

Canadian and American moms face equally expensive child care ^[1]

Many American mothers can't afford child care, either.

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EXCERPTS

According to a new American report, the high cost of child care is a problem for parents everywhere — but especially for mothers.

The eye-opening research illustrates a problem that's also significant in Canada: the lack of affordable child care keeps many women who would otherwise want to work outside of the work force.

Research from The Center for American Progress found that child-care costs in the U.S. have more than doubled in the last two decades, but wages have barely budged.

Child care is considered affordable if it accounts for seven per cent of household income. But although prices vary considerably, “all but the highest-income families” who pay for care are paying more than that.

And in the many cases where child care is unaffordable, it is mothers whose careers suffer — not fathers.

“When families are unable to find child care, the proportion of employed mothers in the United States drops from 89 per cent to 77 per cent, whereas there is no statistically significant impact on fathers’ employment,” the report states.

This has significant effects on the economy as a whole. One quarter of mothers who work outside the home have jobs in one of three sectors: education, hospitals, and food service.

“It is not an exaggeration to argue that American society would not be able to function in its current state without the work being performed in these industries, and a lack of affordable child care options threatens working mothers’ ability to continue providing these essential functions.”

The study also notes that the issue is most dire for mothers from marginalized groups. While white mothers are spending about 26 per cent of their income on child care — already way about the seven per cent affordability cap — that number rises to 42 per cent for Hispanic mothers, 51 per cent for Indigenous mothers, and a whopping 56 per cent for Black mothers.

One of the reasons child care is so out of reach for so many is that it's often framed as “an individual problem left up to parents to solve on their own, rather than as a public good,” the report states.

The American research is in line with the high cost of child care in Canada, as well. In Toronto, where the average annual household income in 2016 was \$65,829, infant care in 2017 cost \$21,096 a year. That's a whopping 32 per cent of household income — a number significantly higher than the American 7 per cent affordability scale.

Even in less expensive cities, child care in Canada wouldn't be considered affordable. The average household income in Calgary is \$113,152, and annual childcare costs in 2017 were \$15,000. But even that is almost double the affordability index, at 13 per cent of household income.

Martha Friendly, the founder of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, previously told HuffPost Canada that the “individual responsibility” approach to child care is what separated the Canadian model from many European countries. In countries like Sweden, which consistently rank highest for meeting early childhood education standards, child care is a societal responsibility that is seen to benefit everyone, she said.

Child care is one of the building blocks of a healthy society, in Friendly's estimation. “You can't build a new community unless you put sewers in, or schools, or roads. What about child care?” she said. “It's something that families really need.”

The U.S. study takes a similar approach.

Parents “are tasked with figuring out how to arrange and pay for child care and generally must do so in the absence of any meaningful public investment to help defray the cost,” it says.

“This approach ignores the important role that child care plays in the economy, particularly the caregiving economy. It devalues caregiving

and masks the fact that the economy, and society overall, can only function if people keep going to work, something that can only happen if someone—be it a parent, family member, or paid caregiver—is providing child care.”

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