

America's child care problem is an economic problem^[1]

"Families are not okay," one expert says. It's making the economic crisis way worse.

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Source: Vox

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

The nation's largest school district, New York City, said last week that students will be physically in classrooms only part time at the most in the fall. The nation's second-largest, Los Angeles, announced Monday that it will be remote only. Meanwhile, day care centers around the country are closing their doors, unable to balance the higher operating costs and reduced enrollment that came with the coronavirus pandemic.

Experts have been warning for months that this pandemic would cause an unprecedented child care crisis in the United States, a country whose system for caring for children was already severely lacking before the public health emergency began. But policymakers devoted little attention to the problem, and for months this spring, parents were left to figure out, largely on their own, how to do their jobs with schools and day cares closed.

As summer lurches toward fall, many families have reached the breaking point. And for single parents, especially those working low-wage jobs, the consequences of an ongoing lack of child care could be devastating. Yet the United States has not done the work of viral suppression necessary to safely open schools and child care centers in many parts of the country. In some cases, restaurants and bars have been prioritized over schools. The idea, it seems, is to swiftly get people back to work and boost economic growth above all else.

But throughout all this, there has been little acknowledgment of the real economic impact a broken school and child care system has on families and child care workers — many of whom are also caring for their own kids. Maybe that's because, historically, the work of taking care of other people, often performed by women and especially by women of color, has been devalued and largely ignored.

"This crisis has laid bare the ways in which caring for the well-being of society has a huge value, and that value has not been accounted for in our economic statistics and economic policy priorities," Kate Bahn, the director of labor market policy at the Washington Center for Equitable Growth, told Vox.

Dollars and cents are just one incomplete way to measure the enormous impact that educators and care workers have on Americans' lives. But they're a way that policymakers tend to understand. With that in mind, below is a numerical framework for thinking about the impact of the current child care crisis on the American economy — and the necessity of resolving that crisis in a way that's safe and equitable for all involved.

More than 41 million workers have kids under 18. Almost all of them lost child care as a result of the pandemic.

As of 2018, over 41 million workers between the ages of 18 and 64 were caring for a child under the age of 18, according to the Brookings Institution. Nearly 34 million of those were caring for a child under 14.

When the pandemic hit, schools and day care centers across all 50 states shut down. At the peak of closures, 55.1 million students at K-12 schools around the country were affected, according to Education Week. An additional 5 million younger children in day care and preschool were affected as well, as Amanda Becker reports at The 19th. Some day care programs did remain open for children of essential workers, and some cities set up special centers to care for those children. However, not all such workers were comfortable sending their children to center-based care while the virus was spreading, and such care was not available in all areas.

Overall, millions of parents suddenly saw their primary source of child care disappear, with no alternatives on the table. That put them in an incredibly difficult position.

In normal times, inadequate child care is the equivalent of a 5 percent pay cut for parents. Now it's much worse.

The pandemic has made a simple truth abundantly obvious, if it wasn't already: Working parents need child care to do their jobs. When they don't have a safe place for their kids to be during their work hours — whether that's at school, at a day care center, or at home with a family member or nanny — their work suffers.

Parents had a hard time finding care for their kids long before Covid hit — in one 2018 survey, 83 percent of parents of children under 5 said finding affordable, quality care in their area was a serious problem, according to the Center for American Progress. And having

inadequate child care creates serious problems for parents at work — in surveys conducted before the pandemic, parents reported having to miss shifts to care for kids, being distracted at work, and being reprimanded at work for absence or other issues related to taking care of kids, Clive Belfield, an economics professor at Queens College, told Vox in an email. They also reported problems with career growth, like an inability to apply for promotions or enroll in training programs that could result in a better job.

All of that impacts workers' earnings over time. Overall, having inadequate access to child care, in the pre-pandemic economy, was like getting about a 5 percent pay cut, Belfield said.

This impact fell disproportionately on mothers, who do the majority of child care in families. In one 2018 survey by the Center for American Progress, mothers were 40 percent more likely than fathers to say they had personally felt a negative impact of child care issues on their careers.

And that was before Covid. The impact of losing child care due to the pandemic is likely to be far worse than simply having inadequate care before the crisis hit, Belfield said.

That's because, even as some day care programs and camps reopen, there are far fewer child care options than there were before the pandemic. Those that exist are likely more expensive. And parents may have lost their jobs or had their wages cut, like a full 43 percent of Americans as of April, so they are less able to afford child care. All that means that parents are facing a bigger pay cut due to child care problems than they would have before the pandemic, at a time when they're less able to afford it.

By late June, 13 percent of parents had cut back hours or quit their jobs

With schools and day cares closed, most parents were forced to figure out child care solutions on their own. They cobbled together a variety of arrangements, from splitting up child care duties (in dual-earner families) to asking grandparents to move in and care for kids. But even with these arrangements, parents had to cut back on their work significantly.

In one survey of 2,557 working parents conducted between May 10 and June 22, 13 percent had cut back hours or quit work entirely due to child care problems, the Washington Post reported. And parents lost an average of eight hours of work a week to child care responsibilities — the equivalent of a full day.

80 percent of moms say they're handling the majority of homeschooling responsibilities in their families

Nearly all parents are being affected to some degree by the crisis in child care and education, but mothers are bearing a disproportionate share of the burden. In an April poll by Morning Consult for the New York Times, 80 percent of moms with kids under 12 said they spent more time than their partners supervising remote learning. Just 45 percent of dads said the same.

In the same survey, 28 percent of mothers said that they were working less than usual, compared with 19 percent of fathers.

And about 16 percent of parents are taking care of kids alone, without a partner

Coupled parents may be able to share child care duties during the pandemic — even if moms still do more. But as of 2017, about 16 percent of parents in the US were single, without a partner in the home, according to the Pew Research Center. About 18 million children were living in homes with just one parent.

Overall, single parents are far more likely to be women — in 2017, 81 percent of parents living alone with kids were moms, according to the Pew Research Center. And women of color are more likely than white women to either be single parents or be significant breadwinners in their households.

As of 2018, 74 percent of Black moms were either single or providing at least 40 percent of a couple's earnings, compared with 58 percent of Native American moms, 47 percent of Latina moms, and 45 percent of white moms, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research. (Asian/Pacific Islander moms were less likely than white mothers to be single or significant breadwinners, at 42 percent.)

Black and Latina women, in particular, are also overrepresented in many essential and front-line jobs that can't be done from home. This makes solving the child care problem all the more difficult, since they can't supervise their children while teleworking, as some parents have been able to do. And across races, more than a third of single mothers are living in poverty, making it harder for them to pay for babysitters or other child care arrangements even where they are available.

All this means that the child care crisis is falling particularly hard on a subset of parents — single and low-income mothers — who are the least able to afford additional challenges right now. As Michelle Holder, an economics professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, told Vox earlier this month, "The problem really looks very bad for women of color who are mothers."

Add to that parents needing and looking for jobs: More than 11 percent of women are unemployed right now

The difficulty of finding child care is already causing parents to drop out of the workforce and reduce hours. Meanwhile, millions of Americans, many of them parents, have lost jobs due to the economic crisis. Job losses have been especially pronounced among women, 11.2 percent of whom were unemployed in June, compared with 10.2 percent of men. Black and Latina women have also been disproportionately affected, with unemployment rates of 14 percent and 15.3 percent, respectively.

And many parents, especially moms, won't be able to take new jobs if they can't get reliable child care. "As we think about what's it going to take for women to reenter the workforce," Nicole Mason, president of the Institute for Women's Policy Research, told Vox, "that's when we're going to start to see that there's some critical challenges, most of them related to care, that women will have to overcome, before they can not only reenter the workforce but also sustain employment."

And while parents have been hoping for some relief in the fall if schools and child care centers reopen, things may be about to get worse rather than better.

Meanwhile, 40 percent of child care programs say they will have to close permanently without outside help

While some day care centers serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers have reopened since the spring, the pandemic continues to put an enormous strain on these businesses, many of which operate on extremely tight margins in the best of times. The public health crisis has driven down enrollment as parents pull their children out due to fear of the virus or because they have lost their jobs — in a June survey of child care programs by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), enrollment was down by an average of 67 percent.

Since many programs are supported entirely by tuition, fewer kids means less money to work with. The pandemic has also driven up costs, because centers need additional cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, and sometimes more staff members to accommodate social distancing requirements. In the NAEYC survey, more than 70 percent of programs were incurring substantial additional costs.

As a result of these pressures, two out of five programs in the survey said are certain they would have to close if they don't get some kind of government help. That includes half of all child care programs that are minority-owned businesses. Only 18 percent of programs said they expected to last longer than a year if they don't get help.

This is the crisis that child care experts have been warning about since the pandemic began — without assistance, day care centers could disappear permanently, and working parents will have no place to send their kids, even if and when it's safe. As Kim Kruckel, executive director of the Child Care Law Center, put it to Vox in April, "child care will not be there for us when we're all ready to go back to work if we don't include them specifically, in a targeted, effective way, in the relief packages."

More than 250,000 child care workers have lost their jobs

The closure of child care centers isn't just a crisis for working parents — it's also a crisis for care workers, many of whom have children themselves. As a result of pandemic shutdowns and enrollment losses, 258,000 child care workers have been laid off, according to the Washington Post.

These workers are among those who can least afford to lose their jobs: They make an average of just \$10.82 an hour, and many relied on public assistance even before the pandemic struck. Many — 75 percent in Los Angeles County, for example — are immigrants, and many speak English as a second language, which can make it more difficult to apply for programs like unemployment. And in most places, unemployment isn't available at all to workers who are undocumented.

Now, many child care workers have been thrown even deeper into poverty. And an enormous job loss in the child care sector — more than a quarter of a million workers — is a drain on the broader economy as well.

When it comes to schools, the news is just as grim: At least 3 of the country's biggest school districts will be partially or fully remote in the fall

While parents of infants and toddlers struggle with the availability (and safety) of day care centers in their area, parents of older children have been looking to the schools to ease the burden in the fall. And for many families, that means public schools, which ordinarily offer not just education but also a free, reliable place for children to be during the day.

Unfortunately, coronavirus cases are surging around the country, leaving teachers, staff, and parents alike concerned about the safety of reopening schools. For example, 7 in 10 parents saw returning to school as risky, according to a July poll by Axios. And three of the country's largest school districts — Los Angeles, San Diego, and New York City — have announced that their classes will be partly or fully remote in the fall, meaning parents will still be responsible for supervising learning and providing child care at least some of the time.

That likely means more parents having to reduce their hours, more parents dropping out of the workforce, and more parents unable to reenter the workforce because they have to take care of their kids. Meanwhile, state, local, and federal officials have yet to offer much in the way of relief for working parents — in announcing the New York City schools' plan to go partially remote, Mayor Bill de Blasio said only that child care help for parents was "something we're going to be building as we go along."

Faced with month after month of working while also taking care of kids, "women are having to make tough choices about maintaining their employment," Mason said.

With fewer options for child care, parents could lose hundreds of thousands of dollars over their lifetime

We don't yet know the long-term impact of parents having to reduce hours or drop out of the labor force during the pandemic, experts say. But the data we have on parents who drop out of the workforce to care for children during normal times isn't reassuring.

Parents who leave the workforce make less even when they go back to work, as Michael Madowitz, Alex Rowell, and Katie Hamm noted in a 2016 analysis at the Center for American Progress. And those losses add up in lower wage growth over time, as well as lower retirement savings and Social Security benefits. Overall, parents lose up to three or four times their annual salary for every year out of the workforce.

For example, a 26-year-old mom making \$44,600 annually — the median yearly wage for women in the US as of the first quarter of 2020 — would lose \$163,139 over her lifetime by taking just one year off of work, according to a Center for American Progress calculator.

Those lost wages obviously matter enormously to families — especially to low-income and Black and Latinx families, who have less

accumulated wealth than white families to fall back on. They also matter to the economy as a whole.

“It’s not good for economic growth if you have primarily women having to reduce or eliminate working altogether because they don’t have other alternatives for child care,” Holder said.

Trump has offered zero solutions to solve the problem

Now, in July, it seems policymakers are finally becoming aware of this fact, though their responses aren’t always helpful. President Trump, for example, is pushing to reopen schools so that the economy can recover, but without a plan for doing so safely.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that the choice between boosting the economy and controlling the virus is a false one — the economy can only grow again once people know it is safe to return to some semblance of normal life.

And a huge part of that life is being able to get reliable care for children. However, that aspect of life has been seemingly forgotten in many reopening plans, as governors and other officials open restaurants and bars without a clear strategy for safely reopening schools — or for testing and tracing to keep community spread low so that schools can open.

The result is that, in addition to the enormous cost to children’s learning and the overall health and well-being of families, the economy can’t recover because parents can’t work.

The solution, experts say, isn’t simply to throw open the school doors and let the virus range free. Rather, it’s to actually acknowledge the value of child care and education and develop our public health and economic policies accordingly.

Right now, “teachers are trying to take on the burden of teaching students in a totally new way,” and child care workers are “massively shifting how they do their jobs,” Bahn said. “These workers are helping carry our society through to the other side of this pandemic.”

But these workers have also been historically underpaid, their concerns often ignored, and the work they do devalued. “There is a clear economic value to caring for well-being, but we have not necessarily accounted for it in our statistics or in our policy priorities as a nation,” Bahn said.

If we could begin to value that work, we might be able to craft a future in which children and the workers who care for and teach them could be safe, even amid a pandemic.

But “what’s so tragic in this moment is that there is no plan,” Mason said. “States don’t have a plan, schools don’t have a plan, families don’t have a plan.”

And while we don’t yet know the full extent of the pandemic’s impact, economically or otherwise, Mason said, “above all, what’s true is that families are not okay.”

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