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CHILD CARE'S IMPACT ON WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES

Rising cost of child care make mothers more likely than fathers to drop down to part-time work or leave the labor force altogether

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The typical American family has increased its child-care spending by 70% since 1995, according to the U.S. Education Department.

Those costs ballooned to a total of \$4.9 billion in 2016, which is bad news for women, who tend to shoulder more child-care-related responsibilities and housework than their male partners. Economists say mothers are more likely than fathers to drop down to part-time work or leave the labor force altogether when child care gets pricey.

"It just limits their choices," says Elise Gould, senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, adding that women tend to make less money than their male partners, which can push them to be the ones to opt out.

U.S. data show that women tend to be less likely to work than men, and are also more likely to seek out part-time options. Last year, 57% of women age 16 and older were employed or looking for work, compared with 69% of men. Some 20% of women worked part time voluntarily, while 9.1% of men did.

When asked to cite their reasons for working part time, women were much more likely than men to identify child-care problems and family issues, according to government data.

Choosing to work part time or not at all for a spell can affect a woman's career trajectory and wage growth, says Grover "Russ" Whitehurst, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution.

On a macro level, businesses and the economy can suffer: The cost of child care "looms at least as large as an economic issue as does the cost of college," Mr. Whitehurst says.

Federal data indicate child-care costs around the U.S. increased nearly twice as fast as overall inflation from 2007 through 2017, according to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute.

In six states—including New York, Colorado, Indiana and California—infant child care amounts to 20% or more of the median income for families with children under age 5. Nowhere is child care more expensive than Washington, D.C., at \$23,089 a year, or 29% of median income for families with young children.