

The daycare industry, exposed ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the United States, daycare is a booming business.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects the daycare industry to be among the country's fastest growing through 2020, according to Forbes. Roughly 11 million kids under the age of five in the U.S. spend every work week in some kind of childcare setting. Parents put their faith in childcare centers—and the governmental departments that regulate them—under the assumption that their children will be safe and cared for until they return. But a slew of media investigations into childcare institutions across the nation has revealed that the childcare industry is not as well regulated as parents might hope. Many states have, in turn, responded with new legislation aimed at tightening regulations and better protecting the millions of children who attend daycare every day.

The daycare industry has grown rapidly in recent years, in part because the work week is longer and more unpredictable than it used to be, as Alissa Quart reported for Pacific Standard in 2014: "Nearly 40 percent of Americans have non-standard work lives. (The average American adult also now works one and a quarter jobs.) Working people who live below the poverty line are particularly afraid to say no to these unusual schedules."

The current work climate has left parents more dependent than ever on childcare centers. Some extreme daycare facilities that cater to parents living outside the nine-to-five work schedule operate 24 hours a day. Quart spent time in one of these facilities in Rochelle, New York, that was run by Doloris and Patrick Hogan. "Most [of the children] see Patrick and Deloris, whom the kids call Nunu, more than they see their parents," Quart wrote. Quart found these extreme daycare settings to be a safe—if not enriching—environment that left children "wise beyond their years."

"At several facilities cited repeatedly for overcrowding, children were seriously injured or left behind in parks and playgrounds by themselves."

But in the last year, a series of scandals has plagued the daycare industry. An investigation by the Clarion-Ledger and the Hechinger Report found that poor and inconsistent oversight over daycare facilities in Mississippi was putting children in danger. The investigation revealed that the majority—63 percent—of the childcare centers reviewed were non-compliant with at least one regulation. Many centers were severely understaffed; at one daycare facility, a single staff member was looking after a full 59 children between the ages of one and four; 10 of the centers investigated left children alone with staffers without background checks; inspection records are public, but, as it stands, parents must request the data in writing; and for facilities with violations, the route to compliance isn't always clear.

Inspectors with the Department of Health exercise discretion in their evaluations, and, as a result, citations and recommendations were often inconsistent, the Clarion-Ledger review found:

For example, the review found that of the 60 centers cited for having water that was too hot, nine were told to send a written statement once the problem was corrected, nine were told to send the written statement and that a follow-up "may be needed," 19 were told they needed a follow-up, four were told they "may" need a follow-up and records for 19 centers did not indicate how or if the Health Department intended to monitor compliance.

A similar investigation by the New York Daily News of more than 11,000 daycare facilities across New York City found the centers were overcrowded and understaffed, which often had devastating consequences for the children. "At several facilities cited repeatedly for overcrowding, children were seriously injured or left behind in parks and playgrounds by themselves," the Daily News' Greg B. Smith wrote. Five children died in daycare between 2013 and 2015, the investigation found, including one child who was brutally murdered by a daycare operator.

Again, the inspection information proved hard for parents to track down, Smith wrote:

For the most part, these serious incidents are invisible because the system is anything but transparent. Finding specifics about violations is difficult, in part because two separate agencies - the city Department of Health & Mental Hygiene and the state Office of Children &

Family Services - regulate day care.

The city is responsible for 2,272 sites; the state for the other 9,241. Often owners operate both city-and state-run sites, but inspection results are kept in separate websites depending on the type of facility.

At the very least, the the response from New York officials has been swift. New York Mayor Bill de Blasio promised to hire 35 more health inspectors, and Governor Andrew Cuomo is pushing for legislation that would create a complete registry of state- and city-run daycare centers across New York City.

Across the country, other states are starting to crack down on the under-regulated industry. In 2015, 43 childcare bills were enacted in the U.S., several of them related directly to child safety, including a comprehensive background check program in Maine; criminal history checks in Virginia; a requirement for sudden infant death syndrome prevention training in North Dakota; and, in Washington, reviews of all child fatality cases by the Department of Early Learning.

Mississippi was not among the 39 states to pass new child care and education legislation in 2015. But the Clarion-Ledger reported that the state's Health Department has plans to put inspection information online to make those records more accessible to parents. (The investigation found that the Health Department itself, like the daycare centers, is overextended and struggling for resources.)

Change can't come soon enough for the parents and children who rely on daycare centers.

-reprinted from Pacific Standard

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