

Economic recovery from COVID-19 must include the 'care' sector^[1]

Author: Bezanson, Kate., Bevan, Andrew., & Lysack, Monica

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EXCERPTS

The COVID-19 economic calamity is unlike any we have experienced. But even as Canadians are reminded of their tremendous capacity for social solidarity, the cracks in our systems of income insurance and social care have been exposed.

This crisis has impacted women most; economist Armine Yalnizyan calls it the she-cession. Labour force numbers for March revealed that 62 per cent of the newly unemployed were women. April's data showed further record-setting job loss. The service and hospitality industries, where women are over-represented, have been hit hard. The child-care sector, where women represent 97 per cent of workers, has been nearly shuttered.

And most people on the front lines – nurses, personal support workers, child-care staff, food sector workers – are women.

The lack of priority given to both child care and long-term care is epitomized by their disparate levels of regulation, oversight, cost, pay, quality and delivery (non-profit or not). Correcting for this underinvestment has been a key lesson of COVID-19.

This crisis has shown that care is at the core of our economic and social lives, whether in homes with children, dependent others or sick family members, or as essential work on the front lines. Our economy cannot function, and we cannot function, without it.

This whole picture must guide governments' plans to get the economy going again. This is no cyclical economic downswing, so the remedies for recovery and reconstruction will be different from "normal" recessions.

The route to economic and social recovery requires both built and social infrastructure stimulus spending, and a commitment to protect the connected economic and care system against vulnerabilities that have become visible in front-line essential work. This requires different thinking about stimulus spending, long-term recovery and the Canada we want to build.

Stimulus measures after the 2008 recession generated employment, notably the short-term emphasis on infrastructure projects that stimulated needed male employment. But no new federal measures supporting child care were part of that recovery. This time, we need to focus more effort on jobs for women, and crucially, putting in place the care that allows them to return to work.

Building a national child-care system requires investing in built infrastructure (new centres, retrofits, supply chain inputs) and in social infrastructure and human capital (early childhood educators, cooks, cleaners, transit workers). These dual priorities will permit the return and entry of women to work, triggering the major economic heft that such participation provides. Building care structures allows people to work and then spend, ensuring there are consumer goods and other products to spend on, and securing good jobs linked to our main economic advantage, our highly skilled workforce.

In the immediate term, governments must financially stabilize the child-care sector so it can reopen at capacity at the same time as the economy is ramped up again in the coming weeks and months.

The federal government should also swiftly create the already promised Child-care Secretariat. This office should be immediately looped in to stimulus and recovery planning measures, so it can serve as a clearinghouse at the centre of government for efforts to support, shore up and build a much-needed child-care system. This will create jobs and draw women into the labour market – essential to a strong sustainable recovery.

It will also ensure that young children have safe and welcoming places to go, where early childhood educators will support their development and social reintegration with their peers.

Care is what holds our economy and our lives together. Universal child care by itself won't ensure economic and social recovery, but it will help the recovery happen much more quickly, and the result will be a lot more fair.

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