

The child care crisis: Why affordable childcare is out of reach for so many people ^[1]

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Excerpted from the article

ASHLEY ALCARAZ REMEMBERS when she started to regret entrusting her infant daughter Paysen to an unlicensed in-home day care when she returned to work. She found out her daughter had been sleeping on the floor in a house where dogs and cats roamed around, and she worried that older toddlers might step on the baby. After her request that Paysen sleep in a crib was ignored, she pulled her daughter out, but the day care had been the most affordable nearby option and Alcaraz had already used up her allotted three weeks of paid maternity leave—in addition to three weeks of unpaid leave—from the Iowa hospital where she works as an X-ray technologist. Desperate for trustworthy care, she enrolled Paysen at Tipton Adaptive Daycare in Tipton, Iowa, which was more expensive, at \$640 per month—about 18% of her income—but the most affordable licensed childcare available. It was worth the cost, Alcaraz felt, because she could tell the staff cared about her daughter, greeting the 16-month-old by name each morning.

Still, Alcaraz, 25, and her boyfriend now often run out of money for groceries while paying the day-care bill. “Right now, it’s paycheck to paycheck,” Alcaraz says. “It’s a struggle.”

Affordable childcare is at once one of the most tantalizing promises of contemporary American life, and the most broken. Our modern economy cannot function without a system for the nurturing of our youngest citizens—as of 2017 there were nearly 15 million children under 6 in this country with all available parents in the workforce. But for everyone except the very wealthy, childcare is ruinously expensive. In 28 states and the District of Columbia, one year of infant care, on average, sets parents back as much as a year at a four-year public college, and nationally childcare costs on average between \$9,000 and \$9,600 annually, according to the advocacy organization Child Care Aware. Many parents spend far more. In Boston, 36-year-old Amy Deveau will spend \$21,000 this year, a third of her salary, on day care for her 2-year-old—more than she would spend on tuition and fees if her daughter were enrolled at the University of Massachusetts. “What’s crazy is that you have 18 years to plan for your child to go to college and put together your savings accounts and work on loans,” Deveau says. “You don’t have the luxury of having 18 years to plan for day care.”

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