

You can't reopen the economy without child care ^[1]

As coronavirus lockdowns ease up, parents must choose between child care and work. Policymakers don't get it.

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EXCERPTS

Catherine Carberry would love to go back to work. The staffing agency she works for in Easton, Pennsylvania, regularly offers her temporary gigs at nearby factories and warehouses. The jobs even pay a few dollars more an hour than she's used to making.

But Carberry, 40, can't work. It's not because she's at high risk of contracting COVID-19 or flush with unemployment benefits, as some conservatives would have you believe.

Carberry can't work because there's no one to watch her 4-year-old son, Robbie. Robbie's child care center is closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, and Carberry's family lives far away. Carberry is a single mother with less than a dollar in the bank.

"I get the emails to see if I'm available. I told them, if I had child care, I'd be there," Carberry told HuffPost. Before COVID-19, in a pinch, Carberry could find someone in the neighborhood to watch Robbie. Now, with social distancing, that's just not possible. "It's not like I can reach out to the church and find some ladies to fill in," she said. "Nobody wants to get their family infected."

More than half the states in the U.S. are tentatively opening back up, easing restrictions on retail stores and other businesses shuttered to stop the spread of coronavirus. Most day cares and schools, however, are not reopening, and millions of Americans can't get back to business as usual. They have children at home.

No one is arguing that it's actually safe to open the schools back up. In most states getting ready to relax restrictions, schools are closed for the rest of the academic year. It's not clear whether summer camps will open. About half of child care centers around the country are closed. And while some higher-income workers can pull off the exhausting — and, let's face it, pretty unsustainable — juggle of working at home and parenting at the same time, plenty of others must work outside the home.

Just like Carberry, these people are stuck. Policymakers throughout this crisis have continually failed to grapple with the reality parents are facing. And as the pandemic drags on the consequences only get worse.

Where Do The Children Go?

Iowa's Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds this week said that if workers in her state didn't return to their jobs without a good reason, they could lose their unemployment benefits. An exception would be if they were actually sick with COVID-19 or living with an infected family member.

But Iowa's schools are closed for the rest of the academic year. About half of all child care centers around the country are closed because of the pandemic. Reynolds' office did not respond to a request for comment.

In Texas, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's plans reaffirmed that schools will stay closed for the rest of the academic year, even as businesses in his state open back up.

Schools in Georgia, where GOP Gov. Brian Kemp is also pushing people back to work, are closed through the end of the academic year, too.

Neither Abbott's nor Kemp's office responded to requests for comment on this story.

There's this notion now, popular among many Republicans and some business owners, that workers are opting to stay home and collect unemployment because the benefits are better than what some companies can pay.

But child care seems to be the real hold up. Some 14% of women workers are considering quitting their jobs because of this dual burden, according to a recent survey reported in Fortune. Plenty of other workers have cut back hours.

Business owners know this. In fact, employees' child care issues were named the second-most common concern among small business owners right now, after bringing in money, according to a survey conducted jointly by the Bipartisan Policy Center and Morning Consult.

"Obviously business owners find the loss in revenue is the number one challenge they are facing, but a close second is the challenges their workers are facing with caregiving responsibilities," said Adrienne Schweer, a fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center, who worked on the survey.

Eventually, this is going to set up a divide between workers with kids and those without.

“As time wanes on, and a lot of these people are in this situation for months and months, I think we’ll see two classes of workers: those who can go back and those who have caregiving responsibilities, and that’s a huge portion of our economy,” Schweer said.

In 2018, about 41% of workers between the ages of 20 and 54 had a child at home, according to an analysis of Census Bureau and Department of Labor data by The Washington Post.

Some policymakers are hip to this situation. House Democrats tried, and failed, to pass a robust paid leave policy that would allow caregivers to stay home from work and still get paid. Other lawmakers are still pressing for bailouts to child care providers to keep the system working.

California’s Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom is considering reopening schools this summer and is prioritizing getting child care centers up and running as part of any reopening plan.

“Child care is foundational to getting people back to work,” Newsom said at a recent briefing. “If they cannot get the kind of quality child care that they deserve, they are less likely to get back to work and jump-start this economy.”

But generally, policymakers are not thinking about this enough, Schweer said. “My concern is that policymakers aren’t looking at these two things in tandem.”

A Crisis In Lack Of Paid Leave

If you want to get people back to work, you have to make sure there’s infrastructure in place, such as schools and child care that supports those workers, Schweer added. If not, a lot of workers are going to lose out — particularly women, who disproportionately carry caregiving responsibilities.

There are some child care centers open now around the country, mainly taking in the young children of essential workers.

That would be of no use to Cleta Kramer, who has a job at a factory in Ohio that’s actually still open right now. Kramer hasn’t made it to work since March 7, when her 12-year-old son Jeremiah’s school closed.

Jeremiah is severely autistic and requires constant attention and care. He doesn’t read. He can’t be left alone with a Chromebook to get his distance learning done, Kramer said. When Kramer spoke to HuffPost, Jeremiah was playing with sand close to his mother.

Before the pandemic, Kramer relied on a trained in-home babysitter to help care for Jeremiah a bit before and after school while she worked. But the babysitter is now home with her own children because of school closures.

“You just hope things get better. Or that there’d be an answer. Or a babysitter just dropped down out of the sky. You gotta keep it light. If you don’t, you drive yourself crazy,” said Kramer, who is a member of the advocacy group MomsRising.

Kramer’s own mother used to help out with Jeremiah. But she was recently hospitalized with pneumonia and influenza. “I’m taking care of them both,” Kramer said.

In an ideal world — or in many other developed countries — someone like Cramer could get paid time off to deal with her caregiving responsibilities.

When the pandemic crisis really escalated in March, there was hope that Congress would pass a robust paid leave policy to help those workers who would have to juggle new caregiving responsibilities with their jobs.

That’s not quite what happened. A paid family leave policy did make it into the Families First Coronavirus Response Act — or the second stimulus bill — but the White House and Senate Republicans blasted giant holes in the legislation. Companies with more than 500 employees don’t have to offer paid family leave under the new law. Cramer’s employer is Jeld-Wen, a multinational window manufacturer with thousands of workers.

And those robust jobless benefits?

Cramer’s had a hard time getting through to the state office to get them. Right now, the family is getting by on her mother’s disability payments.

Carberry, the eager-to-work single mom in Pennsylvania, is relying on food stamps and the goodwill of her landlord to get by. Her mother, who lives in Texas, recently sent her \$50 to help her do laundry. Her stimulus check arrived this week and immediately went to pay two months of back rent. She worries that they’ll soon be homeless.

“I’m hoping the day care will open again,” Carberry said. “I just don’t know how this is going to end.”

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