

Highlights from 'Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta: Results from a National Survey During the COVID-19 Pandemic'



Introduction

In mid-March, the majority of provincial and territorial governments, including the government of Alberta, moved quickly to close centre-based early learning and child care in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Family child care homes were permitted to remain open in Alberta, as they were in other regions of Canada.

In the following two months, provincial and territorial governments took different approaches in providing emergency child care for essential workers and in helping service providers deal with the financial impacts of the pandemic. Almost all provided some form of financial support either to help services required to close meet a portion of their operating costs or to help those that remained open address falling enrolments. A minority of provinces chose to fully fund their early learning and care sectors.

The results of a national survey which asked service providers about their experiences for the reference week of April 27 to May 1 showed the significant impacts of the pandemic on early learning and care sectors across the country.^[1] A subsequent report, prepared by the Muttart Foundation and the Canadian Child Care Federation, compared the pandemic experiences of service providers in Alberta with those in other parts of Canada.^[2] Complete details can be found in these reports.

Service providers in Alberta, especially child care centres, were hit particularly hard by the pandemic. In the absence of direct government support, they fared worse than their counterparts across much of Canada.

Which services were open and which were closed?

During the survey period, 85 percent of Alberta child care centres were closed. Those centres that reopened to provide emergency child care had a median enrolment of only 5 children. The majority of family child care homes were open (85%) but their enrolment fell by a third from pre-pandemic levels.

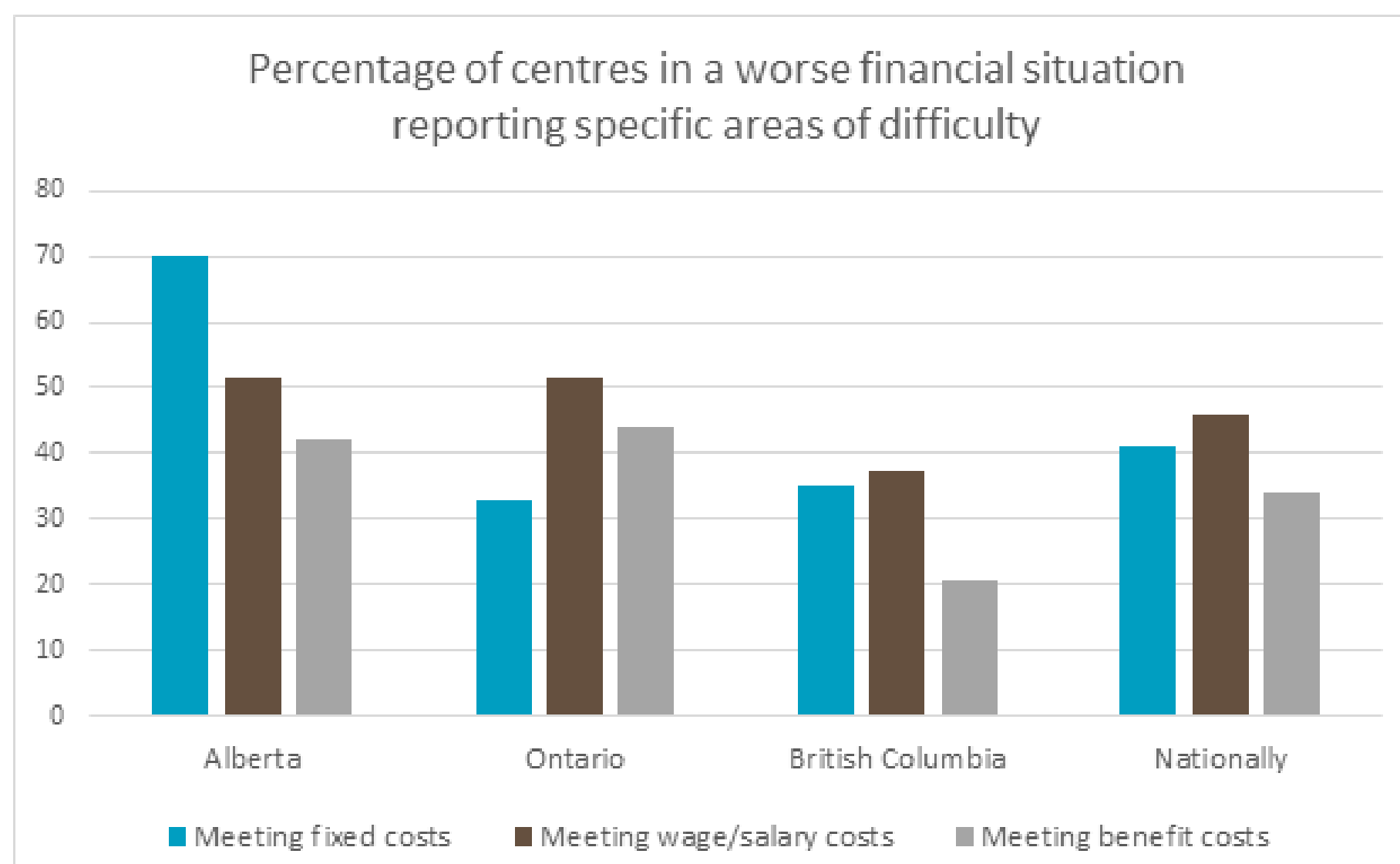
"Providers have remained open for families despite their fear for themselves and families. They appreciate still being able to work however some compensation for their lost attendance is necessary."

"I'm losing money each day I'm open as an emergency site. I don't qualify for the rent program and I fear won't be able to recover."

What was the financial situation of service providers early in the pandemic?

The majority of Alberta child care programs reported their financial situation was worse than before the pandemic – more so than in the rest of Canada.

Child care centres reporting worse financial situations identified three main areas in which they were facing financial challenges: meeting fixed costs, meeting wage/salary costs and meeting benefit costs.

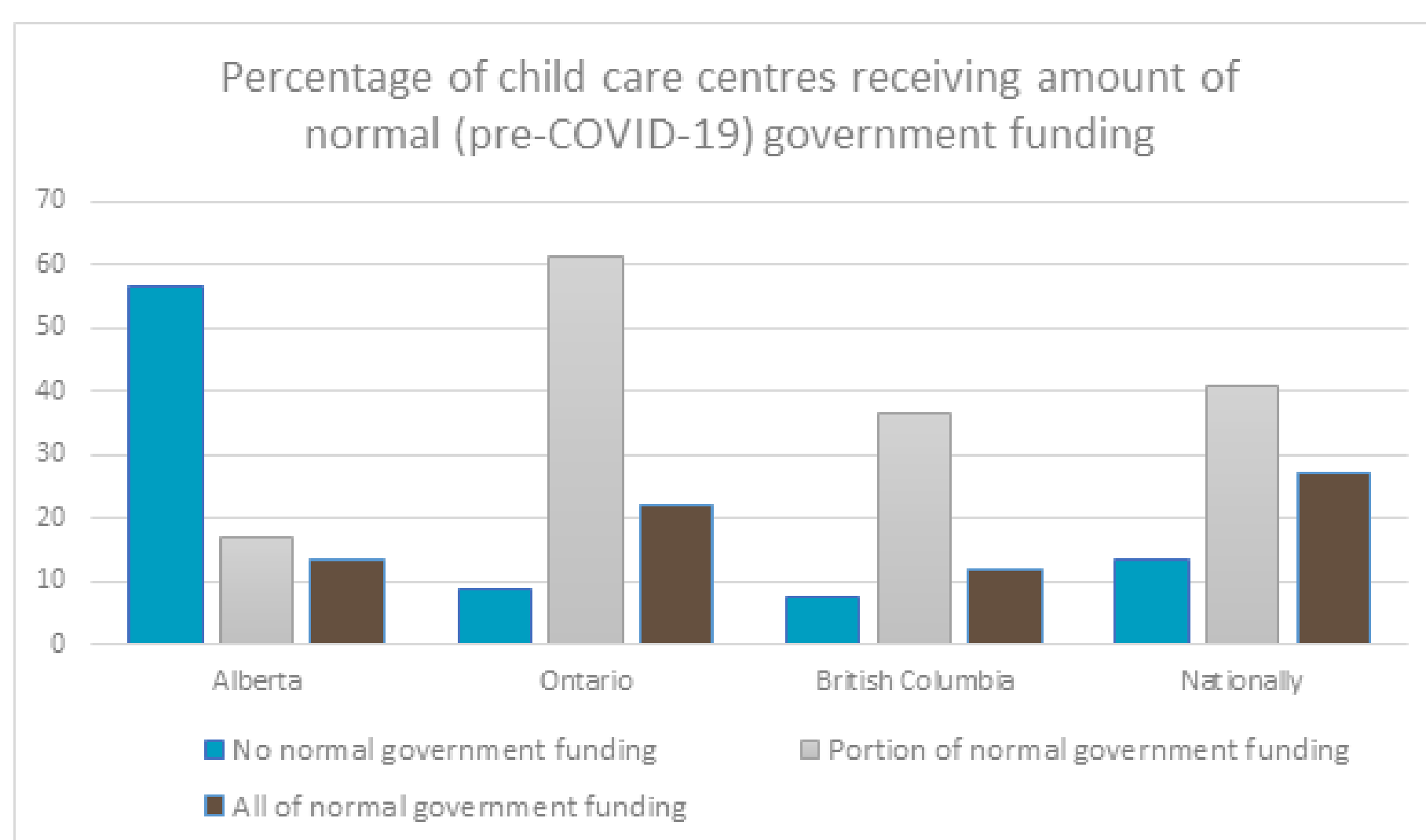


81% of child care centres in Alberta reported their **financial situation was worse** than before the pandemic, with **62.5%** reporting it was 'much worse' - the highest rate of any province.

80% of family child care providers in Alberta reported their **financial situation was worse** than before the pandemic.

“Our provincial government should be using their approved budget to continue providing supports for our programs. There is 25 million in the budget - why are we being shorted? There is no reason that they could not continue providing this funding while programs are closed - the money is there - and this would be a huge support for programs!”

Nationally, child care centres reported the loss or reduction in parent fee revenues as the main reason for their financial difficulties. In Alberta, seven out of ten centres reported that the loss or reduction of government funding also contributed to their worse financial situation – the highest rate in Canada.

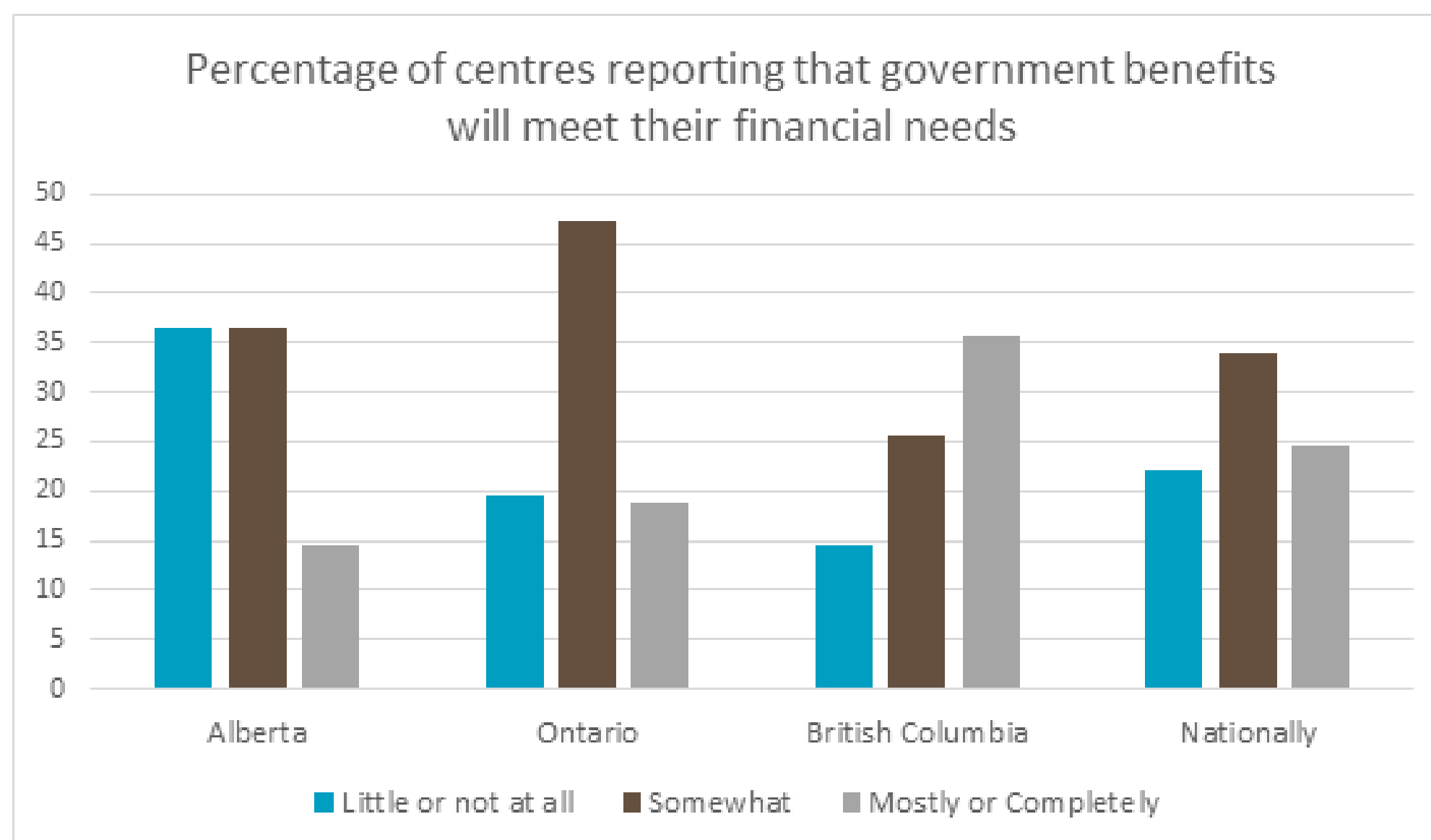


56.5% of child care centres in Alberta reported receiving none of their normal (pre-COVID-19) government funding, by far the highest rate among all the provinces.

45% of family child care providers in Alberta reported receiving all their normal government funding.

“Wishing the provincial government provided some supports to centres choosing to remain closed, such as 25% of program’s budget to allow them to cover fixed expenses and not defer, since that will increase fees once they do reopen.”

Child care centres in Alberta were much less likely to report that government benefits (federal, provincial and municipal) will meet their financial needs during the pandemic than child care centres across Canada.



1 in 7 centres

in Alberta reported that government benefits (federal, provincial or municipal) 'mostly' or 'completely' **met their financial needs** compared to 1 in 3 in British Columbia and 1 in 5 in Ontario.

"Just worried about the length of time it will take for us to get back to pre-COVID. We were profitable prior to our closure, and now with the added loan repayment for CEBA, and backed up bills etc. we don't know if we can recover fast enough to keep us afloat."

"Alberta chose not to pay staff, (or to) put any type of financial assistance in place for child care centres, they have simply directed centres to use federal funding supports."

Will services reopen?

A smaller proportion of closed centres in Alberta (56%) reported that they will 'definitely reopen' compared to other regions of Canada.

One in five closed centres in Alberta reported that they are either 'not sure' of reopening or that they will 'probably' or 'definitely' remain permanently closed. This is double the proportion in British Columbia and Ontario.

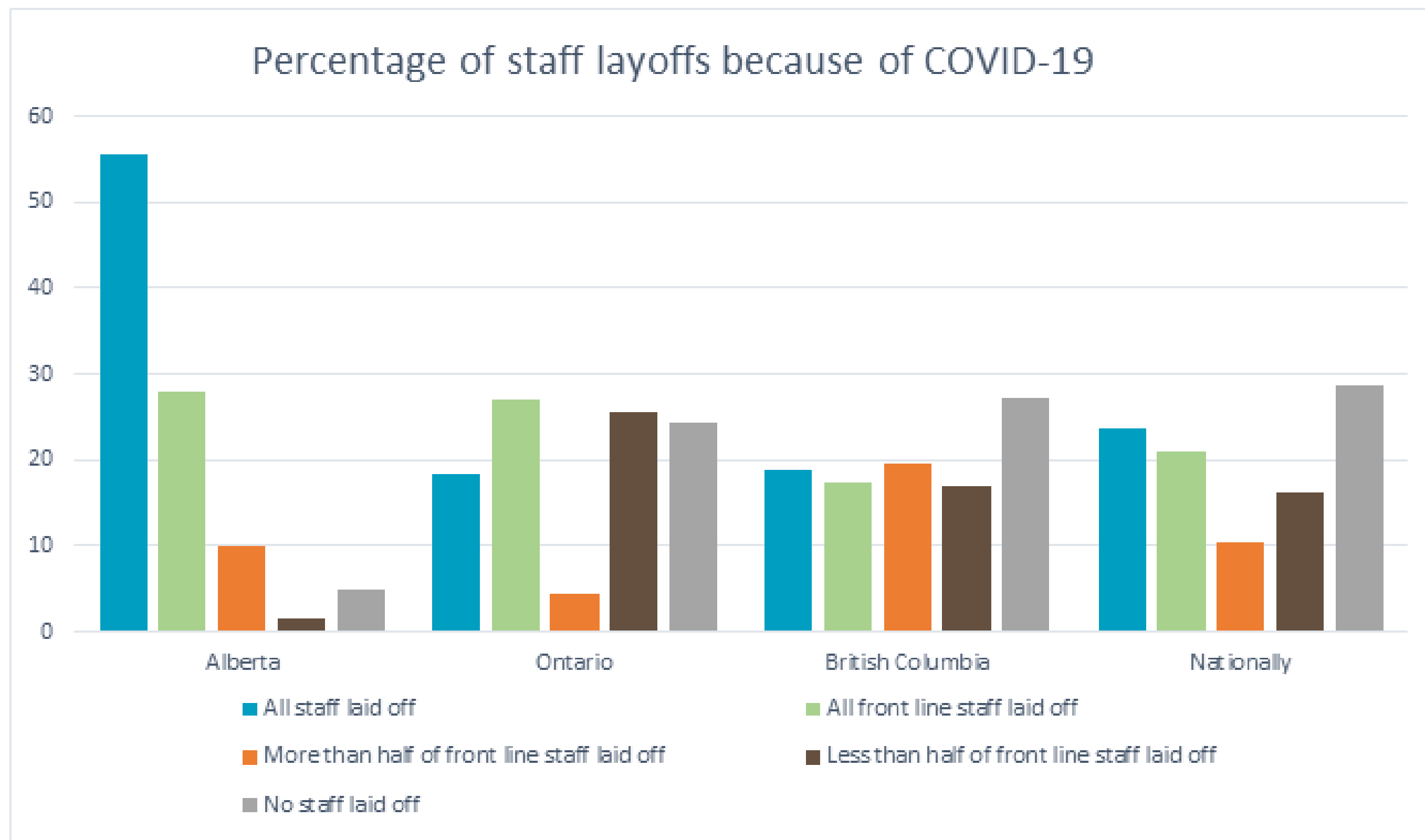
64% of closed family child care homes in Alberta reported that they will 'definitely reopen'. One in four, however, reported that they were either 'not sure' of reopening or that they will 'probably' or 'definitely' remain permanently closed.

"There should be proper health and safety training for all educators prior to re-opening. All centres need time to prepare/set up the environment to ensure that proper guidelines are being followed."

"As a preschool owner, it is very concerning that my program is not included with the other child care programs that offer child care ... I don't know when I will have the opportunity to open again. If it isn't in September, I don't know how much longer I can continue to pay the costs associated with having a program."

What happened to Early Childhood Educators?

The closure of child care centres in Alberta, allied with the lack of provincial funding support, resulted in significant layoffs for early childhood educators. Alberta centres reported the highest proportion of staff layoffs across the country.



The majority of centre staff laid off either applied for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (86%) or Employment Insurance (71.5%).

55.5% of Alberta centres reported **laying off all staff**, including directors and supervisors, compared to **23.6%** nationally.

Only 5% of Alberta centres reported **no staff layoffs** compared to close to **30%** nationally.

“I feel that we will experience challenges staffing our centre. Many staff will not return in fear of increased exposure to the COVID virus. Other staff have found other employment while waiting to be rehired.”

“Already the qualified staff members are quitting their jobs to go and work in the camps and for some cleaning companies where they can get better salaries and medical coverage. The morale is low for these teachers since the Northern Allowance that they were being given is going to stop in July. Most child care workers also work two jobs because the money they get is not enough.”

What challenges do services face around reopening?

The vast majority of Alberta child care centres, like centres across Canada, anticipated problems in both the short and long terms around reopening and the resumption of service delivery.

The **main problems** Alberta centres anticipated around reopening and the resumption of services in the short-term were **lower enrolments** (92%), COVID-19 **health and safety costs** (91%), and the **costs of reopening** (74%).

Alberta centres reported the most or second most anticipated challenges of any province in nine of ten problem categories.

Alberta family child care providers similarly reported anticipated problems around reopening or the resumption of services in both the short and longer terms. The **main problems** Alberta family child care providers anticipated in the short-term were **lower enrolment** (77%) and higher **health and safety costs** (48%). The concerns Alberta family child care providers identified around reopening were similar to those of family child care providers nationally.

In Alberta

9 out of 10 centres

anticipated challenges with lower enrolment and health and safety costs

7 out of 10 centres

anticipated challenges with the cost of reopening

7 out of 10 family child care providers

anticipated challenges with lower enrolment

5 out of 10 family child care providers

anticipated challenges with health and safety costs

“I don’t suspect we will go back to what was normal when things start up. There will still be a great deal of people laid off and there will be various restrictions on enrollment and extra rules to help keep children and families safe. This will result in lower enrollment. The budget plan for our organization doesn’t have a surplus. Less children will mean less revenue and less staffing. The lesser amount of staffing will not offset the lost revenue. I am worried about future financial viability.”

“Lack of funding is also affecting the quality of care we are able to provide with all the additional time committed to cleaning. Funding is often removed without a plan for a sustainable future.”

“As the families and children slowly return they will be challenged by anxiety and added stress. ECE staff will need to have special training to face these situations to support the needs of our families.”

Looking Ahead

The results from the national survey show the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on early learning and care services across Canada. The closure of services in most provinces, and the lower enrolments in those that remained open, resulted in dramatic reductions in revenues.

The impacts of the pandemic on centre-based child cares in Alberta, and to a lesser degree family child care homes, were particularly deep and far-reaching given the limited support the provincial government provided to the sector compared to that made available by other provincial governments. The limited provincial government support for services early in the pandemic resulted in centres experiencing more significant declines in their financial status and laying off much larger proportions of their workforce than centres in other provinces. By comparison, the experiences of family child care homes in Alberta, while challenging, were more similar to those of family child care homes across Canada.

The challenges early learning and care services in Alberta faced early in the pandemic means that the reopening and longer-term recovery of the sector will require significant new investments.

The Ministry of Children’s Services should quickly engage with the early learning and child care sector to determine the provincial investments required to stabilize services across the province and to begin the process of rebuilding service levels to something approaching those prior to the pandemic. Additional public resources and supports will also be needed to ensure that child care centres and family day homes can deliver high-quality, affordable early learning and care in the changed service environments brought on by the pandemic.

Alberta’s economic recovery will depend, in significant measure, on the successful reopening and resumption of child care services across the province.

“While I am happy that we could re-open my concern is that we are still looked at solely for providing a place to "put" children and no real investment and authentic interaction or acknowledgement of our work is happening.”

“Going back to providing quality affordable care will be extremely challenging and a delicate balance that will have expenses attached. We need a universal child care plan to support families required to return back to work.”

^[1] Child Care Now, Canadian Child Care Federation & Childcare Resource and Research Unit. 2020. Canadian Child Care: Preliminary Results from a National Survey During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved at <https://www.childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/20/07/canadian-child-care-preliminary-results-national-survey-dur>

^[2] The Muttart Foundation and the Canadian Child Care Federation. 2020. Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta: Results from a National Survey During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved at <https://www.muttart.org/reports/early-learning-and-child-care-in-alberta-results-from-a-national-survey-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>