The US is stingier with child care and maternity leave than the rest of the world [1]

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AVAILABILITY
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EXCERPTS

In most American families led by couples, both parents are in the workforce [3]. At the same time, nearly 1 in 4 [4]U.S. children are being raised by single moms.

Yet child care is generally unaffordable and paid leave is not available to most U.S. parents.

Around the world, however, most employed women automatically get paid maternity leave. And in most wealthy countries, they also have access to affordable child care.

These holes in the national safety net are a problem for many reasons, including one I've been researching [5] with my colleagues for years: Paid parental leave and child care help women stay in the workforce [6] and earn higher wages [7] over time. This lack of parental leave and child care may explain why the U.S. is no longer a leader in women's workforce participation [8].

Maternity leave

The U.S. is one of a handful of countries [9] worldwide that does not mandate paid maternity leave. The other four are the low-income nations of Lesotho, Liberia, Papua New Guinea and Swaziland.

Paid leave, which typically lasts at least 14 weeks, needs to be designed thoughtfully. When women can and do take two or even three years off after having a baby, as they may in Hungary, long leaves can limit mothers' work experience and lead to discrimination.

The 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act did mandate 12 weeks of unpaid job protected leave for some American workers. Yet most families can't forgo the income that moms bring home [10].

Denmark offers what I think is a strong example. There, moms get almost 18 weeks of paid maternity leave and dads get two weeks of paid paternity leave. On top of that, couples get up to a total 32 weeks of parental leave, which parents can split. This policy grants parents both the time and resources necessary to care for children, without "mommy tracking" mothers.

[Graph available to view online, "Paid maternity leave", shows a variety of developed countries in order of number of weeks of paid leave mandated. Finland tops the list, with 161 weeks and the United States comes in last with 0 weeks of mandated paid leave].

Child care

In many wealthy countries, child care and preschool are considered a mainstay of the educational system. But in the U.S., only about half of all children between the ages of 3 and 6 are getting publicly supported child care of any kind, including kindergarten, versus 99 percent of kids that age in France [7].

[Scatter plot graph shows, "Public spending on child care and early-childhood education" by country. Available to view online].

While European Union countries spend an average of about $4,500 per child on early childhood education and care, the U.S. spends $2,400.

Interestingly, high-quality early childhood education programs are associated with many excellent outcomes for children from lower-income families: higher graduation rates, along with lower rates of teen pregnancy and juvenile crime.

In other words, when governments invest in child care [11] and maternity leave, it fosters a more productive, healthy and creative workforce.

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