

# A Vital Support for Chicago's Working Families: The Child Care Assistance Program



The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) supports working families in Chicago by making child care more affordable. Child care is essential for working parents, yet the cost is often out of reach. CCAP funding is mainly dispersed in the form of vouchers that eligible families can use at any approved child care provider (center- or home-based) to reduce, or even eliminate, child care fees (a small portion of CCAP funding is contracted directly to centers). This subsidy system allows families to select child care programs (or after school programs for older children) that align directly with their employment needs. Without CCAP, low-income families in Chicago spend upwards of 30 percent of their income on child care.<sup>1</sup> CCAP is essential to keep Chicago parents working, children learning, and our local economy growing.

## Key findings from Chicago in 2025:

- Nearly 70,000 children age birth to twelve received subsidies from CCAP
- One in five children birth to twelve received CCAP funding, including one in four children birth to five
- CCAP served families in all 77 Chicago communities
- Half of all licensed child care slots were filled by CCAP children
- Most of Chicago's licensed child care providers participated in the CCAP system

<sup>1</sup>Joshi, P., Walters, A. N., & Shafer, L. (2025). *New estimates of child care affordability for working parents, nationally and by state, income and race/ethnicity* [Fact sheet]. Diversity Kids Data: Boston University. [https://www.diversitydatakids.org/sites/default/files/file/DDK\\_ChildcareAffordability\\_factsheet\\_May2025.pdf](https://www.diversitydatakids.org/sites/default/files/file/DDK_ChildcareAffordability_factsheet_May2025.pdf)

**Definitions to know:**

**CCAP eligibility:** Families with children younger than 13 are eligible for CCAP if they live in Illinois, are employed or enrolled in an eligible educational activity, and have family income below allowable limits.

**Licensed child care provider:** Licensed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to provide care for children in a setting other than the child’s own home. There are two types of licensed child care settings: center-based and home-based.

**Licensed capacity (slots)** is the maximum number of children a child care provider is legally permitted to care for at any one time. Licensed capacity also includes extended capacity, which reflects the additional school-age children a provider can care for beyond their licensed regular daytime capacity.

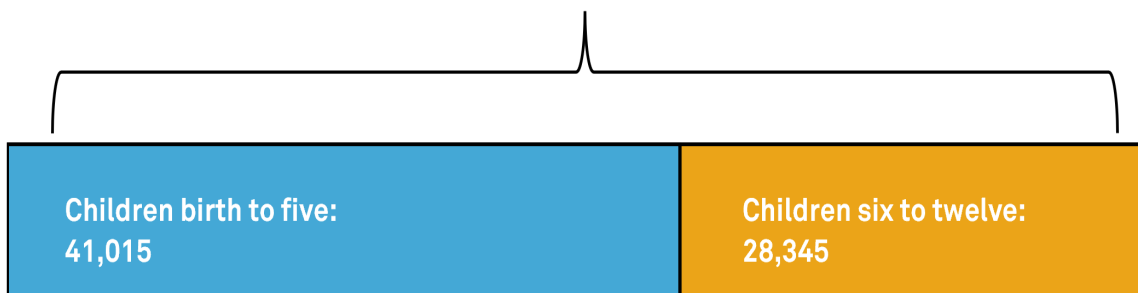
**Enrollment** is the number of children who are registered to receive care with a child care provider, including both full-day and part-day attendees.

**CCAP enrollment** is the number of children who are registered at a child care provider and receive a CCAP subsidy.

## Nearly 70,000 children age birth to twelve received CCAP subsidies in 2025

The number of children in Chicago who received child care subsidies is more than 41,000 children birth to five and 28,000 children six to twelve (see figure below), for a total of 69,360. For *monthly rates*, an average of 47,701 children birth to twelve received CCAP subsidies, ranging from 45,691 to 49,774 across months in 2025 (SD = 1,352).

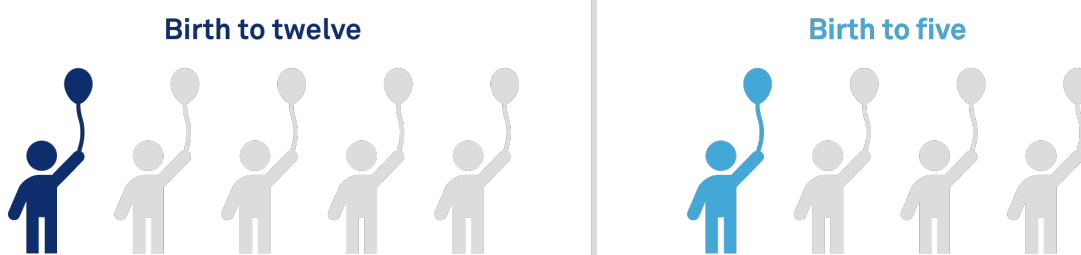
**69,360** children received CCAP subsidies at any point in 2025



## One in five children birth to twelve received CCAP funding, including one in four children birth to five

In total, there are approximately 370,000 children age birth to twelve in Chicago, according to the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimate. Based on the number of children who receive child care subsidies (~70,000), this means that nearly one in five children (19 percent) age birth to twelve used CCAP subsidies at some point in 2025. This proportion was higher among younger children: nearly one in four children age birth to five (24 percent; approximately 41,000 out of 170,000) used CCAP subsidies at some point in 2025. Among children age six to twelve, 14 percent used CCAP (28,000 out of 201,000).

### Number of children that received CCAP funding in 2025



Note: Data on the population of children age birth to twelve and age birth to five in Chicago are drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 2024 5-year estimates. These population counts are the denominator when calculating the share of children in the city who received CCAP subsidies. According to ACS, approximately 370,000 children age birth to twelve and 170,000 children birth to five lived in Chicago. Of those, 70,000 children age birth to twelve and 41,000 children age birth to five received CCAP subsidies in 2025.

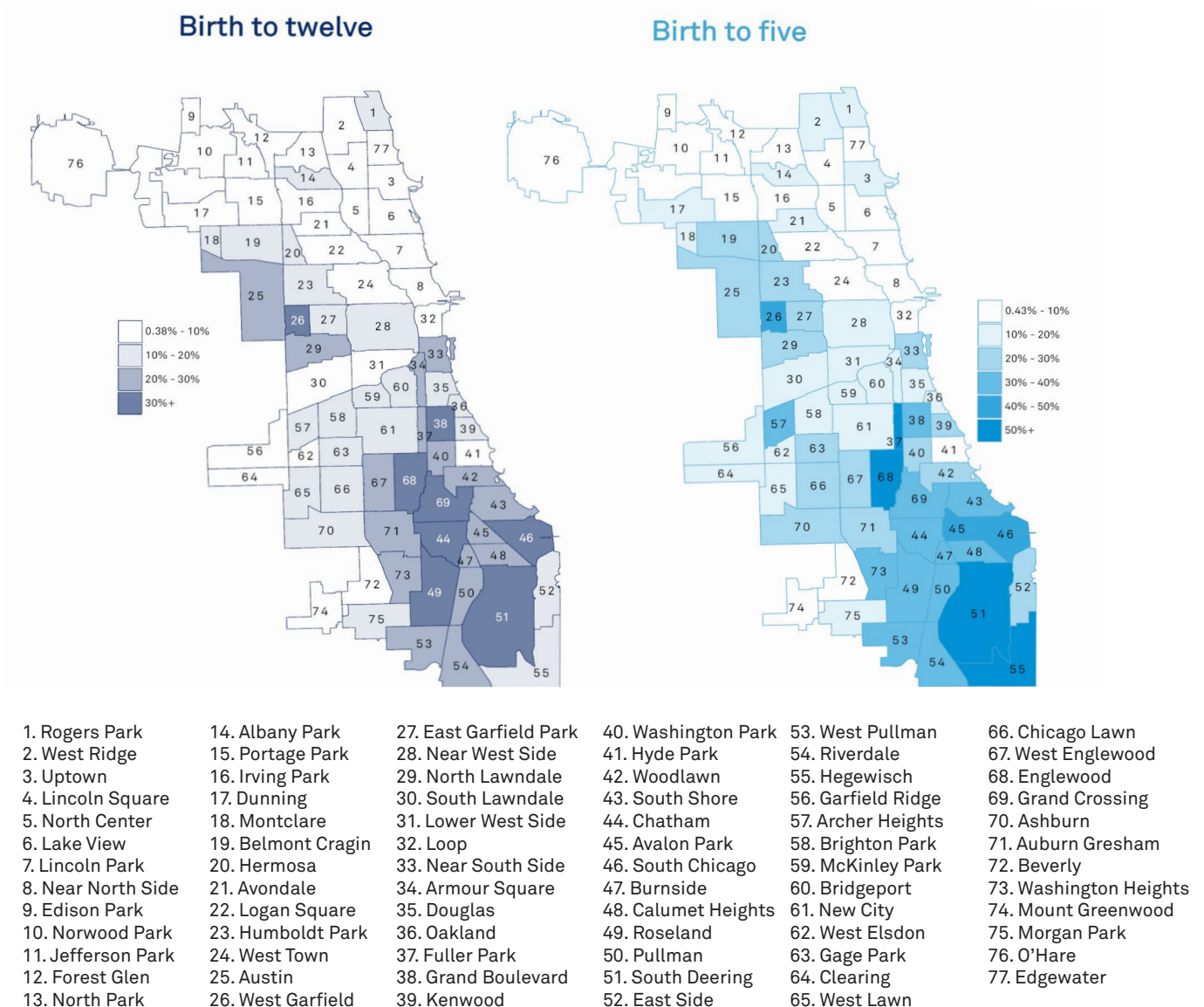


## CCAP served families in all 77 Chicago communities in 2025

While one in four children age birth to five received child care subsidies in Chicago, there was variation in the proportion of children served across Chicago's 77 community areas. Notably, every single community area has families that received CCAP subsidies. The map below shows the variation in the share of all children that used CCAP subsidies, by community area. The map on the left displays the share of all children from birth to age twelve who used CCAP subsidies in each community area. The map on the right focuses specifically on children from birth to age five.

In eight communities—largely concentrated on the South Side, Southwest Side, and Far Southeast Side—30 percent or more of children age birth to twelve relied on CCAP funding. South Deering had the largest share of children with CCAP subsidies at 43 percent.

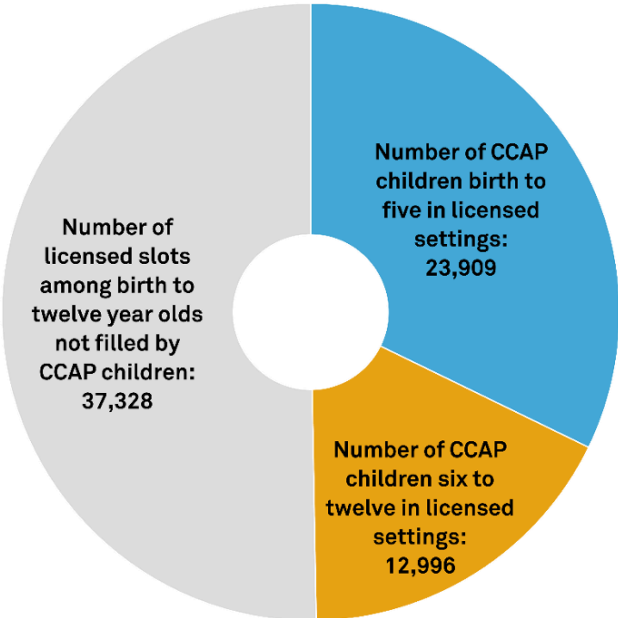
The importance of CCAP for Chicago's communities is especially pronounced for children age birth to five. In 19 communities, at least 30 percent of children in this age group relied on CCAP funding. In four communities—including Englewood, Fuller Park, Hegewisch, and South Deering—half or more of children age birth to five used CCAP.



# Half of all licensed child care slots were filled by children receiving CCAP subsidies in 2025

In June 2025, nearly 37,000 children age birth to twelve with CCAP subsidies were enrolled in licensed center-based and home-based providers. These providers had a total licensed capacity of 74,233 slots, so children with CCAP subsidies represent 50 percent of licensed slots (see figure below). Importantly, this does not mean that half of children enrolled in licensed settings receive CCAP subsidies: some slots in licensed center-based and home-based settings may be vacant, and other slots may be filled by multiple children who receive part-day care. Nevertheless, it indicates that many children in Chicago’s licensed settings rely on CCAP.

**50% of all licensed slots were filled by CCAP children age birth to twelve in June 2025**

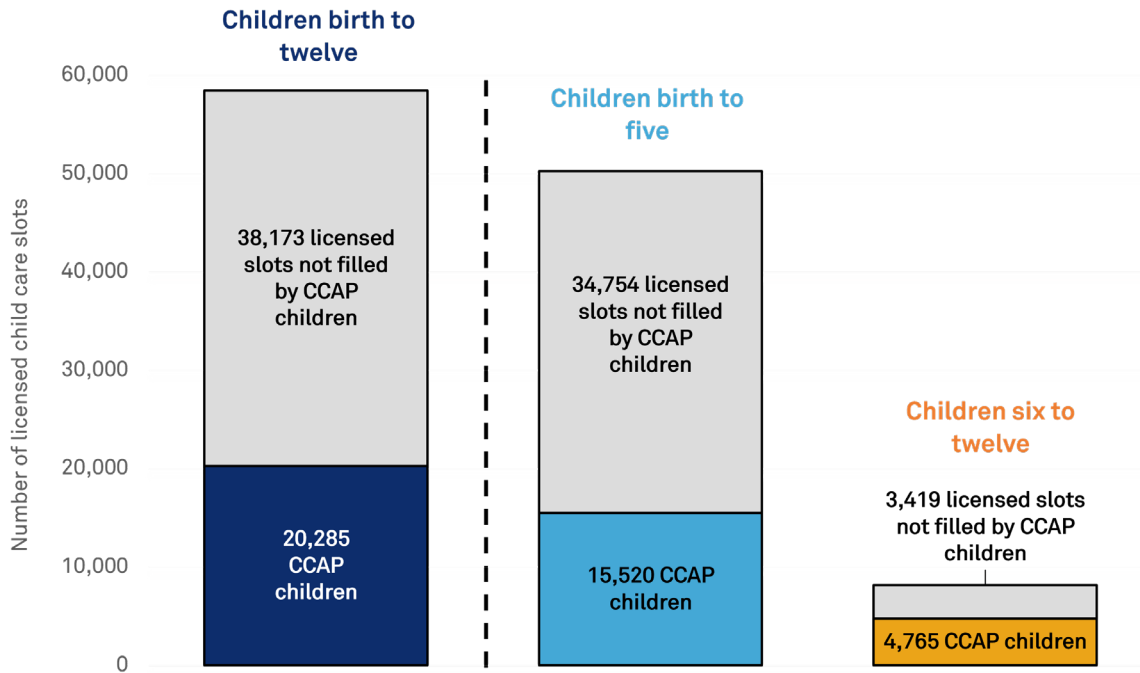


Note: Total licensed slots is the total capacity among licensed providers. It contains extended capacity, which is the number of additional school-age children a provider can care for beyond their licensed capacity during out-of-school time. Number of CCAP children in licensed settings is the number of CCAP children age birth to five and six to twelve in licensed settings in June 2025.

We also examine CCAP enrollment relative to capacity specifically in licensed centers, overall and by age group. Licensed home-based enrollment is not included here because we cannot disaggregate capacity by age group in child care homes. Overall, CCAP is a sizeable source of support for younger children in licensed centers, and the predominant source of support for older children.

In June 2025, licensed centers had approximately 58,000 slots available for children age birth to twelve. Just over 20,000 children with CCAP subsidies were enrolled in these settings, representing 35 percent of total licensed capacity. Looking at CCAP enrollment relative to licensed capacity by age group, roughly 15,000 children birth to five using CCAP subsidies were enrolled in licensed centers, out of roughly 50,000 available slots for this age group. Among children age six to twelve, roughly 5,000 were enrolled with CCAP subsidies out of 8,000 available slots (see figure on next page). This suggests that CCAP is a sizeable source of support for younger children birth to five who receive care in licensed centers, and the predominant source of support for older children age six to twelve.

## Monthly average of the number of child care slots filled by CCAP children

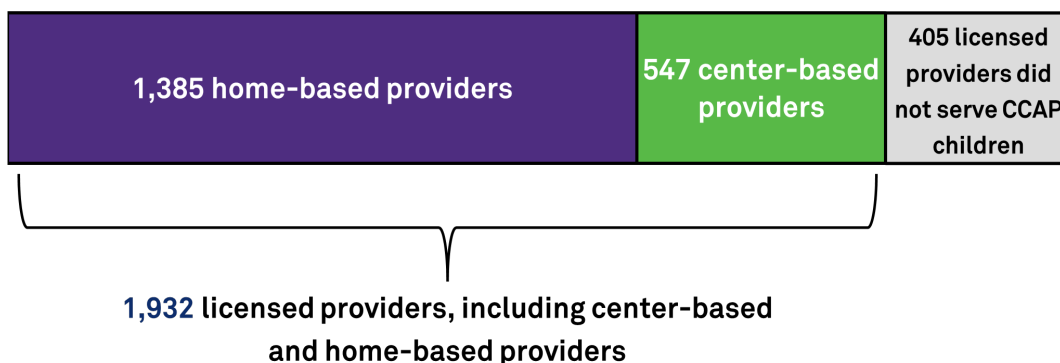


Note: Total licensed slots is the total capacity among licensed childcare centers. Number of CCAP children in licensed settings is the enrollment of CCAP children in each age group in June 2025. Licensed center slots by age is an approximation that assumes 86 percent of licensed center-based slots serve children ages birth to five and 14 percent of licensed center-based slots serve children ages six to twelve. This proportion is based on information from 65 percent of Chicago licensed centers that reported slots by age range. We applied this split to total licensed center-based capacity to estimate the number of slots by age group. We do not know whether the centers that provided information on slots by age group are representative of all providers in the city. If centers that did not provide this information tended to serve older or younger children than centers that did provide this information, our estimates of the total number of slots by age group may be inaccurate.

## Most of Chicago’s licensed child care providers participated in the CCAP system

As of June 2025, 1,932 out of 2,337 of the city’s licensed providers (83 percent) served at least one child with a CCAP subsidy. This included 1,385 out of 1,564 home-based providers and 547 out of 773 center-based providers. Only 405 licensed providers (17 percent) did not serve any CCAP children (see figure below).

### 83% of licensed providers participated in CCAP in June 2025



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## Conclusion

CCAP is the backbone of Chicago’s child care system and provides critical infrastructure to support working families. In 2025, nearly 70,000 children from birth to age twelve relied on CCAP subsidies — that equates to one in five children citywide from birth to twelve, and one in four for the youngest children (ages birth to five). Every one of Chicago’s 77 communities had families in CCAP. But there is also significant variation across the city, where in some communities, upwards of 50 percent of children birth to five received child care subsidies. Half of all licensed child care slots were filled by CCAP children, and most licensed providers in the city participated. By making child care more affordable, CCAP is the critical engine powering Chicago’s working families and the local economy.

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## Acknowledgements

Many knowledgeable, hardworking, and caring professionals quickly assembled to write this Data Brief in a timely manner. As noted on the front page, we are attributing authorship of the paper to two organizations whose staff did the work of gathering and checking statistics, creating figures and maps, writing the text, and double and triple checking the final document. The two organizations are the Early Childhood Research Alliance of Chicago (EC\*REACH), at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, and Illinois Action for Children. These are the staff members from the two groups who worked so well together (in alphabetical order): David Alexander, John Q. Easton, Isabel Farrar, Angela Farwig, Katie Gonzalez, Jordan Herron, Arthur Raines, Terri Sabol, Diane Schanzenbach, and Marcia Stoll. Arthur Raines and Katie Gonzalez led the analysis.

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We sincerely hope that our partners across Chicago find this short paper useful and that they will share it freely with their partners, collaborators, and funders.

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## Technical Appendix

The figures for this report draw on administrative data on child and provider participation in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) from Illinois Action for Children, licensing data from the Department of Child and Family Services, and data from the American Community Survey (ACS). Below, we describe how we used data from each source.

### Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)

Data on children and providers participating in the Child Care Assistance Program are drawn from a summary of administrative records provided by Illinois Action for Children. Illinois Action for Children serves as the Child Care Resource and Referral agency for the Chicago region. The administrative data set includes counts of children and providers that participated in CCAP in each month of the 2025 calendar year, based on payment month. Data also include the monthly average and the annual unique count of children served by each age group, including children birth to twelve, birth to five, and six to twelve. CCAP funding is mainly dispersed in the form of vouchers that eligible families can use at any approved child care provider (center- or home-based). A small portion of CCAP funding is contracted directly to centers. The numbers in this brief reflect the number of children with CCAP vouchers. The numbers do not include a small number of children who received care in centers with CCAP contracts. We report the following:

***Number of Chicago children with CCAP***, which represents the unique count of children in Chicago who received a CCAP subsidy at some point between January and December 2025, regardless of whether their child care provider is in Chicago. Data also include information on the number of children with CCAP subsidies served each month. The annual unique count is higher than any single monthly count because children may enter and exit the program over the course of a year.

***Number of Chicago licensed providers that participated in CCAP***, which represents the count of licensed child care providers in Chicago that served at least one child receiving a CCAP voucher in June 2025. Data include counts of the total number of licensed providers, and the number of licensed centers and licensed home-based providers. We report the share of all licensed providers participating in CCAP using June 2025 data because the DCFS quarterly licensing file provides the total count of licensed providers and their licensed capacities as of June 2025.

***Number of CCAP children in licensed providers***, which represents enrollment of children with CCAP subsidies in licensed centers and home-based providers in Chicago in June 2025. Data include CCAP enrollment in licensed settings separately by age group (including children age birth to twelve, birth to five, and six to twelve) and setting type (including all licensed centers and licensed home-based providers).

### DCFS Licensed Child Care Programs

Data on the capacity of centers and home-based providers comes from the DCFS quarterly file. We report the following:

**Total licensed capacity**, which represents the total capacity across licensed centers and home-based providers who are licensed by DCFS as of June 2025. Licensed capacity includes extended capacity, which reflects the additional school-age children a provider can care for beyond their regular daytime capacity when assistants are present. Data include licensed capacity separately by setting type, including centers and home-based providers.

**Licensed capacity in centers by age group**, which represents the estimated number of slots in licensed centers for children age birth to five and for children age six to twelve. Information on licensed capacity by age group is not directly available from DCFS. Instead, we estimate the number of slots by age group using information from the Illinois Action for Children Referral Database, which contains information on the number of slots by child age for 507 out of 783 centers (65 percent) that were licensed as of June 2025:

- First, among the subset of centers that reported capacity by age, we calculated the proportion of licensed slots that were for children birth to five. We calculate that approximately 86 percent of slots in this subsample of licensed centers were for children age birth to five.
- Second, to calculate the number of slots in Chicago’s licensed centers for children birth to five, we multiplied the total number of slots across all licensed centers in Chicago by this proportion. We calculated that 50,274 out of 58,458 slots in licensed centers were for children birth to five.
- Third, to calculate the number of slots in Chicago for children six to twelve, we took the difference between total licensed capacity and the estimated capacity for children birth to five. We calculated that 8,184 slots in licensed centers were for children age six to twelve.

We do not know whether the 65 percent of licensed centers that provided information on slots by age group are representative of all licensed centers in the city. If centers that did not provide this information tended to serve older or younger children than centers that did provide this information, our estimates about the total number of slots by child age group may be inaccurate.

### **American Community Survey**

Data on the population of children in each age range (including birth to five, six to twelve, and birth to twelve) in Chicago are drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), Table B09001 (Population Under 18 Years by Age). This table provides estimates of the number of children by age group at the national, state, and sub-state geographic levels. We used the most recent available ACS 2024 5-year estimate to report the total number of children in each age group residing in Chicago. These population counts are the denominator when calculating the share of children in the city who received CCAP subsidies.

We also used this information to calculate the share of children receiving CCAP at some point in 2025 by community area. Illinois Action for Children provided CCAP child counts aggregated to the community area level. To calculate the share of children receiving CCAP in each community area, we divided the aggregated count of CCAP children in each community area by the total child population in the corresponding age group from the ACS data.