

**TESTIMONY**

**WAGES AND SALARIES OF CHILD CARE WORKERS:  
THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF RAISING  
CHILD CARE WORKERS' SALARIES**

by

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As more and more mothers enter the paid labor force, and/or work outside of the home, increasing numbers and proportions of children are experiencing care provided in a group context, and/or by someone other than their own parents. The work called child care may be done by people ranging from the child's own mother or other relative, as when she/he is a day care provider, to public school teachers working for a school district.

#### I. Who are Daycare Workers?

Those who care for very young children are found in a variety of occupations and industries that reflect not only varied settings, but also some ambiguity of identity. Not all those who take care of very young children identify themselves as early childhood professionals, much less agree on nomenclature to classify and describe their jobs. Probably the largest group excluded are those who provide day care in their own homes (as self-employed they are not included in most official occupation statistics.) Others are classified as child care workers although their work may involve relatively little 'child care': thus foster parents, lunchroom, playground and bus monitors, and attendants in residential institutions and schools for the handicapped are classified as child care workers.

Both the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics classify most child care workers as either kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers, or as child care workers. Each of these, in turn, is part of a larger occupational grouping: teachers are 'professionals,' while child care workers are 'service' workers. This distinction would probably strike most child care workers as artificial, for the two occupations reflect two aspects of essentially the same job, yet the distinction does correspond very roughly to job categories found in many child care settings, of teacher and aide, in turn reflecting some differences in responsibility, educational preparation, and experience.

Most child care workers work in three kinds of settings, or 'industries.' These are: day care homes, day care centers, and public schools. Day care homes are of three types: unregulated, regulated or licensed, and sponsored. Most are small, but some are group homes, with one or more employees in addition to the home owner(or renter)/provider. Day care centers may be found in a variety of settings, including churches, workplaces, office buildings, and so forth, and may be designated as nursery schools, preschools, early childhood education programs, and many other names. School settings are those programs for young children which are part of a school district's education program, and whose personnel are considered school district staff, and include preschool, prekindergarten, and after-school programs.

Other industries in which child care workers and teachers are found include such diverse settings as respite care, department stores, resorts, religious organizations, and social services not elsewhere classified.

Using data from their own survey as well as Census and CPS figures, NAEYC estimates that there are between 2.8 and 3.4 million people who are directly involved in providing care for children (NAEYC, "In Whose Hands?", 1985.)

## II. Salaries of Child Care Workers: The Overall Picture

Child care workers' salaries are astoundingly low. Just a few statistics paint this picture\*:

- o Over 40% of full-time child care workers earn less than \$5.00 per hour, while less than 18% of all full-time workers have salaries that low.
- o Median wages for full-time child care workers are about \$227 per week, and only 10% earn more than \$600 per week.
- o 45% of child care workers work part-time, and their salaries are even lower; about three-fourths earn less than \$5.00 per hour.
- o NAEYC's survey, which was biased towards those with long-term investment in child care as a career and a substantial proportion with ECE credits, found that in

1984, 90% of aides, and over 40% of teachers responding, earned less than \$5.

- o Salary surveys of day care centers from New York to California, done between 1982 and 1987, (but quoted in 1986 dollars) reveal that starting wages for child care aides - the lowest job category - range from \$3.25 to 5.92 an hour, for teachers from 3.67 to 10.45 per hour, and for directors from 5.23 to \$30.00 an hour.

To put these salaries in context, California's welfare reform legislation mandates that no welfare recipient be required to take a job for less than \$5.14 per hour; below that level, with even one child, and the costs of child care and medical benefits, the State has determined that a family would be more impoverished by entering employment than by remaining on welfare. Yet almost half of child care workers' earnings are at this level, with families to support. In NAEYC's survey, 30% of the respondents stated that they were mostly or wholly dependent on these wages for their family income.

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Actual wages per hour are even lower than these figures would suggest, for many child care workers do not receive paid time off, such as paid holidays and vacations: while almost 100% of American workers receive paid vacations and holidays, only 56 to 86% of child care workers have paid holidays, and between 37% and 99% have paid vacation (depending on the survey.) In addition, many work unpaid additional hours; whether in a day care home or center, the different schedules of parents often means a ten to twelve hour workday; about a third of child care workers are not compensated for overtime hours. The majority are not paid for the extra time and work of parent meetings, staff meetings, and preparation time. While the proportions who receive paid breaks is similar to workers generally, many child care workers report never receiving the breaks to which they are entitled( CCEP, 1986). Indeed, it is not uncommon for child care workers to get rest breaks by napping with the children, literally.

Non-monetary compensation, has become an increasingly important factor in evaluating the adequacy of earnings. Health coverage is one of the most important benefits, for both employees and their families. While most American workers have health insurance, only about one-third to one-half of child care workers have any kind of health care coverage through their

employment. Most people assume that, if they are injured or laid off, they are they are covered by workers' compensation and unemployment compensation; unfortunately, though that is generally true, only two-thirds to three-fourths of child care workers are thus protected. Even worse, while 48% of workers generally have some type of disability coverage, none of the surveys revealed any such coverage of child care workers. Equally striking in contrast, 96% of workers get employer-provided life insurance, only about 15 to 36% of child care workers are covered. Even though many have young children, ironically most child care workers do not receive free or reduced rate child care.

As with salaries, these figures are an underestimate, for they generally refer to full-time workers. Given the high percentage of child care workers who work part-time, many of whom have few if any fringe benefits, these numbers are clearly an overestimate. This is true even with publicly-provided benefits; in many states part-time workers do not qualify for unemployment insurance because their wages and/or hours worked do not meet the minimum thresholds.

### III. Why are child care workers' salaries so low?

The first obvious reason for the low salaries of child care workers is that it is an overwhelmingly female occupation, and thus as with most such occupations, has low salaries. While this clearly explains some of the differential, it is at best a



partial explanation, for other occupations with equally high percentage female do not have such low salaries: bank tellers (91% F) earn \$6.80/hour (27% more than child care workers), telephone operators (91% F) earn \$7.29/hour (36% more than child care workers).

A second possible explanation is that it is disproportionately minority in racial/ethnic composition, and thus shares the lower salary levels among minority workers. This is inadequate, however, on two levels: first, child care workers are not disproportionately minority to a great extent, and secondly, the wages of minority and majority child care workers are generally equally low. (The latter may reflect the fact that salaries are generally higher in urban areas, and that minorities are more urbanized than is the white, non-Hispanic population.)

Third, low salaries may reflect a lack of education or training. This too turns out to be a non-explanation on two counts. First, child care workers are surprisingly well-educated: the average educational attainment level is 14.6 years, according to the Census. Moreover, the survey conducted by NAEYC found that education levels were surprisingly high in all job categories, in spite of low salaries. Thus although 90% of aides reported salaries under \$5.00 per hour, half of those aides had some college education. While child care workers in the position of teachers have higher salaries on average, compared to professions with similar levels of education, they fall far short: elementary teachers earn \$8.80/hour (64% more than child

care workers) and librarians earn \$8.33 per hour (56% more). In contrast, structural metal workers, with average education of 12.1 years, earn almost three times as much at \$14.11 per hour; even garbage collectors, with an average education of 10 years earn \$6.04 per hour.

Finally, low salaries may reflect lack of experience on the job. While those who have longer tenure do have higher salaries, the differential is not nearly as great as one would expect, and one source of data suggests that salaries are actually lower the second year, and do not rise significantly until one's tenure reaches five years or more. Moreover, a significant proportion of day care centers do not increase salaries with increased experience, or with increased education. This suggests that the relationship is a chicken and egg question: low salaries may reflect lack of experience on the job, but low salaries - and the lack of forthcoming raises - may also contribute to the lack of experience of many child care workers, and they leave.

Finally, child care workers' salaries may be low because the parents who pay them - directly or indirectly - are simply not able to pay higher wages. Some salary surveys suggest that centers which receive subsidies, either public or private (e.g., a church-sponsored center), pay higher salaries than do proprietary centers. At the same time, subsidies do not automatically or wholly contribute to raising salary levels of child care workers: one study estimated that the effect of

subsidies was divided equally between raising workers' salaries and lowering parent costs, ie., lowered fees.

Clearly, many parents feel that the salaries they pay those who care for their children are inadequate; at the same time, they feel caught in an impossible bind. As with the elderly faced with medical costs before Medicare, their incomes are fixed, or more exactly, are at the maximum, and cannot be increased to meet the need in time. In many cases, both parents are already working, often full-time, and at least for most in the near future, to substantially and instantly increase their salaries to meet the cost of child care with the birth/adoption of a child is nearly impossible.

#### IV. Effects of Low Child Care Workers' Salaries

Low salaries are creating a rapidly escalating crisis in child care that goes to the heart of the question of quality and continuity in care. Older data - from five to ten years old - estimate average turnover rates of 42% in day care centers; universally, contemporary observers at least double that. As of 1983, about one-third of child care workers had been on the job for less than one year, one third for two to three years, and one third for longer. The crisis in child care is much less recruiting workers, even ones with advanced training and Early Childhood Education courses, and much more retaining the trained and dedicated workers that now exist. Junior colleges graduating

students with AA degrees in early childhood education report that many do not even enter child care jobs initially, finding better pay, in spite of their training, in almost any other profession. On the other side, centers report that in order to compete with such other opportunities open to college educated women, to get teachers with AA degrees, much less college graduates, they must offer higher salaries than their current, college graduate, experienced and dedicated teachers are receiving. Needless to say, such choices are demoralizing for staff, and further escalate turnover.

To illustrate this phenomenon, I would like to end with two examples from a survey, called the National Child Care Staffing Study, now now being conducted by Deborah Phillips, Marcy Whitebook, and Carollee Howes. First, a center in Arizona, in order to maintain a staff of ten, went through 27 teachers in the past year. Second, this study, which is surveying only centers with six or more regular staff, has four times arrived on a site to find that one week after the initial contact, there are only 5 or 4 staff remaining.

Two practices have arisen that further illustrate the effects of budget constraints on staffing, and the quality of care received. Many, many centers are living at the edge of compliance with state law, which in some cases is itself quite low in terms of requirements. Thus to meet classroom staff requirements, centers have some staff designated as "floaters", who spend a couple of hours in Classroom A, a couple of hours in

classroom B, etc., and then each classroom is 'counted' as having two staff. A second practice is "accordion" staffing: when the Center opens at 7:00 am, only one person is on duty to receive the first few children; as more children arrive, staff do so as well, until by 9:00, the center has its full complement of staff, and children. At 3:00, the process begins to reverse itself. Either or both of these practices results in a given child going through as many as five or six different caregivers, peer groups, and/or classrooms in a given day.

When staffing strategies such as these are combined with high turnover rates, children in day care are faced with an appalling lack of continuity of care. Without substantial change, millions of our children face early childhoods peopled with a succession, much too rapid, of people who are overworked, underpaid, and constantly disappearing and reappearing. Is this what we want, for our children and their caregivers?