

Rural child care costs too much, delivers too little ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

It seems like a stretch to call picking up a few bucks off the books by watching other people's kids an "industry," but the practice is so common that it's been dubbed the "informal child care industry." Precise numbers are hard to come by, but it's estimated that it's a \$2 billion industry in Missouri that employs tens of thousands of people. It's unregulated, largely untaxed and generally flies below the radar.

Sometimes it's the friends and neighbors and relatives of working parents who buy themselves enough hours to hold down a job by stitching together a network of adults to watch their children. Often parents must hold their breaths and rely on total strangers.

Not surprisingly, this system doesn't serve anyone very well. Not the children, who spend an average of 37 hours a week in these settings. Not the people — mostly women — who run them. Not the parents who worry about the quality of care and spend lots of time driving to get it. And not the state and rural economies that are denied taxes from this sector of the underground economy.

In a perfect world, the state and the federal governments would help families by further subsidizing the cost of child care, by licensing facilities so a standard of care is established, and by regulating the quality of care. Kids should be able to start kindergarten with developed language and comprehension skills. Providing transportation to licensed child care settings would also be a great help to working parents in rural areas.

Some parents are lucky enough to have a family member who helps out. In urban areas, there are many licensed facilities, some better than others, some too expensive for some families. For a lot of reasons, many parents have no better options, particularly those who live in rural areas.

Tom Johnson, a professor in the University of Missouri Truman School of Public Affairs, and Eun-Young Choi, a former doctoral student at MU, recently studied the size and economic impact of child care, especially informal child care, on rural economies.

The two had a grant to study the impact on Kansas, which Mr. Johnson said is about half the size of the industry in Missouri. They describe informal child care services as unlicensed facilities, unreported day care services run from homes and child care performed for barter rather than money. In 2005, they found, the industry added about \$971.5 million in total value to the Kansas economy.

Mr. Johnson said child care is generally more expensive in rural areas because of time spent and wages lost traveling to and from providers. Better access could improve rural economies, says the study.

"Increased access to child care in rural areas, whether it is informal services or formal services from licensed providers, has the potential to create a large, positive impact on rural economies," Mr. Johnson says. "Parents with affordable child care will have more opportunities to work, generating more income for families and creating a more diverse economy."

A separate study by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies says that federal standards for state child-care programs provide little guidance for the special needs in rural areas. Some 82 percent of the 730 counties in the United States that have experience persistent poverty since 1970 are in rural America. More rural children live in deep poverty — where family income is less than 50 percent of the poverty threshold — than children in urban communities. Some 57 percent of the rural poor children are white and more likely than urban kids to live in families with parents who are not college graduates and unmarried.

Kids in rural America spend an average of two hours more a week in child care than children in urban communities. Pre-school kids in unlicensed, informal and home-based care generally are less ready by the time they go to school.

A nation that's serious about its future would make quality child care readily available for every family, urban and rural alike. It would cost more in the short run, but the long-term benefits would be incalculable.

Region: United States ^[2]

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