



# Preferences and Challenges in Access to Childcare Programs: A Mixed-Methods Study with Newcomers to Canada

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## Abstract

Childcare programs enable newcomers' adaptation and integration to life in the host country by allowing them to access employment and educational opportunities while building new social networks. Newcomer children's participation in quality childcare programs also fulfills their right to education and care while enhancing their development, learning, and future success in school. In a context where affordable, subsidized childcare options are limited, newcomers are particularly disadvantaged in their access to formal childcare programs due to linguistic, cultural, and administrative barriers. Reporting on part of a larger convergent mixed-methods study focused on the post-migration barriers to integration experienced by newcomers to Canada in a smaller urban center, this article explores newcomer families' preferences and access to childcare. Quantitative survey data were generated from a survey of 305 newcomers who had lived in Canada for less than five years ( $n=305$ ), 153 of whom had children ( $n=153$ ). Qualitative data were concurrently collected from 96 ( $n=96$ ) newcomers during 13 focus groups. The findings indicated that 55.2% did not have childcare that was accessible by transportation, 47% did not have subsidized care, and 61.3% did not believe their childcare program was sensitive to their language and culture despite their distinct preferences for these characteristics. Without access to childcare, they reported challenges accessing employment, language learning courses, and social opportunities and experienced feelings of stress and isolation. These findings have negative implications in terms of newcomer families' full and meaningful participation in their new community and suggest the need for culturally and linguistic responsive care options.

**Keywords** Childcare access · Childcare preferences · Immigrants · Refugees · Early childhood education

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## Résumé

Les programmes de garde d'enfants permettent aux nouveaux arrivants de s'adapter et de s'intégrer à la vie dans le pays d'accueil en leur donnant accès à des opportunités d'emploi et d'éducation tout en leur permettant de bâtir de nouveaux réseaux sociaux. L'accès des enfants des nouveaux arrivants à des programmes de garde d'enfants de qualité répond également à leur droit à l'éducation et à la prise en charge, tout en améliorant leur développement, leur apprentissage et leur réussite future à l'école. Dans un contexte où les options de garde d'enfants abordables et subventionnées sont limitées, les nouveaux arrivants sont particulièrement désavantagés en termes d'accès aux programmes formels de garde d'enfants, en raison de barrières linguistiques, culturelles et administratives. Cet article fait état d'une partie d'une étude convergente plus vaste, axée sur des méthodes mixtes et qui porte sur les obstacles à l'intégration rencontrés par les nouveaux arrivants au Canada dans un petit centre urbain. Il explore les préférences des familles de nouveaux arrivants et leur accès aux services de garde d'enfants. Les données quantitatives proviennent d'une enquête menée auprès de 305 nouveaux arrivants vivant au Canada depuis moins de cinq ans ( $n = 305$ ), dont 153 avaient des enfants ( $n = 153$ ). En outre, des données qualitatives ont été recueillies simultanément auprès de 96 nouveaux arrivants ( $n = 96$ ) au cours de 13 groupes de discussion. Les résultats indiquent que 55.2 % d'entre eux n'avaient pas de service de garde accessible par transport, 47 % n'avaient pas de service de garde subventionné et 61.3 % ne pensaient pas que leur service de garde était sensible à leur langue et à leur culture, malgré leurs préférences distinctes pour ces caractéristiques. Ces familles ont signalé des difficultés à accéder à l'emploi, à des cours d'apprentissage de langue et à des opportunités sociales, en raison du manque d'accès à des services de garde d'enfants. Elles éprouvent également des sentiments de stress et d'isolement. Ces résultats ont des effets négatifs sur une pleine participation des familles de nouveaux arrivants dans leur nouvelle communauté et en appellent à la nécessité de créer des options de garde adaptées à la culture et à la langue.

## Resumen

Los programas de cuidado infantil permiten la adaptación e integración de los recién llegados a la vida en el país de acogida al permitirles acceder a oportunidades laborales y educativas mientras construyen nuevas redes sociales. La participación de los niños recién llegados en programas de cuidado infantil de calidad también satisface su derecho a la educación y al cuidado, al tiempo que mejora su desarrollo, aprendizaje y éxito futuro en la escuela. En un contexto donde las opciones de cuidado infantil subsidiadas y asequibles son limitadas, los recién llegados se encuentran en particular desventaja en su acceso a programas formales de cuidado infantil debido a barreras lingüísticas, culturales y administrativas. Este artículo, que forma parte de un estudio más amplio de métodos mixtos convergentes centrado en las barreras a la integración posteriores a la migración que experimentan los recién llegados a Canadá en un centro urbano más pequeño, explora las preferencias de las familias recién llegadas y el acceso al cuidado infantil. Los datos cuantitativos de la encuesta se generaron a partir de una encuesta realizada a 305 recién llegados que habían vivido en Canadá durante menos de cinco años ( $n = 305$ ), 153 de los cuales tenían hijos ( $n =$

153). Se recopilaron simultáneamente datos cualitativos de 96 ( $n = 96$ ) recién llegados durante 13 grupos focales. Los hallazgos indicaron que el 55,2% no tenía cuidado infantil accesible mediante transporte, el 47% no tenía cuidado subsidiado y el 61,3% no creía que su programa de cuidado infantil fuera sensible a su idioma y cultura a pesar de sus distintas preferencias por estas características. Sin acceso a guarderías, informaron dificultades para acceder al empleo, a cursos de aprendizaje de idiomas y a oportunidades sociales y experimentaron sentimientos de estrés y aislamiento. Estos hallazgos tienen implicaciones negativas en términos de la participación plena y significativa de las familias recién llegadas en su nueva comunidad y sugieren la necesidad de opciones de atención cultural y lingüísticamente receptivas.

## Introduction

Scholarship has confirmed the significant role that quality childcare programs play in enhancing young children's development and learning while setting a foundation for future schooling (Kahn & Greenberg, 2010). Given the rapid growth of immigrant and refugee populations in many countries, it is especially crucial to ensure that all children have equitable access to such programs. For newcomer children and families, childcare programs and schools may be their first encounter with formal institutions in the host country, thus easing the families' transition to life in the new context. Childcare programs ameliorate some of the educational disadvantages potentially experienced by newcomer children by facilitating language learning and reconciling disparities between home and host country school norms and pedagogy as they adapt to a new sociocultural environment (Corazzini et al., 2021; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Votruba-Drzal et al., 2015). Furthermore, childcare programs offer social support and resources to newcomer parents to facilitate integration and the development of social capital and support networks in the new context (Dolan & Sherlock, 2010; Miller et al., 2014; Vesely et al., 2013). Unfortunately, there are significant obstacles to accessing Canadian childcare programs, some of which are universal, including lack of available spaces and high costs (Findlay et al., 2021), and others which are unique to newcomers faced with cultural and linguistic tensions, limited support networks, and difficulties navigating administrative systems (Massing, 2018; Kingsbury et al., 2021).

In this paper, we report on the findings relating to childcare generated from a mixed-methods study of challenges to newcomer adaptation and settlement in the small Canadian city of Regina in the province of Saskatchewan. Newcomers<sup>1</sup> to Canada overwhelmingly settle in larger urban centers such as Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto; therefore, Regina is a non-traditional newcomer-receiving city (Statistics Canada, 2022a). However, Regina is projected to be one of the Canadian cities with more significant growth in the racialized population largely due to immigration, progressing from 17.7% in 2016 to 43.8% by 2041 (Statistics Canada, 2022b). The

<sup>1</sup> In this research "newcomers" were defined as having been born outside of Canada and living in Canada for less than five years.

overall purpose of our study was to explore the barriers that newcomers experienced when accessing childcare, educational opportunities, and employment in Regina. We focus here on their preferences and access to childcare programs and supports, including the challenges they have experienced. We define *access* in terms of availability of programs that meet the family's needs, preferences, and budget (Statistics Canada, 2023, 2022c). While there is a significant body of research with a national or large urban centre focus, little is known about the challenges that newcomers encounter when seeking access to settlement supports, including formal childcare programs, in a comparatively small city (Bonifacio & Drolet, 2017).

## Literature Review

### Context of Childcare in Canada

In the Canadian context, childcare is broadly defined as “the care of children by someone other than a parent or guardian” and encompasses childcare centers, home childcare programs, and private arrangements (Sinha, 2014, p.4). Formal childcare programs can be profit or not-for-profit, licensed/regulated or unlicensed/unregulated, and include childcare centers, preschools, family day homes, and before-and-after school programs for school-aged children ages 6 to 12. Until the recent national childcare agreement, childcare provision in Canada has been a provincial/territorial responsibility with no universal, coordinated approach to services (Ferns & Friendly, 2014). The province of Québec is a notable exception, offering universal subsidized childcare. Access to childcare enables full economic participation in the workforce and the pursuit of further education or training (Findlay et al., 2021). While women's workforce participation is higher than the national average in Saskatchewan (Moyser, 2017), most recent figures indicate that only 51% of Saskatchewan families use some form of childcare, suggesting others have made private, informal arrangements (Statistics Canada, 2022c). Furthermore, MacDonald & Friendly (2023) have found that 92% of children in Saskatchewan live in a “child care desert,” which refers to a “lack of or inequitable distribution of child care;” the highest figures in the country (p. 11). Cost, availability, and location are key considerations impacting familial access to childcare and choice of programs (Statistics Canada, 2023).

In a comparative study of childcare in Canada, Sweden, Finland, and Australia, Mahon et al. (2012) noted that the high cost of childcare in Canada is an impediment to women's full participation in the labor force. Many provincial governments utilize childcare subsidies to offset high fees. In Saskatchewan, over 90% of programs are not-for-profit, and for-profit childcare services are not supported by government funds. Subsidies are intended to assist lower-income families enrolled in licensed programs so that parents can work, look for work, pursue education, or attend pre-employment training (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022). Indeed, an examination of the province of Québec demonstrated that subsidized care positively impacts mothers' labor force participation (Lefebvre et al., 2009). Furthermore, results from a national survey illustrated that more than one-third of families using some form of care reported that two of the most significant difficulties were “finding childcare in their community (53%)”

and “finding affordable childcare (48%)” regardless of the familial income level, parental education, or family structure of the respondent (Findlay et al., 2021, p. 10). Low-income and lone-parent families were found to participate in non-parental care arrangements at lower rates and were less likely to use licensed programs (Findlay et al., 2021), thus generating negative consequences for children and families.

## Immigrant Childcare Arrangements

The extant literature has found that many immigrant parents express a preference for caring for their own children as opposed to accessing formal childcare programs, both internationally (de Moll & Betz, 2014; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009) and in Canada (Kingsbury et al., 2021). However, in recent years, evidence has indicated that their preferences might vary depending on the family’s ethnocultural background, country of origin, or other contextual factors (Ackert et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2014; Shuey & Leventhal, 2020; Zangger & Widmer, 2020). Examinations of national datasets from the USA determined that Latin American and Asian immigrant children were substantially less likely to attend childcare centers than White or Black children, which could suggest cultural preferences or economic barriers (Miller et al., 2014; Turney & Kao, 2009). The use of any form of non-parental care is also positively associated with higher levels of parental education and income, as well as with maternal employment status and family size (Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015; de Moll & Betz, 2014; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Yesil-Dagli, 2011).

While informal care provided by a trusted friend or family member is viewed positively, fewer immigrants than non-immigrants avail themselves of such options (Brandon, 2004; Kahn & Greenberg, 2010), conceivably because they have lost their social networks in migration (de Moll & Betz, 2014). As families accrue more resources in the host country, they may access information about how to negotiate barriers such as wait lists, finding available spaces, and subsidies (Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015). For these reasons, a family’s preferences and choices related to childcare have been described as a complex interaction between various factors related to the familial, structural, and policy context in which they live, or an “accommodation” rather than a “choice” (Krafft et al., 2017).

Within the broader context, newcomer families experience distinct constraints in accessing childcare. Newcomers, particularly refugees, frequently live in poverty (Kingsbury et al., 2021). High childcare costs disproportionately affect low-income families (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011). A Canadian survey affirmed that low-income families were significantly more likely than other families to discontinue schooling/training or postpone returning to work when confronted by childcare issues (Findlay & Kohen, 2021). Childcare subsidies expand families’ affordable childcare options, helping them secure higher-quality care and comply with employer expectations (Graafland, 2000; Krafft et al., 2017). A Swiss study (Zangger & Widmer, 2020) delineated how subsidized care can shift the preferences of immigrant and lower-income families toward enrollment in high-quality center-based programs. Sainsbury (2019) similarly found that the universal childcare system in Sweden enabled

immigrant families to enrol their children at the same rate as non-immigrant families, while, in Norway, a decrease in the subsidy had a more negative impact on the labor force participation of immigrant than non-immigrant mothers (Hardoy & Schøne, 2010). Therefore, for newcomers whose employment is often precarious or inflexible (Kosny et al., 2019), increased availability and affordability of childcare programs may motivate them to use non-parental care options (Kim & Liu, 2021; Yesil-Dagli, 2011). Similarly, newcomers are often reliant on public transit (Allen et al., 2021); therefore, access to transportation within a community is crucial if they are to use childcare services.

Cultural and linguistic factors have been cited as reasons why immigrant families might express a desire for informal over formal care (Miller et al., 2014). Immigrants in several qualitative studies prioritized kin care offered by members of their family or ethnocultural community to instil their cultural values in their children and provide economic support to their relatives (Ebbeck & Dela Cerna, 2007; Obeng, 2007; Uttal, 1997). According to Miller et al. (2014), in the US national analysis, immigrant families living in communities where there were more non-English speaking providers were correspondingly more likely to access non-parental childcare. The presence of educators from similar backgrounds can function to advance familial socialization goals and interactional patterns and enhance communication and a sense of trust between home and the program (Ceglowski et al., 2011; Ebbeck & Dela Cerna, 2007; Uttal, 1997). These studies affirm that familial preferences for culturally consonant care inform their decisions, so programs which embrace culturally competent practice may attract immigrant families (Dolan & Sherlock, 2010; Uttal, 1997). Conversely, qualitative scholarship affirms that some immigrant families view childcare centers as potential sites for learning the dominant language to ensure future academic success (Dolan & Sherlock, 2010; Obeng, 2007). Still, Sandstrom and Chaudry (2012) reported that only 14% of families surveyed chose a program specifically because it facilitated English language learning.

Finally, many newcomer families also experience administrative challenges when navigating the childcare system due to language barriers and the loss of social and familial connections. Social networks allow families to locate openings in childcare programs, share information about programs, and navigate the administrative structures (Dolan & Sherlock, 2010; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011). As Ceglowski et al. (2011) found, families were reliant on members of their cultural community to understand how waitlists operate, fill out applications, and apply for subsidies when seeking childcare. Furthermore, some reported that administrative errors impeded their ability to obtain assistance, while others were forced to switch their children to a less desirable program when their subsidy was cut off.

## Methods

### Design

This article reports on the findings relating to childcare obtained in a mixed-methods study of barriers to newcomer adaptation and settlement in the city of Regina,

Saskatchewan. The study employed a parallel convergent design whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, then analyzed separately to see whether they produced a similar understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). We hoped to elicit quantitative survey data from a larger sample of newcomers—particularly those who were hard to reach due to language or cultural barriers—while soliciting more in-depth perspectives using qualitative methods. Data collection methods included surveys of both newcomers and service providers and focus groups with newcomers though we focus on the newcomer data here. Quantitative data were collected at a single point in time from newcomers and service providers, respectively, using two distinct survey instruments, while qualitative data were concurrently generated during a series of semi-structured focus groups with newcomers 90-120 minutes in duration. The study was undertaken in partnership with the Regina Region Local Immigration Partnership (RRLIP).

## Procedures

Survey respondents were recruited using convenience sampling based on their willingness to participate in the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The research team identified and visited or emailed 10 ( $n=10$ ) immigrant-serving organizations, 45 ( $n=45$ ) employers (i.e., restaurants, fast food services, healthcare agencies, ethnic food stores, insurance companies) and 25 ( $n=25$ ) services (schools, language classes, conversation circles, libraries, childcare centers, churches, post-secondary institutions, as well as taxi and bus companies) to distribute paper copies of the survey and/or a recruitment poster with a link to the survey. These service providers assisted with disseminating the survey and information about the focus groups.

Focus group participants were recruited using snowball sampling. We asked service providers and newcomers to share the information with anyone meeting the recruitment criteria. In advance of each focus group, participants were offered the option of having an interpreter who spoke their preferred language; however, most chose to participate in English as they spoke English with sufficient fluency to answer the questions in depth. Two focus groups were conducted in Arabic by a member of the research team according to participants' preferences. Each focus group was led by two members of the research team. The study focused on the barriers that newcomers experienced in accessing educational opportunities, employment, and childcare; therefore, some of the focus group participants did not respond to the childcare questions because their children were older than the age of twelve or they did not have children.

## Participants

In total, 305 ( $n=305$ ) newcomers responded to the survey, and 153 ( $n=153$ ) of these had children. Table 1 illustrates survey participants' demographic information. In relation to childcare, 153 of the participants identify themselves as having at least one child. The greatest share (39.9%,  $n=61$ ) had two or three children living with them, and most (70%,  $n=107$ ) of the participants had two to six children at home.

Of the participants' children, 83% ( $n=127$ ) were of school age, but only 51.1% ( $n=70$ ) had access to childcare services at school or the parent's workplace.

In total, 96 newcomers ( $n=96$ ) participated in one of thirteen focus groups: Fifty women ( $n=50$ ), forty-three men ( $n=43$ ), and three who did not specify their gender ( $n=3$ ). The largest group of participants were originally from Asia (35%), followed by the Middle East (29%), Africa (25%), Europe (9%), and South America (3%).

**Table 1** Survey participant demographic information ( $N=232$ )

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	94	40.5
Female	138	59.5
<i>Age</i>		
18–24 years	22	9.6
25–34 years	90	39.1
35–50 years	94	40.9
> 50 years	24	10.4
<i>Level of education</i>		
No formal education	4	1.7
Elementary school	44	19.0
High school	50	21.6
Some post-secondary education	18	7.8
Certificate, trade, or degree	70	30.3
Post-degree or graduate program	45	19.5
<i>Current employment status</i>		
Employed	91	39.6
Unemployed	139	60.4
<i>Do respondents have children (N=200)</i>		
Yes	140	70
No	60	30
<i>Number of children (N=153)</i>		
1	38	24.8
2–3	61	39.9
4–6	46	30.1
7–10	8	5.2
<i>Are children school-aged (6–12) (N=153)</i>		
Yes	127	83.0
No	26	17.0
<i>Access to childcare at school/workplace (N=137)</i>		
Yes	70	51.1
No	67	48.9



## Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board and adhered to the ethical guidelines contained in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research with Humans published by the Government of Canada. All participants were notified of their rights as participants orally and in writing and gave informed consent.

## Measures

After a review of the literature, the survey was designed by the research team based on the needs of the partnering agency. The questions were reviewed by community stakeholders and international graduate students from key countries representative of the demographics in the city. Then, the entire survey was piloted with a small number of individuals, revised based on their feedback, and reviewed again by the stakeholders and students to ensure clarity and relevance of the content (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The survey was made available in English and translated into five additional languages most commonly spoken in the city: Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, French, and Tagalog, to reach as many non-English speaking newcomers as possible. The survey was administered online (using Qualtrics survey software) and in-person (paper survey). The survey included demographic questions, Likert scale, multiple choice and yes/no questions, as well as open-ended qualitative questions. Some of the questions asked in the survey related to childcare included: “What childcare arrangements do you have for your children?”, “What childcare arrangements do you want for your children?” and “What challenges do newcomers face if they do not have appropriate childcare?” Examples of the focus group questions included: “What have been your experiences with childcare?” “What types of childcare have you used?” “What are your wishes for childcare?” “What are your preferences for childcare?” “What do you think would help you access childcare?”.

## Data Management and Analysis

The quantitative data were cleaned and analyzed using the SPSS statistical analysis program version 27. Descriptive analyses were performed to examine the participants’ level of accessibility to childcare support. The research team also conducted a descriptive analysis of the challenges that newcomers face in their integration process whenever they do not have access to childcare support.

In the qualitative analysis each of the four team members worked separately to conduct multiple readings of the data to write analytic memos and generate possible codes. We then met as a team to come to a consensus on codes and meanings. Once the codebook was developed, each person coded the thirteen sets of transcripts. Finally, we came together again to discuss our analyses and negotiate themes, thus establishing intercoder agreement via group consensus (Creswell & Plano-Clark,

**Table 2** Themes and Explanations

Topic	Themes
Types of childcare arrangements used	<p><i>Familial care</i> Parents switching off, one partner caring for child exclusively, extended family member caring for child</p> <p><i>Mix of arrangements</i> Parent or family member and half-day program, parents sharing care with neighbor or friend</p> <p>Friend, neighbor, or roommate</p> <p>Center or home-based care</p>
Preferred characteristics	<p><i>Culturally congruent care</i> Educator from own cultural background; serving ethnic food, including halal food; speaks their language; can reinforce their culture; understands their safety and hygiene concerns</p> <p><i>Proximity</i> Childcare is close to home, work, or language/education program, childcare is close to bus stop, relationship between proximity and cold winter weather and/or high cost of gas</p> <p><i>Affordability</i> Based on family income and resources</p> <p><i>Availability/hours</i> Care suited to their work/study schedules (longer hours, evenings), more spaces, shorter waitlist to allow flexibility to study or accept employment</p>
Level of accessibility to program with preferred characteristics	<p><i>Lack of spaces</i> Not enough spots in childcare centers, wait lists of two to three years, too far from home, school day is too short to fill gaps in childcare, need for government funding to expand childcare provision, impacts on employment and education</p> <p><i>Affordability issues</i> Issues with subsidy program—income must be below certain level to qualify, but this isn't sufficient to meet basic needs; difficulty qualifying for subsidy; high fees</p>

2018; Saldaña, 2012). The main findings are summarized in the following table (Table 2):

Each of these themes encompasses perspectives of the majority of those participants who had children. After analyzing the quantitative and qualitative results separately, they were compared or triangulated to understand how they converge or diverge (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

## Results

### Types of Childcare Arrangements Used by Respondents

Table 3 lists the different types of childcare arrangements used by the participants. The most commonly used childcare arrangements were: parental care (17.2%,  $n=40$ ), using childcare in language classes (12.5%,  $n=29$ ), and attending childcare centers (11.2%,  $n=26$ ). Only four families (1.7%) had on-site childcare at their workplaces. Respondents also had the option to select “all that apply.”

**Table 3** Types of childcare arrangements used by respondents ( $N = 145$ )

	Frequency	Percent
Childcare center	26	11.2
Home childcare program	10	4.3
Relative/family member caring for children	7	3.0
Friends caring for children	9	3.9
Parent caring for children	40	17.2
Childcare at work	4	1.7
Childcare at children's school	20	8.6
Childcare at language classes	29	12.5

The majority of the focus group participants who had children confirmed that, in their home countries, childcare was traditionally undertaken by parents or family members, as expressed by this participant: “Usually in our culture, it’s like we prefer our child to be raised by our parents.... we are not comfortable to send our child to daycare...what we can do is one of the spouses will stay home.” It may also be that formal childcare programs were uncommon in their home communities, and thus there was a lack of familiarity with this option. Migration to Canada often necessitated securing childcare to enable labor force or educational participation, but they encountered wait times of up to three years and lacked the connections to secure care. As one mother commented, “We don’t know anybody.” Some participants worked opposite hours from their partners to be able to maintain two incomes while having one of them at home to care for children, as described here: “It’s very hard because I work full-time in the evenings. I work until three a.m., then my wife works nine o’clock in the morning to three o’clock in the afternoon.” In other families, one partner studied or worked while the other—typically the mother—stayed at home.

**Preferred Characteristics of Childcare Program**

Table 4 displays newcomers’ preferences for their childcare program. Participants indicated that subsidized childcare (89.7%,  $n = 87$ ), available childcare at language classes (87.3%,  $n = 89$ ), accessibility to childcare using public transportation (83.7%,  $n = 108$ ), and childcare centers that were easily accessible from home (81%,  $n = 98$ ) were very important factors contributing to a smoother integration process.

In the following sections, we present quantitative and qualitative data to further explore participants’ perceptions on familial preferences for childcare programs measured against factors like accessibility via public transportation, subsidized, and sensitive to family language and culture.

**Table 4** Preferred characteristics of childcare program

Easily accessible from home ( <i>N</i> = 121)	Frequency	Percent
Very important	98	81.0
Somewhat important	19	15.7
Not important	4	3.3
<i>Easily accessible by public transportation (N = 129)</i>		
Very important	108	83.7
Somewhat important	17	13.2
Not important	4	3.1
<i>Open many hours to accommodate varying work schedules (N = 99)</i>		
Very important	62	62.6
Somewhat important	28	28.3
Not important	9	9.1
<i>Sensitive to single-parent needs (N = 92)</i>		
Very important	64	69.6
Somewhat important	59	34.0
Not important	22	12.6
<i>Subsidized (N = 97)</i>		
Very important	87	89.7
Somewhat important	10	10.3
<i>Available at the workplace (N = 92)</i>		
Very important	72	78.3
Somewhat important	16	17.4
Not Important	4	4.3
<i>Available at language classes (N = 102)</i>		
Very important	89	87.3
Somewhat important	10	9.8
Not important	3	2.9
<i>Sensitive to family language and culture (N = 89)</i>		
Very important	70	78.7
Somewhat important	16	18.0
Not important	3	3.4
<i>Access to childcare at school/workplace (N = 137)</i>		
Yes	70	51.1
No	67	48.9

### Characteristics of Childcare Programs Participants Currently Use

While Table 4 shows respondents' preferences for their children's care, Table 5 encompasses their responses to the question, "Do you currently have childcare that is...?"; accessible and available based on different dimensions such as programs location, proximity to public transportation and so on. The data in Table 4 demonstrated that most survey respondents (96.9%) desired childcare that was easily accessible by public transportation. However, as illustrated in Table 5, 55.2% of

**Table 5** Characteristics of childcare programs participants currently use

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Accessibility of childcare by public transportation (N=87)</i>		
Yes	39	44.8
No	48	55.2
<i>Accessibility to Subsidized Childcare (N=83)</i>		
Yes	44	53.0
No	39	47.0
<i>Accessibility to Childcare Sensitive to Family's Language and Culture (N=75)</i>		
Yes	29	38.7
No	46	61.3

respondents did not have such a childcare option. Similarly, all of the respondents felt that subsidized childcare was very or somewhat important (see Table 3), yet only 53% ( $n=44$ ) actually had subsidies for their children's care (see Table 4). As depicted in Table 3, survey respondents felt that having a childcare program that was sensitive to their family's language and culture was either very or somewhat important (96.7%). To probe further, we examined familial perceptions of their childcare center's sensitivity to their language and culture, finding that 46 of the 75 (61.3%) participants believed that their childcare center did not meet their expectations.

The qualitative findings further amplified the challenges that newcomers experienced with respect to each of these three dimensions. First, in relation to transportation and accessibility of childcare from home, with or without a car, transportation issues produced limitations to their integration. One focus group participant and his wife were enrolled in language training classes at the same time but could not manage the transportation: "The Open Door [settlement agency] told us that we would help us find a spot for the children, but they also made it clear that it was my responsibility to drop them off and pick them up from the daycare." Another felt that the accessibility of childcare programs was an issue even with a car:

Our children are supposed to be close to where we live or study. If an emergency happens, I would be close to the daycare, or I would ask a friend, if I'm not able, to pick them up...I have tried to register my youngest child at the daycare at my elder children's school.... After just one week, I couldn't do it. It wasn't feasible. I had to drive 44 km every day!

This participant's inability to secure childcare close to their home, workplace, or other children's school necessitated daily travel that was expensive and unsustainable. Therefore, the issue of accessibility extended beyond proximity to public transportation, inhibiting newcomer participation in employment or educational programs.

Second, the qualitative findings likewise affirmed that childcare costs are too high for many newcomers, and the subsidy requirements were constraining. In one focus

group, participants concurred with this parent who stated: “My wish in Regina is for more affordable daycare.” Another participant shared: “It’s really hard as a single mom to take care of your child, and then you have to go for work, right? Then all of the pay goes to babysitting.” This participant explained that even with a subsidy, the cost of a childcare program was prohibitive: “They have the subsidy, right? But my income is not enough.” Eligibility for a subsidy is based on income, so newcomers had to be careful not to earn too much, yet they needed more than one income to cover the family’s expenses; a dilemma described by this participant: “They will cut the [subsidy] money according to the income, and only one person working is not enough...”

With respect to the third element, families defined “sensitivity” in varied ways, but enacting their cultural practices and speaking their language were crucial. However, they concurred that if the educator was from their cultural background, it would make “a huge difference.” In the words of one participant, the children “will come to know more about our culture and language.” Another participant affirmed: “Being an immigrant and a Black woman, I prefer that she [daughter] goes to someone who has that African experience.” Some participants shared a desire for “childcare that provides food appropriate to maintain our cultural traditions,” such as *halal* food for Muslim families. Another explained that educators should “follow my expectations” related to eating, sleeping, and safety. Despite the overwhelming concern with cultural sensitivity in the survey results, the qualitative findings diverged slightly as four newcomers acknowledged childcare centers supported their children in learning English “to become successful” in the future, to “mix” with Canadian-born children and children from different races and backgrounds, and navigate cultural differences.

### Challenges Newcomers Face Without Access to Childcare

In cases where newcomers were unable to access childcare, new challenges emerged (Table 6). The greatest challenge was the difficulty of finding and keeping employment (39.7%,  $n=92$ ), followed by having a parent stay at home rather than go to work (32.3%,  $n=75$ ). Nearly 20% (19.8%,  $n=46$ ) of participants reported feelings of isolation experienced in response to a lack of childcare support.

**Table 6** Challenges newcomers face without access to childcare

	Frequency	Percent
Difficulty finding and retaining employment	92	39.7
One parent staying home rather than able to work	75	32.3
Inability to attend language classes	73	31.5
Lack of language learning opportunities	63	27.2
Worry about child not retaining language and culture	59	25.4
Experience stress	55	23.7
Lack of social opportunities	49	21.1
Feeling of isolation	46	19.8

When families were unable to access language training or employment due to a lack of childcare, it potentially exacerbated financial issues and limited their future opportunities, particularly for women. One participant explained that his friend “couldn’t attend these [language] classes because she wasn’t able to find a place for her child in daycare.” Similarly, this father shared: “My wife had to turn down three jobs because there was nowhere we could put our 2 year-old.”

## Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the newcomers’ preferences and access to childcare programs and supports in the context of a smaller urban center. Consistent with the literature on immigrant childcare preferences (e.g., Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Kingsbury et al., 2021), parental care was the most common form of childcare used by participants (17.2%). Childcare programs were available at each of the post-secondary institutions and sites for language instruction classes which may account for the 12.5% of newcomers who reported having this form of support. The third most commonly used form of childcare was centers (11.2%). Very few participants had family members (3%) or friends (3.9%) care for their children which could be attributed to the post-migration loss of their social networks.

The shortage of spaces and high cost of childcare negatively impacts Canadian families who are unable to access affordable childcare in their community (Findlay et al., 2021). Any family whose income is below the maximum threshold can access childcare subsidies if they use a licensed, regulated childcare program; over 90% of programs in the province fit these criteria (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022). Congruent with national figures, 46.7% of families who utilized childcare services did not have access to subsidized programs; thus, they either used unlicensed, unregulated options or did not have childcare. Research suggests that families report receiving higher-quality care when holding childcare subsidies (Krafft et al., 2014). Program quality is positively associated with establishing crucial developmental skills and foundational concepts to ensure future success in schooling, including the language of the host country (Corazzini et al., 2021; Kahn & Greenberg, 2010). Therefore, it is concerning that so many of the families either depended on unregulated childcare programs or postponed their own plans for further education or employment, both of which are essential for adaption and integration within the new context. Research supports the contention that having universal childcare services ensures more equitable childcare access for immigrant and non-immigrant families (Sainsbury, 2019). The Canadian federal government is adopting a universal, ten-dollar-a-day not-for-profit childcare system to attempt to address affordability and accessibility issues by negotiating bilateral agreements with each individual province/territory (apart from Québec) and providing substantial funding tied to meeting specific workforce and program conditions (Childcare Resource & Research Unit, 2023). In view of this shift, it is our hope that future policies address the challenges around the shortage of spaces while also reducing barriers for newcomers seeking childcare spaces.

The results indicated that 96.7% of the participants felt it was very or somewhat important to have childcare that was easily accessible from home, while 96.9%

desired childcare that was easily accessible to public transit, reflective of their available resources. However, 58.2% of participants did not have accessible childcare, and 55.1% did not have childcare that could easily be accessed via public transit. The issues with affordability, poor service, and connectivity present in large urban centers such as Toronto (Allen et al., 2021; Amar & Teelucksingh, 2015) are magnified in smaller cities like Regina, where the transit system is comparatively not as well-resourced or efficient. Newcomers often depend on public transit, yet users may have to withstand long walks to bus stops or wait times in extreme weather conditions (Massing et al., 2022). Qualitative studies emphasize that poor access to public transportation can serve to further limit the childcare options of newcomers (De Gioia, 2015). These results further support the contention that there is a significant gap between the service needs of many newcomer families and the realities of their situations.

Qualitative studies have outlined numerous reasons why some newcomer families might prefer care that is resonant with their own beliefs, values, and goals for their children (Ceglowski et al., 2011; Ebbeck & dela Cerna, 2007; Obeng, 2007). Miller et al. (2014) ascertained that families who prioritized culturally consistent practice tended to be less likely to choose childcare centers. In a location where there is competition for any kind of childcare space, however, parents often must make compromises. Newcomer families are thus caught between a desire to socialize their children into their own cultural and linguistic communities, and the necessity of choosing any available care option to pursue language learning, employment, or further education. The results in this research indicated that nearly every participant (96.1%) desired care that was sensitive to their language and culture, but 61.3% of families did not have such childcare. It was still encouraging that 38.6% did feel supported in this regard, particularly given the small size of the city and the relative lack of representation of some ethnocultural communities. Given the growing diversity of smaller urban centers (Statistics Canada, 2022a, b, c), it is imperative to ensure that culturally affirming childcare options are available to families from different ethnocultural backgrounds. Enhancing connections between home and the childcare program through meaningful inclusion of familial cultural and linguistic assets is not only integral to newcomer children's well-being, but establishes a foundation for positive relationships with schools (Massing et al., 2023; Dolan & Sherlock, 2010; Tobin et al., 2013). Previous studies have found that cultural values and beliefs related to care activities (feeding, diapering/toileting, sleeping) and teaching strategies (learning through play, educator role) are particular areas of tension for newcomers; (Massing, 2018; McDevitt, 2021; Tobin et al., 2013). Therefore, culturally responsive care must attend to these elements.

In many Canadian cities, immigrant women constitute a substantive portion of the childcare workforce (Massing, 2015), particularly in family childcare homes, and could be a resource in this regard. These educators need to be supported in their efforts to include familial linguistic and cultural values and practices in the context of an occupation which foregrounds Eurocentric theories and pedagogical approaches (Massing, 2018; McDevitt, 2021). Curriculum and policy frameworks must also incorporate diverse perspectives on education and care in meaningful ways. The availability of high quality, culturally responsive options may then shift



newcomers' preferences toward center-based childcare, creating affordances for their family's future prospects.

Finally, when newcomer parents do not have affordable and accessible childcare, there are significant personal and professional costs. According to Dolan and Sherlock (2010), refugee families depend on government financial support but without childcare, they cannot enrol in language training or further education classes or to access the necessary employment services to become self-sufficient. The participants indicated that the lack of access to childcare impacted their ability to find and retain employment (39.7%), attend language classes (31.5%), and participate in social opportunities (21.1%). A significant percentage (19%) of the participants had only an elementary school education; thus, a lack of childcare would negatively impact any aspirations to continue their education. Since women assume the majority of household childcare-related tasks (Zhang et al., 2021), a lack of access disproportionately affects newcomer women's capacities to learn the language or pursue further education or employment. Vesely et al. (2013) reported that not only do childcare programs provide employment and educational supports, but they also facilitate newcomer women's development of social capital. Some participants reported feeling isolated due to being unable to access childcare (19.8%), while others experienced stress (23.7%). All of these areas are central to newcomers' successful participation and integration in their new community.

## Limitations

This study had several main limitations. First, the results relating to childcare were part of a larger study which included a longer survey and focus groups that also included questions regarding education and employment. The second possible limitation is related to language. Participants who completed the online version of the survey may have needed clarity or translation related to some questions, whereas those who completed the paper version had additional support as desired. We believe it is for this reason that the number of respondents varied from question to question. In addition, although we had 305 ( $n = 305$ ) survey respondents and 96 ( $n = 96$ ) focus group participants, language and cultural constraints may have negatively impacted recruitment which could have been ameliorated by translating the survey into additional languages. Finally, since this study was conducted in one geographic location offering specific services and programs to newcomers, the results are contextually informed and cannot be generalized to other locations. However, the results may contribute to our scholarly understanding of newcomer experiences in smaller urban centers with similar demographics and services.

## Conclusion

The study offered an in-depth analysis of the relationships between childcare accessibility and other variables such as public transportation, subsidies, and sensitivity of childcare programs to the family's language and culture. This study showed that a lack of childcare could hinder newcomers' language learning, educational advancement, and ability to secure employment and economic independence, all of which are integral to their settlement and integration as they attempt to build a new life in Canada. The loss of family support networks that might have contributed to childcare may further heighten newcomer parents' and children's social isolation and represent potential losses in terms of securing culturally and linguistically responsive care options. These factors are obstacles to newcomer children's meaningful participation in childcare programs and contravene their right to education and care.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. The research completed in this study was approved by the University of Regina Ethics Review Board and adhered to the ethical guidelines contained in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research with Humans* published by the Government of Canada. All of the participants provided informed consent.

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