

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY CHILD CARE PLANNING COUNCIL
2025 Early Care and Education Needs Assessment
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As required in Welfare and Institution code, Local Planning Council's are required to complete a comprehensive Needs Assessment every five years to help understand demographics and needs of families and children ages 0-12 years old within the county.

Santa Barbara County families face a widening gap between the cost of raising young children and the resources available to support them. This report, prepared to guide the Council's 2025–2030 Strategic Plan for Early Care and Education, finds that nearly half of the county's youngest children lack access to a licensed child care space, that child care is now families' single largest household expense, and that the workforce delivering this care is underpaid and increasingly likely to leave the field.

Who is affected

- 31,826 children ages 0–5 and 64,990 children ages 0–12 live in Santa Barbara County; the child population has declined from 77,108 (2015) even as the county's total population has grown.
- Nearly half (47.6%) of residents identify as Hispanic/Latino, rising above 80% in Guadalupe and Santa Maria; 40% of residents speak a language other than English at home, most commonly Spanish (32.8%).
- Vulnerable populations are substantial: 9,337 children experienced homelessness, 4,820 children (0–15) had an abuse/neglect allegation, 346 children were in foster care, 2,351 were from migrant families, and over 7,400 children (0–12) had an active IFSP/IEP.

Economic pressure on families

- A two-parent family with an infant and preschooler needs \$162,153/year (\$13,513/month) to make ends meet — over \$66,000 above the county's median household income of \$95,977; a single parent needs \$156,221/year.
- Child care is families' largest monthly expense (28.4% of the budget) — more than housing — at \$3,841/month for one infant and one preschooler.
- 13.8% of residents and 15.3% of young children live below the federal poverty line; the California Poverty Measure, which accounts for cost of living, puts child poverty even higher at 18.7%. Only 10% of residents can afford the county's \$1,397,000 median home price.

Cost and availability of child care

- Center-based infant/toddler tuition rose 20% since 2021 (to \$1,922/month) and preschool tuition rose 51% (to \$1,584/month); costs are highest in South County and lowest in North County.
- Licensed capacity meets only 54% of overall need for children 0–5. The shortage is most severe for the youngest children:

Age Group	Children	Licensed Capacity	% Facing Unmet Need
Infants/Toddlers (0–24 mo.)	10,542	2,138	80%
Preschoolers (2–5 yrs.)	21,284	15,082	29%
All Children (0–5 yrs.)	31,826	17,219	46%

- Unmet infant/toddler need is worst in Santa Ynez Valley (94%) and Santa Barbara (84%); Santa Maria has the county's strongest relative supply (73% unmet).

A workforce under strain

- Turnover exceeds California averages across all roles surveyed: 28% for preschool center lead teachers, 30% for assistant teachers, and 36% for family child care (FCC) providers.
- 38% of center teachers and 19% of FCC providers plan to leave the field or retire within three years.
- Median wages trail the cost of living — center lead teachers earn about \$51,230/year and FCC providers \$35,000–\$47,200/year — and local workers are less likely than the state average to have retirement savings (13–43%) or be food secure (53–56%).

Implications for the Council's strategic plan

- Expanding licensed infant/toddler capacity is the county's most urgent need, given the 80% unmet-need rate for children under two.
- Affordability strategies (subsidy expansion, rate reform implementation) are needed alongside capacity growth, since tuition increases are outpacing family incomes.
- Workforce compensation and retention initiatives — building on programs such as the Workforce Pathways Stipend Program are essential to sustaining any gains in child care supply or quality.
- Regional targeting matters: North County carries the greatest burden of homelessness and public-assistance reliance, while Santa Ynez Valley and Santa Barbara face the steepest infant/toddler care shortages.

Source: Santa Barbara County Child Care Planning Council, 2025 Early Care and Education Needs Assessment. Full report contains complete citations and regional data.