

When your job helps the rest of America work ^[1]

Why so many are giving up on child care work and what it will mean for everyone else.

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EXCERPTS

The first children arrive at 5 am. It's still dark out, and they're sleepy, but their mom has to get to New York for her shift in the emergency room. Katherine Lantigua gives each of the kids a bottle or a sippy cup, and then they nap until the others start to arrive, around 7. From there, it's a whirlwind.

Lantigua and her husband, Diogenes del Rosario, take care of 12 children, plus their own two kids, who range from 7 months to 12 years old, at KColorful Daycare, the in-home child care center they started in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 2019.

On a recent morning, that means: teaching the kids about the letter N, pivoting the children to blocks when they're not paying attention to the letter N, snagging a plastic cucumber from someone's mouth and putting it aside for cleaning, asking Messiah to stop running, comforting Anaya, cuddling baby Kamiyah when she got up from her nap, teaching all the kids what an eggplant is, asking Messiah to stop running, helping Amir name the colors of the balls he's putting into a box, putting on the babies' shoes for outside time, pushing Zaid in the swing, brokering a dispute over a push toy, and, of course, asking Messiah to stop running.

Then it's hand-washing time, then lunch, then nap, then the older kids start to arrive for after-school care. The day care closes at 6 pm, but then Lantigua has paperwork, grocery shopping for the next day's meals, and helping her own kids with homework and bedtime.

"I am exhausted at the end of the day," Lantigua said during a brief break while the children napped. "I have to toughen up and say, 'I got this,' because after I finish day care, then it's time for my own kids."

The long days are hard on Lantigua, but her work is what allows Messiah's family, and Anaya's, and so many others, to go to their jobs every day knowing their kids are somewhere safe where they can learn and grow. Care work like Lantigua's is often called "the work that makes other work possible," a truth made especially clear during the pandemic, when many day cares and schools closed, leaving millions of parents struggling to watch their kids while still doing their jobs.

One analysis found that moms spent an average of eight full hours a day on child care in 2020, the equivalent of an extra full-time job — and a reminder of how labor-intensive, and how necessary, work like Lantigua's is.

Lantigua herself, however, is barely making ends meet. After she pays her mortgage and the salary for her one employee, she said, she has to choose: "This month I'm going to pay the light, next month I'm going to pay the gas." Saving for retirement is out of the question for now. Neither she nor her husband takes a salary. "We can't afford that," Lantigua says. Instead, they try to cover expenses as best they can with whatever the day care makes in a month.

For their long hours spent in a difficult, always-on environment, child care providers like Lantigua often make poverty-level wages — an average of just \$13.22 an hour in May 2021, when the median hourly wage for all workers was \$22. They are disproportionately likely to lack benefits and to need public assistance.

"Child care workers, the people providing this labor and this service that is absolutely vital to the continuing of our economy and families, are so underpaid that they can't afford to cover their basic needs," said Asha Banerjee, an economic analyst at the Economic Policy Institute, a nonprofit think tank.

The job has gotten even harder during the pandemic, with new risks, like the possibility of contracting Covid-19, and new requirements, like making a room full of toddlers keep their masks on at all times, constantly sanitizing toys and surfaces, and coping with lost enrollment as parents pull their kids out over Covid fears or because they've lost their jobs. Inflation is driving up the cost of basic supplies and stretching providers' budgets even further. "Our plastic cups and our materials actually cost more," said Reena Abraham, owner of the Learning Experience, a Brooklyn child care center.

There's a limit to how much providers can raise prices, though. Child care costs more than college tuition in many states — in Connecticut, it averages \$15,501 per year — and many families can't afford to pay much more. Indeed, experts in the field say the only way to fix the system is for the government to dramatically scale up its investment, increasing subsidies to help families afford care and make sure

workers earn a living wage. However, with President Joe Biden's big social spending package, which included funding for child care and preschool, stalled in Congress, it's not clear when — if ever — such help will arrive.

Meanwhile, the sector is rapidly losing workers. More than 560,000 people worked in child care in 2019, but one-third of those jobs were lost at the start of the pandemic. The industry hasn't recovered, dropping 4,500 jobs between September and November 2021 and another 3,700 jobs in December alone. In a lot of cases, workers are leaving for better pay as elementary school teachers, or in other sectors, such as hospitality or warehouse work. "We are competing with restaurants and Amazon for staffing," Abraham said.

The situation threatens the entire economy — all those jobs that child care work makes possible. One data analysis found that about 700,000 parents of young children left the labor force in 2020, many because of a lack of child care.

Lantigua, for her part, has big dreams for her day care. She'd love to hire more staff so she could provide more individualized attention to each child. She could design separate activities for the babies and toddlers, rather than having them all do the same thing. She could spend more one-on-one time with each child, attending to their unique challenges and needs.

Instead, she's left trying to make the math work, providing a service that families desperately need but that lawmakers and society at large consistently fail to prioritize. "I feel that we are ignored," Lantigua said. "I feel that we are neglected. I feel that we don't matter."

Lantigua hasn't always been a child care provider. When she and her husband moved to Connecticut four years ago, she was a medical assistant. But the family couldn't find affordable care for their daughter. It's a common problem: 51 percent of Americans live in child care deserts, areas where there are more than three times as many children as there are available care slots, according to the Center for American Progress.

For Lantigua and her husband, that meant splitting the day in half: She worked the day shift at a clinic while her husband drove for Uber at night. It wasn't working, she said. "He almost got into a car accident because he was exhausted."

So they saved up money until they had enough to open a day care in their home, launching a career they hoped would allow them to take care of their daughter and their baby son, born in 2018, while still earning an income.

Starting a day care isn't easy. Would-be providers have to complete a lengthy state licensing process, which can include anything from background checks to inspections of the facility's boiler and fire extinguishers. In Connecticut, it typically takes 60 to 90 days and costs about \$3,000.

Then there's the challenge of the work itself. When Lantigua opened her doors and saw all the kids together for the first time, "I was like, 'what in the world did I get myself into?'" Lantigua remembers. "I have to be insane."

Now, however, she projects an image of calm, even when six kids need six different things at once. A bright pink house with a picket fence, wreaths on the door, and a decorative sign reading, "family," the day care is welcoming even before the children walk in. The kids spend much of the morning playing downstairs, where the play area includes blocks, baby dolls, a truly impressive array of plastic foods, and a reading corner full of picture books.

Lantigua has taught a lot of the kids how to put on their own coats and shoes. "I like them to be independent," she said. "It helps me, and it helps the families."

The families can use the help. Some work long hours. Some are single parents. All receive subsidies, a combination of state and federal funds designed to help lower-income families afford child care.

These subsidies are supposed to help with the punishing cost of care, but there's not enough money to go around: Only about one in six US families who are eligible for subsidies in a federal-state program actually get them, while many families languish on subsidy waitlists for years with no assistance.

The affordability problem affects millions of Americans, worsening as the cost of care skyrocketed during the pandemic. As of 2019, more than half of working families with children under 5 — about 5.1 million households — were paying for child care. The average family spent 10 percent of its income on care, which is about 40 percent more than the Department of Health and Human Services considers affordable. Low-income families, meanwhile, spent a full 35 percent of their pay on child care.

Even still, providers are squeezed. Lantigua, for example, said she only receives about \$5 per hour per child in subsidy payments. At that rate, she can only afford one employee, her assistant, Bienvenida de la Cruz.

Over the last two years, when someone needs a diaper change or a potty trip or some water, de la Cruz has been the one to handle it. Throughout the day, she's constantly stepping in to help, grabbing someone's coat or holding a fussing baby while Lantigua tends to the older kids. De la Cruz also cooks the meals for the day care from an open kitchen where the savory smells — of beef stew with carrots and potatoes, for example — can waft into the playroom. When the kids inevitably throw the food on the floor, she's there to pick it up, too.

For all this, she's paid \$13 per hour, the minimum wage in Connecticut. She doesn't have health insurance. "I love my job," de la Cruz said through an interpreter. At the same time, with three kids of her own to support, "it's hard to make it to the end of the month."

Del Rosario, Lantigua's husband, doesn't have health insurance, either. Lantigua and her kids get theirs through the state's Medicaid program, but she was recently told that her income is above the threshold and she no longer qualifies. "According to them, that's it," she said. "I'm down the drain."

Lack of benefits — and low wages — are typical of the child care field. Only about 20 percent of child care workers have employer-

sponsored health insurance, compared with 52 percent of all workers, according to a November 2021 report by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). Just one in 10 child care workers has retirement benefits.

The low compensation is a result of centuries of devaluing care work in America. Proposals in Congress to create universal child care programs, which could have increased worker pay, have stalled because they were painted as anti-family. “We’re still to some degree fighting the idea that children of a certain age, and really the younger they are, should be at home with their mothers,” said Caitlin McLean, director of multi-state and international programs at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.

Moreover, child care has historically been performed by women, and especially women of color, dating back to slavery. Today, the child care workforce is 94 percent female and disproportionately Black and Latina. A disproportionate share are also immigrants. The low pay of these workers is inextricably bound up with misogyny, racism, and xenophobia, said Banerjee, one of the co-authors of the EPI report. “Care work is undervalued because care workers are also undervalued.”

That devaluation has translated to serious hardship in a country where basics like food and housing are getting more expensive, while wages — especially in child care work — fail to keep pace. One in three child care workers experienced food insecurity in 2020. More than 10 percent of workers in one 2021 University of Oregon survey said they’d been evicted during the pandemic; almost 30 percent said they struggled to pay their rent or mortgage. Meanwhile, child care workers are often unable to afford care for their own children, Banerjee said.

In addition to financial struggles, child care workers contend with long hours, intense physical and emotional demands, and, especially in the case of day care owner-operators, myriad responsibilities beyond just taking care of kids. “Child care teachers are doing all the things that you might realize, like leading a group of kids through lessons and activities and those types of things during the day, but they’re also doing all of these business activities to try to keep their program afloat,” McLean said.

That’s become even more difficult during the pandemic, when thousands of day cares had to close their doors to help stem the spread of Covid-19. Even after they were able to reopen, many struggled with low enrollment, which cut into their already precarious bottom line. Meanwhile, early educators found themselves thrust into the role of front-line workers overnight, caring for kids who were often too young to wear masks or keep a safe distance. “The six-feet-apart situation was a complete disaster,” Lantigua said.

“They want to play with each other, they want to interact with each other, and they can’t.”

Lantigua worried that one of the kids would bring Covid-19 into the day care. “My son has asthma, I have bronchitis,” she said. “It was scary.”

Such fears led some day care operators to close permanently. Others had to close because they could no longer pay the bills. Nearly 16,000 providers shut down permanently between December 2019 and March 2021, according to a report by the nonprofit Child Care Aware of America.

That has made affordable care even harder to find than it was when Lantigua was looking, four years ago. Child care in America today is “just a complete market failure,” Banerjee said. “And without some sort of intervention, it won’t change.”

Many experts and providers say that intervention has to come in the form of increased government funding. “What folks really need is sustainable base funding for their programs,” McLean said.

For programs like Lantigua’s that serve low-income families, that would mean higher subsidies. She’d like to see a standard of at least minimum wage per hour per child. “I’m working with six different characters,” she said — different personalities, different needs, different ways of learning and being in the world. “So why don’t I deserve to get paid at least \$13 per hour, per child?”

More broadly, it means a reimagining of America’s child care system as a public good supported by taxpayers on behalf of everyone, much like K-12 schools.

With public schools, “there’s a recognition that this is an expensive but crucial service, and so it’s going to be paid for with public funds, to make sure that costs can be covered and quality can remain high,” McLean said. With child care, by contrast, “really just whatever parents can afford is what they get. And often, that means that teachers are really shortchanged.”

The pandemic has done a lot to focus public attention on the problem — perhaps depressingly, many Americans began to recognize the value of child care when it was no longer available. The CARES Act, HEROES Act, and American Rescue Plan all included funding to help care providers weather some of the enrollment losses and increased costs associated with the pandemic. Last spring, President Biden unveiled the American Families Plan, a proposal that included universal free preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, along with a \$225 billion investment to make infant and toddler care more affordable for families making up to 1.5 times their states’ median income. The plan also called for raising child care workers’ wages to \$15 per hour, or to parity with those of kindergarten teachers.

It wasn’t perfect — there were questions about how the plan would phase in, and whether it might drive up costs for middle-class families. Still, many workers and advocates hailed it as an important step in the right direction, and a sign that the government was finally taking child care seriously. Biden’s agenda reflected a recognition that “care is as important as roads and bridges to our economy,” Banerjee said.

Then it stalled. The Build Back Better Act, which included many provisions of the American Families Plan, floundered in the Senate last winter when the White House couldn’t get centrist Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) on board. It’s unclear when or if it will be revived, or whether the child care provisions will be part of any revival.

For now, providers and families are still on their own, with some exceptions. Lawmakers in Louisiana are pushing for a \$115 million annual

investment over the next 10 years to improve the state's child care system, including raising pay for workers. Washington, DC, began expanding public preschool for 3- and 4-year olds in 2008, and now pays teachers in the program on par with teachers of older children, McLean said. More recently, the city established a pay equity fund to improve the pay of infant and toddler educators as well. And in New York, state legislators have proposed measures to expand families' access to subsidies and to increase subsidy rates.

Nonprofits have also stepped in. The Connecticut-based group All Our Kin, for example, offers child care providers business training and licensing support; during the pandemic, the group has helped providers get PPE and apply for Paycheck Protection Program loans, and advocated for stabilization grants to help programs remain afloat. As a result of their help combined with federal and state aid, more than 90 percent of All Our Kin-affiliated child care programs have weathered the pandemic so far and remain open, said Jessica Sager, the group's chief executive.

Lantigua relied on All Our Kin to help her transition from medical assistant to child care provider. "They sit down, they explain to you, they help you fill out these applications," she said. "When you're completely lost, it's like you have a backbone."

Today, Lantigua is paying some of that help forward by training and organizing other providers. She teaches CPR on the weekends, and recently helped organize a rally called a "Morning Without Child Care" to call for higher subsidies from the state. Such advocacy may be producing results: Five bills recently introduced in the Connecticut legislature would include more funding for child care, including one that would boost subsidy rates and fund 13,000 additional care slots for infants and toddlers. "We are seeing a real surge of public will around potentially investing in family child care," Sager said.

It remains an uncertain time for Lantigua and for providers across the country. No one knows when or if another Covid-19 surge will force another round of quarantines and closures. No one knows when the price of paper cups will come back down. No one knows when or if policymakers will step in with the funding to boost worker pay and make child care more affordable for parents.

What Lantigua does know is that the status quo is untenable.

"It's not fair for the child care providers, it's not fair for the families," she said, "and it's definitely not fair for the children."

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