

Here's what happened the one time when the U.S. had universal childcare ^[1]

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Source: Think Progress ^[2]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 1 Oct 2014

EXCERPTS

Nothing before or since has been like the Lanham Act, though you probably haven't heard of it. It wasn't even legislation that was supposed to have anything to do with child care. It was a bill to fund infrastructure projects that were needed for the war effort in 1940. But without so much as a Congressional debate or vote, the language was reinterpreted so that funding for child care centers could be funneled through it. And thus between 1943 and 1946, the country had its first, and only, universal child care program.

"It was the first of its kind and really the only one of its kind ever in the history of U.S. child care," says Chris Herbst, an associate professor in the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University and the author of a study of the act and its outcomes.

Before the Lanham Act, child care was funded through private charities or elite women's giving groups, and aimed mostly at low-income and unemployed parents as a way to help them find work. Following the Great Depression, the federal government got involved through the Works Progress Administration, which operated a network of child care centers targeted at the same groups.

But when it passed, the Lanham Act, which took some of the wartime stimulus funds and handed them over to local communities to build and staff their own child care facilities, Herbst said it was a "break from that." Because every community got the money, "The services were open to high-income, low-income, high-education, low-education, married mothers, unmarried mothers, the employed and the unemployed." And access was basically universal: there was no official work requirement and care was heavily subsidized, costing parents just between \$9 and \$10 a day (in today's dollars) for 12 hours of care in a center."

The Lanham Act's child care network came about because women were asked to enter the workforce when servicemen left to fight in World War II. "Initially childless women were urged to enter the labor market, but it became clear that there were far too few childless women," he said. The government then called on women with older children, but even that wasn't enough, so women with younger children were also asked to leave the home and head to the factory. "Along with that came the realization that the nation's system of child care was really inadequate to serve the demand for child care," he said. Horror stories abounded: "[S]tories of children locked in cars adjacent to factories, chained to temporary trailer homes, and left in movie theaters quickly filled newspapers and eventually became the subject of Congressional hearings," Herbst writes in his paper. So Congress acted.

But it didn't escape criticism. "All of the criticisms [of universal child care] you heard back then you hear today," he said. Critics warned that child care would ruin the relationships between mothers and their children, damage children's development, and not even see any take-up because mothers wouldn't want it.

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