

There's not even close to enough child care in the United States for all the families that need it ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The undesirable properties of child care in the United States are not dissimilar to those found at your local tasting menu restaurant: The prices are too high; the quality is mixed; and, salt-on-the-wound, the portions are tiny. Parents looking for good child care encounter the same trifecta: high costs; unreliability; and, according to a pair of new studies, not enough supply to meet the need.

For a recent poll, NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health surveyed more than 1,000 parents nationwide and found that a third reported difficulty finding care. In a story out earlier this week, NPR reporter Jessica Deahl looks at the burden this places on individual families. One spent more than \$1,000 on wait-list fees to try to secure a place for its infant. Unfortunately, a spot didn't open up in time, so the family resorted to asking the baby's grandmothers to quit their jobs and split child care duties—until one did. Another devastating anecdote came from a California parents who spent much of their four-month maternity leave trying to find a place for their baby. After calling nearly 70 centers, they found a place for their son at an in-home facility. On his first day there, the boy was placed on his stomach to sleep, a big no-no, because it makes it harder for the baby to breathe and increases the likelihood of sudden infant death syndrome. Tragically, he stopped breathing shortly into his nap and died—cause of death: SIDS.

In October, the Center for American Progress released a report on child care deserts. According to its findings, 42 percent of American children under 5 years of age live in areas where there is insufficient supply of child care centers. They defined this as a ZIP code with at least 30 children under the age of 5 and either no child care centers or a population that includes three times as many children under age 5 as there are spaces in centers. Parents who do manage to find a spot, whether in a child care desert or oasis, are unlikely to feel really good about it; just 13 percent of 2-year-olds who are cared for outside their homes are in settings rated as high quality.

Most of the conversation surrounding the child care crisis has focused on costs, which are staggering. Research from the think tank New America and Care.com released last September found that the average cost of enrolling a child age 4 or younger full-time at a child care center in America is \$9,589 per year, which is higher than the average cost of in-state college tuition. As such, many of the solutions to the crisis, from both the right and the left, have focused on reducing these costs, whether through vouchers, tax credits, or rebates.

But as these reports on scarcity make clear, solving the child care crisis isn't just a matter of reducing costs, but also of increasing the number of centers. Our current situation—low supply and high demand, even in spite of the high costs—illustrates why the marketplace can't solve this problem on its own. The issue is that providing high-quality and safe child care is expensive and leaves little room for profit. As Deahl explains: "Costs are high, factoring in real estate, supplies, insurance and, above all, labor. Many states require a ratio of one caregiver to every three or four babies."

There are a handful of large child care companies—including Bright Horizons, which manages 1,000 centers across the country—that manage to offer high-quality care at a reasonable price to parents and turn a profit. But the only reason they can pull this off is that they are subsidized by employers, which agree to pay part of their employees' child care bills as a job perk. While there's certainly room for this kind of marketplace-based solution to expand, it's not one that we can count on providing care for everyone, particularly lower-wage earners whose employers don't feel the need to seduce them with extra benefits.

In his child care proposal, President-elect Donald Trump promises a series of deductions and rebates for families to help cover costs, as well as the creation of "family-based and community-based solutions, and also add incentives for employers to provide child care at the workplace." While vague, this suggests that he believes the child care crisis can be solved with little or no investment of public resources into better infrastructure and more supply. Based on the high levels of scarcity and low quality in what's currently available, this is an assumption that is not only wrong, but also dangerous.

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