

Economic Policy

Half of America's childcare workers need food stamps, welfare payments or Medicaid

By Danielle Paquette

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The people who are paid to watch America's children tend to live in poverty. Nearly half receive some kind of government assistance: food stamps, welfare money, Medicaid. Their median hourly wage is \$9.77 — about [\\$3 below the average janitor's](#).

In a [new report](#), researchers at the University of California at Berkeley warn that child care is too vital to the country's future to offer such meager wages. Those tasked with supporting kids, they explain, are shaping much of tomorrow's workforce.

“Economic insecurity, linked to low wages, remains endemic among those who care for and educate young children from birth to elementary school,” the authors wrote. “This condition has endured despite a much-altered landscape in which developmental scientists, economists, and business and labor leaders have widely recognized the importance of early care and education in shaping children's development, promoting the health of families, and building a strong economy.”

In the United States, roughly 2 million adults make a living by caring for and educating more than 12 million children, infants to 5-year-olds. Last year, 46 percent of child-care workers were part of families enrolled in at least one public safety net program, compared with 26 percent of those in the broader workforce. Low pay contributes to a revolving door of staffers. The average annual turnover rate among early childhood education staffers, for example, hovers around [30 percent](#).

Wages remain paltry even among the college-educated workforce. Early childhood education is the college major that [yields the lowest lifetime pay](#).

Marcy Whitebook, director of Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, who co-wrote the report, said these economic conditions aren't ideal for toddlers who require both environmental stability and the constant attention of their caregivers. Plus, highly skilled workers might turn down a day-care job for brighter financial opportunities elsewhere.

The [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development](#) labels the majority of America's day-care programs "fair" or "poor." Just 10 percent, the organization said, offer high-quality care.

"We're entrusting children to people who are really struggling to feed their own families," Whitebook said. "They're managing all this stress, which is distracting to all the important work they have to do."

Not that financial stress always translates to poor workplace performance. But [study](#) after [study](#) has found that anxiety about money can cloud thoughts, thwart concentration and zap energy.

The danger can be more subtle than, say, failing to remove a choking hazard from a playroom. If a distracted worker doesn't interact with a baby for an hour or two, it's unlikely that time alone will damage the child's health. Repeated periods of no contact, however, could have adverse effects in the long term.

Neuroscientists say the foundation of our attention span, memory and impulse control is largely laid before age 3. Jack Shonkoff, director of Harvard University's [Center on the Developing Child](#), wrote in a [2000 study](#) that early interactions build the way we come to think and react. If babies' environment is volatile or "unresponsive" — meaning no one is touching or talking to them for long periods — stress hormones surge, disrupting the mental growth process. They're more likely to experience anxiety or depression as an adult. They're less likely to stay in school or out of jail.

“Children in settings with high turnover,” Whitebook said, “you see the impact on them, in terms of language and social development.”

The economics of child care in the United States remain broken, she said. Parents are spending [mortgage-like sums](#) to get their toddler a spot at a local day care, even if its [quality is unclear](#). Providers aren't [profiting much](#), thanks largely to regulations that exist to keep kids safe.

The report's recommendation: States should pour more money into child care, since the market alone isn't boosting worker wages. Public money for centers, for example, can give owners the power to raise pay, attracting more skilled and less distracted employees.

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