

Finding lessons on power of federally funded childcare for working mothers ^[1]

New research by Claudia Goldin takes look at World War II-era Lanham Act

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Excerpt

As women continue to fight for gender equity in the workplace, a new paper co-authored by Nobel Prize economist Claudia Goldin on a World War II-era act used to support working mothers reveals what can be done with political will.

In “Mobilizing the Manpower of Mothers: Childcare under the Lanham Act in World War II,” the Henry Lee Professor of Economics examined the impact of this 1940 legislation, which was initially passed to finance infrastructure, but later funded childcare for working mothers.

As the National Bureau of Economic Research working paper explains, the Lanham Act created and supported both nurseries for preschool-age children and extended-hour services for schoolchildren. “This was a national, practically universal, federally funded preschool program,” said Goldin, the 2023 Noble laureate. “It is, to this day, the only one.” (The well-known Head Start program, she noted, is federally funded but focuses on low-income children and families so is much more limited in scope.)

“I love being an economic historian. I am a detective,” said Nobel Prize-winning study author Claudia Goldin.

File photo by Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard Staff Photographer

Conceived as a way to free additional labor that might be needed for the war effort, many of the so-called “Lanham nurseries” repurposed some Depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) nurseries for young children, utilizing an Emergency Relief Appropriation Act that authorized “not less than \$6 million” for this purpose. (President Franklin Delano Roosevelt added an additional \$400,000 from another emergency fund, with more appropriations approved in 1943, putting the overall federal outlay at nearly \$52 million from 1943-46.)

But while the WPA nurseries were designed to help children of low-income and unemployed parents, the Lanham nurseries aimed at helping working mothers with children ages 2 to 11.

In addition to year-round supervision, these nurseries and the extended care also provided education and, at most of the nurseries, nutritionist-devised meals.

“We know that from Gallup polls of the era that practically no one thought that it was a good idea to employ women with preschool children,” said Goldin. “There was a lot of negative sentiment about that.”

But as the war progressed with no end in sight, mothers were viewed as an essential resource to keep many industries going as well as to contribute directly to the war effort while men went off to fight. These efforts included producing supplies as well as munitions or armaments manufacturing.

“The contracts for goods and services increased enormously” as the law went into effect, said Goldin, who analyzed some 191,000 federal contracts from this period.

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