



COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Reform of U.S. Childcare Policy

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COVID-19 has exposed the dependency of the United States economic system on weak and costly child care. As the pandemic recedes, possibilities for new legislation to revamp the system will begin to close as well. If policymakers cannot seize the moment, the country will lose the chance to create a new model of effective child care.

The K-12 education system in the U.S. has, by default, served as the childcare system for school-aged children, with private providers and some subsidized means-tested programs filling the gaps. As schools closed during COVID-19, working parents faced a crisis of affordability, accessibility, and quality options for care of their children. New, extreme burdens of caregiving disproportionately hampered women, communities of color, and lower income families. Gender inequities in child care are especially troubling, because they perpetuate additional disparities along lines of income, race, and health status. Data show that women, especially women of color, are disproportionately affected by the closing of schools, because they carry out most of the duties involving child care. Women do not remain in the workforce when schools are closed and when affordable, high-quality, and flexible child care is unavailable. Looking forward, these issues must be addressed.

Impacts of Childcare Policy Failures on Parents, Women

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately suspended the careers of American parents who must juggle work and child care. Americans seemed to intuit this, even when it was not stated plainly. Many jurisdictions kept schools open at the onset of the pandemic as an acknowledgement that it was a form of child care, despite the growing risks. Now, data show that women, especially women of color, are disproportionately affected by the closing of schools. **Women of color experienced job loss at a disproportionate rate**, compared to other women and the general working population. As of December 2020, Hispanic women and African-American women had unemployment rates of 9.1% and 8.4% respectively—compared to 5.7% for white women and 5.8% for white men. Many women have either lost their jobs or faced impossible choices between paid work hours and caregiving. Many of those affected were out on the frontlines during the pandemic as essential workers.

The pandemic accentuated the challenges women face, particularly the dual burden faced by those who are both the primary caregiver and the family breadwinner. Such dual burdens disproportionately face women of color. Women held 55% of the 20.5 million jobs lost between April and December 2020. Such gender disparities in job security and caregiving should be primary considerations in policy reform.

COVID-19 Childcare Policy and Prospects for Reform

Many policymakers recognize that child care is crucial to post-pandemic economic recovery. Conditions revealed during the pandemic provide an opportunity to plan for lasting improvements. Policy reform should address challenges parents face and promote greater gender equity. Reform should also account for the costly impacts of COVID-19 on both home-based and center-based childcare providers. Going forward, this means bolstering access, quality, and flexibility for families, particularly those from underserved communities. Access to quality child care and early education programs are vital not only to the development of children but also their families' financial health, especially when women are heads of households. COVID-19 clearly highlights the need for federally subsidized but locally based childcare facilities, beyond the public education system. New supports need to be adapted to the real challenges working parents now face. Federal funding should allow for local involvement and discretion and flexible programming for parents who need child care.

As of the summer of 2021, the Biden administration's proposal might promote equitable, permanent solutions. President Biden's plan would cover care for all children under the age of five, and no family earning below 1.5 times the median income in their state will have to pay more than 7% of their income for quality care. A typical family will pay no more than \$45 per week and for the most-hard pressed working families, early childcare costs would be fully covered, saving these families about \$200 per week.

Beyond this economic component for parents, flexibility in choosing care that meets the varied needs of parents with nontraditional work schedules should remain central to policy proposals. In addition, reform should address the regulatory and financial challenges childcare centers and home-based providers face. If Congress and the states that will ultimately have a great role to play in how this plan would be implemented act to shore up these gaps, the rewards to women and families across the racial and socioeconomic spectrum could reverberate for generations.

Read more in Maria J. D'Agostino and Nicole M. Elias, "Care in Crisis: COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Universal Child Care in the United States." *Administrative Theory & Practice* 43, no. 2 (2021): 217-229.