

# The U.S. once had government-provided childcare. Where is it now? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Transcript

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

The debate over whether the federal government can or should provide child care for working parents has been going on for years. Turns out, though, we already did it back during World War II, when America needed women in the workforce. Sally Herships and Darian Woods from The Indicator on what we learned, if anything, from this grand experiment.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

DARIAN WOODS: The birth of Rosie the Riveter, women in the workplace, represented a pretty big cultural shift for the United States. Here's a clip from a government-sponsored training film from the time.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Women scare me - at least, they do in a factory.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Well, maybe the women are scared, too, Joe. Let's see. Most of them are working on their first industrial job, Joe.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: It's a totally unfamiliar world.

SALLY HERSHIPS: It was a strange, new world. Seven million women had entered the workforce, which created a problem. If no one was home, who was going to take care of the kids? So Congress set aside tens of millions of dollars to cover a child care program. In today's money, that's about \$1.2 billion. So the idea did not go over so well.

CHRIS HERBST: Even in the face of this war, there was a lot of opposition to running this child care program.

WOODS: Chris Herbst researches public policy and child care at Arizona State University.

HERBST: And a lot of the opposition, interestingly enough, came from the parents themselves.

WOODS: Chris says you have to understand that the shifts in these wartime factories, they could be 12 hours long, seven days a week. That's a long time to have a kid in day care. So some moms and dads were skeptical. Businessowners, of course, were strongly in favor of the child care program.

HERBST: It's hard to make tanks and battleships without workers.

WOODS: So in 1942, the first federally subsidized war nursery opened in New Haven, Conn.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: On their way to work, parents left their hopefuls at one of the nursery schools. The 50-cent daily fee included mid-morning and afternoon nourishment, as well as a hot, balanced lunch.

HERSHIPS: It was perceived as a high-quality program. But its history has kind of disappeared over time. Chris himself only heard about it randomly one day mentioned in a news story.

HERBST: I wrote a whole dissertation on child care. I read what I thought was the history of child care policy in this country. I had never heard of this. And so I literally dropped everything I was doing to learn everything I could about this program.

WOODS: Chris says that for women, the outcome was positive immediately. And for the hundreds of thousands of kids who were in the day care program, it had this really big impact down the road.

HERBST: Outcome after outcome after outcome, they did better than their counterparts who did not participate in the program. They were more likely to be employed. They were more likely to be employed full-time. Their earnings were higher. They were less likely to receive cash assistance. And they appeared to be in better health as well.

HERSHIPS: But it was expensive. And the program was always supposed to be just a temporary fix.

HERBST: When the war ended, all funding for the child care program would also end. And, in fact, that's what happened.

HERSHIPS: But 80 years later, some of those war nursery buildings are still there, and so is this debate to what extent the federal government should pay for daycare.

Sally Herships.

WOODS: Darian Woods, NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF GIANTS' "ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO")

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** public management <sup>[4]</sup>

economy <sup>[5]</sup>

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