

Where Do the Children Play?

Private daycares are trending in Cuba, but can they help curb a demographic downturn?

by Julienne Gage

Many childcare providers are opening small, home-based centers

When former school teacher Eneyda Díaz Díaz opened a childcare center in her native Cardenas, she didn't know how to run a business, nor did she expect so much demand in an island where the birthrate has been substantially shrinking for decades.

"I had no idea how to start. I had a loan, I had two kids I knew I needed to feed, and so with that money, I put together the basics and the Garden of Eden was born on the terrace of my house," she said during a presentation on entrepreneurship at the 2017 Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy conference in Miami. "The majority of us Cubans begin businesses out of necessity."

In 2015, Cuba had an average of 10.9 births per 1,000 people, about half of what it was in the 1970s, and substantially less than the World Bank's estimated global

average of about 19 births per 1,000 today. This has contributed to what demographers call a "depressed" birthrate.

Even so, Díaz quickly discovered there weren't enough daycares, especially in areas where parents work long hours in the burgeoning private sector. State-run daycares are short on subsidies and staff willing to work for low state salaries. Before Díaz even knew how to balance her accounts or grow her team, children were flooding in. "There were kids and kids and more kids, and I couldn't handle that all by myself," she said.

Fortunately, Cardenas' Center for Christian Reflection and Dialogue, a protestant organization helping Cubans start small and medium-sized businesses, gave her management training and helped her train and license other daycare specialists to assist her.

BABY MAKING CAPITAL

Daycares are of great interest to demographers because they could be part of a long-term solution to a rapidly approaching demographic crisis in Cuba. By 2021, the Cuban government estimates that more people will be retiring from the workforce than joining it.

"On average, we need two kids [per couple] just to sustain a population," explained Sergio Díaz-Briquets, a Cuban-American economist and owner of NTS, an international development consulting firm in Virginia. But Cubans have been falling short of that average for four decades. As women became more educated and involved in the workforce, many of them delayed having children, limited the number they had, or simply opted out of having any. While Cuba is more egalitarian