

# U.S. child care: Parents can't afford it and workers can't afford to live <sup>[1]</sup>

Without public support, workers are quitting, and parents and providers are desperate.

**Author:** Herschander, Sara

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

### Excerpts

After three years working for less than \$15 per hour at a corporate-owned child care center in Cincinnati, Emily Helen — a 25-year-old teacher so beloved that she once rescinded her two weeks' notice after families begged her to stay — had finally had enough.

So, when yet another outbreak of COVID-19 rattled the chronically understaffed center this summer, she and three co-workers — a full two-thirds of the teaching staff — submitted their resignations.

They're not alone.

"Day care workers are literally crying out for help right now," said Helen, who doesn't plan to return to the day care industry. "I've never seen so many people so frustrated in this career."

Across the country, officials are scrambling to retain and incentivize child care workers and providers, who have abandoned an already beleaguered industry at a dizzying rate since the COVID-19 pandemic began, leaving centers struggling to stay open, and parents unable to find or afford care.

The U.S. child care industry is failing on various levels: Workers are low paid, the cost to parents is extreme, and child care providers are struggling to stay afloat.

Unlike other nations, the U.S. does not make large public investments in child care. The United States funds child care at a rate that's just 3.5% of the average of what other rich countries spend — and without a fundamental reimagining of child care, the burden will likely continue to fall on underpaid workers and providers, many of whom are immigrant women of color, and overburdened working parents themselves. Meanwhile, the price of child care will continue to be prohibitive to many families.

### 'Nobody Wants to Work for Such Low Wages'

At a starting rate of \$11.50 per hour, Helen's center was the best paid of any in Cincinnati when she began working there in 2019. She would still be earning a dollar less than in her previous job in food service, but Helen didn't care. She loved kids, and says that even on her hardest days — "where I'd be in tears about how stressed out I was" — she did genuinely love her job.

She loved it, even as each year seemed to bring new responsibilities — often without proper training — and only meager annual wage increases of 10 cents per hour. And, she stayed on, even as she saw co-workers flee for more lucrative jobs in food service or the cleaning industry, or to care for their own families.

Still, at times, Helen, who is currently seeking an associate's degree, felt she was being "paid to work for quarters," and struggled to keep up with living expenses while her partner was also in school.

Since February 2020, almost one in 10 child care workers, who face poverty at rates eight times that of K-8 teachers, have left the industry, per government statistics. In 2011, child care workers earned roughly \$19,900 per year, and a decade later in 2021, they earned only \$27,490 per year — an increase in salary of roughly 12% if adjusted for inflation, but one that still lands workers within the lowest paid industries in the country.

The industry's wages are inextricably tied to its roots in slavery, when Black women were forced into domestic work and child care.

By the time Helen and her co-workers quit, their center had already been forced to cut its hours of operation due to deep staffing shortages. And many of the more seasoned teachers from whom Helen learned in her early days there had left by 2022. The center had

roughly 15 teachers when Helen was first hired in 2019, and had only six when she and three co-workers submitted their resignations.

“We couldn’t keep staff, and we couldn’t hire anybody, because nobody wants to work for such low wages,” she said.

Nationally, the average center-based child care worker earns around \$13 per hour, less than half of the \$32.80 that kindergarten teachers earn. Full-time teachers in infant and toddler classrooms fare even worse at less than \$11 per hour, despite relatively high levels of education and professional credentials. It’s a startlingly low salary in an industry where 97% of workers are women, and more than two in five are women of color, who earn significantly less than their white counterparts.

The industry’s wages have always been low, and they are inextricably tied to its roots in slavery, when Black women were forced into domestic work and child care; then, decades later, they were intentionally excluded from federal New Deal-era labor laws. Even today, Black women child care workers earned only \$11.27 per hour in 2019 – roughly 76% of white workers’ \$14.78 per hour, according to the Center for American Progress.

“The fact that we undervalue different types of care work is not random – it is deeply rooted in who does care work and who they attend to,” said Marokey Sawo, a state economic analyst specializing in the care economy – including child care, elder care, health care and domestic services – at the Economic Policy Institute.

“This is labor that is incredibly important, but we’ve undervalued it for centuries,” she said.

### **‘Their Child Care Is More Than Their Mortgage’**

Kasia Kaim-Gonçalves had been working in early childhood education for years when she became pregnant with her first child in 2012. She wanted to be with her young daughter, so she decided to start a nanny share with one other parent, wherein Kaim-Gonçalves would care for both children for a small fee so she could afford to stay home.

In 2017, a few years after her second child was born, Kaim-Gonçalves was ready to return to work at a child care center. By then, her daughter was old enough to enroll in Head Start – a free federal child care program for low income families – but Kaim-Gonçalves found it impossible to find affordable child care for her toddler son.

“I visited all of the facilities in the neighborhood, and I looked at all of the prices and I realized something,” said Kaim-Gonçalves. “I would not be able to send my 2-year-old son to day care and work as an early childhood educator.”

“I would have to pay to send him – I would need to pay to work,” she said.

So, once again, she got creative. When a small unit opened on the ground floor apartment building in Brooklyn, New York, she quickly made the fast decision to rent it out and start her own small child care center called Greenpoint Garden Playhouse.

“It was so difficult and stressful,” she said. “At the same time, I realized I could solve my own child care problem, while also solving other moms’ child care problems.”

It hasn’t been easy. Child care expenses have only ballooned since 2017, and though Kaim-Gonçalves charges roughly \$2,400 per month for toddlers enrolled in her full-day program, she can barely make ends meet. For her first two years in operation, she couldn’t even afford to pay herself a salary.

The average cost of child care in the United States is now more than \$10,000 per year, and those costs would be even higher if workers and providers were paid a living wage. Though many countries underfund child care, the United States stands out in its lack of support for parents with young children. Other wealthy countries spend an average of \$14,000 per year to help pay for a toddler’s care – the United States contributes just \$500 in public funding per child.

In 1971, Congress nearly succeeded at creating a comprehensive system of nationally funded child care centers, but President Nixon vetoed the bill.

“For many parents, their child care is more than their mortgage,” said Heidi-Jo Brandt, who has spent 32 years running a home-based child care program in Saugerties, New York, and is Ulster County chapter representative of CSEA/VOICE Local 100A, a union of child care providers. “And that’s not fair – it’s more than college tuition.”

The United States funds K-12 and higher education at rates comparable to or higher than other wealthy countries, so the lack of funding for early childhood education is tied to more than just fiscal conservatism. As of 2017, nearly 80% of Americans said it was ideal for young children to have a stay-at-home parent or one that works outside of the home only part-time, with even higher percentages among older adults and Republicans.

Yet, the U.S. has attempted to implement universal child care before, including to facilitate more mothers entering the workforce during World War II. In 1971, Congress nearly succeeded at creating a comprehensive system of nationally funded child care centers, but President Nixon vetoed the bill over fears that it would “commit the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach.”

In other words, the federal government feared the creation of a “communist-style” system of care that would replace the often invisible labor of stay-at-home mothers in ‘traditional’ family structures. More recently, conservative lawmakers have employed similar rhetoric to oppose funding for child care, which members of the public in both parties support by wide margins.

The Inflation Reduction Act, which recently passed in Congress, initially included unprecedented investment in early childhood education as part of President Biden's Build Back Better proposal. However, the early childhood provisions were cut during negotiations with moderate Democrats, leaving the industry on shaky ground as temporary pandemic-era measures expire.

**"It's devastating for the children to continually lose these significant caretakers in their lives."**

**~ Sarah Ficken, early childhood educator**

Wherever possible, Kaim-Gonçalves tries to offer sliding scale tuition to families at her center, but has struggled to do so while still attracting and retaining workers. During COVID-19, she lost two employees, one of whom needed to provide child care to her own daughter during school closures. She feels guilty for needing to charge such steep fees, but has little choice to sustain her business.

"The reason I opened my space is because I couldn't afford child care — and that's a big internal struggle I have," she said. "Am I really helping or am I just another problem in this system where it's so unequal to get child care?"

Sarah Ficken, 28, once went from earning a salary of \$60,000 as a K-12 special education teacher to \$14 per hour as an early childhood educator. She currently works at Kaim-Gonçalves's Greenpoint Garden Playhouse, where she earns roughly \$40,000 per year while pursuing a master's in early childhood education at Bank Street College.

Ficken is deeply passionate about her work but has struggled with the industry's chronically low wages and the impact of an increasingly high turnover rate on families and staff.

"It's devastating for the children to continually lose these significant caretakers in their lives," said Ficken. "It's also difficult as the lead teacher to try to create a classroom culture that's in line with your expectations if you're constantly having to retrain people on what those expectations are."

For Kaim-Gonçalves, who couldn't find enough staffing for her regular summer program this year, the state of the industry has left her disheartened as she approaches her center's fifth year in operation.

"I am having a lot of doubts," she said. "Will I continue? I really want to, but is it sustainable? Is it good for my mental health? There are times that I get so overwhelmed."

#### **'If We Went Down, So Would 16 Families'**

For the past 12 years, Armet Barnes has been operating a home-based child care program for children aged 6 weeks to 12 years old in the suburbs of Rochester, New York. For Barnes, running a child care program is both deeply challenging and deeply fulfilling work, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, when she had nine school-aged children learning remotely in her care.

"Being able to see growth in them after such a traumatic experience for all of us — that keeps me going," said Barnes of the children in her care. "They feel safe with me, they have their parents send me pictures when they get haircuts, and they invite me to their birthday parties. That's the stuff that keeps me going."

Many child care providers like Barnes stepped up at the height of the pandemic, when New York state began incentivizing home-based care through stabilization grants, and they've worked tirelessly since to guarantee longer-term funding for the industry.

"Our community needed us," said Brandt, of union local CSEA/VOCAL 100A, of the providers' role during the pandemic. "And, if we went down, so would 16 families, because there was nowhere else to go."

**"There needs to be more than just the expectation that a continually underpaid workforce will keep going the extra mile."**

**~ Gregory Brender, Day Care Council of New York**

Yet, across the country, centers have been struggling to keep their doors open. Nearly 16,000 child care providers permanently closed their doors between December 2019 and March 2021, further imperiling communities where parents were already struggling to find and afford care. In many cases, parents — especially mothers — have been forced to leave the workforce to care for their children.

"The whole state of New York is really a child care desert," said Bonnie Caldwell, director of child care programs at the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), which manages VOICE Local 100A.

"For every one infant that is in care, there are seven infants waiting for care," said Caldwell. "By the time there's an opening in a program, the third or fourth infant on your list will already be in kindergarten."

#### **How to Reverse the Trend**

And, while lawmakers have been trying to reverse the trend with an array of new bills — including bonuses, stabilization grants and scholarships for child care workers — it remains to be seen whether that will be enough.

"The policy changes are great, but they need to come with the funding," said Gregory Brender, chief of policy and innovation at the Day

Care Council of New York, a membership-based group of over 200 New York City-based child care programs.

“There needs to be more than just the expectation that a continually underpaid workforce will keep going the extra mile,” he said.

Just months before she quit her job at a Cincinnati child care center, Helen received by far the largest raise of her career — one that bumped her and other longer-term employees up to \$14.90 per hour. Yet, it wasn’t enough to convince them to stay.

Shortly after submitting her two weeks’ notice, Helen logged on to a Facebook group for local parents searching for nannies to care for their children, where she quickly received over 30 direct messages from interested parents.

Just days after quitting her job at the center, she accepted an offer to nanny for a family for \$20 per hour. With the higher rate, and by working more hours than she did at the day care, she’ll be taking home more than double her previous salary. It’s a flexible solution for Helen, though domestic workers like nannies and others in the gig economy face their own tribulations in the labor market.

“My experience and credentials are proving to me that I am worth so much more, even though this company was telling me that I’m expendable,” she said. “It’s going to be completely lifechanging — and 72 hours ago, I never thought it would be possible.”

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

**Tags:** workforce <sup>[4]</sup>

recruitment and retention <sup>[5]</sup>

parent fees <sup>[6]</sup>

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