Business

For low-income parents, no day care often means no pay

Low-income parents have been hit disproportionately during the pandemic, losing both child care and income at much higher rates than their wealthier counterparts.

Child care programs have been disrupted during the pandemic. And lower income parents have been hit the hardest. (John Moore/Gett...
John Moore / MCT

by Abha Bhattarai and Alyssa Fowers, Washington Post
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It's become a familiar routine: Her daughter's day care is closed, so Hannah Watland is home without pay.

In the meantime, her expenses pile up. She owes $500 in rent and $600 a month for day care, City, S.D. "Every day we don't work is a lot of money that isn't coming in."

The latest wave of coronavirus cases has disrupted even the best-laid child-care arrangements. But low-income parents have been hit disproportionately with a double whammy in recent weeks - losing both child care and income at much higher rates than their wealthier counterparts, according to The Washington Post's analysis of census survey data.

Day-care closures and other child-care disruptions increased sharply from December to January, as cases of the omicron variant peaked across the country, but they were most common in households that make less than $25,000 a year, data from the Census Household Pulse survey shows.

In the first two weeks of January, 30% of households with children under 11 reported child-care disruptions in the past four weeks, up from 22% in December - as children got sick or quarantined after coronavirus exposure, or child-altogether. That's in contrast to higher-income families, who often made do by using paid vacation and sick leave, supervising their children while working or cutting back on work hours. Households making $50,000 or less a year were far more likely to experience a pay cut than those making $100,000 or more a year.

Plus, only a third of the country's lowest-paid workers had access to paid sick leave as of March 2021, compared with 95% of workers in the top 105 of wages, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Mia Rodriguez, who recently started a $10-an-hour job at the day care her daughter attends in Wichita, doesn't get paid sick leave. So when her 1-year-old tested positive for the coronavirus in December, she had to take off a week unpaid while continuing to pay for child care.

The 25-year-old got a $200 cash advance from a credit card to cover her daughter's day care fees that week. She also struggled to buy diapers and formula.

still have to pay the bills."

Inequities in child-care disruptions are another example of how the pandemic recession has widened inequality nationwide. Lower-income, and often service-sector, workers weathered higher job losses and more exposure to the virus in these jobs. They also experience the problems of soaring inflation more deeply, research shows.

The disparities in how families deal with child-care disruptions underscore the lopsided safety net in the United States, said Betsey Stevenson, an economics professor at the University of Michigan and former Obama White House economic adviser. The country's highest-paid workers are also the most likely to receive other protections such as sick leave, vacation time and health insurance, she said. And if they do need to borrow money, wealthier Americans typically get more favorable terms.

"The issue isn't just compensation," Stevenson said. "It's also that we provide more stability and resources for higher-income people. It's much harder to smooth things out when you're lowvarying incomes who either don't get paid leave or have exhausted all of it, all said they have faced significant COVID-related child-care disruptions since December. Many described going without pay for several weeks and, in some cases, having to quit altogether to care for their children. Others said they were putting off job searches or sticking to gig work because of child-care uncertainties.

To make ends meet, parents working lower-income jobs said they were relying more on credit cards, taking on additional roommates or picking up extra jobs, such as bartending or restaurant delivery, on evenings and weekends.

Watland, the mother in Rapid City, S.D., has begun selling her belongings - including a diamond necklace she got for high school graduation, a laptop and a Puma jacket - on eBay. Neither Watland nor her fiance, who works in food service, receives paid leave, which means there's no money coming in when they're not working. Two weeks ago, her entire household tested positive for the

Pandemic-era child-care disruptions haven fallen heaviest on those without family or resources to lean on. Studies show that a lack of child care is most likely to hurt mothers, particularly if their children are younger than 6. In the first year of the crisis, working mothers were more likely to scale back on work or quit their jobs because of child-care disruptions than fathers were, according to research published in the JAMA Health Forum.

“It’s a very familiar theme, in that the pandemic has intensified preexisting inequalities,” said Nancy Folbre, an economist and retired professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where her research has focused on gender and care work. “We’ve locked ourselves into a problem that is amplifying itself.”

The Biden administration has flagged affordable child care as one of its biggest priorities. Last year’s American Rescue Plan Act included $39 billion for child-care funding, including grants for child-care providers and subsidies to help low-income families

Kevin Flanagan of Seekonk, Mass., lost his $50,000-a-year job at a car dealership early in the pandemic. Two years later, he's taken a significant pay cut for an $18-an-hour gig as a medical courier so he can accommodate the seemingly endless day care and school closures for his 2- and 7-year-old children.

His daughter's day care, which costs $342 a week, has closed down three times since December, for at least a week each time, he said. A few weeks ago, he got a call just as he was starting his morning deliveries. A teacher had tested positive for the coronavirus, which meant he'd have to pick up his daughter within the hour.

"It's like a gut punch every time," said Flanagan, 42. "The last thing I want to hear is, 'Kevin, you're unreliable so we've got to let you go.' It makes me feel like I can't look for a job any time soon."

In Emporia, Kan., Paul Brosemer says he sometimes has no choice but to take his children, ages 3 and 8, along to his job at a land surveying company. He's used up all of his paid time off and is now stuck taking unpaid leave whenever day care shuts down.

The child-care facility charges $500 a month regardless of whether his toddler can go. To cover costs, Brosemer takes on bartending and warehouse shifts after his wife gets home from her job at a car dealership.

“There are whole weeks where we don't even get a paycheck,” the 36-year-old said. “I'm stressed out