

# D.C.'s universal pre-k program is keeping more women in the workforce <sup>[1]</sup>

Low-income parents, in particular, are much more likely to be working or looking for work due to the free program, a new study finds.

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Free, universal preschool in Washington, D.C., has made it much more likely that mothers of young children will join the city's workforce, according to a new study by the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank.

The city's novel preschool program, rolled out in 2009, has increased mothers' labor force participation rate by roughly 10 percentage points, the study estimates. D.C. women with children ages 5 or younger are now just as likely to be working or looking for a job as women whose kids are in elementary school or older.

The findings make a strong case for putting public dollars toward robust preschool programs so parents can continue working, rather than quit their jobs or go on hiatus until their children reach kindergarten, said Rasheed Malik, the study's author.

"It's an interesting case where a city has shown a prolonged and substantial investment in providing public preschool," said Malik, the father of a two-year-old and a six-year-old in D.C. "For me, this is an example of how quality preschool can really change the calculus for working families."

The cost of decent day care is high throughout much of the country, and obscene in D.C. Parents in the city pay roughly \$23,000, on average, for a year of day care for one child, compared to the \$9,000 U.S. average, according to the advocacy group Child Care Aware of America. Parents must weigh that extraordinary cost against their own salaries, and often find that working isn't worthwhile when day care wipes out much or all of their earnings.

Leaving the workforce for an extended period costs more than just lost wages: It can slow salary growth, leading to lower cumulative earnings in the future, and can also shrink retirement accounts and Social Security payments. Historically, women have been much more likely than men to take on child care duties and pay a price in their careers.

The D.C. preschool program was designed to blunt that financial hit. Residents of all income levels can now send their 3- and 4-year-olds to full-day preschool for free at the city's public schools and charter schools — a highly unusual public benefit in the U.S. The program reduces the time parents have to quit working or shell out for day care from five years to three, making the expense more bearable.

CAP's findings suggest the program has been a boon to working women. Before free pre-K launched, D.C. mothers' labor force participation was around 65 percent. By 2016, it was up to 76.4 percent. Around three-quarters of the city's eligible children were enrolled in the public preschool program by then, at a cost to the city of roughly \$17,000 per child, according to CAP. (The high per-pupil cost is likely because the city's preschool teachers are paid on par with elementary school teachers.)

**"This is an example of how quality preschool can really change the calculus for working families."**

**- Rasheed Malik, Center for American Progress**

Washington, D.C., has gentrified significantly over the last decade, getting whiter and wealthier as rising housing costs displace minorities earning lower incomes. The CAP report acknowledges those changes complicate any analysis of the free pre-K program's effects. But Malik found that the labor participation rate for mothers with children already in elementary school didn't really change in those years.

However, the labor force participation rate increased markedly for women with children under five, suggesting that free pre-K was driving the change. (The study used neighboring municipalities in Virginia and Maryland as a control group to account for the improving economy and other factors that could affect the labor participation rate.)

The U.S. tends to spend far less money than other developed countries on early childhood education. Democrats on Capitol Hill have floated a bill that would cap the amount of money families have to devote to child care, but it hasn't gone anywhere in the Republican-controlled Congress. In a recent survey by CAP, 41 percent of parents who responded said someone in the house had passed on a job or training opportunity because they needed to take care of a child.

When it comes to keeping women in the labor pool, the benefits of the program in D.C. have not accrued equally across income levels. Malik found that both low-income and high-income mothers were much more likely to be working or seeking work after the pre-K program was created. But there was virtually no change in the labor participation rate for middle-income mothers — perhaps, Malik says, because so many of those women were already working out of necessity, making their labor participation rate high.

Low-income mothers' labor participation rate increased the most, jumping from 40 percent to 55 percent. The increases were particularly quick for unmarried mothers and mothers without a high school degree. But while those women were much more likely to be in the labor force, Malik found they were more likely than women in the higher income brackets to be underemployed or looking for a job.

Overall, Malik said the D.C. program is helping individual families and could have macroeconomic benefits in the long run. Parents have significantly cut down the time they have to choose between not working and paying for day care, and more workers in the labor pool can help the economy grow.

“A big component of sustained economic growth nationally was more people being able to enter the labor force,” Malik said. “The difference between stepping out of the labor force for five years versus two or three years is really significant, especially for single parents.”

**Region:** United States [3]

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