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The Child Care and Early Learning Workforce Is Underpaid and Women are Paying the Price

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Child care and early learning is essential for many families. Yet due to historic underinvestment, the high costs of providing care, and parents' concerns about their children's health, the already fragile child care sector was hit particularly hard during the pandemic. Still missing a net 54,000 jobs since February 2020, the child care sector is also experiencing a more sluggish recovery than many other industries.¹ Low wages have made it extremely challenging to bring workers back to the child care and early learning field—and made it difficult for those who have remained in or returned to the field to support themselves and their own families. This underpaid sector largely consists of women—including many women of color, who typically receive even lower wages than other workers in the field.

Who are child care and early learning workers?

Women make up a disproportionate share of the child care and early learning workforce: In 2021, they made up 94% of child care workers and 97% of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten (pre-K/K) teachers, compared to 47% of workers in all sectors. Women of every race and ethnicity are overrepresented in the child care and early learning workforce. For example, Black women make up 12% each of child care workers and pre-K/K teachers, compared to 6% of workers in all sectors. Similarly, Latinas make up 21% of child care workers and 15% of pre-K/K teachers, compared to 8% of workers in all sectors. More than two in 10 child care workers (22%) and more than one in 10 pre-K/K teachers (13%) are women born outside of the U.S., while 8% of people working in all sectors are women born outside of the U.S.

Most child care workers have post-secondary education: Nearly four in 10 child care workers (39%) have some college education or an associate's degree, and nearly one in five (19%) have a bachelor's degree or higher education level. Pre-K/K teachers are particularly likely to be highly educated, with 32% having some college or an associate's degree and over half (52%) holding a bachelor's degree or higher education level—compared to the nearly four in ten workers across all sectors (38%) who have at least a bachelor's degree. And many early childhood education workers—especially pre-K/K teachers—are working to support families: 28% of child care workers and 41% of pre-K/K teachers are parents, compared to 32% of workers in all sectors. More than one in ten child care workers (11%) and pre-K/K teachers (13%) are single parents, compared to 8% of workers in all sectors.

TABLE 1. THE CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING WORKFORCE BY GENDER, RACE/ETHNICITY, AND NATIVITY

	Child care workers	% of all child care workers	Pre-K/K teachers	% of all pre-K/K teachers	Workers in all sectors	% of workers in all sectors
<i>Shares of the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces by gender</i>						
Men	55,858	6%	21,037	3%	83,353,386	53%
Women	852,231	94%	763,736	97%	74,462,136	47%
<i>Shares of the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces who are women, by race/ethnicity</i>						
White, non-Hispanic women	462,695	51%	494,304	63%	44,210,527	28%
Black women	110,155	12%	93,432	12%	9,428,550	6%
Latinas	194,837	21%	118,788	15%	12,621,016	8%
Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women	35,924	4%	25,551	3%	4,866,164	3%
<i>Shares of the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces who are women, by nativity</i>						
U.S.-born women	651,621	72%	663,983	85%	61,853,979	39%
Foreign-born women	200,610	22%	99,753	13%	12,603,701	8%

Source: NWLC calculations based on the U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey 1-year estimates using Sarah Flood et al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS): Version 8.0 [dataset] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2022), <https://ipums.org/>. Individuals self-identify their gender, race, and ethnicity.

TABLE 2: THE CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING WORKFORCE BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND PARENTAL STATUS

	Child care workers	% of all child care workers	Pre-K/K teachers	% of all pre-K/K teachers	Workers in all sectors	% of workers in all sectors
<i>Shares of the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces by educational attainment</i>						
Less than high school diploma	113,548	13%	14,135	2%	13,559,261	9%
High school diploma or equivalent	266,978	29%	110,883	14%	37,609,991	24%
Some college or associate's degree	350,762	39%	251,653	32%	46,582,629	30%
Bachelor's degree or higher	176,801	19%	408,102	52%	60,063,641	38%
<i>Shares of the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces by parental status</i>						
Parents	250,070	28%	324,282	41%	50,280,210	32%
Single parents	95,523	11%	98,313	13%	12,628,802	8%

Source: NWLC calculations based on the U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey 1-year estimates using Sarah Flood et al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS): Version 8.0 [dataset] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2022), <https://ipums.org/>. Parents include those with children under the age of 18. Single parents are those with children under the age of 18 and who are married but their spouse is absent or who are separated, divorced, widowed, or never married/single.

How much are child care and early learning workers paid?

Child care and early learning workers—especially women and women of color—consistently face low wages compared to workers in all sectors. Among full-time, year-round child care workers, women are typically paid \$11.54 per hour and men are typically paid \$12.58 per hour. Full-time, year-round pre-K/K teachers have median wages of \$14.78 per hour for women and \$15.85 per hour for men. These compare to the median wages for full-time, year-round workers in all sectors: Typically \$22.32 per hour for women and \$27.52 per hour for men.

In general—in keeping with the legacy of racism and sexism that is evident not only in the care sector but across our economy²—many women of color in the early childhood field, particularly Black women and Latinas, are paid even less than their peers who are white, non-Hispanic women. For example, full-time, year-round pre-K/K teachers who are Black and Latina women have median wages of \$12.97 per hour and \$13.59, respectively, compared to a median cut wage of \$15.38 per hour for those who are white, non-Hispanic women. One exception appears in the child care field, where full-time, year-round child care workers who are Black women typically are paid \$12.50 per hour while those who are white, non-Hispanic women are paid \$11.54—but Latinas working full time, year-round as child care workers typically are paid just \$10.85 per hour.

TABLE 3: THE CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING WORKFORCE: WAGES BY GENDER, RACE/ETHNICITY, AND NATIVITY

	Median hourly wage for full-time, year-round child care workers	Median hourly wage for full-time, year-round Pre-K/K teachers	Median hourly wage for full-time, year-round workers in all sectors
<i>Median hourly wages for the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces by gender</i>			
Men	\$12.58	\$15.85	\$27.52
Women	\$11.54	\$14.78	\$22.32
<i>Median hourly wages for women in the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces by race/ethnicity</i>			
White, non-Hispanic women	\$11.54	\$15.38	\$24.16
Black women	\$12.50	\$12.97	\$19.23
Latinas	\$10.85	\$13.59	\$17.12
Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women	\$12.45	\$15.94	\$28.53
<i>Shares of the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces who are women, by nativity</i>			
U.S. born women	\$11.54	\$14.78	\$22.64
Foreign born women	\$11.54	\$14.42	\$20.38

Source: NWLC calculations based on the U.S. Census Bureau 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-year estimates using Sarah Flood et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS): Version 8.0 [dataset]* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2022), <https://ipums.org/>. Individuals self-identify their gender, race, and ethnicity. Wages are calculated by dividing the group's median annual salary for someone working at least 35 hours per week for at least 50 weeks a year by 2,080 hours. The median annual salary for full-time, year-round men in all sectors was rounded to the nearest \$50. The median annual salary for full-time, year-round workers in all sectors for all other groups was rounded to the nearest \$25.

Low wages persist for women working in early childhood education—especially women who are child care workers—at every level of educational attainment. Among women working full-time, year-round, child care workers with less than a high school diploma are typically paid only \$9.23 per hour, compared to \$12.08 for full-time, year-round pre-K/K teachers and \$12.97 for women working full-time, year-round in all sectors with the same level of education. And while highly educated women in the child care field are typically paid more than those with less education, they are still typically paid less than those in other occupations. The median wage for women child care workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher who work full-time, year-round is \$14.42 per hour—compared to the median wage for comparably educated women working full-time, year-round in all sectors (\$31.35 per hour) and the median wage for their counterparts who are working full-time, year-round as pre-K/K teachers (\$20.13 per hour). Notably, pre-K/K teachers are often employed in public schools that are funded primarily by public tax dollars, rather than the private parent fees that most child care providers rely on (which are constrained by families’ ability to pay) .

Low wages can be particularly challenging for women who are supporting their own children at home. Among those working full-time, year-round, mothers who are child care workers typically are paid just \$11.67 per hour, and mothers who are pre-K/K teachers are paid \$15.10 per hour. Wages for mothers caring for children on their own are even lower: Single mothers working full-time, year-round as child care workers typically are paid \$11.01 per hour, and their counterparts who are working full-time, year-round as pre-K/K teachers are typically paid \$12.74 per hour. This compares to moms and single mothers working full-time, year-round in all industries, who are paid \$22.93 and \$18.11, respectively. Unsurprisingly, survey research has consistently shown that many child care and early learning workers worry about having enough money to pay their bills and put food on the table—especially workers who are parents.³ And these workers are far more likely than workers overall to rely on public programs like Medicaid and SNAP (food stamps) to make ends meet.⁴

TABLE 4: THE CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING WORKFORCE: WAGES BY GENDER, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, AND PARENTAL STATUS

	Median hourly wage for full-time, year-round child care workers	Median hourly wage for full-time, year-round Pre-K/K teachers	Median hourly wage for full-time, year-round workers in all sectors
<i>Median hourly wages for women in the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces by educational attainment</i>			
Women with less than high school diploma	\$9.23	\$12.08	\$12.97
Women with high school diploma or equivalent	\$10.47	\$10.63	\$15.87
Women with some college or associate's degree	\$11.72	\$12.02	\$19.23
Women with bachelor's degree or higher	\$14.42	\$20.13	\$31.35
<i>Median hourly wages for women in the child care, pre-K/K, and overall workforces by parental status</i>			
Mothers	\$11.67	\$15.10	\$22.93
Single mothers	\$11.01	\$12.74	\$18.11

Source: NWLC calculations based on the U.S. Census Bureau 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-year estimates using Sarah Flood et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS): Version 8.0 [dataset]* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2022), <https://ipums.org/>. Mothers include those with children under the age of 18. Single mothers are those with children under the age of 18 and who are married but their spouse is absent or who are separated, divorced, widowed, or never married/single. Wages are calculated by dividing the group’s median annual salary for someone working at least 35 hours per week for at least 50 weeks a year by 2,080 hours. The median annual salary for full-time, year-round workers in all sectors for all groups was rounded to the nearest \$25.

Child care and early learning workers can't wait.

As a result of insufficient public investment, families continue to struggle to afford the child care and early learning they want for their children while child care and early learning workers continue to receive inadequate compensation. These challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic but existed long before it. The child care and early learning industry needs large-scale, sustained federal and state funding to help it not only recover from the pandemic but to build a system that truly values child care as the backbone of our economy. Investments must be targeted to improve the compensation of child care workers—most of whom are women and many of whom are women of color—and ensure equity among workers within the field and wages and benefits that are competitive with other jobs, and that reflect that importance of child care and early learning work.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sarah Javaid and Brooke LePage, "In April, Women Gained 57% of Jobs Added to the Economy," (National Women's Law Center, May 2023), <https://nwlc.org/resource/in-april-women-gained-57-of-jobs-added-to-the-economy/>.
- 2 See generally: Julie Vogtman, "Undervalued: A Brief History of Women's Care Work and Child Care Policy in the United States" (National Women's Law Center, December 2017) <https://nwlc.org/resource/undervalued-a-brief-history-of-womens-care-work-and-child-care-policy-in-the-united-states/> and Brooke LePage and Jasmine Tucker, "A Window Into the Wage Gap: What's Behind It and How to Close It" (National Women's Law Center, January 2023) <https://nwlc.org/resource/wage-gap-explainer/>.
- 3 See, e.g., Undervalued at 8; and "Early Educator Pay & Economic Insecurity Across the States" (University of California Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment 2020) <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/the-early-educator-workforce/early-educator-pay-economic-insecurity-across-the-states/>.
- 4 Marcy Whitebook, Deborah Philipps, and Carolee Howes, "Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages," (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment," (University of California Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment 2014).