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Child Care: The Federal Role During World War II

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Summary

During World War II, the federal government supported a nationwide program of child care centers, intended to boost war production by freeing mothers to work. Labor force participation of women grew significantly during the war, and children of working mothers were eligible for the child care service. The centers had a peak enrollment near 130,000 children in 1944. After the federal subsidy ended in February 1946, California, New York City and Philadelphia were the only locations to use public funds to continue child care programs indefinitely. This report describes federal child care initiatives during World War II, and briefly traces the evolution of federal child care policy from the postwar period until today. This report will not be updated.

During World War II, the federal government offered grants for child care services to authorized community groups that could demonstrate a war-related need for the service. The program was justified as a war expedient necessary to allow mothers to enter the labor force and increase war production. Funding authorization came through the 1941 Defense Public Works law (Title II of the 1940 National Defense Housing Act), popularly known as the Lanham Act. The law was designed to assist communities with water, sewer, housing, schools, and other local facilities' needs related to war industry and growth. The federal government granted $52 million for child care under this Act from August 1943 through February 1946. Communities, mostly through user fees, contributed an additional $26 million. At its July 1944 peak, 3,102 federally subsidized child care centers, with 130,000 children enrolled, were located in all but one state and in D.C.[1]

The federal government indirectly supported limited private employer-sponsored child care during the war as well. The most noted instance involved several state-of-the-art child care centers able to serve more than 1,000 children of workers at the large, west coast Kaiser Shipyards. Parents paid a small fee to use the centers (built by the U.S. Maritime Commission), but a majority of program operating expenses, including the cost

[1] New Mexico was the only state not to request or receive child care funding via the Lanham Act. Hawaii and Alaska were not yet states but both received Lanham Act funding for child care.

of hiring well-trained staff, was absorbed by the federal government, as a component of Kaiser's defense-related contracts. The program ended with the war.

Women's Labor Force Participation. An increase in female labor force participation was the primary impetus for World War II-era child care funding. The employment upsurge coincided with the federal government's campaign (headlined by Rosie the Riveter) that urged women to aid the war effort by joining the workforce. Initially, the federal government was reluctant to encourage the employment of mothers with young children, but demands for new workers, especially when issued by aircraft, ship, and bomber manufacturers, proved powerful. These employers also cited absenteeism among women workers as proof of the need for child care and other household services. Advocates for public provision of child care invoked images of children left in parked cars outside workplaces or fending for themselves at home, and also raised concerns about juvenile delinquency.

Statistics are not available specifically on the employment of mothers in the war period but overall, women's labor force participation grew dramatically, with the most notable growth among married women. Data show that about 13 million women were in the workforce in 1940, compared to 19 million in July 1944. Among women age 14 and older, 26% were in the civilian labor force in March 1940, compared to 32% in March 1944. Married women's labor force participation grew from 15% in 1940 to 23% in 1944, while the employment rate among single women increased from 46% to 55%. Although married women had a much lower labor force participation rate than single women, they made up the largest part of the female population. During the war, for the first time, married women workers outnumbered single women workers.

Pre-Lanham Act Programs. The wartime Lanham Act child care centers built upon a base of Depression-era nursery schools that in 1934-35, enrolled about 75,000 children in 1,900 schools. Operated by the Works Project Administration (WPA), this earlier program intended first, to provide jobs for unemployed teachers and only secondarily, to assist children. The Emergency Nursery School program served low-income families, regardless of parental employment status, and was championed and administered by early childhood educators, rather than social welfare professionals. With the program's intended purpose increasingly irrelevant in the war-boosted economy, these administrators saw the emerging war-related child care need as a legitimate reason for a continued program. In 1942, Congress stipulated that $6 million of the WPA's appropriation be made available for child care services for children with working mothers.

The Federal Works Agency (FWA) was the parent agency of WPA and in 1941, it was also charged with distributing Lanham Act funds for all war-related community facilities.[2] Although the Lanham Act did not explicitly include child care facilities, the FWA sought and obtained recognition of this service as necessitated by the war. Correctly anticipating the imminent termination of the WPA, the FWA informed nursery school operators that if they could make a war-connected case for their services, they could apply

[2] An independent agency established in 1939, the FWA included the Works Projects Administration, and the Bureau of Community Facilities (responsible for most wartime child care grants). The FWA was abolished in 1949.

for funds under the Lanham Act. As many as 1,150 WPA centers found new funding under the Lanham Act before the WPA ceased to exist in April 1943.

In addition to the nucleus of WPA centers, wartime child care facilities were encouraged through short-lived and relatively small grants to state welfare and education agencies, provided by the Office of Education (OE) and the Children's Bureau (CB) with resources from the President's Emergency Fund.[3] Congress eliminated this funding source in mid-1943 but, at the same time, appropriated new child care funding under the Lanham Act. This prior funding may have encouraged early organization of local agencies, which subsequently sought child care operations funding under the Lanham Act.

Financing and Administration. Federal funds for wartime child care under the Lanham Act were available for costs related to group child care provision, including facilities construction and upkeep, staff wages and most other daily operating costs. Grants were made directly from the federal government to local communities. To access federal child care funds, a community needed primarily to show that due to war circumstances, it did not have the resources to meet the child care needs of working mothers. Communities were also required to provide some matching funds. Initially, the FWA intended to meet a maximum 50% of a project's cost, but quickly changed this requirement when it appeared to hinder the growth of the program. Nearly all local funding came through fees paid by child care consumers. In the fall of 1943, the FWA placed a ceiling on fees at 50 cents per child per day (raised to 75 cents in July 1945), but stated that communities needed to supply at least the cost of food served. Overall, the federal subsidy supplied two-thirds of the total maintenance and operation budget for the wartime centers, with parent fees supplying most of the remainder.

Program standards, such as staff-child ratios, worker qualifications, and facility design, were at the discretion of local planners. Some 95% of wartime child care projects were operated by education authorities and, in addition to the primary FWA certification of war-related need, plans from these groups were cleared through the Office of Education. Projects sponsored by social welfare, child care, or other non-education groups were cleared through the Children's Bureau. The OE and CB approvals were mostly pro forma, but this added oversight resulted primarily from a clash in views, between the OE and CB on one side and the Federal Works Agency on the other, about which federal agency should administer the wartime child care program.[4] The CB, which had strong reservations about the employment of mothers with young children and the value of group care (especially for children less than 2), successfully prevented federal

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[3] The Office of Education was part of the Federal Security Agency (FSA) and a predecessor of today's Dept. of Education. The Children's Bureau, established in 1912, was part of the Dept. of Labor, and now is part of the Dept. of Health and Human Services.

[4] The dispute revealed differences in opinion concerning federal-state relations and the purpose of child care. The OE and CB, backed by the Federal Security Agency, argued that they had the expertise and state connections to ensure that available prewar resources would be used and expanded to meet the wartime need. On the other hand, the FWA argued that Congress had granted it jurisdiction of wartime public works monies and that it had already been operating a similar program through its WPA unit. The dispute came to a head in 1943 when hearings were held on a congressional bill to transfer the child care program to the FSA-OE/CB group. The bill passed the Senate but died in the House.

funding of at least one project intended to serve infants; very few approved projects included care for children under 2 years of age. On the other hand, the CB fought unsuccessfully to allow funds to be used for child care counseling, casework, "foster day care" (roughly equivalent to family day care), and referrals.[5]

Use of Centers. The wartime child care programs were locally planned, and there was wide variation in the amount, kind and quality of services a community provided, and the speed at which they were put in place. Overall, as many as 635 communities across the nation were granted funds to operate one or more centers. Projects included programs for preschool and school-age children. In July 1944, when the wartime child care program reached its apex, 52,440 preschoolers and 76,917 school-age children were enrolled. However, school-age enrollment climbed dramatically during summer vacation but, in most months, preschoolers were the majority of children attending the centers. Enrollment of preschoolers peaked at 73,660 in May 1945, when a total of 111,000 children were signed up for the program. Center hours of operation varied, but at least some accommodated the round-the-clock manufacturing schedule by staying open 24 hours a day, 6 days a week.

Need for the child care centers was estimated to be much greater than the services provided yet, at least initially, some programs struggled to fill available slots. Some women were skeptical of group care provided by strangers, and pre-war child care for working mothers tended to be viewed as charity for the poor. Private employers, local agencies and the federal government sought to describe the service as both appropriate and convenient and they promoted the program through radio broadcasts, detailed brochures, employment counselors and other methods. The program's simple eligibility test – based solely on a mother's employment status – and a flat, inexpensive fee were important features intended to attract a broad group of working mothers.

Program Phaseout and Protest. Congressional approval of child care funds explicitly tied these funds to wartime need, and the FWA repeatedly expressed its commitment to this limitation. Especially after the drop in war production needs following the spring 1945 Allied victory in Europe, the FWA granted fewer project approvals (or renewals). In mid-August 1945, once victory in Japan was assured, the agency announced all Lanham Act funding of child care centers would cease as soon as possible, but in no case later than the end of October 1945. Approximately one month after this announcement, the FWA reported it had received communications from 26 states and the District of Columbia (1,155 letters, 318 wires, 794 postcards and petitions signed by 3,647 individuals), urging continuation of the program. Principal reasons given were the need of servicemen's wives to continue employment until their husbands returned, the ongoing need of mothers who were the sole support of their children, and a lack or inadequacy of other forms of care in the community.

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[5] In many cases, the CB believed "foster day care" (daytime care available to a very small number of children in an individual home and coordinated and supervised through a local resource and referral agency) was superior to group care. But the FWA noted that Lanham Act monies could only be expended for the maintenance and operation of "public works" and ruled that because family homes were not "public works," Lanham funds could not support this type of care.

The loudest protest came from the state of California, which had multiple major war manufacturing sites and where the largest federally subsidized program was in place. In August 1945, close to 1 in 4 of all children enrolled in the Lanham Act-funded centers lived in California. The extensive national protest, a concern for families of servicemen still overseas, and lobbying by California officials, prompted an extended federal commitment of approximately $7 million dollars. The new funds allowed programs to continue operation with federal subsidy through the end of February 1946.

Early Postwar Programs. Given widespread early postwar sentiment against women's employment, a measure of the protest's strength can be seen in the number of centers initially continued with local resources. In July 1946, just under 1,000 of the wartime centers continued to operate. However, few of these programs continued over the long-term, as private resources proved inadequate and most states and localities found child care too expensive and/or not an appropriate public expenditure.[6] At the behest of a local parents committee, Congress mandated a postwar public child care program in the District of Columbia. (Federal lawmakers exercised full legislative and appropriations authority over District matters in this period.) Congress discontinued the program in December 1950, despite continued calls for support by parents and a rise in defense-related employment linked to troop deployment on the Korean peninsula.[7] During the Korean conflict, Congress authorized new funding for child care services as a part of the 1951 Defense Housing Act (the Act included authorization for community facilities), but it did not subsequently provide appropriations for child care. California was the only state to continue the World War II era program indefinitely. New York City (which had received state rather than federal subsidy during the war) also continued a permanent and sizeable program and the Philadelphia, PA, school board maintained a small number of the Lanham-funded centers indefinitely. In the states of Washington, New York, Massachusetts (very limited) and in Detroit, MI, some public funding was continued for 2 to 10 years. A 1960 CB survey found just 376 child care centers operating nationwide with at least partial public financing. Most of these (324) were located in California, New York City and Philadelphia, where public funding had continued since the war.

Ongoing Issues in Child Care Provision. The centrality of mothers' employment to debates about child care reflects a long held assumption that mothers would or should be available to provide care for their children. During the war, the FWA's director of child care grants carefully asserted that the nation's peacetime policy continued to hold that mothers of small children served the nation best by remaining home to personally rear their children. However, the common belief, that most mothers of young children would return or remain in the home after the war, proved unfounded. In 1946, following postwar voluntary exits and industrial layoffs (which disproportionately affected female workers), women's presence in the labor force declined briefly, but the workforce participation of women resumed an upward trend as early as 1947. Among mothers of children under age

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[6] For instance, municipal funding for continuation of the wartime child care centers in Cleveland, Ohio was halted after a Common Pleas judge ruled, in part, that the program was expending "public funds for a private purpose" (i.e. the care of children from non-financially destitute families). See Ferrie v. Sweeny 72 N.E. 2d 128 (1946).

[7] The District Commissioners, D.C.'s highest officials, opposed the mandated city funding of child care throughout this period citing variously a lack of funds, the undesirable encouragement to mothers' employment, and the "un-American" nature of group care.

18, 19% were in the workforce in April 1947, compared to 72% in March 1999. Other important changes in the social and policy context also have occurred. Private child care providers have expanded and become more vocal. Greater popular awareness of early childhood development and education issues also has developed.

Perhaps most significant, federal policy regarding the employment of mothers with young children has shifted from professed support of full-time homemaking for all mothers – regardless of income status – to an increasing insistence on work for certain low-income mothers. In the annual debates Congress had from 1946 through 1950 on funding the D.C. child care program, and again in its 1953-54 discussion preceding adoption of a tax deduction (later changed to a credit) for child care expenses, lawmakers struggled to separately define the group of women who *chose* paid employment and those who were financially *compelled* to work (considered by some to have legitimate child care funding needs). Rising expectations about standards of living and increasing numbers of women workers complicated this effort. Lawmakers reached the greatest agreement in their belief that mothers who alone supported their families might need child care assistance. In turn, some critics of public financing for child care argued that the correct policy for this group of mothers had been determined by the Social Security Act's Aid to Dependent Children program (renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children). They argued that this policy dictated that instead of child care services, mothers of young children should be assisted to remain at home and give full attention to child rearing.

As early as 1956, lawmakers included "self-sufficiency" as a goal of the welfare program. By 1967, federal law called for "appropriate" aid recipients to work, and in 1971, it asserted that welfare mothers of school-age children should be available for work. Child care as a welfare reform measure was explicitly discussed in the 1962 legislative debate and Congress authorized a small amount of funding as grants to states for child care services (not necessarily tied to welfare recipients). Child care funding for AFDC recipients remained available on a limited basis in the following decades but became much more significant after the 1988 Family Support Act required mothers with children under age three to participate in self-sufficiency activities and increased funding for child care. In 1990, Congress established the Child Care and Development Block Grant and the At-Risk Child Care Program, which extended some child care assistance to low-income working families who were not welfare recipients. The 1996 welfare reform law subsequently replaced the AFDC entitlement with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant. The 1996 law also combined all prior federal child care grants for welfare and non-welfare recipients into the Child Care and Development Fund, and limited the federal work exemption for welfare mothers to those with children under age one. (Some 23 states have imposed a stricter limit; most of these require work activity participation for a mother whose youngest child is at least 3 months.) However, the law also provides that states may not sanction single welfare mothers with children under age 6 if they fail to participate in work activities because of a lack of child care.

Additional Reading. U.S. Women's Bureau, *Employed Mothers and Child Care* (1953). U.S. Women's Bureau, *Employment of Women in the Early Postwar Period* (1946). U.S. Children's Bureau, "Licensed Day Care Facilities for Children," (1960). Sonya Michel, *Children's Interests/Mother's Rights: The Shaping of America's Child Care Policy,* New Haven: Yale University Press (1999). Bernard Greenblatt, *Responsibility for Child Care: The Changing Role of Family and State in Child Development,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers (1977).

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