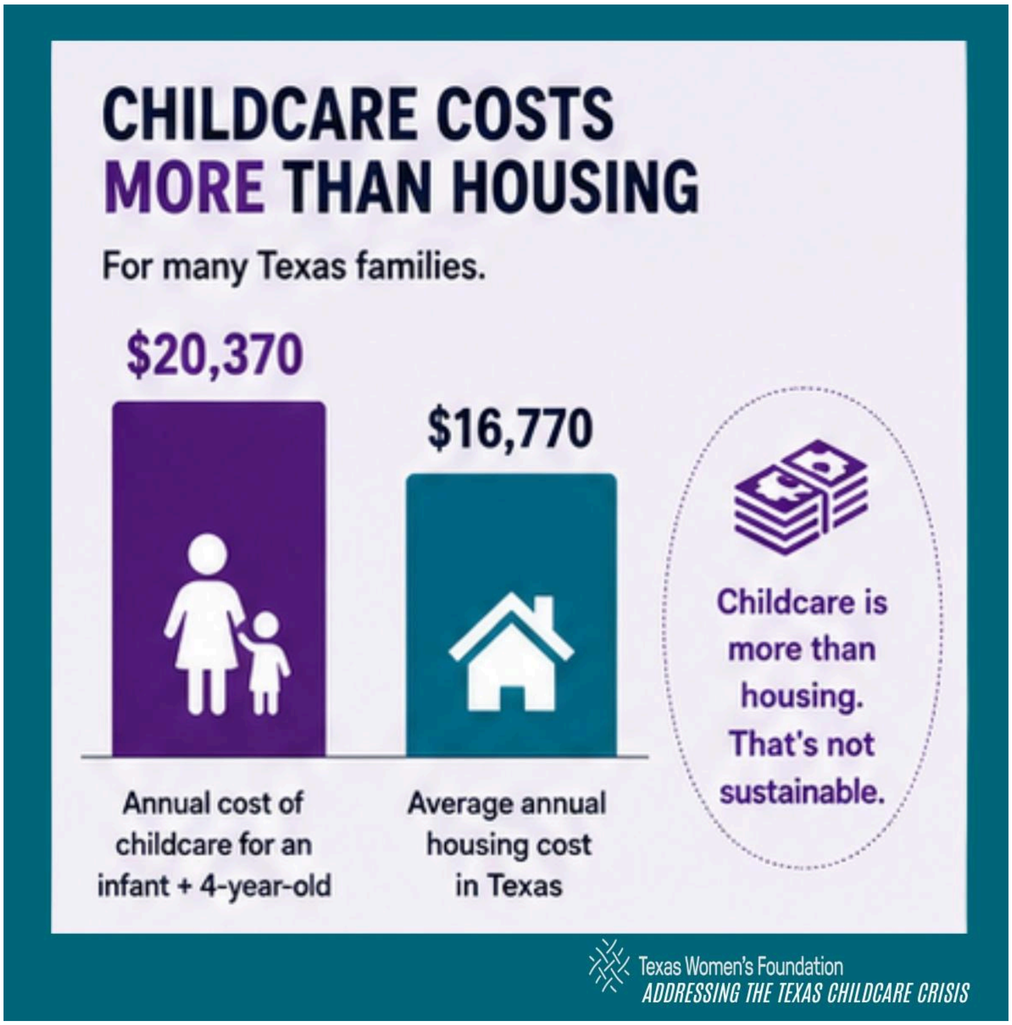
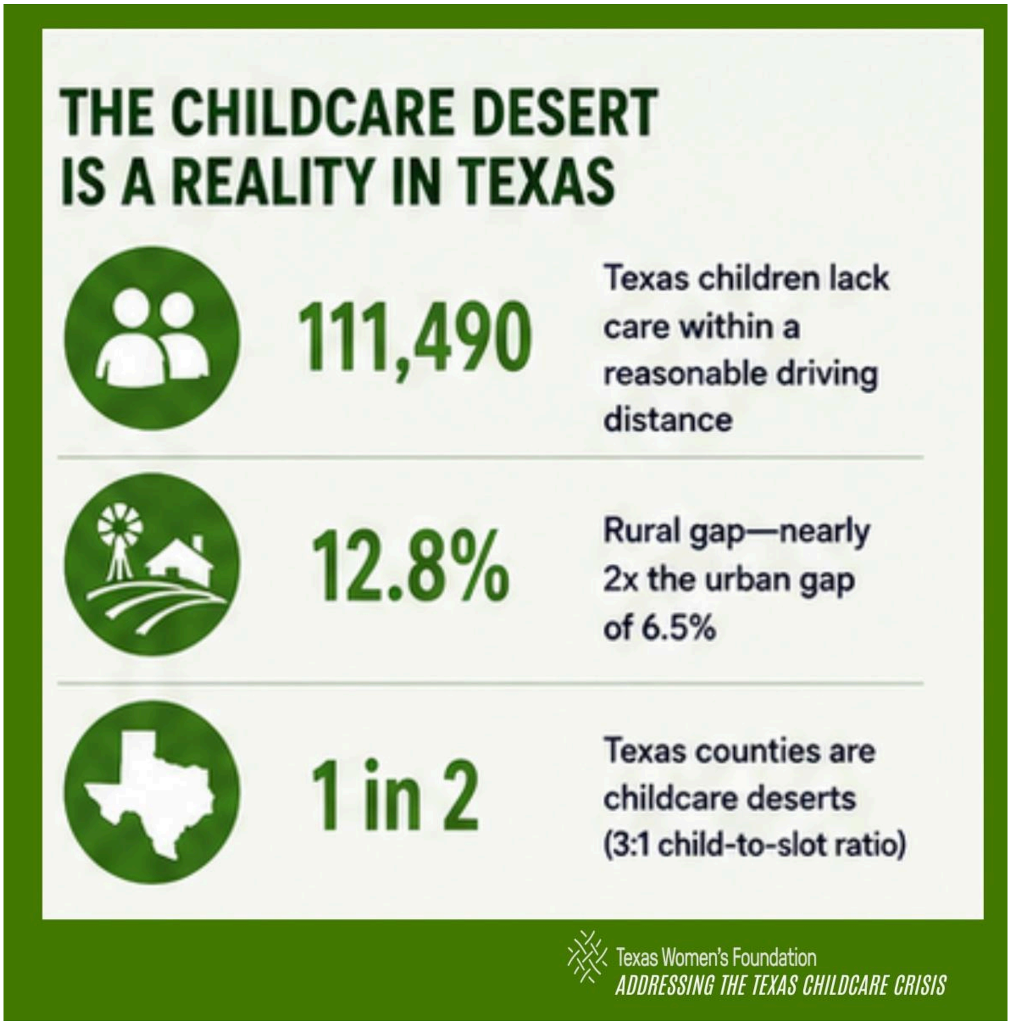
ECONOMY

Report links childcare shortages and lost earnings for families

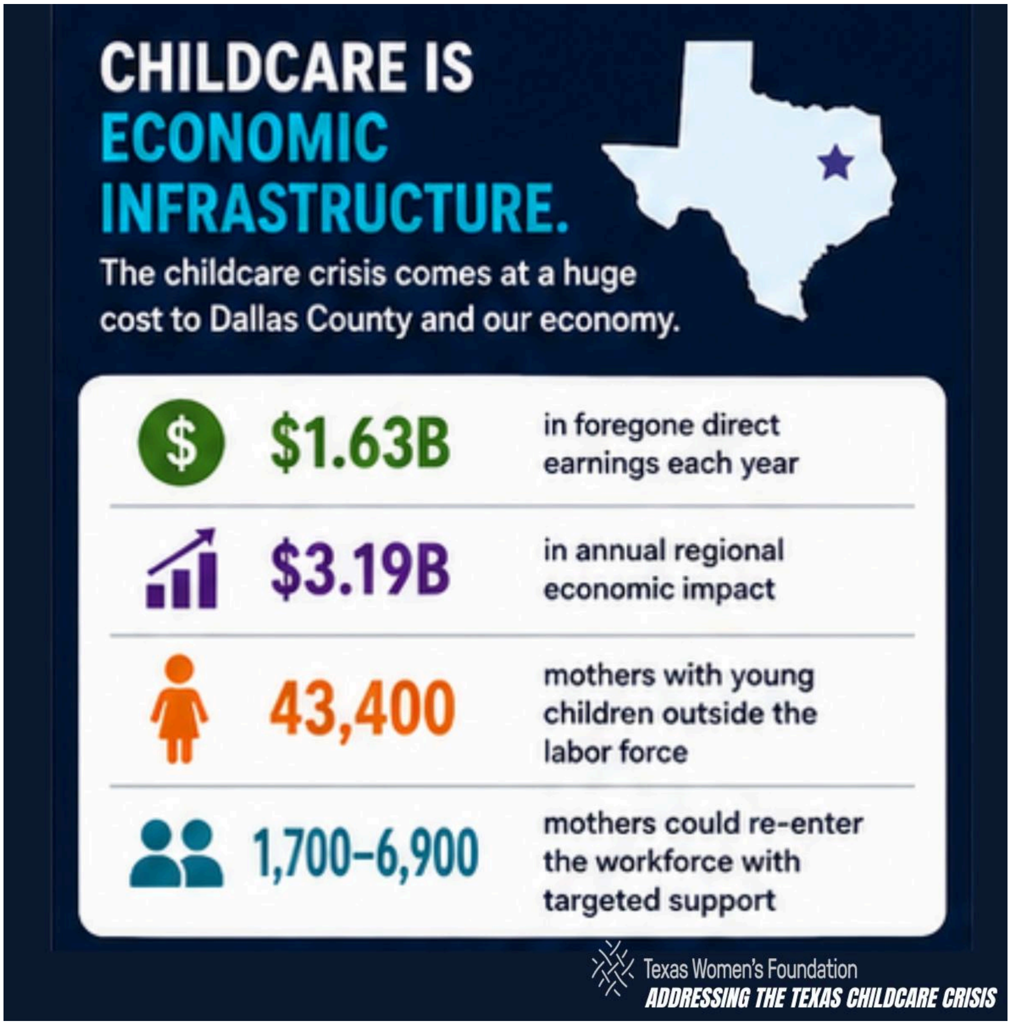
Findings come as coalition pushes to place funding measure on ballot



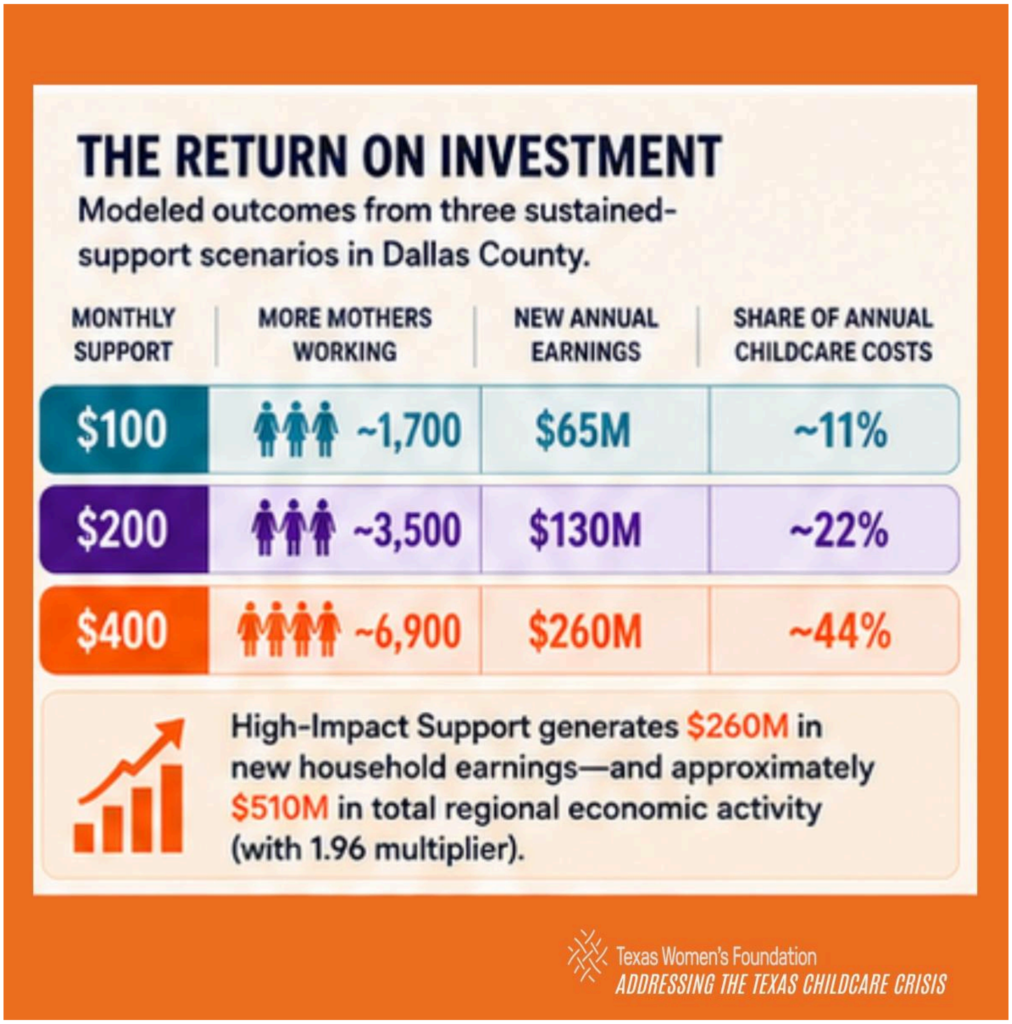
For a Texas family with an infant and a 4-year-old, annual childcare costs exceed the estimated annual cost of housing, according to a new report from Texas Women's Foundation and Every Texan.



More than half of Texas counties qualify as childcare deserts, according to the report, meaning there are at least three children under age 5 for every available licensed childcare slot.



A new report estimates that approximately 43,400 Dallas County mothers with young children remain outside the labor force due in part to childcare affordability and access barriers. Researchers estimate that those constraints correspond to about $1.63 billion in annual earnings and roughly $3.19 billion in annual regional economic activity.



Researchers modeled several childcare-support scenarios for Dallas County and found that sustained assistance could help thousands of additional mothers enter the workforce while generating millions of dollars in new earnings and regional economic activity.

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Dallas County families lose an estimated $1.63 billion in earnings each year because thousands of mothers with young children remain sidelined from the workforce by childcare barriers, according to a new report released Tuesday.

The news comes as Dallas County leaders debate a proposal to expand public investment in childcare.

Lack of access to affordable childcare is keeping more than 43,000 mothers of young children out of the workforce in Dallas County, according to a new report, released Tuesday by the Texas Women's Foundation and Every Texan. When broader economic effects are included, the impact grows to roughly $3.19 billion lost in annual regional economic activity.

The estimate is based specifically on mothers with at least one child under age 6, a group the report's researchers say is disproportionately affected by childcare barriers.

The findings arrive as the Dallas Childcare Works coalition pushes Dallas County commissioners to place a proposed childcare funding measure on the November 2026 ballot. Supporters say the plan could generate about $132 million annually for childcare scholarships and related investments.

The report's researchers describe the childcare crisis as a combination of affordability, access and quality challenges. They argued that only sustained multi-year funding can help address Texas' childcare crisis.

Affordability

Center-based infant care in Texas costs more than $11,000 annually on average, according to the report. In Dallas County, infant care consumes about 12.5% of median family income, nearly double the federal affordability benchmark of 7%.

For a Texas family with an infant and a 4-year-old, annual childcare costs exceed $20,000, which is more than the estimated cost of housing, according to the report.

"Childcare now costs more than housing and more than college tuition," said Coda Rayo-Garza, senior director of research and data at Every Texan and lead author of the report.

Access

The report also highlights access challenges. More than half of Texas counties qualify as childcare deserts, defined as areas with at least three children for every available licensed childcare slot. Statewide, researchers estimate that more than 111,000 children lack access to childcare within a reasonable driving distance.

Even where childcare exists, quality remains uneven. About 31% of Texas children receiving childcare subsidies attend providers that do not meet Texas Rising Star quality standards, according to the report.

“These aren’t separate problems we can solve one at a time,” Rayo-Garza said. “They compound.”

Researchers also argue the costs extend beyond individual families.

The report also points to what happened after Texas invested $100 million in childcare scholarships in 2025 with the goal of adding 10,000 additional scholarships. The Texas Workforce Commission childcare programs already served roughly 116,600 families and nearly 149,000 children per day in 2025, researchers said.

However, the statewide waitlist still grew from about 95,000 families to roughly 100,000 by year’s end as rising operating costs absorbed much of the funding, researchers said.

“The one-time injection really did not do what it was intended to do across the state,” said Texas Women’s Foundation President and CEO Karen Hughes White during Tuesday’s webinar.

To estimate what sustained investment could accomplish, researchers modeled several childcare-support scenarios for Dallas County.

A program providing families with $100 per month in childcare assistance could allow roughly 1,700 additional mothers to enter the workforce and generate about $65 million in annual earnings, the report found.

At $400 per month, researchers estimate roughly 6,900 mothers could reenter the workforce, generating approximately $260 million in earnings and more than $500 million in regional economic activity.

“This is why we keep saying that childcare is economic infrastructure,” Rayo-Garza said. “The return on this investment isn’t just to families, It’s to our entire region.”

Proposal

The findings are being cited by advocates backing Dallas Childcare Works, a coalition that includes United Way of Metropolitan Dallas, North Texas Early Education Alliance, Dallas Area Interfaith, ChildCareGroup and other organizations.

The coalition’s proposal would create a dedicated county childcare fund supported by a property tax increase. Supporters estimate the measure would cost the average homeowner about $10 per month.

“This sustained investment could generate approximately $132 million in public funds annually and serve around 10,000 childcare scholarships,” said Hillary Evans, vice president of policy and advocacy for United Way of Metropolitan Dallas.

Dallas County commissioners ultimately need to approve ballot language by mid-August for the measure to appear on the November 2026 ballot.

Melanie Rubin, director of the North Texas Early Education Alliance, said the proposal is designed to support both families and childcare providers.

“Right now, the current childcare system does not work on its own,” Rubin said. “It requires public investment.”

Advocates hope county commissioners will place the measure on the November ballot, giving voters the opportunity to decide whether to create what supporters say could become one of the largest dedicated children’s funds in the country.

“This issue has bubbled up to a new height,” Rubin said.

She said employers increasingly view childcare shortages as a workforce issue because they make it harder to recruit and retain workers.

This reporting is part of the Future of North Texas, a community-funded journalism initiative supported by the Commit Partnership, Communities Foundation of Texas, The Dallas Foundation, the Dallas Mavericks, the Dallas Regional Chamber, Deedie Rose, Lisa and Charles Siegel, the McCune-Losinger Family Fund, The Meadows Foundation, the Perot Foundation, the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas and the University of Texas at Dallas. The News retains full editorial control of this coverage.