

If Parenting Came with a Paycheck, Mothers of Young Children Would Earn \$450 Billion a Year

Caregiving takes time, particularly for mothers. On an average day in 2023, mothers of younger children spent 2.5 hours exclusively on child care (primary care) and another 6.5 hours supervising children in combination with other activities (secondary care; see Figure 1).

While fathers also spent time caring for kids—averaging 1.5 hours on primary and 4.9 hours per day on secondary child care—the gaps in parental care are large: **Mothers spent 167 percent more time on primary, and 133 percent more time on secondary child care than fathers** (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Average Daily Time Spent on Primary and Secondary Child Care by Mothers and Fathers of Children Aged 12 or Younger, 2023



Source: IWPR analysis of 2023 American Time Use Survey—Microdata Files as provided by US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024, at <https://www.bls.gov/tus/data/datafiles-2023.htm>.

Notes: Average daily time spent by individuals aged 15 years and older with their own household children aged 12 or younger. Child care includes primary as well as secondary care (combined with, e.g., personal care, work-related activities, studying, cleaning, cooking, or eating).

Gender differences in unpaid child care work reduce women's participation in paid work and their economic security. In 2023, mothers of children 12 or younger were substantially more likely than fathers to be out of the labor force or unemployed (27.4 compared to 6.3 percent) or work part-time (16.3 compared to 3.7 percent), and substantially less likely to work full-time (56.2 compared to 89.9 percent; IWPR analysis of 2023 ATUS).

In 2023, the median hourly wage for women was \$18.10.¹ **At that rate, the annual foregone earnings of mothers of children 12 years and younger for the time spent providing primary child care came to \$16,516 on average, and to more than \$450 billion when multiplied by the number of all mothers with younger children.**

Parents, of course, spend substantially more time supervising their children—time combined with other activities, but when children should not be left alone. The total unpaid time provided by mothers

and fathers for child care makes a large and underrecognized contribution to the economy. Across families, each year, mothers collectively spend more than 57 trillion hours, and fathers 36 trillion hours on primary and secondary child care. In this calculation, time spent providing secondary child care is discounted by half (50 percent) because the caregiver's focus is shared between supervising a child and performing another primary task.² When measured at the very low hourly rate of the federal minimum wage of \$7.25, the total value of this time would come to \$702,659,901,984 (in 2023 prices), or roughly 2.5 percent of total GDP.

This Quick Figure was prepared by Kate Bahn, PhD, Ariane Hegewisch, and Tanim Ahmed, PhD, based on an analysis of the 2023 American Time Use Survey. It is part of IWPR's Policies for Action Research Hub, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Policies for Action program. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Foundation.

¹ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Highlights of Women's Earnings in 2023," *BLS Reports* 1111 (August 2024), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-earnings/2023/>.

² The decision to apply a 50 percent weight, following the approach used in the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), reflects the fact that supervisory child care is always recorded together with one other primary activity; a half-weight factor offers a reasonable and standardized method to avoid overstating the caregiving burden while still recognizing that supervisory care imposes real time constraints.