

Generous social welfare policies are linked to decreased child neglect

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Concept illustration of a mother receiving cash for child care. Credit: Nicole Smith, made with Midjourney/University of Michigan

Young children in low-income households could be at risk for abuse and neglect if their parents are unable to receive adequate child care subsidies, according to a new University of Michigan study [published](#) in *Child Maltreatment*.

Employment requirements, which vary by state, above a certain threshold have [negative consequences](#) for children and families, said Kathryn Maguire-Jack, U-M associate professor of social work and study's lead author.

"Child care subsidies that require employment may not reach the most precarious working families," she said. "They potentially exclude groups of highly vulnerable mothers who either cannot work, cannot work the required hours, or for whom the documentation to establish and retain eligibility is overly burdensome."

Researchers investigated the ways employment hours, which were part of economic support programs, impacted how parents treated their children between birth and age 4. In general, some adults feel stressed about material hardship, resulting in harmful parenting practices.

In the United States, subsidies are provided to [low-income families](#) who meet certain requirements to offset the high cost of child care. States have flexibility in setting many policies related to the provision of these subsidies.

The study involved 11 years of data ending in 2019 about two child care subsidy policies: employment requirements and copayment size; and [child neglect](#), [physical abuse](#) and [emotional abuse](#). Researchers analyzed the work requirement for part-time child care among states, as well as the copayment amount, which was typically less than \$500 per month.

For every 1,000 children, in terms of cases that could be substantiated by social work professionals, the neglect rate was 2.68, the physical abuse rate was 0.78; and the emotional abuse rate was 0.42, according to the findings.

Within the states that required some employment hours, the neglect and

physical abuse substantiation rates were slightly higher (3.01 and 0.89 per 1,000 children, respectively), while the emotional abuse substantiation rate was slightly lower (0.29 per 1,000 children).

Twenty-two states had a minimum number of hours required to receive part-time care supported by child care subsidies, and among those that had a minimum, five required 30 hours per week.

Overall, the study shows that requiring some level of work was not associated with neglect substantiations, but requiring 30 hours of employment was associated with higher rates.

Maguire-Jack said the results were consistent with the expected benefits of child care subsidies.

"If hourly employment requirements functionally exclude the most vulnerable families, the increased risk for [young children](#) may stem from parents' inability to afford child care while simultaneously balancing unstable, variable or lack of work," she said. "Similarly, young children require significant parental time and attention. To that end, lower employment requirements may allow parents time to invest in their children outside of the [child care](#) setting, thus reducing child maltreatment."

More information: Kathryn Maguire-Jack et al, Childcare Subsidy Employment and Copayment Requirements and Child Maltreatment, *Child Maltreatment* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/10775595231218174](https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595231218174)

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