

Cutting Pentagon pork could fund free childcare in the US ^[1]

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Source: Al Jazeera America

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Aug 2015

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

The cost of childcare is bankrupting America's parents. But providing free, universal childcare for all parents is easily affordable by simply cutting a small handful of military programs whose absence almost nobody would notice.

Joy Richmond-Smith is a full-time social worker and mother of two small children. Her husband also works full-time, so daily childcare is essential to the couple. In the Boston area, where she lives, Richmond-Smith pays \$400 for four days of childcare per week just for her 3-year-old son. If she were to put her 1-year-old daughter in childcare for two of those days, the cost would jump to \$500 per week. And if she were to pay for both children to have full-time daycare at that same facility, the cost balloons to \$700 per week. Richmond-Smith says her household's childcare costs are more than double the amount she pays for her mortgage.

"These early years of life and brain development are so important," she says. "I'm not skimping on childcare, so I'll pay whatever I need to pay."

She's right. Between birth and the age of three, the human brain is forming most of the neural connections it will depend on for life. According to the Urban Child Institute, 80 percent of brain development takes place before kids turn three. A 2008 joint study by Arizona State University and the University of Colorado at Boulder found that, on average, children with access to quality early childhood care and education have higher test scores, have a lower chance of having to repeat the same grade and are less likely to commit crimes as teens and adults.

High-quality childcare and early childhood education are largely inaccessible to middle-class parents such as Richmond-Smith, who doesn't qualify for federal childcare subsidies under programs such as Head Start. To qualify, a family of four needs to make less than the incredibly outdated federal poverty limit of \$22,000. Worse still, families that do qualify for a low-income childcare subsidy have to get in line - according to Richmond-Smith, more than 500 low-income families are on the Head Start waiting list in Middlesex County, Massachusetts. In 2010, Head Start workers were penalized for enrolling middle-class families who couldn't afford childcare, but didn't meet federal qualifications for subsidies. One solution for funding free childcare for all parents could be found by simply cutting out Pentagon waste that nobody would notice.

To find out how much free, universal childcare would cost for all American children under age 5, I calculated the median cost of childcare in all 50 states using data published by The Boston Globe in 2014. The Globe's research showed the estimated cost of full-time childcare for one child in all 50 states in 2012 dollars. The cheapest was Mississippi (\$4,863 per year for an infant), while the most expensive was Washington, D.C. (\$21,948 per year for an infant). The median figure was \$9,230 - the halfway point between 26th-most expensive (Wyoming, \$9,100 per year for an infant) and 25th-most expensive (Maine, \$9,360 per year for an infant). By multiplying that figure by the estimated 21,005,852 children in the U.S. under age 5, I estimated the total cost for providing childcare to all of these children to be \$193.8 billion.

That sounds like a lot, but much of the funds can be made available by simply eliminating one wasteful Pentagon program that serves no purpose: the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

The U.S. military has already spent approximately \$400 billion on a fleet of 2,457 F-35 jets. To operate and maintain the program, the Pentagon is set to spend more than \$1.5 trillion. In December, the Pentagon revealed the F-35 wouldn't be able to fire its gun until 2019, due to computer malfunctions.

By scrapping the F-35 program, the U.S. government would have another \$1.1 trillion to spend, which could fund almost six years of free, universal childcare across the United States.

To shore up more money, Congress could eliminate the \$30 billion Littoral combat ship fleet, the \$15 billion Gerald Ford-class aircraft carrier program and the \$25 billion that former U.S. Senator Tom Coburn outlined in his Pentagon "wastebok" (which includes a \$1 billion missile defense system that only stops 3 out of 10 missiles). Congress could listen to Pentagon officials who have asked for fewer military appropriations in order to cut the troop size down by 70,000 or 80,000 troops, saving between \$59.5 billion and \$68 billion, assuming

2012 costs of \$850,000 per troop, per year. The U.S. military could also simply cut down on the amount given to private military contractors. In 2011 alone, defense contractors got \$374 billion.

Germany, France, Sweden and Denmark all understand the importance of free childcare in supporting their national economies, and make it a priority in their budget. The U.S. should follow their lead. If you get a chance to talk to your member of Congress during the August recess, ask them which they feel is more important - free childcare for everyone under age five, or wasteful weapons programs?

- reprinted from Al Jazeera America

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