

# Mobilizing the manpower of mothers: Childcare under the Lanham Act during WWII <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** National Bureau of Economic Research

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 20 Aug 2024

## AVAILABILITY

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

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## Abstract

The Lanham Act was a federal infrastructure bill passed by Congress in 1940 and eventually used to fund programs for the preschool and school-aged children of working women during WWII. It remains, to this day, the only example in US history of an (almost) universal, largely federally-supported childcare program. We explore its role in enabling and increasing the labor supply of mothers during WWII. Our information is at the city or town level and includes war contracts, the size of and expenditures on the childcare program, and the “reserve labor force” of mothers as of 1939. We find that the programs became well-funded but were late to start, limited in scope, and incapable of greatly increasing women’s employment in the aggregate. They were more numerous in places that already had high participation rates of women suggesting that they were effective in caring for the children of women who had already entered the labor force. Their impact on the children as adults is still to be determined.

**Related link:** Finding lessons on power of federally funded childcare for working mothers <sup>[4]</sup>

**Region:** United States <sup>[5]</sup>

**Tags:** universal child care <sup>[6]</sup>

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