# Why doesn't the U.S. value child care? A historic look [1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care ranked low on the list of jobs a mother had in 18th century colonial America.

What mattered more was survival. Wives and husbands toiled on farms, or in shops, and the work of bathing and feeding young ones fell to older children or other women, either enslaved or servants.

"We didn't value child care at all," said historian Stephanie Coontz, director of research and public education for the Council on Contemporary Families, a nonprofit based at the University of Texas that disseminates data on parents and kids.

As years went by, American children were put to work themselves. It wasn't until the 19th century, when husbands in middle-class families began leaving in the morning for jobs and women stayed home with the kids, that the importance of caring for one's children was elevated.

"Soon after, contempt developed for any families who had to hire someone to care for a child," Coontz said.

Not only did society abhor the idea of entrusting child care to someone other than the children's own mother, the concept also ran afoul of the burgeoning American notion of self-sufficiency: "If you can't afford to raise kids on your own, you shouldn't have them," Rutgers University-Camden sociologist Laura Napolitano said of the parroted sentiment of the time.

That antipathy toward child care has contributed to devastating results: The United States has never developed a coherent child care system, experts say.

And now, just as the Black Lives Matter movement has exposed the ubiquity of racism, the pandemic has laid bare the stunning paucity of opportunities for children and their parents — a situation that's brought financial and emotional disaster not just to American mothers, but to the U.S. economy missing the labor of 2.3 million women as of February.

"COVID was a reckoning," said Mai Miksic, early childhood policy director for Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), a child advocacy nonprofit in Callowhill. Forty percent of child care centers closed in the U.S in the last year. "Parents were needing those centers as never before."

But, she added, Americans live in a "misogynistic society where women's work is undervalued and women are underpaid. Society expects women to care for children, and women, typically because they're mothers, take on that burden."

**'Child care deserts'**

There are cavernous holes in U.S. child care, experts say.

The federal government sends block grants to states that help pay for the care of just one in six eligible low-income children, said Lisa Dodson, emerita Boston College sociologist.

Some 50% of Americans live in "child care deserts" where there are either no licensed child care providers, or there are three times as many children as child care slots, according to the Center for America Progress.

Just 10% of child care facilities are considered high-quality, such as Children's Village in Center City, according to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. That means highly educated staff, small groups of kids, and age-appropriate curriculum.

Meanwhile, the majority of American parents, who spend an average of 23% of their income on child care, get no government help, according to the National Women's Law Center (NWLC). Average yearly child care costs are about $10,000, with high-quality care double and even triple that, said Jessica Calarco, an Indiana University sociologist.

To compensate for the estimated 4.4 million child care slots lost to the pandemic, many women — who are making 82 cents for every man's dollar — elect to sacrifice their work lives and stay home with their children, "pushing women toward poverty," said Sade Moonsammy, interim executive director of Family Values at Work, a nonprofit network of women of color in Washington.

“We’d cut my job if we lost child care for my kids, because my husband’s pay is better,” said Tina Irwin, 43, a mental health case worker from Pemberton with a 3-year-old daughter and a son, age 2. “That’s not equality. It’s all complicated because, as a woman, I have all these connections to the children because of the biology of it all — pregnancy, delivery-room complications, then the breastfeeding. Women have to take on lot more responsibilities even in this day and age.”

On the other end of the equation, most child care workers themselves are poorly paid, with nearly 17% living below the poverty line of around $22,000 for a family of three, according to the NWLC. The vast majority are women of color, said Miksic, some of them with college degrees but still earning just $10 or $11 an hour.

It’s unfair, said Janet Filante, a coordinator at Childspace Centers, child care facilities in Mount Airy and Germantown, that we don’t expect Americans to make monthly payments to the local elementary school, “but they’re on their own paying for child care.”

She hopes the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act, which is allotting $39 billion for child care — $1.1 billion to Pennsylvania, $695 million to New Jersey — will be a turning point.

**A duty out of love**

By the end of the Civil War, many white, middle-class women were entrenched as in-home caregivers, historians say. It was, people reasoned, a duty performed out of love.

After the war, widows’ pensions were awarded so that they wouldn’t have to leave their children to work. “This was the first recognition in America that some women would need assistance,” said sociologist Joan Maya Mazelis of Rutgers University-Camden.

In keeping with racist policies, though, the pensions were not offered to Black women, Mazelis said. At this point, many newly freed Black women were working outside the home.

“Slavery not only minimized Black men’s earning power, inducing Black women to enter the labor force, but also made work for pay less socially stigmatizing to [Black women] than it was to white women,” according to a 2017 NWLC report on the history of child care.

Around the same time, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Black and white educators were encouraging young Black women to attend schools such as the so-called Black Mammy Memorial Institute in Georgia to train them in domestic skills to help raise white children in white homes, the report says.

African American reformer Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute also encouraged Black women to seek similar jobs, believing that race relations would be improved by the presence of “intelligent,” “clean,” “morally fit” Black women in white homes. Although many heeded his call, Washington was criticized for demanding subservience of Black women, many of whom had to scramble for their own child care to help whites.

Between 1890 and 1960, the white women’s workforce grew to 34%, while the number of Black women workers remained at 40% throughout, according to economist Abby Cohen. Black women had few occupations to choose from, however, with caring for white children being one of the more acceptable options, historians say. Increasingly, immigrants joined American Black women performing such duties for middle- and upper-class white women in their homes.

These domestic workers were “thrown under the bus” and excluded from New Deal labor laws, according to Nicole Kligerman, Pennsylvania director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, an advocacy group for 2.5 million U.S. nannies, in-home caregivers, and house cleaners.

“The way America treats women who perform the work of raising others’ children indicates very little regard is given to child care as real and dignified work,” she said.

**Universal child care doesn’t stick**

During WWII, America experimented with universal child care.

Government dollars funded 3,100 child care centers serving 600,000 children of women working in men’s jobs for the war effort, historians say. It was a success, but U.S. officials collapsed it once soldiers returned. “There was a huge push to get women back home with their children,” said Calarco of Indiana.

European countries created similar centers during that time and never closed them. One result: “Today, people in Denmark pay just 25% of child care costs,” Calarco said.

In Europe, which also champions paid parental leave, people hold the common value of a need for a strong kids’ safety net, said Lise Van Susteren, a Washington, D.C., psychiatrist and activist.

But in America, we say, “‘I’m not spending one more dollar on someone else’s kid,’” she said. “We believe we’re not all alike. We’re not all in this together. We say, ‘I don’t care what happens to your kid.’ ”

In other industrialized nations, Van Susteren said, people view children as “the seed corn, the future.”

But here, scholars say, we don’t think of having children as a public good; it’s a personal choice. And that doesn’t make for competent child care policy.

As the U.S. government in the 1950s spent millions educating veterans and building highways that helped create suburbs, the Ozzie-and-Harriet style of idealized American domesticity was born: Dad off to work in the morning, housebound Mom looking after the kids,

historians say.

Starting in the 1960s, the government instituted work rules for low-income women receiving welfare benefits; eventually they were paid minimal dollars for child care. Soon after, the notion of child care was conflated with "handouts," devaluing it further, scholars say. And conservatives have claimed low-income Black women had babies to grasp federal money, a notion repeatedly debunked by historians.

In 1971, Congress made an attempt to address child care by passing the Comprehensive Child Development Bill, which would have established a national child care system. "But it became a victim of the culture wars, and President [Richard] Nixon vetoed it," Coontz of the Council on Contemporary Families said. Interestingly, she added, the military offers child care that's often praised.

Society rocketed forward and by 1986, 63% of U.S. women with kids under 18 worked outside the home, federal figures show. By then, the need for child care was acute: A woman making $33,000 annually who leaves the workforce for five years forfeits $477,000 in lost wages and benefits, according to the National Institute on Retirement Security.

Today, "the idea of universal child care is once again in the air," said University of Pennsylvania sociologist Pilar Gonalons-Pons. "The pandemic made people realize this idea of full-time work and family responsibilities is kind of insane." And currently, 40% of all U.S. households are led by women, many of them lacking sufficient child care, said Moonsammy of Family Values at Work.

But convincing Americans that caring for children is noble, let alone work, remains difficult. "We're still seen as babysitters," said Keisha Wright-Daniel, who runs C.A.R.E. For Me Children's Learning Center in Pennsauken, "and that's how we're paid."

Beyond that, noted Napolitano of Rutgers, "we lack concern for all kids, as opposed to just my kids."

In the end, she added, child care is dismissed as a woman's issue:

"And, in America, women's issues are just not given the gravitas they deserve."

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