

Child care wasn't prioritized in the first infrastructure package. It's 'cause for alarm,' experts say. ^[1]

While male-dominated industries are typically hit hardest in a recession, the coronavirus sparked a different kind of economic downturn

Author: Kitchener, Caroline

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EXCERPTS

Throughout the 2020 campaign, Joe Biden made big promises to women and families.

He would bail out day-care centers. He would introduce mandatory paid family leave. He would make child care more accessible and affordable — so that the millions of women forced out of their jobs in the pandemic could get back to work.

While the \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill, passed on March 11, included some revolutionary provisions for families, they are temporary, meant to keep families afloat until they can put the coronavirus behind them. Many parents have been eagerly anticipating President Biden's infrastructure bill, a landmark piece of legislation expected to include sweeping benefits for caregivers and fundamentally reshape the U.S. child-care system.

But the Biden administration announced last week that child care and caregiving will not be part of the initial \$2 trillion jobs and infrastructure package, which focuses largely on male-dominated industries such as construction and manufacturing. Instead, those issues will be tackled in a second, family-focused proposal, the details of which are expected to be announced later this month.

The delay is "cause for alarm," said C. Nicole Mason, president and chief executive at the Institute for Women's Policy Research, a gender-focused think tank.

Advocates say by putting child care on the back burner, even briefly, Biden is sending a message about his priorities, suggesting that the needs of women and families are less pressing than other items on the administration's agenda. The delay could mean less money for the caregiving portion of the bill, they say. If Biden and the Democrats expend all their political capital on the first portion, persuading Congress to approve an already high price tag, they may struggle to push through ambitious policies on child care.

"The order in which the President stages his roll-out does not reflect the relative value he places on each policy," a Biden administration spokesperson said in a statement. "In the coming weeks, the President will lay out his vision for a second package that focuses squarely on creating economic security for the middle class through investments in childcare, healthcare, education, and other areas."

A single mom who has taken a lead on child-care issues, Rep. Katie Porter (D-Calif.) said in a Tuesday interview that she'd hoped child care would be included in the first round of the bill.

"What happened to the investment in child care? What happened to the investment in paid family leave?" said Porter. If child care is tackled after other infrastructure priorities, she said, she worries lawmakers will end up saying, "Golly gee, there's no money left to help make it possible for women to recover economically." (The Biden administration did not respond to a request for comment.)

While male-dominated industries are typically hit hardest in a recession, the coronavirus sparked a different kind of economic downturn. In the Great Recession of 2008, dubbed a "mancession," 70 percent of jobs lost were held by men, clustered in the industries of manufacturing and construction. But this time, with people forced to stay inside their homes, female-dominated service industries were affected most severely. Waitresses, child-care workers and shop attendants, for example, were laid off in droves, leaving women — and especially mothers — in dire need of government support.

The White House has differentiated the two infrastructure plans, calling one the American Jobs Plan and the second the American Family Plan. This language itself is problematic, Porter said.

"I'm afraid there's a suggestion that the things in the first plan are, quote, about 'jobs' and the things in the second plan are, quote, about 'families,'" she said. While the first portion of the bill includes \$25 billion to upgrade and build new child-care centers in high-need areas, the bulk of the policies that would help women and families have been relegated to the second proposal.

This undermines the idea of child care as basic infrastructure, Porter said, a concept Biden reiterated throughout his campaign. The basic premise, she said, is that child care is essential to the economy, just like roads or trains: Without child care, people cannot go to work, as

the pandemic has made abundantly clear.

Historically, the United States has been “ambivalent about the role of women in the workplace and our collective responsibility to young children,” said Myra Jones Taylor, chief policy officer at Zero to Three, a think tank focused on the development of young children. Parents have generally been left to care for young children on their own, with child-care and early-education policies that are far more limited than those in many other industrialized countries. In Sweden, for example, parents spend no more than 3 percent of their income on child care — and a maximum of \$1,800 per child, per year.

Child care in the United States costs almost \$10,000 per year on average, according to New America’s Care Report. In big cities, it can shoot up to more than \$24,000.

Many Americans are uncomfortable with the idea of child care as infrastructure, said Liz Gulliver, co-founder of Kunik, a company that works with employers to create better policies for parents. After Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) tweeted that “child care is infrastructure” on Wednesday, hundreds of commenters mocked the statement, with critics tweeting, “unicorns are infrastructure” and “love is infrastructure.”

While there tends to be far more bipartisan support for child care than other issues, many Republicans bristle at the idea of talking about child care as infrastructure. Child care is certainly important, said Rep. Markwayne Mullin (R-Okla.) — but it is not infrastructure. (Mullin did not respond to a request for comment.)

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has echoed these statements, calling the infrastructure plan a liberal “wish list the White House has decided to label ‘infrastructure.’” It’s unlikely to receive broad bipartisan support, he said in a statement.

Gulliver, who has two young children, has learned to expect this kind of response when talking about child care.

“We are very, very far from caregiving as being recognized as any service and benefit to the country,” she said. “Every time I see comments like that I am freshly aware of how far we have to go.”

Soon after the delay in the caregiving portion of the bill was announced, Gulliver said, she started hearing from parents on online platforms hosted by Kunik. Many were “depressed,” she said, asking: “Does nobody care?” The decision to relegate child care to a subsequent proposal made some parents feel like they were “second round people,” Gulliver said, and “not as important as everybody else.”

When she heard that child care would not be included in the first proposal, Melanie Frazza said she was not surprised. In December 2019, Frazza decided to quit her job to do freelance work at five months pregnant, determined to spend more time at home with her baby than the eight weeks of paid leave offered by her company.

“I tortured myself about it for months,” said Frazza, a social content strategist based in Tarrytown, N.Y.

She is hoping that Biden’s infrastructure plan will include six months of federally mandated paid maternity leave, she said. If she had that benefit while she was pregnant, she said, she never would have quit her job. (Biden has proposed three months of paid maternity leave.)

By delaying the child care portion of the infrastructure bill, the Biden-Harris administration could stop employers from instituting their own child-care benefits, said Gulliver. Child care is like a “hot potato,” she added, passed between employers and the government: Everyone knows something needs to be done about it, she said, but no one wants to be the one to foot the bill.

Now that Biden has indicated that he is going to take action on the issue, employers are reluctant to make any moves, Gulliver said. Since Biden took office, she said, she regularly hears from employers who say, “We’re not going to reevaluate those benefits quite yet because we don’t know what is going to change with this administration.”

As a new mom, Frazza sometimes feels like she is “expected” to suffer, she said, her daily struggle “normalized” by a government that has done little to help. She said she has not felt comfortable sending her daughter to day care in the pandemic.

Despite the delay on the infrastructure bill, Frazza said, she remains hopeful that the White House could take significant action to help parents and families.

If a lengthy paid parental leave policy is pushed through, she said, “I think I would sob hysterically with joy.”

Region: United States [3]

Tags: economic recovery [4]
infrastructure [5]

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