

We have a child-care crisis in this country. We had the solution 78 years ago. ^[1]

The federal government responded smartly and swiftly to the child-care crisis brought on by WWII.

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Source: The Washington Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 22 Jul 2018

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EXCERPTS

Millions of babies are born in this country every year, although the numbers are declining. Last year, the United States had its lowest birthrate in 30 years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In a new survey, in which participants were asked why they were having fewer children than they wanted, the top responses were almost all economic: “child care is too expensive,” “can’t afford more children,” “waited because of financial instability,” “worried about the economy.” Babies are costly, and the current administration is not offering relief for the majority anytime soon.

For all the joy and privilege of becoming a mother in America, most of us are navigating a host of challenges with little to no societal support: the physical effects of labor, the chronic sleep deprivation, the complexities of breast-feeding (logistically and politically), juggling the demands of work and family. But perhaps the most daunting is finding and paying for child care.

The United States holds the dubious distinction of being the only developed country in the world that does not offer paid maternity leave as a federal mandate. If and when a woman returns to work after having a baby, she must confront the sobering reality of securing care for her child. (Even if she is partnered, the responsibility is likely to fall to her, statistically speaking.) Once she determines whether there are viable options in her area — by no means a given — she’s likely to encounter a wait list. If a spot does become available, she must then contend with sticker shock: In more than half of states, the cost of child care exceeds public university tuition.

It hasn’t always been like this. Once upon a time, the country set mothers up for greater success, if only unintentionally.

During World War II, as more and more men found themselves on the front lines, ammunition factories were short of workers. The solution: Women took their jobs. During the war, 6.5 million American women joined the labor force; the percentage of working women with children younger than 10 increased from 7.8 to 12.1 percent between 1940 and 1944. This significant uptick in working mothers left countless young children at home and unsupervised.

The government resolved the quandary by swiftly amending the Lanham Act. The 1940 law, which allowed for the provision of war-related grants, would now also provide for the establishment of federally subsidized child-care centers nationwide.

Serving thousands of families across all income levels, these programs were innovative, smartly designed and well equipped to serve mothers’ needs. In addition to play spaces, they included medical clinics that provided vaccinations and routine health care, as well as infirmaries where sick children could be tended to by doctors and nurses. They offered an amenity that would make today’s parents swoon: personal shoppers who fulfilled a mom’s customized grocery list while she was at work. Items were bagged and ready when she came to pick up her children at quitting time, right down to the chicken dinner.

At the program’s peak in 1944, 130,000 children were enrolled. The federal government spent \$52 million on the program between August 1943 and February 1946; parents paid an additional \$26 million in user fees, which in today’s dollars would be \$9 or \$10 a day.

A report released at the time suggested overwhelming satisfaction with these centers. More than 80 percent of those surveyed had favorable opinions, while nearly 90 percent said the programs should be established in every school district and made available to both working and stay-at-home moms. In a much more recent analysis of the far-ranging effect of the program, Chris Herbst of Arizona State University reported on the outcomes of the children who were enrolled. “They were more likely to be employed, have higher earnings, and less likely to need cash assistance as adults,” he writes. “In addition, the benefits of the program accrued largely to the most economically disadvantaged individuals.”

After the war ended, the Child Welfare League of America lobbied to keep the centers open. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her newspaper column, “Many thought [the centers] were purely a war emergency measure. A few of us had an inkling that perhaps they were a need which was constantly with us, but one that we had neglected to face in the past ... it would seem to be in the interests of the community to organize child care centers and see that they are properly run. Where state help is needed, it should be given; and when states are

incapable of giving sufficient help, it should be forthcoming on a national scale as it has been in the war years.” But the efforts of Roosevelt and others were for naught. Despite irrefutable evidence of the program’s efficacy, funding was cut shortly after the end of the war, and centers were closed within a year or two.

In 1971, we came close to realizing a second nationwide, federally subsidized system of child care. Then current research on children’s development during the critical zero- to 5-year period helped inform Congress’s decision to pass the Comprehensive Child Development Act with bipartisan support. According to the plan, free care would be provided to the country’s poorest children, with their more advantaged peers enrolled on a sliding scale. Shortly after Congress took action, President Richard M. Nixon was scheduled to visit China. In an unfortunate twist, conservative presidential adviser Pat Buchanan framed the act as not only fiscally irresponsible, but also a threat to democracy at large. He suggested that federally subsidized day care would impose the “moral authority” of the government, systematically weakening the nation’s families. Nixon vetoed the act, and mothers were again left to fend for themselves.

Although the Lanham and Comprehensive Child Development Acts fizzled, they established compelling precedents for federally funded day care. In fact, the government is still enacting some versions of them. One is Early Head Start, a child-care program run by the Administration for Children & Families. Intended for youngsters from birth to age 3 who fall at or below the poverty level, and for homeless and foster children, EHS lacks the necessary funding to meet the demand, and wait lists are the norm. The second option is afforded to military families. After identifying that a surprising number of those on active duty had been absent from training because of a lack of child care, the Army decided that providing reliable access was a matter of national security – not the 1940s.

The Military Child Care Act of 1989 outlines a detailed plan. Cost is determined by parental income level. A mother who enrolls her child generally pays no more than 10 percent of her salary, a sharp contrast to her civilian peers, who are likely to pay twice that. Military child-care centers are conveniently located on base, and are uniformly accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. (Only about 10 percent of their nonmilitary counterparts are accredited by the NAEYC or a similar organization.)

The child-care models offered by the Lanham and Military Child Care acts are neither uniquely inspired nor perfect. What they were, and are, is funded: paid for because those in power appreciated a substantial risk to our country if those resources were unavailable. The truth is, a larger, pervasive threat already exists. Forty-two percent of children younger than 5 live in parts of the country considered “child-care deserts,” rural areas where no child-care centers are located or can meet the demand. This results in lost wages and benefits for parents who are forced to quit jobs to care for their children at home. Families who can access day care are forced to pour the bulk of the resources into covering those costs.

Yet President Trump’s budget for fiscal 2018 indicates a \$100 million cut in funding to military child care. His daughter and adviser Ivanka Trump’s child-care plan, a proposal that offers tax deductions determined by the cost of child care in each state, has been reported by members of both parties to favor those who need it the least – the rich.

Raising the next generation of citizens to run our country requires love, time and attention, obligations most parents fulfill. But it also requires money, more than most hard-working parents can come by, and they are responding by having fewer children. We might not be embroiled in a world war, but as a nation that depends on robust birthrates to thrive, we are imperiled.

Region: United States ^[3]

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