caregivers were working from home or because their children were old enough to be left alone for extended periods of time. This demonstrates that there is a split among respondents – those who are able to work from home but still feel as though they need help to be most productive (e.g. university professors, professional staff in industries that do not rely upon in person transactions) and those who need assistance because they are essential workers and are faced with either leaving their children alone or losing their jobs.

The shift in where children are cared for during COVID has been drastic. As **Figure 2**, below, illustrates, rather than the majority of respondents using either the YMCA or Kids World, most children are currently being taken care of by friends, family, a nanny, or other in home licensed care. 86 reported family or friends, and 27 reported in home care. 35 reported still using YMCA and 22 reported using Kids Worlds facilities. As with Figure 1, only facilities or programs that were reported by two or more respondents are shown for the sake of simplicity and space. Another difference is that more respondents noted that they were also leaving their children with neighbors (five respondents said only neighbors, however multiple respondents who selected multiple programs also selected neighbors as one). Some noted that they were also bringing their children to work. This indicates that those who do have work are trying hard to cobble together some form of care given the limited options.

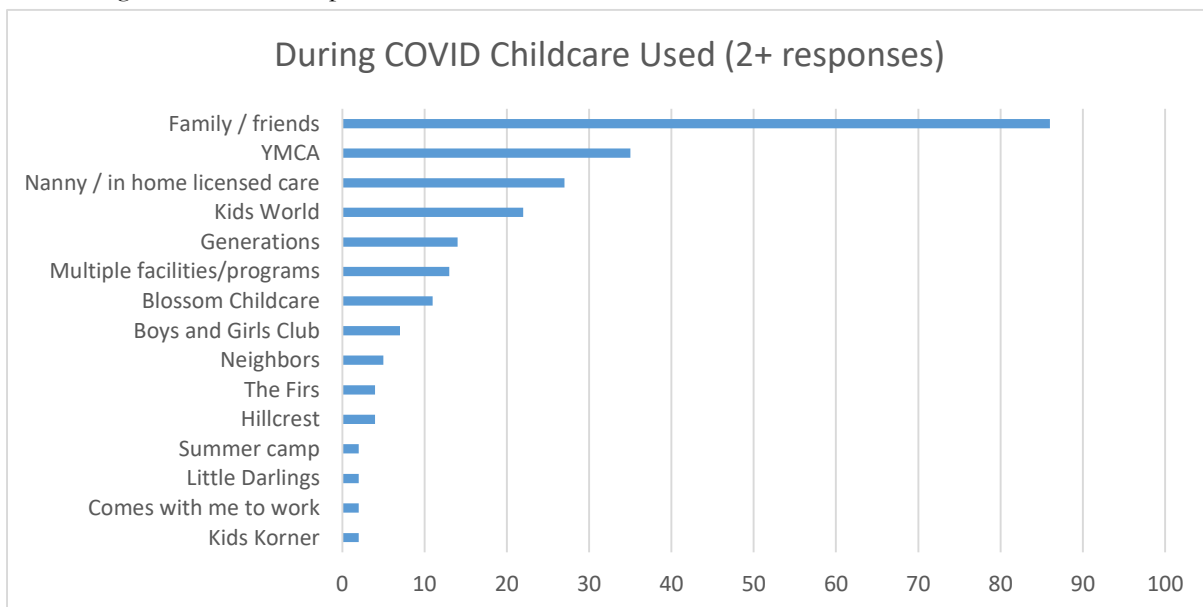


Figure 2: This figure illustrates where children are being cared for during the COVID-19 shutdown.

b. As Washington state and Whatcom County re-opens, will you need to return to work and therefore require childcare?

477 of 655 respondents (73%) indicated that they will need childcare when they return to work. 119 or 18% said that they would not need childcare. The remainder either were already working as essential employees, working from home, or unsure of their future plans.

c. When do you anticipate returning to work?

Respondents indicated that they estimate returning to work anywhere from the end of June 2020 (25%) to September 2020 (8%). 11.1% were uncertain when they would return. 16.4% responded that they would be working remotely until further notice. 45% (298 of 655) respondents noted that they did not have plans for childcare when they returned to work because they were unsure of what would be open and available. 21% said they have some ideas and 29% already have plans for childcare.

d. Where will your child be cared for? If at a childcare center, which program?

32% respondents indicated that they planned to have their children care for by friends or family when they return to work. 34% said that they planned to use a childcare center, 12% were unsure and the remainder were either unsure, did not want to reply, or planned to use a nanny or in home care provider.

As for the second part of question, it is important to note that despite the question noting that this question was for respondents who indicated that their child would return to care at a childcare center, many respondents who chose other options, such as being cared for by friends and family, still entered answers. It is also clear that some respondents already had confirmed slots at childcare centers whereas other respondents were merely hoping that the program would open or have spots.

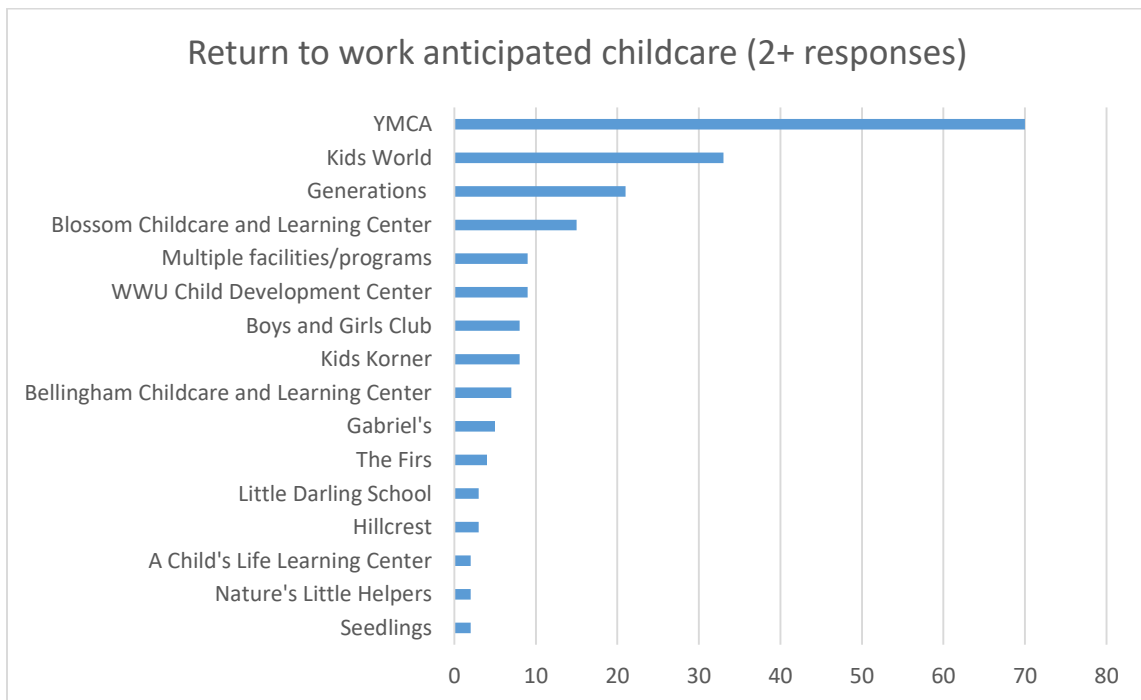


Figure 3: This figures illustrates where respondents anticipate or plan to have their children cared for when they return to work.

As shown in **Figure 3**, above, the programs identified by respondents, 70 said that they anticipated their children would attend YMCA programs when they returned to work, 33 reported Kids World, and 21 reported planning to take their children to Generations. Nine respondents also noted that they hoped that

they would be able to have their children return to the Western Washington University Childcare and Learning Center, however, expressed that they were uncertain it would reopen to all staff and faculty as many are likely to continue to work remotely, when possible.

e. [What concerns do you have about childcare going forward?](#)

Overall, respondents expressed myriad concerns regarding childcare services in Whatcom County. 58% were concerned about themselves or their children being exposed to COVID-19. 51% said that the cost of childcare is too high and 21% said that they believe the quality of childcare services to be low. 48% were concerned about the ability of childcare providers to follow health guidelines and safely socially distance children and keep masks on them within their facilities.

32% were also concerned that they had nowhere to take their children or stated that their normal programs were not open. Many also noted in other comments that they were very concerned with the traumatic experiences and mental health of children as a result of the pandemic.