



Moms Are Stressed. Congress Can Help.

AUGUST 28, 2024 — JULIE KASHEN, LAUREN HIPPI, NINA PEREZ, LAUREN HOGAN, AND CASEY PEEKS

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Jobs numbers from spring and summer 2024 have reflected higher employment rates for prime-working-age women than ever in history. Moms with children under age 5 have been the most rapidly growing segment of the labor force. At the same time, child care prices are rising faster than inflation, child care programs are having trouble hiring and retaining early educators, and, in too many communities, child care programs are closing down. But despite the challenges, these moms are making it work—somehow.

One of the most clear takeaways from this situation is that moms are facing increased levels of stress. The Century Foundation partnered with Morning Consult on a new poll of parents in May 2024. Our findings reveal that 87 percent of parents that are home with their children without other sources of child care a few or more times a week are experiencing increased stress, with a negative impact on their mental health as a result of child care challenges. Nearly half (47 percent) of all parents who rely on child care facilities a few or more times a week are experiencing either increased stress (28 percent) or negative impacts on their mental health (19 percent) due to child care challenges. One in three moms (33 percent) report an increase in stress as a result of child care challenges. For parents with children under age 5, it's even higher (37 percent).

For example, Daphne in North Carolina, the mom of children ages 8, 5, and almost 2 says: “The child care crisis has put my family in an impossibly stressful situation.” When

Daphne and her husband moved further away from the family that helped with child care for their two older children, they found out just how hard the challenges were. They put their two year-old on waitlist after waitlist, and in the meantime arranged for piecemeal care like so many families do. Between juggling work and taking care of her children, relying on friends to help out, alternating schedules with her husband, staying up late to catch up on work after the kids go to bed, and even using PTO (paid time off) to make up for lost work time, the stress levels are high. Daphne and her husband work hard, but without a child care guarantee to rely on they are exhausted.¹

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Courtney in Columbus, Ohio puts it succinctly: “CHILDCARE IS A STRUGGLE!”² In Rio Rancho, New Mexico, Mary and her husband commute an hour twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening—to get to the only affordable child care program they could find, facing the added stress of the commute, the cost of gas, and the sacrifice of time together as a family.³

Increasing parental stress levels—like what Daphne, Courtney, and Mary are experiencing—are not an acceptable byproduct of child care challenges. Not only is supporting parents and child care providers the right thing to do to keep the economy running, but also, investing in parents’ mental health and wellbeing has a positive impact on their children, employers, and the public health of their communities.

Moms Make It Work—Because They’ve Had To

Moms have always worked, and made it work. But it hasn’t always been easy, and it certainly hasn’t been equitable. In fact, U.S. policies and norms have long pushed moms of color, specifically, into the workforce—into low-paying jobs that have few workplace protections—[while setting up barriers, and in some cases supports](#), to keep white women out of the workforce. As [Jocelyn Frye explains](#), “Because of the combined effects of entrenched racial, gender, and ethnic biases, women of color historically have not been seen as equal to white women or men—and little consideration has been given to their personal needs and challenges.” Since women of color are also more likely to be the primary breadwinners in their families, they have had to figure out how to meet their child care needs even when the options are limited.

The United States has only once temporarily provided public resources for comprehensive child care options—[during World War II](#), when six million women entered the workforce to fill the wartime labor gap. In the seventy years since, parents have made it work without the safe, nurturing and affordable child care options that they truly need, that are an investment in our children and their future. As sociologist Jessica Calarco put it so well, “Other countries have safety nets. The United States has women.” She explains that intentional policy and cultural choices have made us a “DIY society”—one in which people are expected to solve their own problems . . . where people who fail to solve their own problems are shamed and denied support.”⁴

Just because moms make it work doesn’t mean that any of it is okay. The challenges of juggling work and child care hold

women back from achieving equity in the workplace, building wealth, and supporting their families. They deprive our society of meaningful contributions. (During the pandemic, women academics, for example, [kept noting](#) that dads were writing books and getting ahead in their careers while moms were practicing their primal screams and barely managing). And such challenges are simply unfair and inequitable.

Alexandra in Florida quit her job as a teacher when she couldn’t find affordable child care in her community.⁵ So many moms like Alexandra either quit, reduce their work hours or choose jobs that are flexible even if they are not the right fit. And, when they do, the impacts can have ripple effects. When women like Alexandra leave their jobs due to child care challenges, it contributes to some of the most critical [worker shortages the United States is experiencing](#).

Another ripple effect is that child care challenges can have a negative impact on the children themselves. [Children benefit from their parents’ economic stability](#) and the stability of their child care and early learning programs. Quality early childhood education supports children’s cognitive development, physical health, and social and behavior development—as does family income. Children’s development is connected not only to [parents’ ability to access and invest in goods, programs, and services](#) that further child development, but also to the stress and anxiety parents and educators can suffer when faced with financial difficulty, which in turn can have an adverse effect on children in their care.

Provider Stress

Moms are not the only ones who are stressed. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce is also experiencing high stress levels. Child care and early learning providers—administrators, early educators, and other staff, who are disproportionately women of color—are some of the lowest paid workers in America. [The continued undervaluing of their work](#) leaves many early educators (one in seven), many of whom have their own children to support, living below the poverty line, and often with no health or retirement benefits.

That leaves the wellbeing of the entire ECE field at risk.

A [January 2024 survey from the National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#) showed that 46 percent of all respondents reported increased levels of burnout since January 2023:

Despite the overall trend of marginally increasing educator wages—moving from an average of \$12.24 per hour in 2020 to \$13.71 per hour in 2022—it has not been enough. Twice as many respondents said their economic situation had worsened (32%) compared to those who said it had improved (16%). An exodus of educators still looms—and among those who were considering leaving the field, higher wages was listed as the top factor that would drive them to stay.

As [one child care owner/operator in Georgia](#) said:

My own salary has been cut along with health insurance. To avoid raising the cost of child care for parents that are already struggling I no longer pay myself and I'm using credit cards to help purchase food, gas and other necessities.

A [child care director in Mississippi](#) similarly shared:

My program has been impacted in every negative way possible. I can't pay bills on time, supplies are limited, I can't support the children as I did. I am at the point of closing my center after 25 years. I helped all of my employees to get a degree; some have received Masters, and I can't afford to pay them what they are worth or I don't pay myself.

These worsening conditions are having an impact on provider stress. According to the RAPID Survey, from March 2021 through July 2023, about 50 percent of the child care providers experienced moderate-to-high levels of anxiety or depression symptoms. Low wages are a big part of the problem. A center director from Ohio [told RAPID](#):

Food costs concern me and we usually run low. We make too much to qualify for any assistance yet we struggle to pay for food after all the bills are paid and usually end up charging it which then leads to more anxious nervous

feelings because now I have to pay that off before interest is tacked on. I also have a lot of medical bills that have gone to collection because I just don't have the money to pay it and choose to pay for food instead.

A center teacher in California [commented](#):

My income is insufficient, I can't meet the needs of family expenses, and I don't have enough necessities, which makes my psychological pressure great. I have been suffering from insomnia recently, and I want to seek psychological health support.

After parents, child care providers are some of our children's first teachers, and play a critical role in early childhood education. Consistent relationships with stable, responsible adults are important for children's healthy development. But low wages and high stress levels create high turnover, which can lead to children feeling [insecure and unstable](#) about whether their needs will be met. In addition, high levels of stress, poor mental well-being, and high rates of food insecurity [can impact](#) anyone's ability to support and nurture children—parents and providers alike.

Becca from Lansing, Michigan, the mother of three young children puts it well:

We are so lucky to have amazing caregivers for our boys. . . . These WOMEN deserve better pay, but I know that would only come at the cost of us as parents, and we are barely making it as is. I can only imagine how other families are struggling and I am incredibly disappointed by what the lawmakers in our country are choosing to focus on, instead of their own constituents. I ask that our elected officials step up and make changes to support all families, especially those that are most affected by funding for childcare.⁶

It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

Imagine children and families having reliable, stable child care options that meet their families' needs—convenient options, with no commute, no wait list. Picture early educators having the resources to stay in the profession they love,

and grow and prosper as they support our next generation to do the same. Parents would have more time with their children and the peace of mind that everyone urgently needs. With families and educators working in partnership, children would be safe, happy, healthy and learning— about themselves, their peers, and the world around them. This is the vision that advocates have been working toward. Families, providers, and our nation’s economy cannot afford to continue imagining, we need Congress to act and make this vision a reality.

Notes

- 1 As told to MomsRising.
 - 2 As told to MomsRising.
 - 3 As told to MomsRising.
 - 4 Jessica Calarco, *Holding It Together: How Women Became America’s Safety Net* (New York: Random House, 2024).
 - 5 As told to MomsRising.
 - 6 As told to MomsRising.
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