US: The American government once offered widely affordable child care...77 years ago [1]

Author: Hsu, Andrea
Source: National Public Radio
Format: Article
Publication Date: 31 Oct 2020

AVAILABILITY
Access online [2]

EXCERPTS

Rachael Shannon gets nostalgic when she thinks of the life she lived in Germany until just a couple of years ago. While she and her husband worked, their children spent their days in child care, creating awesome crafts, building pillow forts and going on outings to farms where they'd dig up potatoes.

"It was like wow times 10," says Shannon, who worked for a U.S. government contractor.

For this highly imaginative, full-time care for two kids, the Shannons paid about $750 a month, roughly a quarter of the cost of comparable care in the Washington, D.C., area where they returned to in 2018.

Today, in the middle of the pandemic, Shannon is one of millions of parents at their wit's end over the lack of good child care options here in the U.S. Safe, reliable child care was already expensive and difficult to obtain before the pandemic. Now it is even more so. With increased costs due to social distancing and sanitation requirements, many day care centers have been forced to close.

The pandemic-induced child care crisis has revealed the fragility of the system and ignited a debate about why it can't be better. Why do parents in the world's wealthiest nation pay such a high price to have both children and jobs?

"I wish more Americans knew what parents are living like in other countries," Rachael Shannon says. "I'm jealous, and I'm angry."

The German system of highly subsidized child care is the norm across Europe. It might sound like a utopian option for many American parents today, but the United States government offered its own version 77 years ago.

During World War II, as men headed off to war, women were called on to help run factories and perform all sorts of other jobs. But it was clear that it would be impossible to pull off unless children were taken care of. Child care was seen as a matter of national security.

Under the Lanham Act, day care centers, funded by federal and local dollars, opened up in communities impacted by the war. In 1943, families paid 50 cents per day, equivalent to $7.70 a day now.

"The main priority was bringing women into defense factories," says historian Sonya Michel, author of the book *Children's Interests/Mothers Rights: The Shaping of America's Child Care Policy*.

More than half a million children were cared for during the war, Michel says.

There was plenty of opposition to the effort — some argued that separating children from their mothers for long hours would result in psychological damage. But it was overcome with a promise that government-funded child care would be "for the duration only."

"What that meant was as soon as the war was over, mothers were expected to return home. And of course the federal funding would be withdrawn," Michel says. "As soon as the war was over, almost all the centers closed down right away."

Decades later, in 1971, the U.S. came close to a universal child care system, where the poorest children could attend for free and others on a sliding scale. Congress passed such a bill, but it was vetoed by President Richard Nixon, who wrote about the "family-weakening implications of the system it envisions."

Till today, the U.S. does not heavily subsidize child care, and the subsidies that do exist reach only 1 in 6 eligible children. Most parents in the U.S. shoulder the high costs of child care on their own, according to analysis from the Center for American Progress.

As a result, parents in the U.S. pay too much, and child care workers earn too little, says Ashley Williams, a senior policy analyst with the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, and a former preschool teacher herself.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, child care workers earn a median wage of $11.65 per hour. Their jobs, which are taxing in normal times, are now more stressful than ever, putting strain on a workforce that is almost exclusively women and 40% people of color.

The pandemic has made clear the need for more investment in the system, Williams says. "Parents need somewhere for their children to be

safe and cared for so that they can engage in the economy."

But there is one employer in the U.S. that does make child care viable for both families and workers: the military.

The Defense Department's Child Development Program has its origins in the end of the draft. The military was no longer composed of single men in barracks. A volunteer force meant there were now wives and children to consider.

"There was a saying in the early days — you recruit the soldier, but you retain the family," says M.A. Lucas, an early childhood educator who was tapped in 1980 to build a formal child care system for the U.S. Army.

Even with the experience of World War II, it was not an easy sell. For the first couple of years, she avoided talking about children. "It didn't mean we weren't thinking about children, but we didn't talk about children. We talked about the impact of the lack of child care on the military force," says Lucas, who was a military spouse herself.

She focused on readiness, and through anonymous surveys, demonstrated the immense need.

"I asked soldiers at all levels, officers and enlisted, if they lost time from the job because of a lack of child care," she says. "It was an astounding revelation to find the high number of folks that admitted to it." Twenty percent of the workforce reported losing duty time.

Lucas went to work, guided by a mission statement that remains largely unchanged today: To reduce the conflict between parental responsibilities and the military mission. She spent 31 years on the project.

Under Lucas's leadership, the Army built day cares on bases for easy pickup and drop-off and kept them open for long hours to accommodate shifts. Like other jobs in the military, there was a training regimen for caregivers, and they were paid competitive wages. Fees were charged on a sliding scale to make the care affordable.

But running child care in this manner is costly. The Department of Defense spends more than $1 billion a year on child care.

"It shows that the federal government can do it when it wants to," says historian Michel. But despite the proof of concept, Americans remain allergic to the idea of funding such programs outside of times of need.

"Maybe Congress and the government rises to the occasion in an emergency, but does it last afterward? That's always the problem," Michel says.

Currently, a bill that would greatly expand federal child care subsidies sits idle. The fate of the Child Care for Working Families Act will likely be determined in the next Congress.

Region: United States [3]
Tags: funding [4]

Links

[1] https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/11/us-american-government-once-offered-widely-affordable-child-care77 [2] https://www.npr.org/2020/10/31/927267330/the-american-government-once-offered-widely-affordable-child-care-77-years-ago [3] https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865 [4] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding