

The childcare crisis is a threat to our nation ^[1]

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Source: Public Health - Columbia University

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Jun 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

I'm resigning because I can't find anybody to take care of my child."

This is not the first time I heard something like this. Frankly speaking, every few weeks, a staff member will come into my office breaking such news. Working in human resources, we are constantly looking into why our talented staff members leave their positions. Childcare is among the top reasons.

And every time this happens, I ask myself the same questions: How will they secure money for rent, food, and healthcare? How is something like daycare becoming the limiting factor for a family's ability to achieve security in their health and wellbeing?

This much is clear: the childcare crisis is a barrier to human development, collective wellbeing, and the future of the United States.

WHAT IS THE CRISIS?

For over two decades, access to childcare in the U.S. has been diminished by high costs, poor quality, and burdensome regulations. As a result, parents are pushed out of the labor force. In 2016, the National Survey of Children's Health revealed that almost 2 million parents with children under the age of 5 had to step away from the workforce in the last 12 months of that year.

Since the pandemic, the childcare crisis has become much worse. *The New York Times* reported "1.6 million fewer mother of children ages 5–17 in the labor force in September 2020 alone." According to a report by the U.S. Chamber Foundation, since the start of the pandemic, 86 percent of childcare centers have started serving fewer children, with enrollment going down an average 67 percent.

OKAY, CHILDCARE IS EXPENSIVE, BUT HOW EXPENSIVE?

- According to a study done by the Department of Health and Human Services, childcare care costs an average of \$11,000 per year, per child, which is more than the price of public college in 33 states.
- The average daycare center cost in California is equivalent to half of the median income of a single mother.
- The average family in the U.S. spends about 10-15% of their annual income on childcare.

WHY IS IT SO EXPENSIVE?

There are quite a few factors that contribute to the high cost of childcare:

- The average annual salary for childcare workers in America is \$26,790 (\$12.88 hourly). While this is a low salary, childcare labor force costs continue to rise faster than inflation. As childcare continues to increase in cost, middle-class wages have remained stagnated.
- Strict labor laws like square footage per child and teacher-to-child ratios make childcare more expensive.
- The best childcare centers have high real-estate costs, and since parents do not want to compromise on quality, they end up paying the higher price of facilities with high rents.

A RECIPE FOR POOR HEALTH.

A combination of a lack of early childhood education and lack of a steady household income is a recipe for long-term impacts on health and wellbeing. There is a direct correlation between health and income, with lack of income contributing to worse health.

Labor economist Betsey Stevenson writes: "This puts families on just a completely different trajectory that's not about losing two or three years of income; it's about being on a lower earnings trajectory for the rest of your life."

HOW WILL WE FIX THIS?

We have been in similar circumstances. During World War II, the American government utilized the Lanham Act of 1940, which generated one of the largest expansions of childcare this country has ever seen. While it was active, over 550,000 children were utilizing childcare services. Similarly, a large social and financial investment from our government is what we need now too.

The Office of Head Start, a sector within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offers grant funding to agencies to help with the effects of the childcare crisis. In cities like New York and Boston, the Office of Head Start offers federal policy direction, funding, and training for early childhood education. Head Start has seen success not only in enrollment rates in daycare but also an increase in child and family health measures through their efforts to also obtain adequate housing, job training, and health insurance enrollment.

More recently, the Biden Administration promised to allocate a \$225 billion investment in the childcare sector to increase worker wages, reduce childcare prices and potentially offer free childcare services to low-income families. Should this plan go into effect, the average American family can save up to \$14,800 per year on childcare. But the question is how we can continue to sustain this kind of support for the years to come. The solution to this crisis is multifaceted and requires consistent and committed support from leadership across all levels of government.

The childcare crisis is a serious public health issue. As public health students and practitioners, we must ask the tough questions so we can build a comprehensive system that supports our nation's workforce with the resources and solutions necessary for quality childcare.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: mother's labour force participation ^[4]
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