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The Static Nature of the Childcare Workforce, 1990 to 2025

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Despite decades of policy attention aimed at strengthening the early childhood care and education workforce, concerns about low pay, high turnover, and limited economic security persist. This paper revisits whether the composition and economic conditions of the childcare workforce have meaningfully changed by documenting long-run trends from 1990 to 2025. Using nationally representative data from the March Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey, I analyze trends in demographics, reliance on economic support, and earnings and employment dynamics across childcare sectors. I find that aggregate wage gains mask modest within-sector growth, driven largely by compositional shifts away from home-based care rather than real pay increases. Childcare earnings have not kept pace with broader female workforce gains, and post-pandemic turnover rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels, erasing the modest gains achieved in the intervening years despite temporary compensation stabilization through the American Rescue Plan. School-based settings remain more economically attractive than center- or home-based care, a pattern that persists despite sustained investments in early childcare. Finally, trends in workforce composition and material hardship closely mirror those of female and low-wage workers broadly. These findings highlight the persistent nature of the childcare workforce and suggest that sector-specific policy interventions have not fundamentally altered who childcare jobs attract or their economic viability.

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Abstract: Despite decades of policy attention aimed at strengthening the early childhood care and education workforce, concerns about low pay, high turnover, and limited economic security persist. This paper revisits whether the composition and economic conditions of the childcare workforce have meaningfully changed by documenting long-run trends from 1990 to 2025. Using nationally representative data from the March Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey, I analyze trends in demographics, reliance on economic support, and earnings and employment dynamics across childcare sectors. I find that aggregate wage gains mask modest within-sector growth, driven largely by compositional shifts away from home-based care rather than real pay increases. Childcare earnings have not kept pace with broader female workforce gains, and post-pandemic turnover rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels, erasing the modest gains achieved in the intervening years despite temporary compensation stabilization through the American Rescue Plan. School-based settings remain more economically attractive than center- or home-based care, a pattern that persists despite sustained investments in early childcare. Finally, trends in workforce composition and material hardship closely mirror those of female and low-wage workers broadly. These findings highlight the persistent nature of the childcare workforce and suggest that sector-specific policy interventions have not fundamentally altered who childcare jobs attract or their economic viability.

Keywords: early childhood education, childcare workforce, turnover, labor markets

Highlights:

- Childcare wage gains are driven largely by compositional shifts, with modest within-sector growth.
- Despite some real wage growth, childcare earnings have not kept pace with broader female workforce gains.
- Pandemic-era aid briefly stabilized childcare worker pay, but turnover returned to pre-pandemic levels.
- Rising childcare education reflects broad labor market trends, not sector-specific policy success.
- School-based care consistently outperforms center- and home-based settings on all economic measures.

Data Statement: Data for this project comes from publicly available sources and is made available through a data appendix.

I. Introduction

Over the past three decades, interest in early childhood care and education (ECCE) policy has grown substantially. Childcare functions as foundational economic and social infrastructure supporting parental labor force participation while shaping children's early development and school readiness. Decades of research demonstrate that stable, high-quality caregiver relationships are among the strongest predictors of children's cognitive and socioemotional development in the short and long run (Heckman et al., 2010; Markowitz, 2024). Yet longstanding workforce challenges, including low pay, high turnover, and limited access to benefits, undermine these conditions, cycling children through unstable care arrangements and making it difficult to attract and retain qualified workers (Araujo et al., 2016; Baker et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2025; Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). Prior work documents the durability of these challenges through 2010, highlighting the structural fragility of childcare employment (Bassok et al., 2013).

Since then, the policy environment has changed in ways that would plausibly alter who childcare jobs attract and how they function economically. State minimum wage increases have raised wage floors across low-wage work broadly, potentially reducing turnover by improving compensation, though whether childcare wages have kept pace with other sectors, and what this means for workforce quality, remains unclear (Brown & Herbst, 2023; Sadowski, 2025) Expansions of public pre-K have drawn more educated workers into school-based settings but may simultaneously strain the supply of qualified workers in center- and home-based care serving infants and toddlers (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024). Federal and state professionalization efforts, including rising education requirements in Head Start and the growth of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, push toward a more credentialed workforce, yet may accelerate turnover if more educated workers use childcare as a stepping stone to better-compensated roles (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, 2007). Most recently, the American Rescue Plan Act directed unprecedented federal investment toward workforce stabilization and compensation (American Rescue Plan Act, 2021; Office of Child Care, 2021). Together, these changes create competing pressures whose net effect on workforce composition and economic security is not obvious.

In this paper, I assess whether these policy shifts have translated into meaningful changes in the childcare workforce over the past three decades. Using nationally representative data from the March Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey, I construct a long-run portrait of childcare workers from 1990 to 2025 (Flood et al., 2025). I examine who works in childcare, the economic supports they rely on, and the earnings and employment dynamics of childcare jobs, comparing patterns across school-based, center-based, and home-based settings and benchmarking them against female and low-wage workers.

I find evidence of little substantial change in the composition or economic viability of the childcare workforce over the past three decades, including during periods of heightened public investment. School-based settings remain more attractive than center- or home-based care along multiple dimensions, a pattern that persists even as state and federal investments in early childcare have increased. More broadly, demographic and economic trends within childcare closely mirror those observed among female and low-wage workers in other industries,

suggesting that sector-specific policies have not fundamentally altered who childcare jobs attract or the economic security they offer. These findings underscore the persistent nature of childcare employment and raise questions about the limits of short-run or narrowly targeted workforce interventions.

A growing descriptive literature documents the childcare workforce through national snapshots, cross-sectional surveys, and state-level workforce indices (Markowitz & Bassok, 2025; McLean et al., 2024; Phillips et al., 2016; US Department of Health and Human Services et al., 2014). Prior work has documented long-run trends in childcare employment through 2010, including the persistence of low pay, economic insecurity, and declining relative workforce quality (Bassok et al., 2013). More recent work finds that childcare workers have fallen behind broader female workforce gains in education and wages (Herbst, 2025). I build on this foundation by extending this work through 2025 and situating recent policy expansions. including public pre-K growth and pandemic-era investments, within a broader labor-market context. By benchmarking childcare workers against female and low-wage workers outside the sector, the analysis assesses whether and to what extent decades of reform have altered both the level and relative economic position of childcare.

II. Background

The Structure of the Early Childcare Market

The early childhood care and education (ECCE) market in the United States is highly diverse, both in the types of care families pursue and in the funding mechanisms that support them. Families access care through a range of settings, including school-based programs, federally-funded programs such as Head Start, center-based providers operating largely on tuition revenue, home-based family day care providers, and informal arrangements such as care by relatives or nannies. These settings differ substantially in their regulatory environments, funding sources, and employment structures, with important implications for workforce conditions.

School-based early childhood programs, most notably public pre-kindergarten, are typically funded through state and local education dollars. The populations served vary widely across states, with some offering universal access and others targeting disadvantaged children (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024). Head Start, established in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty, is federally funded and serves primarily low-income children through both center-based and home-based providers. Center-based childcare outside of schools and Head Start is predominantly tuition-funded, though many providers accept subsidies through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). Home-based childcare providers often operate as self-employed individuals, sometimes subject to licensing or registration requirements that vary by state. This paper focuses on three segments of the market: school-based care, center-based care, and home-based care. The scale of these sectors is substantial, with nearly 60% of children from birth through age five participating in nonparental care as of 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Funding and Investment in Early Childcare

Public investment in early childcare has evolved substantially over the past several decades, though not always in ways that directly affect the workforce. At the federal level, Head Start represents the earliest sustained investment, with funding targeted toward expanding access for low-income children rather than explicitly improving compensation or job quality for workers. The Child Care and Development Fund, now the largest federal funding stream for childcare, provides subsidies to help families afford care and operates largely through formula-based allocations to states. While CCDF funding levels have fluctuated over time, expenditures have remained relatively stable in real terms and have historically been constrained in their ability to directly support workforce compensation (Lynch, 2016).

The most significant recent federal investment affecting the childcare workforce occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Unlike prior funding streams, ARPA explicitly allowed funds to be used not only to subsidize care for families but also to stabilize providers and increase compensation for workers, marking a notable departure from previous policy design (The White House, 2022).

Outside of federal funding, states play a central role in shaping childcare investment, particularly through public pre-K programs. States have adopted pre-K at different times and scales, with Oklahoma and Georgia among the earliest adopters of universal pre-K, and other states pursuing targeted or phased approaches (Cascio, 2023; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024). Most state pre-K investments focus on serving four-year-olds, and in some cases three-year-olds, often within public school systems. However, budget constraints and workforce limitations can complicate expansion. Several states have explicitly cited difficulties in scaling pre-K programs due to challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified childcare workers, underscoring the link between funding, workforce capacity, and program growth (Bassok et al., 2024; Weekes et al., 2024).

These investments, while meaningful, remain modest relative to public commitments to older children. In 2019, public spending per child amounted to approximately $12,800 for elementary-age children, compared to $2,800 for three- and four-year-olds and roughly $500 for children under three (Davis & Sojourner, 2021). This gap reflects not only different program histories but also the degree to which early care remains outside the scope of publicly funded systems, with costs borne primarily by families and the low-wage workforce that serves them.

Workforce-Focused Policy and the Emphasis on Quality

Alongside expansions in access and funding, childcare policy over the past three decades has increasingly emphasized program quality, with direct implications for the workforce. A central feature of this shift has been the adoption of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) across states. Beginning in the late 1990s, QRIS frameworks were designed to assess and incentivize quality across dimensions such as staff qualifications, learning environments, and curricula (Cannon et al., 2017). While QRIS participation has expanded substantially, systems vary widely in their design and incentives, and participation is often voluntary. Many states attempt to encourage uptake through higher subsidy reimbursement rates or financial bonuses, though it remains unclear whether these incentives are sufficient to offset the costs of meeting higher workforce standards in a sector characterized by thin margins and low wages (The Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2024).

The growing focus on quality was accompanied by broader policy changes that reshaped who entered the childcare workforce. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act brought new workers into the sector. Separately, the Child Care and Development Fund required family day homes to register with the state to receive subsidy dollars, with some states mandating a high school diploma, gradually shifting the educational composition of the home-based workforce.

Federal policy has also explicitly sought to professionalize the childcare workforce. Amendments to Head Start in the early 2000s introduced minimum education requirements for assistant and lead teachers, mandating that an increasing share of staff hold associate or bachelor's degrees (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, 2007). More broadly, states have expanded early childhood credentials and certification requirements, reflecting a national effort to formalize early childhood work as a profession (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024). Together, these policies have raised expectations for worker qualifications and training, even as funding streams have not consistently supported commensurate increases in compensation or job stability.

Collectively, these workforce-focused policies distinguish early childcare from many other low-wage sectors. Unlike retail, hospitality, or domestic work, childcare has been the subject of sustained public intervention explicitly linking worker characteristics to program quality and child outcomes. Through Head Start requirements, QRIS frameworks, and the expansion of public pre-K, policymakers have articulated a vision of childcare as a professionalized workforce embedded within broader education systems. In this context, one might reasonably expect childcare employment to evolve differently from the broader female and low-wage labor force, with rising educational attainment, improved compensation, and greater economic security. Whether these expectations have been realized, however, remains an open empirical question—one this study addresses by documenting long-run changes in the structure and economic conditions of childcare employment.

III. Data & Methods

Data

The primary data source for this study is the March Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey (CPS), covering the period 1989 through 2025. The CPS ASEC provides nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional data with detailed information on demographics, labor market outcomes, income sources, and participation in public programs, making it well suited for examining long-run trends in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce.

Across the full sample period, the CPS includes an average of 208 school-based pre-K and K workers, 509 home-based workers, and 821 center-based workers per year, allowing for consistent analysis of workforce composition and economic outcomes across childcare sectors and relative to other workers. The CPS ASEC contains harmonized measures of earnings, employment, education, family structure, and employment transitions, including industry turnover.

To assess the robustness of the CPS-based findings, I replicate key analyses using data from the American Community Survey (ACS; Ruggles et al., 2025). While the ACS offers a substantially larger sample size, it lacks comparable detail on earnings and employment dynamics.[1] For these reasons, the CPS ASEC serves as the primary data source, with ACS results used to confirm that observed trends are not driven by survey-specific features. Across outcomes, ACS-based estimates closely track CPS patterns, reinforcing the stability of the main findings.

Methods

The analysis is descriptive and documents long-run changes in the characteristics and economic conditions of childcare workers from 1990 to 2025. To reduce year-to-year volatility—particularly for smaller childcare sectors such as school-based early education—most results are presented using three comparison periods: 1990–1995, 2005–2010, and 2020–2025. These periods are chosen to capture long-run change while preserving the ability to assess distinct periods of the early childhood market. To assess whether differences across periods are statistically meaningful, I estimate OLS regressions with robust standard errors and test whether coefficients differ significantly between the initial and middle periods (1990–1995 vs. 2005–2010) and between the middle and most recent periods (2005–2010 vs. 2020–2025). All analyses apply CPS ASEC survey weights to ensure national representativeness. [2]

For a subset of outcomes related to economic support, employment, and earnings, I additionally present raw annual trends to illustrate shorter-run dynamics around the COVID-19 period that may be obscured by period averaging. Trends are examined separately by childcare sector and benchmarked against comparison groups—including female and low-wage workers—to contextualize observed patterns within broader labor market changes. Given small sample sizes in some sectors, particularly school-based care, I complement select figures with estimates from the ACS to assess whether observed trends are sensitive to survey-specific noise.

Sample Construction

I examine differences across childcare sectors and worker types. For childcare workers, I create three mutually exclusive sectors: school-based pre-K and K workers, home-based

[1]The ACS measures total annual income across all jobs rather than earnings tied to a respondent's primary industry or occupation and does not capture employment transitions. Additionally, the ACS reports industry and occupation as of the survey reference week but collects earnings over the prior 12 months, meaning a worker's reported wages may not correspond to their reported industry or occupation if they changed jobs during the year. These challenges are especially pronounced in childcare, where turnover is high and many workers hold multiple jobs. As a result, ACS-based wage measures are likely noisier for childcare workers than for workers in more stable industries. Thus, I use the ACS to assess the robustness of long-run trends rather than as a primary source for earnings dynamics.

[2] Bassok et al. (2013) trim the earnings distribution to reduce the influence of outliers, an approach that is well suited to their focus on outcomes measured in the prior calendar year. In contrast, the present analysis examines a combination of outcomes measured in the respondent's current job (e.g., demographics and employment characteristics) and outcomes measured in the prior year (e.g., earnings). Trimming observations based on prior-year earnings would therefore apply non-uniform sample restrictions across outcomes. For this reason, no outlier trimming is applied in the main analysis. Sensitivity checks that trim the top and bottom 0.5 percent of the earnings distribution for prior-year outcomes produce substantively similar results.

childcare workers, and center-based childcare workers. To contextualize trends in the childcare workforce, I examine differences in outcomes across two benchmark worker type groups: female and low-wage workers. To create these categorizations, I use a combination of industry codes, occupation codes, and class-of-worker indicators, with definitions adjusted as necessary to account for changes in codes over time following the rules outlined in Bassok et al. (2013).

I classify workers into three segments of the early childcare workforce: school-based, center-based, and home-based care. School-based workers are individuals employed in elementary or secondary schools whose primary role involves early childhood education, including pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, childcare workers, and early childhood teaching assistants; these workers are primarily wage-and-salary employees. Home-based workers provide childcare in residential or household settings, such as family day homes or private households, and include self-employed childcare providers operating outside formal centers. Center-based workers are employed in non-residential, non-school-based childcare centers and are primarily wage-and-salary employees. To contextualize trends in the childcare workforce, I compare these groups to all female workers in the CPS, reflecting the highly gendered nature of childcare employment, and to low-wage workers employed in historically low-paid service sectors (e.g., food service, personal care, retail, and recreation). Workers outside childcare and these low-wage sectors serve as a higher-wage comparison group.

Outcomes

Outcomes are organized around the paper's three primary research questions. First, I study workforce demographics. I examine worker's reported sex, age, race and ethnicity, citizenship, family structure, and education. Sex is redefined as an indicator, for whether the individual is female or not. Age is grouped into four binary categories: ages 16–25, 26–40, 41–55, and 56 and older. Race and ethnicity are categorized into three binary variables: non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic. Citizenship is an indicator for whether you are a native-born United States citizen or not. Family structure measures include indicators for marital status, the presence of any children, and the presence of children under the age of five in the household. Educational attainment is converted into four indicators, which are defined as whether an individual has earned less than a high school degree, a high school degree, some college or an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree or higher. I create a parallel measure for spousal educational attainment. To assess availability of workforce supports or reliance on economic supports, I examine access to employer-sponsored benefits which I define using an indicator for whether the individual had access to either a pension or health insurance plan through their primary employer, whether the individual is covered by a union through their primary employer, participation in food assistance programs, poverty status, and total welfare income reported.[3] Finally, economic outcomes correspond to the respondent's job held in the prior year and include: annual earnings from the longest-held job; hourly wages, calculated as annual earnings divided by usual hours worked multiplied by 50 weeks; total spousal income; and year-to-year industry turnover as a measure of employment stability. Year-to-year industry

[3] Welfare income is the total public assistance a respondent reported receiving from the state or local welfare office including income from Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and other public assistance programs.

turnover is defined as whether an individual is employed in industry X in year t-1 and is not observed in industry X in year t, including individuals who exit the labor force. This is an undercount of firm turnover, as it omits individuals who leave a company for another in the industry. All monetary values are inflation-adjusted to 2025 dollars using CPI-U-RS (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

IV. Results

First, I examine how the demographic composition of the childcare workforce has evolved over time. Second, I document trends in childcare workers' reliance on workforce and economic supports. Third, I analyze changes in earnings and employment dynamics. For each research question, I present trends separately by childcare sector to highlight differences across care settings (Table 1). I then compare these sector-specific trends to those observed among female and low-wage workers in other industries (Table 2). This structure allows for a clear assessment of whether changes within the childcare workforce reflect sector-specific dynamics or broader labor market trends.

Demographic Composition

Across all periods and sectors, the early childcare workforce remains overwhelmingly female: approximately 96 percent of workers identify as women. This share is substantially higher than among low-wage workers more broadly, 62 percent of whom are female. Neither the childcare sector nor the low-wage workforce experienced meaningful changes in gender composition between 1990–95 and 2020–25, indicating that childcare's gender imbalance reflects persistent features of the labor market rather than sector-specific change.

In the early 1990s, nearly 80 percent of childcare workers across all sectors identified as non-Hispanic White. Over the subsequent three decades, this share consistently declined. The proportion of non-Hispanic White workers fell by 14 percentage points (pp) in school-based pre-K and K, by 18pp in home-based care, and 19pp in center-based care. These declines were accompanied by increases in the share of Hispanic workers, who now comprise 20 percent of school-based workers, 28 percent of home-based workers, and 23 percent of center-based workers.

While these changes may appear large in isolation, they closely mirror broader shifts in the composition of the U.S. labor force. Among all female workers, the share identifying as non-Hispanic White declined by 14pp over the same period, while the share identifying as Hispanic increased by 12pp to 19 percent. Similar patterns are observed among low-wage workers, where the non-Hispanic White share fell by 17pp and the Hispanic share rose by 15pp to 25 percent. Taken together, these trends suggest that changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the childcare workforce largely reflect broader demographic shifts rather than sector-specific dynamics.

A similar pattern emerges for citizenship status, though with important variation across sectors. Overall, the share of childcare workers who are citizens declined by 10 percentage points between 1990–95 and 2020–25, closely mirroring declines among female and low-wage workers

broadly. However, this aggregate trend masks substantial heterogeneity across settings. Home-based care, which already had the lowest citizenship share in 1990–95 at 87 percent, experienced the steepest decline, with roughly one in four home-based workers now a non-citizen. This growing reliance on non-citizen labor in home- and center-based settings is particularly notable given these workers' more limited access to labor protections and public supports.

Age profiles tell a similar story. In 1990–95, the largest share of childcare workers fell in the 26–40 age range; this group experienced the most pronounced, and again consistent, decline over time. Between 1990–95 and 2005–10, growth was concentrated among workers aged 41–55, while from 2005–10 to 2020–25 the largest increases occurred among workers aged 56 and older, reflecting the aging of the U.S. population and workers staying in the labor force longer. One notable source of heterogeneity across sectors is reliance on younger workers, which has remained stable across time. Nearly a quarter of workers in home-based and center-based care are aged 16–25, compared to roughly 10 percent in school-based settings, likely reflecting differences in credentialing and entry requirements.

Consistent with these patterns, educational attainment differs sharply across sectors. In 2020–25, nearly 80 percent of school-based workers had some college education or more, compared to 63 percent in center-based care and 58 percent in home-based care. Over time, educational attainment increased across all childcare sectors, with the largest changes occurring among home-based workers. In 1990–95, home-based providers had the highest share of workers with a high school degree or less at 70 percent; by 2020–25, their educational distribution more closely resembled that of center-based workers, with roughly equal shares reporting having some college or more.

Despite these gains, the childcare workforce—and the home-based sector in particular—continues to lag the broader labor market in formal educational attainment. Between 1990–95 and 2020–25, the share of all childcare workers with a high school degree or less declined from 53 to 35 percent. While significant, this shift largely mirrors broader human capital trends: over the same period, the share of workers with a high school degree or less fell from 46 to 28 percent among all female workers and from 59 to 47 percent among low-wage workers. These parallel trajectories suggest that rising education in childcare reflects a general expansion in high school graduation rates and postsecondary access rather than the success of sector-specific workforce initiatives. The notable exception is the home-based sector, where the "education floor" was likely raised by external regulatory pressures.

Finally, I examine family structure, given the predominance of women in childcare and longstanding policy interest in supporting working mothers. Historically, childcare—particularly home- and center-based care—relied heavily on mothers of young children. In the early 1990s, roughly one-fifth to one-quarter of workers in these settings had children under age five, compared to 14 percent in school-based care. Over time, this share has fallen sharply in home- and center-based settings, driven largely by the aging of the childcare workforce rather than changes in behavior within age groups (Appendix A). This shift is substantively important: childcare is no longer being performed to the same extent by women concurrently caring for young children of their own.

At the same time, broad patterns of marriage and parenthood among childcare workers increasingly mirror those of female workers overall. School-based workers remain more likely to

be married today (59 percent) than home- and center-based workers (43 and 45 percent), but across all childcare sectors roughly 47 percent report having any children, a share that has declined by about 8 percentage points since the 1990s—closely tracking trends among women more generally. Low-wage workers are somewhat less likely to be married or have children, but the overall similarity in trajectories suggests that changes in family structure within childcare largely reflect broader demographic shifts rather than sector-specific transformation.

Economic Supports and Material Hardship

Economic supports differ sharply across childcare sectors and have remained highly unequal over time. School-based settings consistently provide substantially greater access to employer-sponsored benefits than either home-based or center-based care. Even in 1990–95, 78 percent of school-based workers reported access to a pension or employer-sponsored health insurance, compared with just 4 percent of home-based workers and 30 percent of center-based workers. These gaps have proven remarkably persistent. Benefit coverage in school-based and center-based settings has remained relatively stable over the past three decades, while access among home-based workers increased by 11pp to 15 percent by 2020–25.

These differences closely track patterns of union coverage. In 1990–95, approximately 42 percent of school-based workers were covered by a union, compared with just 1 and 4 percent of home-based and center-based workers, respectively. Although unionization among school-based workers declined over time, nearly one-third remain union-covered in 2020–25, while coverage in home- and center-based settings has remained negligible. This institutional divide helps explain the persistence of benefit disparities across childcare sectors.

Relative to other workers, childcare jobs offer unusually limited access to workplace support. In the early 1990s, both female workers and low-wage workers were more than twice as likely as childcare workers to have access to a pension or employer-sponsored health insurance. While this gap narrowed over time—reflecting both the growth of school-based employment within childcare and declines in benefit coverage among low-wage workers more broadly—it remains substantial. Low-wage workers have also consistently been more likely than childcare workers to be covered by a union, despite declines in unionization across the labor market, further contributing to differences in workforce supports.

Material hardship remains widespread across the childcare workforce. In 1990–95, roughly 6 percent of school-based workers reported living in poverty or receiving food assistance. While poverty rates among school-based workers have remained relatively stable, reliance on Supplemental Nutrition Program Assistance (SNAP) increased by 2pp to 8 percent by 2020–25. Hardship is considerably more pronounced in home-based and center-based settings. In 2020–25, poverty rates were approximately 16 percent among home-based workers and 9 percent among center-based workers, with 15 percent reportedly receiving SNAP. Although poverty rates declined modestly among center-based workers over time, reliance on food assistance increased by roughly five percentage points. Notably, there was no sharp increase in poverty or SNAP reliance during the COVID-19 period (Appendix Figure B.1). Instead, the pandemic is characterized by a pronounced rise in reported welfare income across

school-, center-, and home-based workers, possibly reflecting the temporary expansion of public transfers rather than a structural change in material hardship (Han et al., 2020).

These patterns closely mirror broader trends among female and low-wage workers, for whom poverty rates declined slightly while reliance on food assistance increased. However, levels of hardship remain higher in childcare. In 2020–25, both poverty and SNAP receipt were two to three percentage points higher among childcare workers than among low-wage workers more broadly. Notably, much of the increase in food assistance occurs in the 2020–25 period rather than earlier decades, consistent with rising living costs and inflationary pressures in the early 2020s. Taken together, these results suggest that while childcare workers' economic hardship is not unique, it is systematically more severe and reflects persistent gaps in access to stable wages and employer-sponsored benefits.

Employment and Earnings

Industry turnover highlights the underlying fragility of childcare employment. Turnover in center-based settings fell from 30 percent in 1990–1995 to 24 percent by 2005–2010, but this progress proved short-lived. By 2020–2025, rates rebounded to 29 percent, nearly erasing 15 years of decline. School-based care followed a similar pattern, declining from 15 to 12 percent before spiking to 18 percent in 2020–2025. Home-based care was the notable exception: starting from a steep 38 percent in 1990–1995, turnover fell to 28 percent by 2005–2010 and remained near that level at 30 percent in 2020–2025 suggesting its gains were more durable. The speed of reversal in center- and school-based settings is particularly striking when compared to other low-wage service sectors, where turnover declined modestly over this period from 26 to 24 percent. That center- and school-based settings turnover rates rebounded so sharply while home-based care and comparable low-wage sectors stabilized suggests these settings may have been more susceptible to disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Earning patterns help explain this instability. Real wage growth across childcare settings has been modest over the long run and has not kept pace with earnings growth among female workers. Although childcare workers experienced positive percentage wage growth, these gains translate into smaller absolute increases because of their lower starting wages. As a result, childcare workers have fallen further behind the broader female labor force in terms of real purchasing power. This divergence is especially consequential in periods of elevated inflation, when low baseline wages and limited benefits heighten economic vulnerability.

Pandemic-era investments through the American Rescue Plan appear to have stabilized compensation during a period of substantial labor market turbulence but did not generate lasting improvements. Hourly wages rose across childcare settings during 2020–2025, yet annual earnings gains were limited, as increases in hourly wages were offset by reductions in weeks worked. Usual hours remained flat in home- and center-based care but increased in school-based settings, leading to growth in annual earnings only for school-based workers. By contrast, annual earnings in home- and center-based care remained flat. By the end of the period, real hourly wages across all groups had returned to approximately their pre-pandemic levels (Figure 2-3, Appendix Figure B.2).

Modest improvements in average childcare earnings over time are largely driven by compositional change rather than rising pay within settings. The aggregate trend reflects a decline in the lowest-paid home-based employment and an expansion of center-based care, which raises sector-wide averages mechanically (Figure 1). Employment growth in school-based settings plays a comparatively smaller role. This "compositional lift" masks the persistence of low pay in the foundational segments of the childcare sector, while the recent surge in turnover underscores the limits of current wage levels for sustaining workforce attachment.

Own earnings, however, capture only part of the household economic picture. Among married childcare workers, spousal income represents a potential buffer against low wages, yet here too the data suggest a weakening over time, as spousal income growth has not kept pace with that of female workers broadly. School-based workers are most likely to have highly educated, high-earning spouses with nearly half reporting a spouse with a bachelor's degree or more, and nearly half having spouses in the top income quartile. Home-based workers more closely resemble low-wage workers, with most spouses holding a high school degree or less and spousal incomes concentrated in the middle quartiles, though home-based workers' spouses earn modestly more than those of low-wage workers. Across all childcare sectors, however, spousal income growth between 1990–95 and 2020–25 has not kept pace with that of female workers broadly, suggesting that the household economic buffer available to childcare workers is eroding over time rather than compensating for stagnation in their own earnings.

V. Conclusion

Although the demographic composition of the childcare workforce has evolved over the past three decades, these changes largely mirror broader shifts in the U.S. labor force rather than reflecting sector-specific transformation. Trends in race, ethnicity, age, and family structure closely track those observed among female and low-wage workers, suggesting that childcare has not become meaningfully more attractive relative to alternative employment options. One notable exception is home-based care, which experienced the most pronounced changes in workforce composition, including a sharper rise in educational attainment and a substantial shift in who performs this labor. These changes may partly reflect tightening state licensure and registration requirements over this period, which could have reshaped entry into home-based care independent of broader labor market trends.

Across all childcare sectors—and similarly among female and low-wage workers—material hardship remains persistent. Reliance on food assistance has increased, and while some of this reflects expansions in program eligibility rather than deteriorating conditions, it underscores that low earnings leave workers with little buffer against economic disruption. This pattern raises broader concerns about inflationary pressures, as workers with low baseline wages face increasing difficulty maintaining economic security despite continued labor force attachment.

Wage trends further underscore this vulnerability. While childcare workers experienced percentage wage growth comparable to or even exceeding that of female workers overall, lower starting wages mean these gains translate into smaller absolute increases. As a result, childcare

workers have fallen progressively behind the broader female labor market in terms of real purchasing power. This divergence is particularly consequential during periods of elevated inflation and suggests that childcare jobs are becoming less competitive over time, exacerbating long-standing recruitment and retention challenges.

The home-based childcare sector appears especially sensitive to these broader labor market forces. Historically framed as a flexible income option for mothers of young children, family day homes have seen a marked decline in the share of workers with children under age five—a trend largely explained by the aging of the workforce. While this compositional shift reflects broader demographic change, it has important implications for supply. Specifically, reliance on older workers may constrain both the scalability of home-based care and its perceived compatibility with caregiving, weakening a sector often viewed as a policy lever for expanding access.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the infusion of relief funding through the American Rescue Plan functioned primarily as a stabilizing force rather than a catalyst for long-run improvement. Pandemic-era investments helped prevent further erosion in wages during a period of severe disruption, with the largest gains concentrated in school-based settings. However, these interventions did not generate sustained increases in annual income or fundamentally alter compensation trajectories, particularly in home- and center-based care.

Taken together, these results suggest that three decades of policy have not substantially improved the economic quality of childcare jobs. Apparent progress has largely occurred through a redistribution away from home-based providers and towards center-based, while the foundational segments of the childcare system remain characterized by low pay, persistent material hardship, and growing instability. Pandemic-era investments, at the national level, stabilized the childcare workforce but failed to produce uniform or sustained improvements in economic conditions. This is a discouraging finding not only for workers, but for the children they serve and the families whose employment depends on affordable, stable care.

Tables

Table 1. Mean Characteristics and Comparative Trends in the Childcare Workforce by Sector, 1990–2025

	School-Based			Home-Based			Center-Based		
	1990-95 Mean	2005-10 Change	2020-25 Change	1990-95 Mean	2005-10 Change	2020-25 Change	1990-95 Mean	2005-10 Change	2020-25 Change
Demographics									
Female	0.97	-0.02*	-0.02	0.97	-0.00	0.00	0.95	0.00	-0.00
Married	0.71	-0.04	-0.12*	0.53	-0.03*	-0.10*	0.57	-0.09*	-0.12*
Have Children under 5	0.14	-0.00	-0.02	0.23	-0.06*	-0.13*	0.19	0.00	-0.04*
Have Any Children	0.65	-0.04*	-0.10*	0.53	-0.01	-0.12*	0.55	-0.00	-0.07*
Race: Non-Hispanic White	0.82	-0.05*	-0.14*	0.80	-0.14*	-0.18*	0.76	-0.11*	-0.19*
Race: Non-Hispanic Black	0.12	-0.00	0.00	0.09	0.05*	0.01*	0.16	0.04*	0.04
Race: Hispanic	0.07	0.06*	0.13*	0.11	0.09*	0.17*	0.08	0.08*	0.15*
Citizen	0.95	-0.04*	-0.06	0.87	-0.09*	-0.15*	0.95	-0.07*	-0.12*
Age: 16 to 25	0.11	0.01	0.03	0.27	-0.04*	-0.05	0.28	-0.01	-0.02
Age: 26 to 40	0.44	-0.12*	-0.12	0.37	-0.07*	-0.09	0.39	-0.06*	-0.07
Age: 41 to 55	0.34	0.05*	0.02	0.19	0.11*	0.08*	0.23	0.05*	0.01*
Age: 56 or over	0.11	0.06*	0.07	0.11	0.05*	0.13*	0.09	0.02*	0.09*
Educational Attainment, Self									
Below High School	0.06	0.00	-0.02*	0.36	-0.15*	-0.22*	0.13	-0.01	-0.06*
High School	0.24	-0.09*	-0.08	0.34	-0.02	-0.06*	0.32	-0.03*	-0.04
Some College or AA	0.18	0.02	0.04	0.23	0.10*	0.11	0.34	0.02	0.01
Bachelor's or More	0.51	0.07*	0.06	0.07	0.06*	0.17*	0.20	0.02*	0.08*
Educational Attainment, Spouse									
Below High School	0.06	0.01	-0.02*	0.18	-0.04*	-0.07	0.10	0.00	-0.03*
High School	0.21	0.02	-0.00	0.36	-0.00	-0.06*	0.34	-0.03	-0.03
Some College or AA	0.28	-0.01	-0.01	0.26	0.02	0.01	0.28	-0.00	0.01
Bachelor's or More	0.45	-0.02	0.03	0.19	0.02	0.11*	0.27	0.03	0.04
Workforce and Economic Supports									
Pension or Health Insurance	0.78	0.01	-0.04*	0.04	0.05*	0.11*	0.30	0.07*	0.05
Covered by Union	0.42	-0.03	-0.09	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.04	0.03*	0.00
Living in Poverty	0.06	-0.00	-0.01	0.17	0.01	-0.01	0.12	0.02	-0.03*

SNAP Recipient	0.06	-0.01	0.02*	0.10	-0.00	0.05*	0.09	0.02*	0.05*
Employment and Earnings									
Industry Turnover	0.15	-0.03*	0.03*	0.38	-0.10*	-0.08	0.30	-0.06*	-0.01*
Hourly Wage	26.45	2.22	3.50	8.72	4.87*	9.00*	15.01	3.26*	6.62*
Personal Income in $1000	35.38	7.73*	10.35	8.82	9.98*	16.89*	17.38	7.26*	12.69*
Spousal Income in $1000	87.61	0.94	7.39	68.06	0.54	7.24*	74.25	2.33	6.67*
Spousal Income: Q1	0.05	0.03*	0.01	0.07	0.03*	0.02	0.09	0.00	0.00
Spousal Income: Q2	0.15	-0.02	-0.00	0.24	0.00	-0.02	0.22	-0.01	0.02*
Spousal Income: Q3	0.33	-0.03	-0.05	0.40	-0.04*	-0.02	0.34	-0.00	-0.03
Spousal Income: Q4	0.47	0.01	0.04	0.30	0.01	0.02	0.35	0.01	-0.00

Note: Based on author's calculations using United States Current Population Survey March Annual Social and Economic Conditions supplement, 1990-2025. The first column for each sector reports the weighted baseline mean for 1990–1995. Columns 2 and 3 report the estimated change relative to the 1990–1995 baseline for the 2005–2010 and 2020–2025 periods, respectively. All monetary values are adjusted to 2025 dollars using the CPI-U-RS. Spousal income is reported in thousands of real dollars and as quartiles of the spousal income distribution among married female workers, where Q1 reflects the lowest earners. Quartile cutoffs are calculated separately for each period. Differences are estimated via weighted OLS regressions with robust standard errors. Characteristics related to the previous year (e.g., earnings, turnover) are classified by the sector of employment reported for that year. Significance stars denote a statistical difference at the 5% level from the 1990–1995 mean in column 2 and a difference from 2005-10 in column 3.

Table 2. Mean Characteristics and Comparative Trends of the Childcare Workforce relative to Female and Low-Wage Workers, 1990–2025

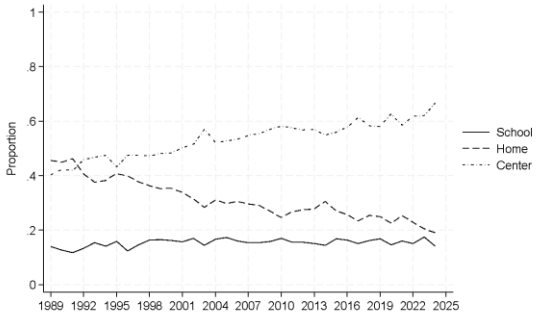
	Childcare			Female			Low-Wage		
	1990-95 Mean	2005-10 Change	2020-25 Change	1990-95 Mean	2005-10 Change	2020-25 Change	1990-95 Mean	2005-10 Change	2020-25 Change
Demographics									
Female	0.96	-0.01*	-0.01	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.62	-0.00	-0.02*
Married	0.57	-0.06*	-0.11*	0.57	-0.02*	-0.06*	0.49	-0.03*	-0.08*
Have Children under 5	0.20	-0.02*	-0.07*	0.14	-0.01*	-0.03*	0.13	-0.00*	-0.04*
Have Any Children	0.55	-0.01	-0.08*	0.50	-0.02*	-0.05*	0.42	-0.01*	-0.05*
Race: Non-Hispanic White	0.79	-0.11*	-0.19*	0.81	-0.07*	-0.14*	0.79	-0.08*	-0.17*
Race: Non-Hispanic Black	0.13	0.04*	0.04	0.12	0.01*	0.02*	0.11	0.01*	0.02*
Race: Hispanic	0.09	0.07*	0.14*	0.07	0.06*	0.12*	0.10	0.08*	0.15*
Citizen	0.92	-0.06*	-0.10*	0.91	-0.05*	-0.08*	0.90	-0.06*	-0.08*
Age: 16 to 25	0.25	-0.01	-0.02	0.18	-0.03*	-0.04*	0.31	-0.02*	-0.04*
Age: 26 to 40	0.39	-0.07*	-0.08	0.41	-0.09*	-0.08*	0.34	-0.06*	-0.06
Age: 41 to 55	0.23	0.07*	0.03*	0.30	0.06*	0.01*	0.24	0.04*	0.01*
Age: 56 or over	0.10	0.03*	0.10*	0.11	0.06*	0.11*	0.10	0.04*	0.09*
Educational Attainment, Self									
Below High School	0.21	-0.07*	-0.13*	0.11	-0.03*	-0.05*	0.21	-0.02*	-0.06*
High School	0.32	-0.04*	-0.05	0.35	-0.07*	-0.13*	0.38	-0.04*	-0.06*
Some College or AA	0.28	0.05*	0.06	0.30	0.01*	-0.03*	0.27	0.02*	0.01*
Bachelor's or More	0.20	0.06*	0.12*	0.24	0.09*	0.21*	0.14	0.04*	0.10*
Educational Attainment, Spouse									
Below High School	0.12	-0.01	-0.05*	0.12	-0.03*	-0.06*	0.15	-0.02*	-0.06*
High School	0.33	-0.01	-0.03	0.33	-0.03*	-0.07*	0.39	-0.04*	-0.09*
Some College or AA	0.27	0.00	0.01	0.26	0.01*	-0.01*	0.26	0.01*	-0.00*
Bachelor's or More	0.28	0.02*	0.07*	0.29	0.05*	0.14*	0.20	0.05*	0.15*
Workforce and Economic Supports									
Pension or Health Insurance	0.25	0.10*	0.12	0.63	0.02*	-0.02*	0.54	0.00	-0.06*
Covered by Union	0.10	0.03*	-0.01*	0.15	-0.02*	-0.03*	0.17	-0.02*	-0.03
Living in Poverty	0.13	0.00	-0.03*	0.07	-0.00	-0.02*	0.10	0.00*	-0.02*

SNAP Recipient	0.09	0.01	0.04*	0.04	0.00*	0.03*	0.06	0.00	0.04*
Employment and Earnings									
Industry Turnover	0.31	-0.08*	-0.04*	0.24	-0.05*	0.01*	0.26	-0.05*	-0.02*
Hourly Wage	14.25	4.24*	7.90*	25.29	5.26*	11.33*	21.20	2.19*	5.42*
Personal Income in $1000	16.04	9.82*	15.45*	36.34	11.62*	23.14*	27.33	6.67*	11.27*
Spousal Income in $1000	74.13	2.65*	8.30*	77.76	3.12*	13.39*	58.37	2.56*	11.72*
Spousal Income: Q1	0.08	0.02*	0.01	0.08	0.01*	0.01	0.19	0.00	-0.03*
Spousal Income: Q2	0.21	-0.01	0.01	0.21	-0.01*	-0.02*	0.26	-0.01*	-0.02
Spousal Income: Q3	0.36	-0.03*	-0.04	0.34	-0.02*	-0.05*	0.30	-0.01*	-0.02
Spousal Income: Q4	0.35	0.02	0.02	0.38	0.01*	0.06*	0.25	0.01*	0.06*

Note: Based on author's calculations using United States Current Population Survey March Annual Social and Economic Conditions supplement, 1990-2025. The first column for each sector reports the weighted baseline mean for 1990–1995. Columns 2 and 3 report the estimated change relative to the 1990–1995 baseline for the 2005–2010 and 2020–2025 periods, respectively. All monetary values are adjusted to 2025 dollars using the CPI-U-RS. Spousal income is reported in thousands of real dollars and as quartiles of the spousal income distribution among married female workers, where Q1 reflects the lowest earners. Quartile cutoffs are calculated separately for each period. Differences are estimated via weighted OLS regressions with robust standard errors. Characteristics related to the previous year (e.g., earnings, turnover) are classified by the sector of employment reported for that year. Significance stars denote a statistical difference at the 5% level from the 1990–1995 mean in column 2 and a difference from 2005-10 in column 3.

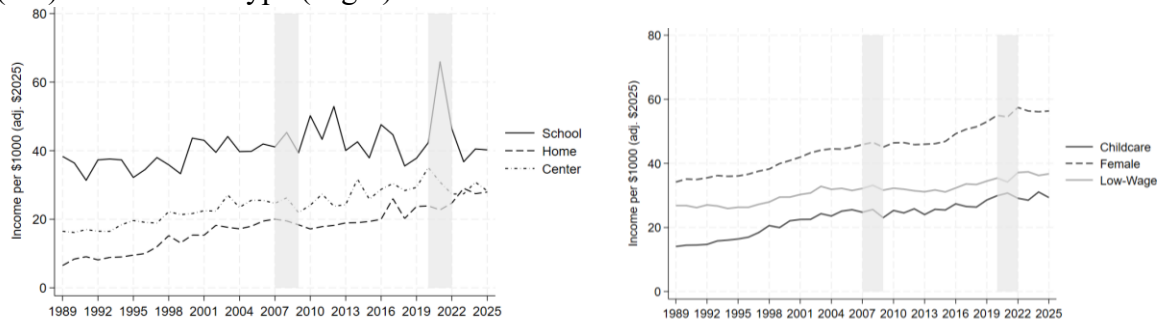
Figures

Figure 1. Share of Childcare Workers by Sector



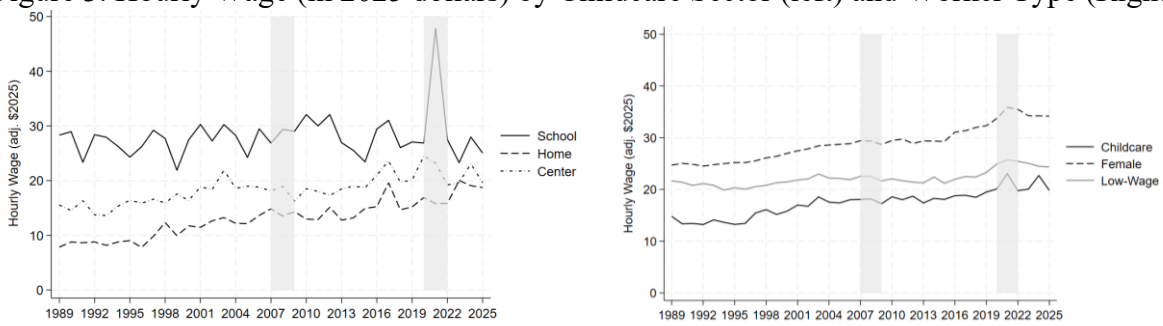
Note: Based on author's calculations using United States Current Population Survey March Annual Social and Economic Conditions supplement, 1990-2025. The figure reflects the weighted share of childcare workers employed in school-, home-, and center-based settings.

Figure 2. Annual Personal Income for Longest Held Job (in 2025 dollars) by Childcare Sector (left) and Worker Type (Right)



Note: Based on author's calculations using the United States Current Population Survey (CPS) March Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), 1990–2025. Figures reflect average annual earnings for workers in their longest-held job from the prior year, adjusted to 2025 dollars using the CPI-U-RS, with CPS ASEC weights applied. The left panel shows earnings broken out by childcare setting, school-, home-, and center-based, while the right panel compares childcare workers to female and low-wage workers overall. Gray bars denote the 2007–2009 recession and the 2020–2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3. Hourly Wage (in 2025 dollars) by Childcare Sector (left) and Worker Type (Right)



Note: Based on author's calculations using the United States Current Population Survey (CPS) March Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), 1990–2025. Figures reflect average hourly wages, calculated by dividing annual earnings from a worker's longest-held job by annual hours worked (usual weekly hours multiplied by 50 weeks), adjusted to 2025 dollars using the CPI-U-RS, with CPS ASEC weights applied. The left panel shows earnings broken out by childcare setting, school-, home-, and center-based, while the right panel compares childcare workers to female and low-wage workers overall. Gray bars denote the 2007–2009 recession and the 2020–2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Age Corrected Results

I conduct the following age standardization exercise to account for differences in age composition across worker categories, which may otherwise confound comparisons of marital and family outcomes. This approach ensures that observed differences across groups reflect changes in outcomes rather than shifts in the underlying age distribution of the workforce. I use the full worker population as the reference (standard) population and partition the sample into five-year age intervals (e.g., 20–24, 25–29). For each age bin, I calculate the proportion of workers in the reference population and apply these proportions as weights when constructing age-adjusted estimates for each subgroup, including childcare workers, low-wage workers, and all female workers. Formally, the age-adjusted outcome rate for group $G$is defined as:

$$Rate_{G,adj} = \sum_{a=1}^{A} \omega_a \; x \; r_{a,G}$$

where $a$indexes age bins, $w_a$denotes the share of the reference population in age bin a, and $r_{a,G}$is the age-specific mean of the outcome for group Gwithin that bin. Operationally, this adjustment is implemented by rescaling individual survey weights. For each individual i in age bin a and group G, the adjusted weight is given by:

$$W_{i,adj} = \omega_i \; x \; (\frac{P(Age_a|\, Standard)}{P(Age_a|\, G)})$$

where $\omega_i$is the original CPS ASEC survey weight. This reweighting aligns each group's age distribution with that of the reference population while preserving the original survey design. The following table and figures show the age-adjustment weights and how the estimates reported in the main paper change when the new weights are applied.

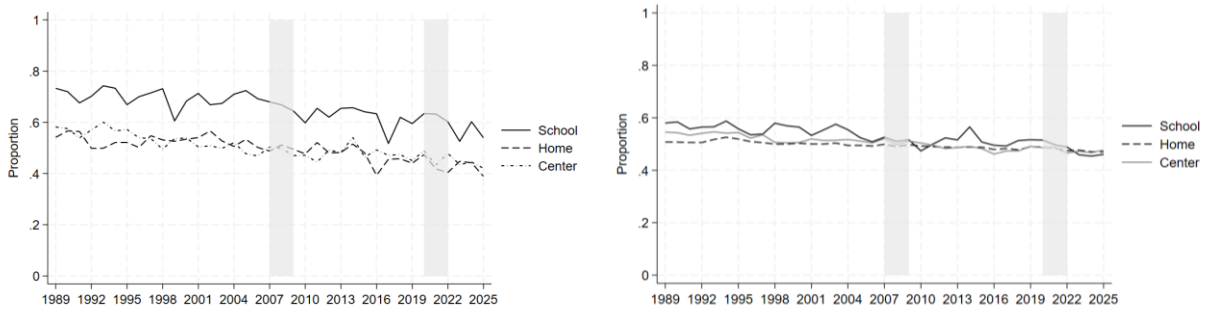
Table A.1. Unweighted Age Distributions (left) and Age Standardized Reweighting (Right) by Age Bin and Worker Type

	Unweighted			Re-Weighted		
Age Bin	ECCE	Female	Low Wage	ECCE	Female	Low Wage
15-19	0.09	0.04	0.13	0.08	0.08	0.08
20-24	0.13	0.08	0.13	0.08	0.07	0.07
25-29	0.12	0.10	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.08
30-34	0.09	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.08
35-39	0.11	0.12	0.10	0.08	0.08	0.08
40-41	0.09	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.07
45-49	0.09	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.08
50-54	0.09	0.10	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.08
55-59	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.08
60-64	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.08
65-69	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.07	0.07	0.07
70-71	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.06	0.06	0.06
75-79	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.04	0.04
80-84	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.02
85-90	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.02

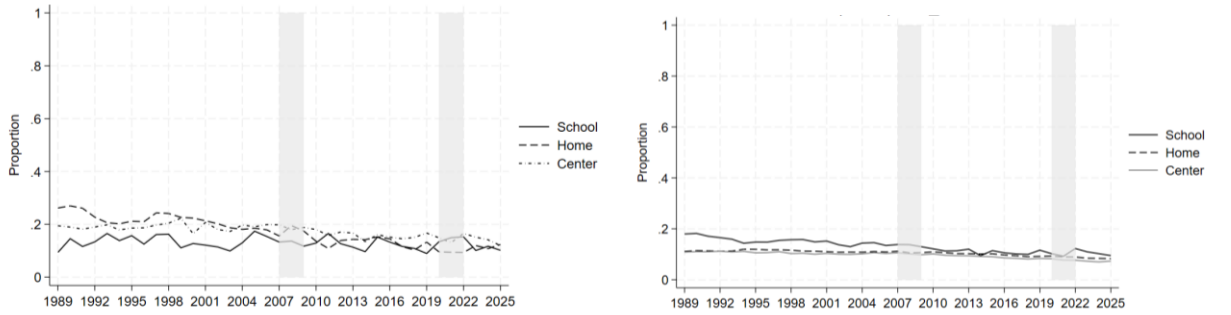
Note. Based on author's calculations using the United States Current Population Survey (CPS) March Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), 1990–2025. This table presents the unweighted age distributions of workers by age bin and worker category (columns 2-4) and the re-weighted age distributions (columns 5-8).

Figure A1. Share of Workers by Family Structure and Worker Type Non-Age Adjusted (Left) and Age-Adjusted (Right) Trends

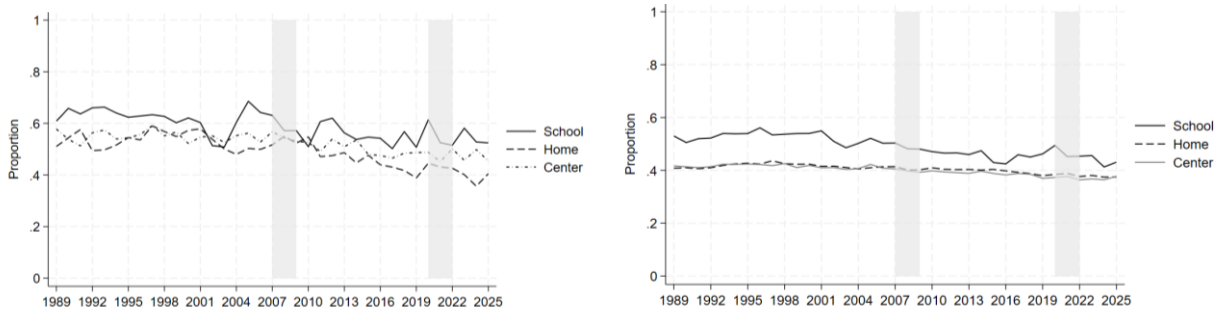
Panel A. Marital Status



Panel B. Has Kids Under 5



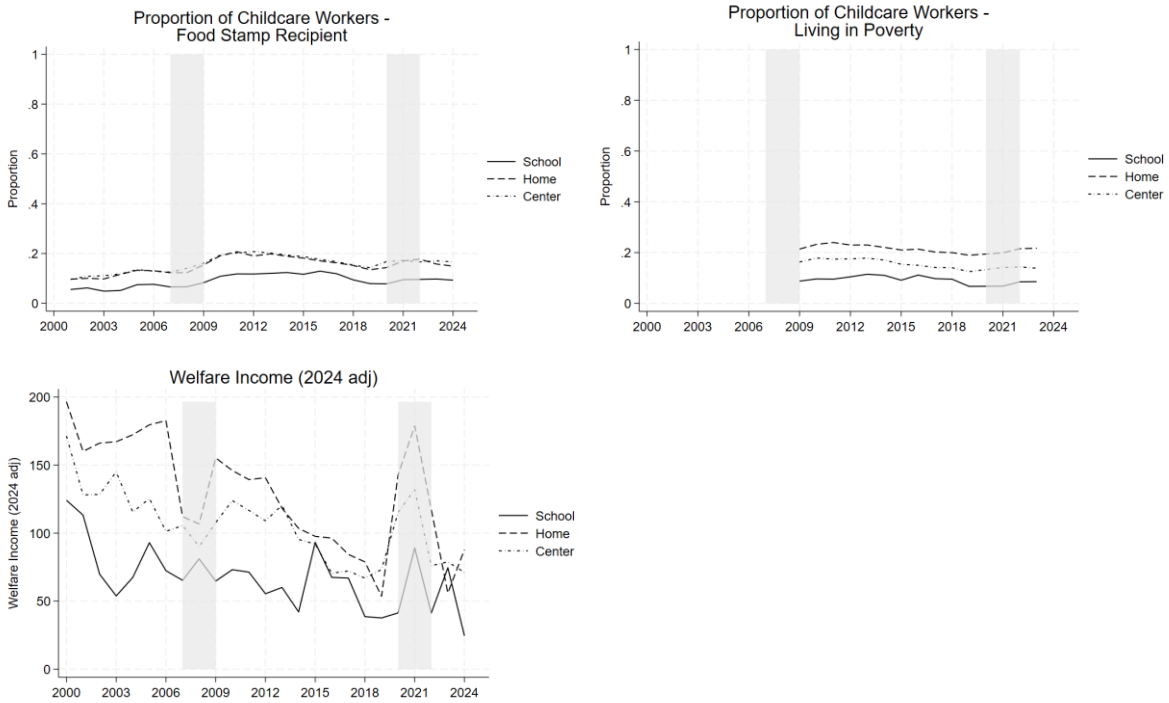
Panel C. Has Kids



Note: Based on author's calculations using the United States Current Population Survey (CPS) March Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), 1990–2025. Figures reflect the proportion of workers who are married (Panel A), have kids under 5 (Panel B), and have kids (Panel C). All figures are weighted using CPS ASEC weights. All figures show the shares broken out by childcare setting, school-, home-, and center-based with the figure on the left depicting the non-age adjusted trends and the age-adjusted on the right. Gray bars denote the 2007–2009 recession and the 2020–2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

Appendix B. Examining Key Outcomes of Economic Supports and Earnings by Childcare Sector using American Community Survey Estimates

Figure B.1. Economic Security as measured by the American Community Survey



Note: Based on author's calculations using the United States American Community Survey (ACS) 2000–2024. Figures reflect the proportion of childcare workers receiving food stamps (SNAP), living in poverty, and the average reported welfare income received. All monetary values are adjusted to 2024 dollars using the CPI-U-RS. Figures are weighted using ACS weights and refer to the prior 12 months. The figures each show trends broken out by childcare setting: school-, home-, and center-based. Gray bars denote the 2007–2009 recession and the 2020–2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure B.2. Wages and Earnings as measured by the American Community Survey

Note: Based on author's calculations using the United States American Community Survey (ACS) 2000–2024. Figures reflect average weeks worked per year, usual hours worked per week, hourly wage, and wage and salary income (in $1,000s). All monetary values are adjusted to 2024 dollars using the CPI-U-RS. Figures are weighted using ACS weights and refer to the prior 12 months. The figures each show trends broken out by childcare setting: school-, home-, and center-based. Gray bars denote the 2007–2009 recession and the 2020–2022 COVID-19 pandemic.