FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS
COUNCIL FOR A STRONG AMERICA

REPORT

Child Care Educators Set Young Kids on the Path to Success

A qualified, well-compensated teaching staff is key to quality child care and future public safety

Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids
Thousands of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and violence survivors protecting public safety by promoting solutions that steer kids away from crime.

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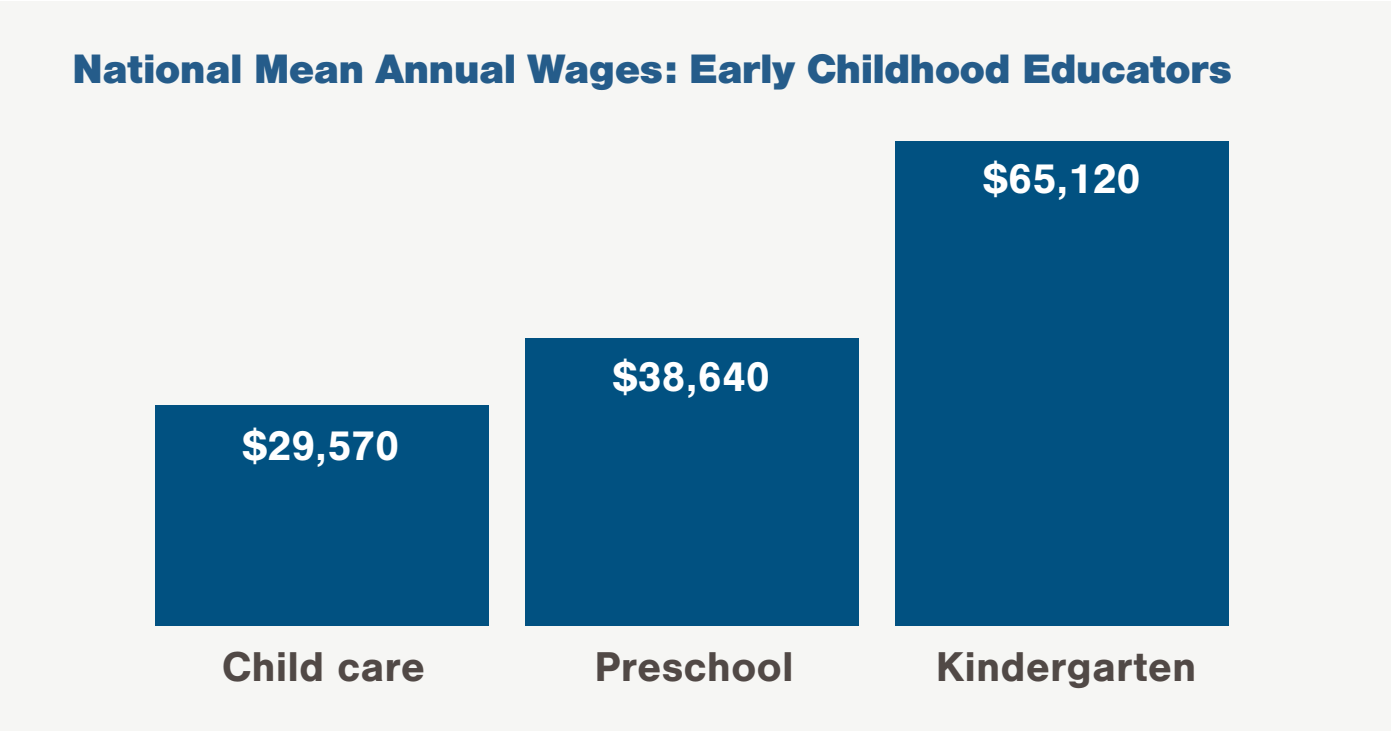
Summary

The law enforcement members of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids recognize that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs are a powerful way to give kids the right start in life and help them avoid becoming involved in crime later. Research shows that to have a real impact, programs must be high quality, in order to help children develop the critical academic and social skills needed for success in school and life. **Among the most fundamental ECE quality features are highly-qualified teachers who are well-trained before and during their service and who need to be fairly compensated.**

Unfortunately, the child care system does not adequately meet the needs of parents, children, or early educators. Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is often not available and is unaffordable for many families, particularly those with low incomes. Inadequate compensation and subpar working conditions for child care educators result in high levels of turnover, impacting the availability and quality of programs. The pandemic exacerbated these longstanding challenges and resulted in a loss of 40,800 child care educators since February 2020.

Federal and state policymakers must support investments in evidence-based policies that enhance the availability and affordability of high-quality child care, including addressing the needs of the child care workforce. Providing young children with high-quality early learning opportunities can improve the



experiences of children and families today and help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future.

Most parents of young children are in the workforce and need child care

Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of infants and toddlers nationwide–more than seven million–have mothers in the workforce[1] and many of these very young children are in child care while their parents work to support their families. Child care settings are a key environment for young children's development, particularly given the importance of the early years for brain development.

Experiences and interactions in early childhood shape brain development and lay the foundation for positive lifelong outcomes.[2] Interactions that are reassuring and responsive foster a warm and nurturing environment that sets the stage for strong bonds between young children and care providers—inside and outside the family.[3] When care is consistent, healthy, and safe, this can result in improved cognitive and behavioral outcomes and enhanced school readiness.[4]

The child care system does not meet the needs of parents, children, or educators

Even prior to the pandemic, more than half of Americans lived in a child care desert, an area in which there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.[5] Availability is especially limited for families who have infants and toddlers, work non-traditional hours, or live in rural areas.[6]

Providing quality child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, requires significant resources, and families often cannot afford that expense alone. The cost of infant care in a center averages more than $13,000 per year, which is more expensive than in-state public college tuition and fees in

Law enforcement's child care challenges

A review of research on families of public safety personnel, including law enforcement (LE), found that they report child care issues, particularly single parents or dual-career LE families. Formal child care is typically not available during non-traditional work hours, which are common in LE. Varying shifts also make securing child care difficult. As LE departments across the country face recruitment and retention problems, providing support for child care, especially for female personnel, is important.

LE departments have responded to their workforce's child care needs in various ways, including contracting with local child care providers, encouraging LE parents to coordinate with each other around child care, and altering scheduling. The San Diego police department will soon be the first in the nation to have a child care center dedicated specifically to its employees. Using a combination of state grants and private philanthropic funds, the center will charge half the market rate to LE parents, while paying educators 15 percent more than market rate. It will be open from 5 am to 10 pm and will offer in-home care when personnel are called out for emergencies.

While such efforts by individual departments are innovative and commendable, policy solutions would have broader impact. As such, a group of bipartisan members of Congress introduced the *Providing Child Care for Police Officers Act* in April 2023. The legislation would establish a pilot program under the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program to provide grants to local governments and LE agencies to partner in establishing and operating child care centers for LE families.

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32 states and the District of Columbia.[7] The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) is the primary source of federal funding for child care. CCDBG provides subsidies to working families with low incomes to help pay for child care. Yet the program serves only 16 percent of eligible families, falling far short of the need.[8]

Despite the high cost of care to families, child care educators are poorly compensated, with annual mean wages of $29,570, compared to $38,640 for preschool teachers, and $65,120 for kindergarten teachers.[9] Low wages contribute to teacher turnover and staffing shortages,[10] further reducing availability of care, creating instability for child care programs, parents, and children, and impacting the quality of care.

The pandemic exacerbated child care challenges

The effects of the pandemic further stressed an already fragile child care system. Early in the pandemic, 60 percent of all child care providers closed, at least temporarily,[11] and some have not reopened.[12] Among child care programs that have reopened, many are operating at reduced capacity, often due to staff shortages, as many early educators have not returned to the field.[13]

During the pandemic, the child care sector lost over 100,000 jobs and has still not fully recovered. As of July 31, 2023, the sector was still down 40,800 jobs nationwide compared to pre-pandemic levels, a loss of nearly four percent.[14] This loss has further impaired a sector that cannot meet the overwhelming demand for its services.

Research shows that high-quality child care supports child development

Studies have found that early education has the potential to positively change life path trajectories for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who face compounding barriers to success.[15] Early exposure to stimulating environments led by responsive and caring adults is an important predictor of later life outcomes in adulthood.[16] Children who do not receive the support they need early in life are more susceptible to poor outcomes, including developmental delays, academic failure, high school dropout, delinquency, and involvement with crime.[17]

Providing children with high-quality child care in infancy and early childhood can buffer against risk factors and disadvantages, and facilitate the development of skills and accessibility to resources needed to avoid crime and have successful life outcomes.[18] For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they had significantly lower levels of behavior problems.[19] Another study found that children who were randomly selected to attend a high-quality child care and early education program from ages 2 to 3 had fewer behavior problems (as rated by parents) than children who were not selected.[20]

Research also points to the importance of early social and emotional development as a significant factor for deterring involvement with the criminal justice system. A study examining 800 kindergarteners found that those with high levels of social-emotional skills were less likely to later have involvement with police or be held in a detention center. By age 25, those with high

> “If we want youth to be successful, we need to invest where it matters - in quality programs during their earliest years.”

Nate Dreckman
Sheriff,
Grant County, WI

levels of social-emotional skills in kindergarten were less likely to have been arrested or to have arrests for serious offenses.[21]

In sum, quality child care can set children on a path to successful adulthood. However, child care must be high-quality in order to help children develop critical skills needed for success in school and life. **Among the most fundamental child care quality features are highly-qualified teachers.**

Early educators are the foundation of high-quality child care

The heart of any early education program is the relationship between the teacher and the children.[22] Research indicates that a well-qualified workforce is an essential, fundamental component of high-quality child care.

Highly-qualified early educators engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children to support their development in all areas. Excellent educators also provide developmentally-appropriate instruction in key early literacy, math and other academic skills.[23]

To offer this high-quality experience, child care educators must be well-trained, both before they start teaching and once they are on the job through ongoing professional development.[24] Adequate compensation is key to attracting and retaining top talent.[25] Retaining teachers is particularly important for young children, since positive, stable relationships support healthy early development.[26]

Key elements of a highly-qualified child care workforce

Education: The level of education required for early educators has been a matter of long-standing debate. A comprehensive review of 48 studies by the Campbell Collaboration found that higher education levels have a strong relationship to higher quality in early education.[27]

> "Law enforcement professionals know training and compensation are essential to an effective workforce. The same is true for the early childhood care and education workforce."

Tommy Clark, Jr.
Chief of Police & Superintendent of Safety Services,
Grambling City, LA

Professional development: Studies show that effective professional development is:

- Classroom-focused: related to what early educators are actually teaching;
- Active: allows for hands-on practice of skills;
- Collaborative: with modeling and/or coaching of skills and feedback provided.[28]

However, educators face barriers to participating in professional development, including long work hours and low compensation.[29] Further, investments in professional development can be lost when educators leave their jobs.[30]

Compensation: Adequate compensation is required to attract and retain a high-quality child care workforce;[31] but as mentioned above, child care educators are poorly-paid. Early childhood educators have a poverty rate nearly eight times higher than K-8 teachers, leading many to rely on public assistance to meet the needs of their own families.[32] Low compensation is a major factor in ECE teachers leaving the field.[33]

A recent natural experiment demonstrated the importance of compensation for child care teacher retention, finding that increasing pay by $1,500 over an eight-month period cut turnover in half, from 30 to 15 percent.[34]

> "Kids who attend high-quality early education programs are more likely to graduate high school, enroll in post-secondary programs, and are less likely to have disciplinary issues. Teachers are a big factor in the quality of early education."

Jennifer Webb-McRae
County Prosecutor,
Cumberland County, NJ

Conclusion

High-quality child care is a powerful means of supporting children's development while their parents work, leading to enhanced child outcomes, and helping to reduce future crime. However, this potential will only be fully realized when children can attend quality programs with a highly-qualified child care workforce with adequate education, ongoing professional development, and sufficient compensation. Policymakers must continue to invest in strategies to ensure that child care educators receive the professional compensation and support they need to provide high-quality early learning experiences for young children. Support for high-quality child care is an investment in our future public safety.

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