

# Affordable Childcare Could Reduce Domestic Violence

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BRIEFING 2025-3

APRIL 2025

Communities often respond to Domestic Violence with funds for shelter and victim services—from federal and local grants and philanthropy. Though those do much good, they can never fully meet the demand for services, given the size of the problem. The clear next step—addressing causes—has rarely been attempted, but it’s not rocket science: resolve the economic disadvantages many women face—often (but not solely) linked to care for children.

**Economic disparities** and the status and resource issues associated with those are the **direct or indirect cause of much domestic violence**.<sup>1</sup> Many women stay in abuse because they can’t afford to leave, and they don’t want to risk homelessness for their kids. People are often vulnerable to violence at the hands of those they depend upon; and their vulnerability may make partners more likely to commit violence (which they may regret later). Children often witness it. Everybody loses.

Among the many tools for building a world where women and men have equal status and resources, a key element is **affordable childcare**. That’s because it allows moms to work and earn, supplying more funds for the whole family (reducing stress), making her more in-dependent, and lowering harm.

Currently, many Harris County families with kids under 6 can’t access childcare because it’s expensive. Income-eligible families may apply for childcare vouchers through the Texas Workforce Solutions network, but there’s a long waiting list—so many don’t apply. Others whose households earn too much for eligibility still can’t afford care.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, when urged to consider subsidizing childcare, legislators have refused, saying it’s “too expensive.” That shortsighted approach looks only at initial investment, ignoring the huge long-term economic and social gains childcare would pay out.

**Conclusion:** In a time when federal funding for shelters is declining, expanded childcare services can allow women and their families to earn more, and thus avoid violence in the first place. And they can spur economic and social gains for all.

A recent study of the long-term effects of investment in full-day free Pre-K for 4-year-olds in New Haven CT found that “Universal Pre-K (UPK) enrollment **increases parent earnings by 21.7%** during pre-kindergarten,” and **gains persisted for the six years** after pre-kindergarten that the study tracked (and likely longer). They also found that conservative estimates of the **tax revenue generated** by parents’ income gains combine with gains from substitution away from other government programs to **reduce the net government cost of UPK by 90%**. **Less conservative estimates suggest the program actually generates revenue for the government**. In addition, **UPK generates substantial gains to family income**, so that “**each dollar of government expenditure on UPK yields \$10.04 in benefits**.”<sup>3</sup>

If families also had access to subsidized childcare for kids before Pre-K, benefits would increase further, since that would disappear the negative impact of career disruption on a mother’s earnings.

The study’s estimates omit the **ripple effect gains** to be won through **reduced domestic violence**, which would add huge savings on the personal and societal costs of trauma, as well as on the economic costs of: missed work, mental health and health issues, policing, shelter, courts, prison, foster care, etc.

They also don’t include the positive ripple effects **that purchases by families with more spending power** would have for all businesses in the region.

<sup>1</sup> See A. Aizer, “The Gender Wage Gap and Domestic Violence,” *Am. Economic Review* 100 (September 2010): 1847-1859; O. Barnett, “Why Battered Women Do Not Leave,” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 1 (2000): 343-372; S. Nouer et al., “Identifying Predictors for Children Witnessing IPV,” *Journal of Family Violence* 29 (August 2014): 675-679.

<sup>2</sup> Frustratingly, if families access vouchers, expand their work hours and earn more, they may lose eligibility, then can’t afford care on their own, lose the job, and return to the back of the wait list.

<sup>3</sup> J.E. Humphries, C. Neilson, X. Ye, S.D. Zimmerman, “Parents’ Earnings and the Returns to Universal Pre-Kindergarten,” NBER Working Paper 33038 (December 2024).

## The Gendered Hardship Matrix <sup>4</sup>



At base, gender is a work-assignment system, with a wage scale. It's intersected by race/ ethnicity, which has also been utilized historically to assign tasks and wages and further narrows options for many.

Care tasks have long been viewed as “women’s work” – a “naturalized” function viewed as deserving of no or low pay—and, as a result, women of all social positions, kept busy with care work and with no civic status or money of their own, have had small roles in public life or policy making. Because care tasks continue to be un- or low-paid, many women and their children become dependent on men’s financial support, while society still counts on women to bear, rear, and maintain the nation’s workforce.

Though there are now more women leaders, the lack of affordable childcare limits their advance. Children 0-18 are in public school during work hours only 37% of the time,<sup>5</sup> cutting moms’ employment and informing the fact that women are still only 8.2% of S&P 500 CEOs (Catalyst, 2025).

The combination of women’s financial dependency, lack of policy influence, and enormous caretaking responsibility

catalyzes a network of negative effects, at all income levels. But for lower-income women in particular, gender and economics connect within a nexus we’ve named the Gendered Hardship Matrix. Without a strong social safety net, challenges for women—including low wages, unplanned fertility, caregiving, violence, depression, poverty, health issues, etc.—may cascade and compound.

The dependency due to low wages that leads women to stay in abusive relationships may be intensified for immigrant women, who may be isolated.<sup>6</sup> Undocumented women may fear deportation if they report abuse; and even if not undocumented, immigrants may fear deportation of family members. Unplanned births may cut resources at the same moment that they enhance need—increasing poverty, dependency, and often violence.

Economic pressures make other forms of hardship more likely; but cutting those pressures by letting women work consistently can lessen those hardships across the board.

<sup>4</sup> Originally published in E. Gregory et al., “Houston/Harris County Gender and Sexuality Data: Annual Report,” *IRWGS* (May 2021): 3.

<sup>5</sup> E. Gregory & A. Miller, “Houston/Harris County Gender & Sexuality Data: Initial report,” *SGP* 3:1 (2020): 8-22.

<sup>6</sup> A.S. Reina et al., “He said they’d deport me’: Factors Influencing Domestic Violence Help-seeking Practices among Latina Immigrants,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29 (2014): 593-615.

