

Why do the people raising our children earn poverty wages? Women who care for poor kids are often mothers living in poverty themselves ^[1]

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Excerpts:

Shanita Hargrove lives in a sunny second-floor apartment in Newark, New Jersey, not far from Mayor Cory Booker's house and, all too often, an electric roadside sign marking a recent homicide. On a winter morning, she was caring for two infants: 7-month-old Shawn and 5-month-old Jade, whose older sister had been with Hargrove years before. The babies were in and out of sleep, lying faceup on a colorful trio of yoga mats.

Hargrove handles children with the easy skill of a baker handling dough. She leans Shawn against her wide bosom, cooing in a Southern alto. She massages his back and feet and lightly touches his neck, which stimulates good hormones, she says.

She's been in this work a long time, having helped raise her younger brothers in North Carolina. "The majority of us providers, you'll find out, were taking care of children when we were children ourselves," she tells me.

As an adult, Hargrove found herself in New Jersey, the single parent of a young son and daughter, working days as an office manager and nights in fast food. "The hardest part was being separate from them for that long, even more than the hours and being drained.

"Sometime later, I had stopped working and gotten on public assistance, and when I didn't have childcare, I found out about Programs for Parents," she adds, referring to Newark's childcare training and referral agency. Through PfP, Hargrove obtained care for her son and later became a licensed provider. Today, she tends to kids in her predominantly African-American community, many of whom are covered by public childcare subsidies.

Despite Hargrove's thirteen years of caregiving experience, her income is unsteady and sparse. Her earnings have ranged from \$0 for weeks at a time to a short-lived career high of \$3,000 per month, which brought her household to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. "I've had to go on and off food stamps several times-especially when I had my children, before they went to college-depending on how the childcare was going," she says. Hargrove has even qualified for Medicaid.

Subsidy rates are low, and she charges the same-just \$165 per week for fifty hours of infant care-to private-pay clients. With one or two children, she can't make ends meet, and Hargrove rarely has the state maximum of five in her care. "There are times that you have no clients, so if you get a drop-off-somebody just needs you for a few hours-you do that."

Hargrove does other side jobs as well: typing résumés, cleaning houses and watching elderly relatives. In the summer, she tries not to use the air-conditioner. She also bargain-shops for groceries and baby supplies-difficult without a car-and accepts donated furniture from struggling clients, sometimes in lieu of payment. "You know what they're going through, and you give them a break," she says. "But usually it comes around, because as you bless these parents, they will bless you."

* * *

Throughout New Jersey, more than 2,000 in-home or "family childcare" providers tend to infants, toddlers and school-age children from low- and middle-income households. These providers are unlike nannies, who work in private homes and need not register with the state. As independent contractors, they are also distinct from daycare center employees entitled to the minimum wage and overtime.

The typical in-home provider is a middle-aged woman of color with children of her own. Like Hargrove, she enters the field to raise her own kids and earn a living minding others'. The government pays her to watch the poorest of these children, whose parents-often single moms-are in welfare-to-work programs or juggling minimum-wage jobs. She also cares for private-pay kids, whose parents, though low- and middle-income, do not qualify for help.

Childcare workers perform that most vital labor, rearing our young. But across the country, they are invisible and poorly paid, without healthcare, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation or other benefits. In 2011, the median income of all childcare workers was

about \$19,000; 17 percent were living in poverty, and for "self-employed" in-home providers, the figure is likely much higher. Subsidy levels are based on a fraction of "market rates," rather than providers' expenses, and cover far fewer hours than are actually worked. Out of empathy with the families they serve, some providers charge even less to those ineligible for subsidies, who must pay fully out of pocket.

Nearly everyone agrees on the importance of high-quality childcare and early education. It's good for child health, safety and development; it's good for parents who work; and, as an industry, it's good for our economy. Universal childcare seemed fleetingly possible in the 1940s and early '70s, but today, only 2.4 million kids receive subsidized care (about 16.1 million children under 18 live in poverty), and early education is a minimum-wage job.

The funding is primarily federal, but states have broad leeway in use and distribution. In fiscal year 2011, the dedicated childcare "block grant" totaled \$10 billion nationally. In fiscal year 2012, New Jersey spent \$227.8 million in combined federal and state subsidies, serving about 43,000 children per month-down from nearly 63,000 in 2010, when stimulus money still flowed. New Jersey's subsidies generally pass through local childcare resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs), like Newark's Programs for Parents, which oversees 632 in-home providers and about 165 licensed daycare centers.

Thousands of in-home providers are paid as little as \$118.80 to \$183.80 per week for each full-time, state-subsidized child. At these rates, workers must care for the maximum number of children-five in a given shift-to live above the poverty level.

"New Jersey pays particularly low rates, some of the worst-for infants, it's 38 percent below the market rate. So providers after a while can't do this; they can't afford it," says Helen Blank, director of childcare and early learning at the National Women's Law Center.

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Region: United States [3]

Tags: subsidy [4]

poverty [5]

staff [6]

federal programs [7]

regualted family child care [8]

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/subsidy> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/poverty> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/salary-enhancement> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs> [8]

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