

Child care costs soaring in NJ [US-NJ] ^[1]

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Source: WABC-TV, New York

Format: Article

Publication Date: 11 Apr 2003

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Child care costs in New Jersey are soaring, and can be more expensive than housing, according to a new report.

The study by the New Jersey Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies found that families earning the median household income in each county in New Jersey would spend between one-third and one-half of their gross income on licensed child care for a baby and a preschooler.

Child-care advocates said New Jersey's situation is part of a nationwide problem.

"Nationally, child-care consumers pay significant amounts that equal or exceed housing or public college tuition," Helen Blank, director of child care and development for the Children's Defense Fund, told The Star-Ledger of Newark for Friday's editions.

In New Jersey, the least expensive licensed child care for a preschooler, in Cumberland County, exceeds Rutgers University's \$5,770 tuition, the survey found.

The study also found that child-care workers in New Jersey earned \$16,900, below the federal poverty level for a family of four. It said many child-care workers would not be able to afford to place their own infants in a licensed child-care center.

Experts attribute low wages and lack of benefits - 68 percent of workers in the survey did not get benefits - to a high turnover rate in child care.

In the survey, turnover was nearly 50 percent, meaning half of child-care workers left their positions within a year. At least half of the centers surveyed had unfilled positions at the time of the survey.

Low salaries and high turnover make for poor quality, said Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research. "Kids have poorer-quality experiences when you have a high turnover rate, and poor salaries make it difficult to recruit good teachers in the first place," he said.

But Blank said it's difficult to raise salaries when parents shoulder most of the burden of paying for the licensed centers and registered family day-care centers, which are required to maintain minimum standards set by the state.

Economists recommend that families spend no more than 10 percent of their income on child care, said Faith Wohl, president of the Child Care Action Campaign, a New York-based child-care advocacy group. But poor families easily pay 25 percent and more.

- reprinted from transcript from WABC-TV.

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