

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Child Care Ratios in Texas and Children's Safety

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services' (DFPS) minimum ratio standards for licensed child-care centers and facilities establish the maximum number of children allowed per caregiver in a child care setting based on children's ages. Currently, the Child Care Licensing (CCL) Division of DFPS collects and reports whether a child care center has violated the minimum ratio standards set by the state, but does not collect or report the actual ratio data. In June 2016, CCL representatives collected and reported ratio data during their annual licensing inspections. Analyses of these data show that centers in which all classrooms had ratios better than the minimum standard were significantly safer compared to other centers. Ratio data should be collected on an ongoing basis to help inform whether the state's minimum ratio standards are adequate at keeping children safe.

In June 2016, the Collaborative for Children (CC), Children's Learning Institute (CLI), and the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) partnered with the Child Care Licensing (CCL) Division of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to collect data on child care ratios in licensed centers serving infants and toddlers in Texas. CCL currently collects and reports information on whether a center violated the minimum ratio standards set by the state, but does not collect or report the actual ratio data (e.g., the number of children and caregivers present during the inspection). Ratio data can help inform whether the state's minimum ratio standards are adequate at keeping children safe. Previous analyses of data from the 13 county Gulf Coast Region indicated that child care centers with ratio standards better than those required by Texas have significantly fewer reported serious incidents, and centers with at least one ratio violation had a higher number of supervision deficiencies (violations for inadequately supervising children) than did centers with no ratio citations.¹

CCL agreed to have their licensing representatives, who conduct annual (and sometimes more frequent) inspections of every licensed child care center in the state, complete a short survey in which they reported the number of children and caregivers present, the specified age group of the classroom, and whether the observation occurred during an abnormal time (e.g., drop-off or pick-up, naptime, etc.). Data collection began in June and was supposed to continue through August, but was discontinued suddenly at the end of June after a change in leadership at DFPS

and CCL. Preliminary analyses of the ratio data collected in June 2016 are provided below, but our limited sample, though random, is not fully representative of centers around the state and these results should be interpreted as suggestive, not conclusive.

The Sample

A total of 432 survey responses were collected from CCL reps throughout June 2016. Data from DFPS on indicators of children’s safety: 1) reports of serious or critical injuries; 2) serious incident reports; and 3) supervision deficiencies in licensed child care centers over the last two years were matched with our survey responses. Serious or critical injuries reflect the number of reported, not confirmed, injuries. Licensing defines a serious injury as any physical injury to the child’s overall health or well-being (i.e. an injury that requires medical attention). Licensing defined critical injury as a life-threatening injury that requires life-resuscitation methods. Serious incidents can include serious accidental injury or medical incident; inappropriate discipline or inappropriate physical restraint; serious physical or emotional harm or death caused by abuse or neglect; or death of a child.

Of the 432 responses, 29 were excluded because we identified that the observed child care operation was not center-based, but instead a registered or licensed child care home. Other responses were excluded because they were duplicates or incomplete (the CCL rep did not finish the survey). Data from 353 centers (1,750 classrooms), or approximately 4 percent of the 8,352 licensed child care operations open at the time of the survey, are included in the following analyses.

Region	Total Operations	Matched, complete survey responses	(% of total operations)
1	234	4	2%
2	174	3	2%
3	1975	119	6%
4	295	28	9%
5	191	6	3%
6	2062	59	3%
7	1250	12	1%
8	798	57	7%
9	196	5	3%
10	221	16	7%
11	956	43	5%
Total	8352	353	4%

Specified Age Groups

Texas establishes ratio standards based on the specified age of the children in the group (classroom), which ranges from infancy to age 13. Given a specified age group, Texas sets a maximum number of children that one caregiver may supervise. If the number of children in the group exceeds that maximum, the ratio standard has been violated. The maximum number of children per caregiver across the specified age groups is provided below.

If the specified age of the children in the group is...	Then the maximum number of children one caregiver may supervise is...
0 – 11 months	4
12 – 17 months	5
18 – 23 months	9
2 years	11
3 years	15
4 years	18
5 years	22
6 – 8 years	26
9 – 13 years	26

Classroom Ratios and the Minimum Standard

If the number of children observed in a classroom by the CCL reps exceeded the maximum number of children allowed given the number of caregivers observed in the classroom, this classroom was identified as **VIOLATING THE MINIMUM STANDARD.**

If the number of children observed in a classroom by the CCL reps was equal to the maximum number of children allowed given the number of caregivers observed in the classroom, this classroom was identified as **MEETING THE MINIMUM STANDARD.**

If the number of children observed in a classroom by the CCL reps was less than the maximum number of children allowed given the number of caregivers observed in the classroom, this classroom was identified as being **BETTER THAN THE MINIMUM STANDARD.**

The majority (nearly 90%) of classrooms in this sample were observed with ratios that were better than the minimum standard. Importantly, it should be noted, high ratios were not prevalent in this sample. Very few classrooms (2%) were observed violating the minimum standard.

Children-to-caregiver ratios:	Number (%) of classrooms
Observed violating the minimum standard	32 (2%)
Observed meeting the minimum standard	130 (8%)
Observed being better than the minimum standard	1,355 (89%)

Excellent, Good, and Poor Child Care Centers

The 353 centers were categorized into three groups based on the proportion of classrooms in the center that were violating, meeting, or better than the minimum standard for the number of children per caregiver. Roughly half of the centers were categorized as excellent, another 43 percent were categorized as good, and 8 percent of centers were categorized as poor.

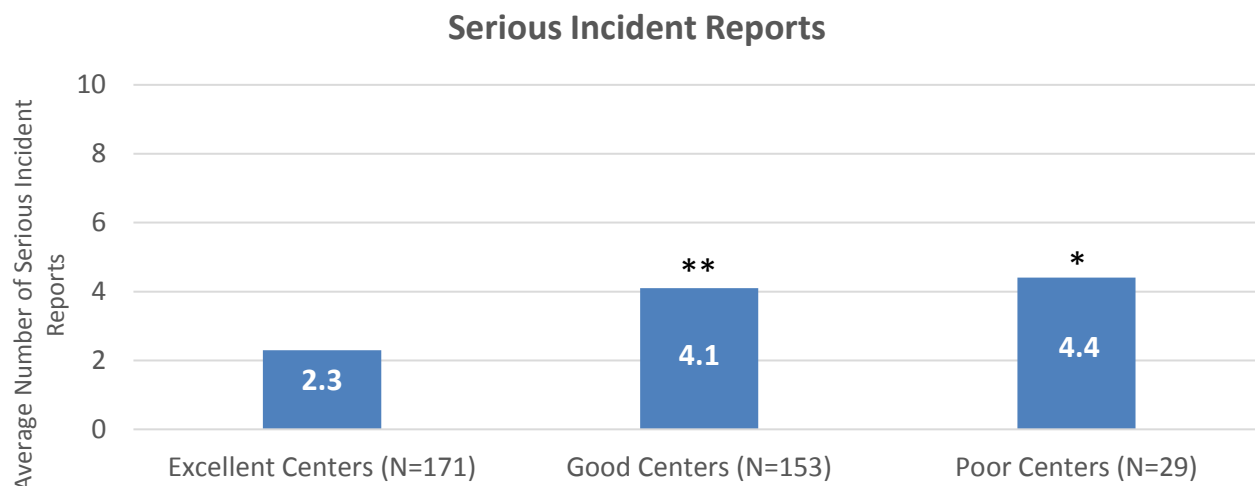
Center type	Description	Number (%) of centers
Excellent	100% of classrooms observed with ratios better than the minimum standard	171 (48%)
Good	100% of classrooms observed met the minimum standard (or better), but not all classrooms were better than minimum standard	153 (43%)
Poor	At least one classroom observed with a ratio violating the minimum standard	29 (8%)

When ALL Classrooms are Better than the Minimum, Children are Safer

Analyses of the available data suggest that excellent centers, those in which all of the observed classrooms were better than the ratio minimum, are safer for children compared to other centers.

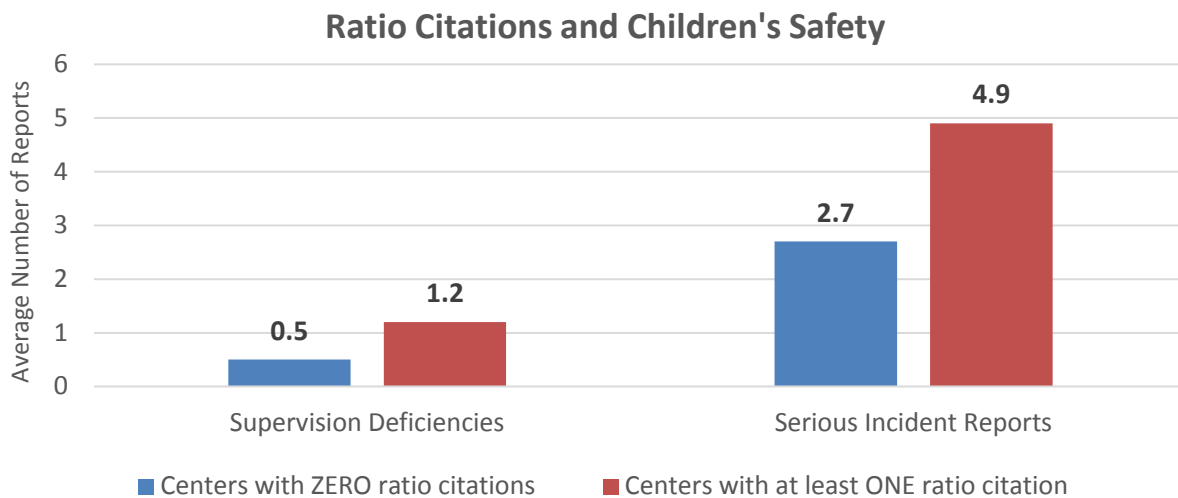
Excellent centers are significantly more likely to have ZERO supervision deficiencies and ZERO reports of serious or critical injuries, when compared to all other centers.

Excellent centers have significantly fewer serious incident reports on average compared to both good centers and poor centers—both have nearly twice the number of serious incident reports as excellent centers.



Note. Excellent centers have significantly fewer incident reports compared to good centers ($p < .01$) and poor centers ($p < .05$).

Additionally, data from DFPS show that centers with zero ratio citations have significantly fewer supervision deficiencies and fewer incident reports compared to centers with at least one ratio citation. Centers with at least one ratio citation have twice as many supervision deficiencies, and approximately 80 percent more serious incident reports than do centers with zero ratio citations.



Conclusion

These findings, though preliminary, suggest an important link between classroom ratios and children’s safety in child care centers. Centers in which all classrooms had ratios better than the minimum standard were significantly safer compared to other centers. Additional data are necessary to fully support the link between ratios and children’s safety, and to determine the ideal ratio for ensuring children’s safety in child care settings. Ongoing collection of ratio data during licensing inspections would provide the State and parents with important information about how safe children are in child care classrooms.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

Please contact cfpr@austin.utexas.edu for additional information.

¹ Collaborative for Children. (2015). Safety data supporting improved childcare ratios and group sizes.