

Five things you should know about the people watching your children^[1]

Caring for young children in the U.S. continues to be devalued as unskilled 'women's work'

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Source: The Hechinger Report

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Jun 2018

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EXCERPTS

More than 10 million children age 5 and younger spend their days in the care of 2 million adults who are not their parents. Those adults are mostly women and are disproportionately women of color. Even the best paid among them, those who teach kindergarten at public schools, are barely holding on to the bottom rungs of the middle class. Many live in poverty. Fifty-three percent of the child care workforce is enrolled in public assistance of some kind, compared to 21 percent of the U.S. workforce as a whole.

"Any woman doing 'women's work' is not seen as skilled," said Marcy Whitebook, co-director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, and lead author of the 2018 Early Childhood Workforce Index. All of the statistics cited above come from the new report.

"We have a history in this country of relying on poor women and women of color to take care of children of people who have more resources," Whitebook said. "This idea that you can be working full-time taking care of someone else's children and then worrying about feeding and clothing your own..." She trailed off and sighed. "In many countries there's a gap. It's just not as big."

Whitebook has studied the plight of child care workers for more than 40 years. When first researching the issue in 1976, she was stunned to find a 1918 review of "day nurseries" in Chicago highlighting the problems with low pay and poor working conditions for nursery "matrons."

One hundred years later, Whitebook said, we have the same problems.

"We've never built a 21st century system," Whitebook said. "That's what we have to do. The solution is public investment."

Here are five key facts from the 2018 index that illustrate what the people watching young children in this country are facing as they go about their work:

1. They earn shockingly little.

Across all settings, child care workers earn an average of \$10.72 per hour or \$22,290 per year. That's less than the federal poverty level for a family of four.

The best paid of the adults caring for children ages 5 and younger are kindergarten teachers who work in public schools and have at least a bachelor's degree, if not a master's. Kindergarten teachers earn an average of \$31.29 per hour or about \$53,030 per year, according to Whitebook's report.

For comparison, construction laborers have about the same level of education as that required for child care assistants. But construction laborers, most of whom are men, earn an average of \$18.70 per hour or \$38,890 per year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Civil engineers, the most educated and best paid workers in the construction industry, earn an average of \$44.13 per hour or \$91,790 per year.

More than half, 53 percent, of child care workers are enrolled in some form of public assistance. Among child care workers who care for infants and toddlers and earn an average of \$10.10 per hour, that percentage rises. Just 21 percent of the U.S. workforce as a whole receives public assistance.

2. The earnings bump for getting a better education is smaller than in other fields.

[Bar graph available to view online, 'Mean Annual Salary of Teachers With at Least a Bachelor's Degree by Occupation & For All Workers by Gender, 2012']

Child care workers who earn a bachelor's degree make more than their colleagues with just an associate's degree or with no degree, but early childhood majors still make less than any other college-educated workers.

And where they work matters. Early educators employed by the federally funded Head Start program, which has pushed its teachers to earn bachelor's degrees, make \$3.74 more per hour or \$7,780 more per year, than they would with no degree. Those who work for school-sponsored preK programs get a bigger bump: \$8.24 more per hour or \$17,000 more per year.

In comparison, the average U.S. worker with a bachelor's degree makes \$23,972 more per year than the average worker with just a high school diploma, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

3. They are disproportionately women of color.

Forty percent of child care workers are women of color.

Women of color also hold the least well-paid jobs in the sector. Hispanic women are more likely to be aides, rather than classroom teachers. And black women are more likely to work with infants and toddlers, rather than with preschoolers.

Even controlling for education level, black child care workers are paid particularly poorly. They make \$1,622 less per year on average than their white colleagues. Black women are also overrepresented among unlisted home-based care providers, an especially poorly paid segment of the workforce.

4. Where they live matters to their quality of life, sort of.

[Bar graph available to view online, 'Race/Ethnicity of Center-Based Staff by Job Role: National']

In all states, child care workers earned less than two-thirds of the state median wage. And there are no states where the median child care worker wage meets the living wage threshold for a single adult with one child. All but three of the 23 states that have had minimum wage increases since 2015 have also had bumps in child care worker pay.

Statewide policies regulating teacher qualifications, community and state college enrollment, paid family leave and minimum wage levels affect early childhood educators who are usually offered minimal benefits.

Early childhood educators also rarely get planning time, paid professional development or retirement benefits. These issues have been made part of states' systems to improve child care quality in some states, which could be a model for improvement, the report states.

5. We don't actually know that much about them.

There is no comprehensive, national way to track data about the child care workforce. The data in the report is pulled from several sources and based on the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment's own research. Without better data, report authors insist, it will continue to be difficult to improve the plight of the people taking care of America's youngest children.

Region: United States ^[3]

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