# Why the U.S. has long resisted universal child care [1]

Americans still aren't in agreement that mothers should work at all.
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EXCERPTS

Most Americans say it's not ideal for a child to be raised by two working parents. Yet in two-thirds of American families, both parents work.

This disconnect between ideals and reality helps explain why the United States has been so resistant to universal public child care. Even as child care is setting up to be an issue in the presidential campaign, a more basic question has recently resurfaced: whether mothers should work in the first place.

In many ways, it has already been settled: 93 percent of fathers and 72 percent of mothers with children at home are in the labor force. It helps the economy when women work, research shows, and it's often economically beneficial for their families, too — 40 percent of women are their families' breadwinners. Significant evidence demonstrates that when there's high-quality, affordable, easy-to-find child care, more women work.

Some form of early childhood care and learning is part of the campaign platform of most of the Democratic presidential candidates. President Trump has not supported universal child care, but has bolstered existing child care policies, including approving a record increase to the Child Care and Development Fund for low-income families and a child tax credit increase.

Yet there has also been a revived discussion over whether mothers should outsource child care at all. Tucker Carlson, the Fox News host, earlier this year denounced what he called the belief that "it's more virtuous to devote your life to some soulless corporation than it is to raise your own kids."

One-third of Democrats surveyed by the Pew Research Center said it was ideal for one parent to stay home. (Half said it didn't matter if it was the mother or the father, but in most opposite-sex couples, it's the mother.)

The debate persists because in the United States, the resistance to public child care has never been mainly about economics. It has been rooted in a moral argument — that the proper place for mothers (at least certain ones) is at home with their children.

"In the United States, child care is still at the political level viewed symbolically and not economically," said Leah Ruppanner, a sociologist at the University of Melbourne. "All of the discussions are around the sanctity of motherhood, preserving the traditional family. Women and families are living very different lives from that."

She is an author of a study published this month in the journal Socius that found that in states where child care is more affordable and school days are longer, more mothers work than in states where it's expensive and school days are short. It used American Time Use Survey data from 30,000 working-age mothers with school-age children at home, from 2005 to 2014, and state data on the average school day length and the cost of full-time child care.

California, Oregon and Washington, for instance, have among the lowest shares of women working, and some of the most expensive child care and shortest school days. North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska have higher shares of women in the work force, more affordable child care and longer school days.

Research has shown that in industrialized countries, subsidized child care and education had the single biggest effect on women's employment. In Washington, D.C., public pre-K increased the labor force participation of women with young children by 10 percentage points. The lack of subsidized child care was a major reason the share of women working in the United States unexpectedly stalled in the 1990s. The economic benefits of good, affordable child care for low-income children extend for generations, research has shown, and some studies indicate spending on it more than pays for itself.

"As child care costs increase over the decade, what happens is we see mothers are spending more time in child care," said Ms. Ruppanner, who conducted the study with Stephanie Moller at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Liana Sayer at the University of Maryland. "You're boxing women out of the labor market."

But in the United States, people have long had conflicted feelingsabout whether society and government should make it easier for mothers to work outside the home, and these are complicated by attitudes about race and poverty.

In the 19th century, people thought it was fitting for women to use child care and to work for pay only if their husbands were unable to support them because of death, disability, divorce or drunkenness, said Sonya Michel, professor emerita of history at the University of Maryland. A network of day nurseries started, mostly financed by philanthropy. By the turn of the century, though, they'd been replaced by so-called widows' or mothers' pensions. The idea was that if a woman didn't have a husband to support her, it was still best that she stay home.

The expectation was different for black mothers, beginning with enslaved Africans. Later, poor black mothers were often denied the pensions that white mothers got. Today, most families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are required to work — and receive some government help with child care to do so.

"The country has been so traditional in the persistence of the idea that women did not belong in the work force," Ms. Michel said, "but the idea that poor women, especially black women, should work has persisted."

Just 18 percent of Americans told Pew that it's best if both parents work full time, and nearly half said one parent should stay home. Today, Americans are more likely to believe in gender equality in work and politics than in the home, a large study found. Certain scholars and far-right politicians around the world have also been using arguments about preserving traditional gender roles and family structure to frame issues like abortion rights and fertility declines.

The only time the United States had something close to universal public child care was during World War II, when in 1941 the Lanham Act directed federal funding to high-quality, government-run child care centers so women of all incomes could work as part of the war effort. But lawmakers were careful to say that it was an emergency measure, and that the centers would not become permanent. (The children who went to these centers, particularly from low-income families, performed better educationally and economically throughout their lives, compared with children who were too young to be eligible for the care, research found.)

Universal child care had strong bipartisan support when it was proposed in the Comprehensive Childhood Development Act of 1972, but President Richard Nixon vetoed it over its "family-weakening implications."

Since then, the government has provided some child care assistance to low-income families. There is also a child care tax credit for working parents. But half of Americans live in places where there is no licensed child care provider or where there are three times as many children as child care slots. Child care costs a typical family about a third of its income. Just 10 percent of providers are considered to be high quality. At the same time, work for many Americans has become more inflexible and time intensive, and part-time or flexible jobs can be hard to find.

The result is a divided system, in which good child care is accessible only to affluent families, and many mothers in the United States can't afford to work, said Taryn Morrissey, who teaches public policy at American University and was an adviser to the Obama administration on its early-learning initiative. "Instead of investing in a tool we know would help inequality," she said, "we're exacerbating it."

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