

# Listening to workers: Child care challenges in low-wage jobs <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report (pdf) <sup>[2]</sup>

## Introduction

Workers in low-wage jobs often struggle not only with inadequate income but also with difficult working conditions that undermine their best efforts to both provide and care for their families. Women make up the large majority of workers in these jobs and they also shoulder the majority of caregiving responsibilities. Given the rapid growth in low-wage jobs, and the continued strong growth projected in low-wage female-dominated occupations, there is an urgent need to examine and address working conditions in these positions that are incompatible with family life. In particular, low wages and difficult working conditions make it nearly impossible for many of these workers to access and afford high quality child care.

The Ms. Foundation is supporting an effort by six worker justice organizations - Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the Garment Worker Center, the Retail Action Project and Center for Frontline Retail, and Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United - and the National Women's Law Center to identify and call attention to these challenges. The worker justice organizations represent workers from a wide range of industries - retail, agriculture, restaurant and fast food, nail and beauty, domestic work, and garment work.

The Ms. Foundation, the National Women's Law Center, and the six organizations collaborated on a participatory survey research endeavor that focused particularly on workers' child care needs, and how the often challenging and sometimes abusive working conditions in low-wage jobs - including very low pay, difficult scheduling practices, lack of supports like paid sick days and family leave, and discrimination - affect parents' ability to find and maintain high-quality, affordable child care. The research also focused on the special challenges facing immigrant workers, including language barriers and their often precarious immigration status.

All of the organizations convened in New York City in March of 2014 to discuss the findings from their research and to develop an agenda for action. While the method of gathering information and the number of participants varied widely among the organizations, the research revealed challenges shared by working parents across low wage occupations, as well as some specific to particular industries. This interim report provides preliminary information about the organizations' findings. A forthcoming report will describe the findings in further detail.

Parents working in these low-wage jobs confronted significant barriers to obtaining the high-quality child care they wanted for their children: very low wages and high child care costs, limited information about child care options, lack of access to assistance, and challenging work schedules. As a whole, the information workers provided paints a picture of incredible resilience - many workers were able to find some type of child care so they could hold on to their jobs, despite the formidable obstacles. But it also paints a picture of a child care system that seems totally inaccessible to many workers and fails to provide the early learning opportunities they want for their children, and of workplace policies and practices that place incredible strain on working parents and their children, who all suffer considerable stress as a result.

Across all of these industries, employers frequently shifted the risk of doing business onto low-wage workers - taking actions such as keeping employee headcount high but providing very few hours to any individual employee; requiring workers to stay past their shifts in order to keep their jobs or to be available to work on a moment's notice if the pace of work increased; and penalizing workers when they needed to call out sick. Not only did these practices make it difficult for workers to make ends meet, but they also wreaked havoc on caregiving responsibilities and other family obligations. These problems are discussed in greater detail below.

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/15/04/listening-workers-child-care-challenges-low-wage-jobs> <sup>[2]</sup>

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