

The Hell of American Day Care

Manuscript from the Interview of Jonathan Cohn by Terry Gross, NPR – April 17, 2013

TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. In his new article "[The Hell of American Day Care](#)," Jonathan Cohn writes: Trusting your child with someone else is one of the hardest things a parent has to do, and in the U.S., it's harder still because American daycare is a mess. About 40 percent of children under five spend at least part of their week in the care of somebody other than a parent.

Cohn's article - which is the cover story of the current edition of The New Republic - examines how we ended up with a daycare system that is barely regulated and is sometimes unsafe, a system that is difficult for many working parents to afford, yet offers many of its workers very low pay. Cohn is a senior editor at The New Republic, where he's written about national politics and health care policy. He's also the author of the 2007 book "Sick: The Untold Story of America's Health Care Crisis - and the People Who Pay the Price."

Jonathan Cohn, welcome back to FRESH AIR. In America, childcare is basically considered your problem. It's a personal problem. Find a way to deal with it.

JONATHAN COHN: That's right, it is. It is considered an individual responsibility, for the most part. And, you know, look, there was a time in American history when that worked. You can go back 100 years, and for the most part, most families were able to take care of their kids on their own - not all families, even back then, but most families. But that was a very different time. We lived a very different way of life.

And, you know, 100 years have passed, 150 years, and I think it's about time we said that, gee, we don't live like we did in the late 19th century. We're not all living on farms with our families all together. We can't depend on one spouse - usually the woman - staying home and taking care of the kids. So we have this need now, and what are we going to do about it?

GROSS: There's different types of daycare, and there's daycare centers. There's also home daycare. Would you describe what the home daycares are for people who are not familiar with them?

COHN: Sure. A home daycare is like it sounds. It's a daycare that somebody runs out of their house. And, you know, there's a lot of variation from state to state, and within states, for how these daycares are run, what kind of requirements they have, what kind of oversight local or state authorities provide over them. But they are a significant part of the childcare network in the United States.

GROSS: Your article starts with a worst-case scenario at a home daycare. And so the story is about a mother who has a two-year-old who she needs to put in daycare. The mother has a new job, and the daycare is a home daycare. It's somebody in the neighborhood who has, like, a little daycare center in their apartment.

The mother doesn't feel great about leaving her kid at this place, but she does what she feels she needs to do. And then she gets a call that the house, that the daycare is on fire. So tell us what happened. Tell us how this fire got started at the daycare center.

COHN: Yeah, it really was, it was a horrible story and a worst-case scenario. There was a fire. The fire started, apparently, when the woman who ran the home daycare, her name was Jessica Tata, apparently

left. She had put some oil in a pan to cook lunch, and while it was on the stove, it caught on fire. And that much was apparent right away.

The fact is, when fire vehicles responded and Ms. Tata was there, she told them, you know, that's what had happened. What turned out - there was more to this story. When the first responders were there, the officials, she had explained that she had been in the bathroom when the pan caught fire, and then she ran out because she couldn't find the kids.

It turned out later they were able to show that, actually, witnesses testified that, in fact, she had been out. She had apparently left the children while the pan was cooking on the stove. They eventually obtained surveillance tapes from a local Target, which is right nearby - it's maybe a half mile from the house - showing her there at the time of the fire, and witnesses then saw her pull up to the house.

And she had apparently left the kids sleeping and gone out to the store to get something and come back. And then during that time, the pan had apparently caught fire.

GROSS: To make matters worse, this woman who ran the daycare had lied about her own past. She had a criminal record. What was the record, and how was she able to open up a home daycare center with a criminal record?

COHN: So it turned out - again, this all came out after the fact and as they began investigating - that, you know, in the state of Texas, they do make you fill out a background check form, and they actually conduct a computer background check to make sure you have no criminal history. And they ask: have you ever - it's a fairly broad question - is there anything in your past involving kind of criminal activity?

It turned out that as a high school student, as a juvenile, she'd had a lot of trouble. There were a lot of cases of behavior problems. Police were called out. And one particular case, she had apparently started a fire in a school bathroom. Now, the Texas legalities are a little complicated, but she essentially plead true - is the way they describe it in Texas - to a charge of starting a fire.

And she did not reveal that on her background form, and for whatever reason - and it's still not entirely clear - the computers didn't pick it up. Later, as there was a trial, they asked an official if they had known about this in her past, might that have disqualified Jessica Tata from running a daycare, and the answer was yes. You know, this is the type of history that would have raised some kind of red flag.

GROSS: So, the story has a very tragic ending: The woman whose story you follow who left her two-year-old at this home daycare center, this child died in the fire. The woman who ran this home daycare center, she's serving an 80-year sentence. Why did you choose this story to start your article about the hell of American daycare?

COHN: So, you know, it was tragic, and actually, four children died that day, and three others were badly injured. And, you know, on the one hand, it is a worst-case scenario. Fatalities in childcare are relatively rare events, thankfully. At the same time, the data we have suggests that the majority of daycare in this country is very poor.

And lots of kids are getting daycare that most of us would not feel comfortable if we really knew what was going on. Now, that doesn't mean there's not good daycare out there. There is. There's some excellent daycare out there, in fact. And if you're lucky enough to have the money to pay for a good daycare provider and you can find one, then your kid's going to be - your kid's going to do great. But there's a lot of mediocre daycare, and there's some that's just really lousy.

GROSS: So the fire, this tragedy that we've been talking about, was at a home daycare center, you know, daycare center in somebody's apartment. And this one person was the only staff member there. And the home daycare centers are often used by people with low incomes who can't afford a staffed daycare center.

And yet you write even some of the less-competent, less-qualified home daycare centers, it's difficult to shut them down, in part because even when parents know that it isn't the best care, they're still desperate to have what they can get. They still desperately need it in order to go out and work and support their family.

COHN: That's right. I mean, this is one of the tragedies of the situation, is that parents need these daycares to work to make a living. You're talking about single parents a lot of the time. You're talking about families that aren't making a lot of money. They desperately need someone to watch the kids, or they're not going to be able to make it. And there just are not a lot of options out there.

You know, you look at the people who ended up at this daycare in Houston, and it was a very interesting set of stories. There was Kenya Mire, who I mentioned, who I sort of focus on in the story, and her situation. And she just - she couldn't find anything else that had the combination of having a slot for her child and being in her price range.

You know, there was another woman who had two children in the daycare, one of whom perished, one who survived. Her problem was she was working at a local hospital, and her big issue was her hospital shift ended late enough that most daycares weren't open that late. Most centers closed by 6 or 6:30, and she could not reliably get to pick up her child at that time, given the time requirements of her job.

So she had to take - she eventually ended up at Jessica Tata's, because Jessica Tata said, you know, hey, I'm happy to, you know, watch the kid a little extra time. She could be flexible. You know, this was something people said over and over again. You know, these home daycares, they do tend to be more flexible. And, you know, in many cases, that's a great thing.

You know, even in Jessica Tata's case, I mean, the funny thing was if you talked to people, a lot of people said, hey, she was very loving. She loved the kids. She was very understanding towards parents and their special needs if they had strange hours, if their incomes were inconsistent, that sort of thing. So, again, people end up at these daycares because they don't have better choices available.

GROSS: You know, in some ways, when you look at the finances, daycare's like the worst of both worlds. Parents have to pay a lot of money to send their child to daycare. At the same time, you write that in 2011, the median annual salary for a childcare worker was \$19,430, which is less than a parking lot attendant or a janitor.

So do you think that's part of the problem, that the salaries are so low at daycare centers, it's hard to attract, you know, really highly qualified people?

COHN: It's a huge part of the problem. In effect, you know, you're looking for quality providers - really not a lot different, say, than what you would look for in a public schoolteacher. Of course, to do that, you know, in general, you know, if you think about it, what is going to attract the most qualified people? What's going to attract people who have more education? What is going to attract people and keep them on the job for year after year after year?

Well, you know, for the most part, you're going to have to pay them a little better. You're going to have to pay them a decent salary. And yet here we have a situation where the typical annual salary for a childcare worker is \$19,000.

Now, again, you know, there are - you're going to get some great childcare workers working at that. You're going to get people who are unbelievably dedicated. You're going to get people who are at a particular stage in life for whatever reason, where that amount of compensation works for them. But overall, you're not going to get the most qualified workforce.

So, you know, if you're thinking about ways to improve childcare in this country, you know, where would you start? Well, you'd start by paying childcare workers more. But immediately, you're going to run into the other problem, right? Which is that, wait a minute, if you're going to pay the childcare workers more, all of us are going to have to pay more for childcare, and it's already so expensive.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Jonathan Cohn. He's a senior editor at the New Republic and author of the cover story "The Hell of American Day Care: An Investigation into the Barely Regulated, Unsafe Business of Looking After Our Children." Let's take a short break here, and then we'll talk some more. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Jonathan Cohn. He's a senior editor at The New Republic, and he has the cover story this week, "The Hell of American Day Care: An Investigation into the Barely Regulated, Unsafe Business of Looking After Our Children."

You know, the subtitle of your article, "The Hell of American Day Care," is "An Investigation into the Barely Regulated, Unsafe Business of Looking After Our Children." What did you learn about the regulations for a daycare or a home daycare center? I know it varies from state to state. Give us a sense of what those variations are.

COHN: So, the regulations, they vary enormously from state to state, and there are different kinds of regulations. So you will have regulations about, well, how much training and education do the people providing childcare need? Another very important one is about the ratio. That's really important: How many adults for how many kids?

And, you know, you hear the experts will say things like, well, we want, you know, one adult for no more than three infants, you know, one adult for no more than a few toddlers. But, you know, you go around the states, and many states have very loose requirements, much higher than that. And they will have different, you know, requirements for home daycares and for centers.

And then there's the frequency of inspections: You know, how often do these places get inspected? Is it once a year? Is it more than once a year? Is it less than once a year? And there's just a huge variation. But in general, if you talk to the experts, even if you talk to the people who do the inspections and you talk to the regulators, they will be the first to tell you that, you know what? We could be doing a much better job if we had stronger laws and more people to enforce them.

GROSS: Enforcement is - not enough people to enforce the laws is part of the problem in many states?

COHN: Yes, one of the most revealing conversations I had was when I sat down with the inspectors and officials from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. They're the ones who oversee childcare. And they told me it's very difficult to enforce these regulations, in part because even if they see violations, even if they want to shut down a center, they have to go through a complicated legal process.

If the center is going to fight it, they're going to have to go in front of a judge. They're going to have to convince a local attorney, the district attorney to take on the case. You know, and the district attorney's probably got a bunch of other cases. They're going to, like - can't you just, you know, sort of settle this some other way and just take some kind of remedial action? And they are - it is very frustrating to these officials that they cannot do more.

GROSS: And then if the center is closed, then, you know, mothers, parents have no place to send their kids, and they really - you know, they've got a problem on their hands.

COHN: And the truth is, you know, parents are sometimes an obstacle to enforcing these rules, because the parents hear that you're shutting down a daycare, and their first thought is: What do you mean you're shutting down my child's daycare. I need this daycare, because otherwise, I can't work. My child seems happy. Are you sure it's a problem?

This is a hard job enforcing these regulations. It would be a lot easier if there were more options out there. You know, parents would be much - I think much less resistant to closing down daycares if they knew that, oh, well, all right. This - I'm glad this was closed down, because there's, you know, there's another one right down the street that I can go to that I can afford.

But, of course, when parents lose a daycare, they all know what a struggle it is to find it. And so the first thought is going to be oh, my God. What am I going to do now?

GROSS: Let's look at a little history of daycare. You say that the U.S. has always been profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of supporting childcare outside the home. Do you think that relates to social ideas of a woman's role?

COHN: I do. I think there's always been a strong sense - and we still have this, to some extent - that a lot of people still feel like a mother's place is in the home. She shouldn't be in the workplace. And, you know, if you go back to the sort of Industrial Revolution, where for the first time you had women working, you know, creating a demand for daycare, the sort of social reformers of that time - people like, you know, Jane Adams in Chicago - they would set up day nurseries to watch the kids of these women who were working.

But they made a very big deal about saying that, you know, in an ideal world, these women would not be working. They'd be at home with their children. And, in fact, it was that spirit that eventually prodded states to create widows' pensions, they would sometimes call them. But basically, you know, paying mothers to stay at home with their kids, which of course became what we now know as the welfare system.

So there was always this idea that in an ideal world, women would be at home, and we shouldn't be providing encouragement for women to go out and work and have someone else watch their kids.

GROSS: You write about daycare during World War II, when the federal government actually stepped in and created daycare centers so that women could work in the factories to create things that we needed for the war effort while so many men were overseas fighting in the war.

So there was an actually an act, you know, a law that Congress passed in 1940, the Lanham Act. What was the system of government-run centers, daycare centers, that was created then?

COHN: This was the one time in American history when everybody agreed that, hey, actually it's OK to have women working, because we need them, because otherwise, we couldn't have people in the factories building the tanks and the ships to fight the war. And there was a recognition that we needed to do something. So the government set aside money and actually created daycare centers.

Many of them were in California, where you had such a large concentration of wartime factories, and they actually created daycare centers. And, you know, at their peak, they served more than 100,000 families. And, you know, as I said, it is the one time in American history we actually had a program designed to watch the kids of working parents.

GROSS: And this was for families of all incomes?

COHN: Yes. That was a very big distinction. This was not just for low income. This was not sort of a charity measure. This was for families of any incomes, because of course you had middle-class women who were working at the factories.

GROSS: So this daycare system was started during World War II. What happened to it after the war?

COHN: So the war ends, and you had a lot of advocates for children saying, hey, this is a good thing. Let's keep these going. But, of course, you know, now everybody says, well, the war is over, and the national consensus is we want women back at home. We want them back at home, first of all, because we want men to have their factory jobs back. But we also want them back at home because, gosh, this is where we want women: back home raising kids.

GROSS: Now, you say the federal government didn't get back into childcare until the 1960s with the Head Start Program for low-income children. But then a broader bill passed designed to help working mothers by providing care to all children who needed it, but President Nixon vetoed the bill. Tell us about the bill and why Nixon vetoed it.

COHN: So, the bill was sponsored - one of its lead sponsors was Walter Mondale, who was a senator back then. And it grew out of a sense that - you know, this is the late '60s. Feminism, as a movement, is starting to have some power in American politics. And there's a sense that providing childcare is important for giving women access to the workplace, for changing our conceptions of what a proper home is.

But, you know, precisely because of that, it starts to generate some backlash. There are a lot of people who don't like that. In addition, there's a sense that hmm, you know, this sounds very communal. This sounds very state-run. Don't the communists have daycare centers?

And there's this sort of stew of opposition to it from different quarters, and Nixon ends up vetoing it. And this surprised a lot of people, because he had not said previously it was something he was particularly opposed to, and, you know, different political analysts have speculated on what else may have been going on.

But the fact is that that bill was vetoed, and we really - that's probably about as close as we came to creating some kind of comprehensive childcare program in this country.

GROSS: Now, part of the idea of welfare was to help women stay at home and take care of their children. But you describe how welfare reform changed welfare, and how it's really a very difficult situation for women now to either work or be home with their children.

COHN: That's right. I mean, the irony is the welfare system evolved, it came into being precisely because, you know, 100 years ago, people looked at this situation and said: We don't want mothers abandoning their children to go to work. Let's pay them to stay at home. So we built a system that did that. We built the old welfare system.

And if you were a single mother, you got a check to stay home with your child. And then, you know, at some point, we decided that actually, that was not a good thing. We didn't want women staying home. We wanted them working. And we suddenly had this huge, new demand for childcare, because now all these single parents who used to get paid to stay at home with their kids were now being told, nope. You've got to go get a job, or you have to get job training, and you need childcare.

Now, when that bill passed, the federal government did put more money into childcare in recognition that this was going to happen, but it was not nearly enough. And today the demand for childcare vastly outstrips the financial assistance that the government provides for it.

GROSS: Jonathan Cohn will be back in the second half of the show. His article "The Hell of American Day Care" is the cover story of the current edition of The New Republic. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross back with Jonathan Cohn. We're talking about his article "The Hell of American Day Care," an investigation into the barely regulated, unsafe business of looking after our children. It's the cover story of the current edition of "The New Republic." He's a senior editor of the magazine.

President Obama has proposed a preschool plan. What's his plan?

COHN: So President Obama's plan is basically - it is not a plan to create a federal child care centers all over the country. It is instead a plan to put up money and to tell the states basically, to give them matching funds. So it is a plan to tell the states look, if you want to go ahead and set up a state preschool program, we, the federal government, we will match you dollar for dollar up to a very high amount of money. And, you know, you hear matching funds, you think gosh, well, who's going to do that? What states are going to take them up? And if any states do it, well, you'd probably think oh, you know, it'll be one of those liberal New England states, whatever. Well, you know, that might be true but actually, the model for this program and the impetus in many ways, were two successful preschool programs that are running right now in Georgia and Oklahoma. And those two programs have gotten pretty good results and experts who have looked at them think quite highly of them. And so the hope is that by the federal government putting up this extra money more states will follow that model, create their own preschool programs - not just any old preschool programs, but high-quality programs that have enough money to hire good teachers, to have the resources they need and provide the kind of safe nurturing environment we all want for our children.

GROSS: Let's compare the United States to France's system of day care. And France has two tiers. There's one for toddlers and infants and another for preschoolers. So let's start with toddlers and infants. What does France offer parents?

COHN: So France is considered by many early childhood experts to have the model program for early childhood education. It's something they take pride in. And they have developed over the course of a hundred years. The preschool part of it, it is really a preschool and emphasis on the school in the following sense: It is treated as part of this country's education system. The teachers in it have extensive training in early childhood education. It's voluntary. You don't have to enroll your child in a preschool, but almost everybody does and there are frequent inspections. They have good resources and here's a very important part of it, is that it's available to all at an affordable rate. Basically the government subsidizes it.

So if you have enough money to pay for expensive child care you will, but as your income comes down, if you don't have enough money the government basically make up the difference so that even someone who is relatively poor can get their kid into a good preschool program. And it's really like, you know, what you would think of as a good public school system, it just extends down to four and five-year-olds.

GROSS: And if you're a parent who stays home to care for your children, or if you hire caregivers to care for your children, you get a tax break?

COHN: That's right. That's right. So, you know, France basically says if you want to stay home with your kids and you don't want to send your child to a school, we will give tax credits to offset that cost. And like I said, most French parents do send their kids to the preschools but as you get into the younger children, in particular, the infants and the toddlers, at that point you see a much larger percentage of parents staying home. They are taking advantage of the tax breaks. They are also taking advantage of the very generous parental leave policies that France has. And so they take advantage of that to stay at home with their kids when they first have children.

GROSS: What is the philosophy behind this French system of day care? I mean obviously the French believe it's important. So if you compare the philosophy of the American government toward day care and the French government toward day care what would the difference be?

COHN: Part of it is philosophical. They have always in France taken a very strong aggressive interest in the health of their children. You know, you see this in the nature of their health care system. It's true of the child care system. They see this as a collective responsibility. They feel like it is not just up to every individual parent. It's also up to the country as a whole to make sure that all children get all the opportunities they need in life. So there's that philosophical basis. It's deeply ingrained in that society. So that is one part of it. There is also though, you know, there's a historical factor there that does help explain why their system evolved differently than ours and that is about the attitude towards women. And that has a lot to do frankly, with the history of the two world wars. You know, France needed women in the workplace because they lost so many men to the wars. So for France, they didn't have the luxury of saying gee, we want to keep our women at home because if they had kept their women at home they wouldn't have had enough people out in the workforce, so aggressive, generous, strong child care policy was seen as necessary to keep up the numbers in the labor force and at the same time to improve the fertility rate. And that I think really explains a lot of why the French system today looks so different than the American system.

GROSS: There's an economic argument for day care that has been made in the United States, including by a couple of people from the Federal Reserve.

COHN: That's right. A lot of hard-nosed economists, a lot of hard-nosed male economists who are looking at this and thinking, you know, for the sake of economic productivity we need better child care. For two reasons: Number one, it improves the flexibility of the labor force. It helps us realize the full potential of the labor force. So that is one part. Second part is these children who are not getting good child care, they are going to grow up at best to be less productive, at worst to cause problems in their society through delinquency, through criminal activity that disrupts our society and require extra resources. To neglect child care is a poor investment, and so people like Ben Bernanke, people like Larry Summers, have made the argument that we should be investing in child care. Even if it means spending a lot more money up front we should be investing in child care for the same reason that we invest in universities, for the same reason we invest in our schools, for the same reasons that we invest in roads and infrastructure because we spend the money now but we reap the rewards later on.

GROSS: In talking about federally funded day care centers - or the lack of them - in the United States there is the U.S. military. And you've looked into the system that the military has for day care. Describe it for us.

COHN: So it's funny or ironic or strange or whatever you want to call it but some of the best child care in America is on U.S. military bases. They do what a lot of experts wish the rest of the country would do. They have pretty strict requirements about who can provide day care; they inspect those facilities not once a year, four times a year; and they make sure that base personnel can afford it because they basically give them subsidies and say, if you can't pay the bill for these day cares, we will give you assistance.

Now the system is not perfect and there was actually - there was a big scandal a couple of months ago and it turned out one of the base centers wasn't conducting background checks on - oh, very quickly - on its providers. So I don't want to say it's a perfect system, but it is by most accounts one of the best systems in the United States. You know, in terms of the quality benchmarks that most experts use, you know, the number of caregivers per children, what have you, the military does really, really well.

GROSS: So the story that you told that ends with this tragic fire and with several children in the home day care center being killed, is that representative in any way of larger problems in the system? Is that more of a one-off or are there a lot of day care and home day care centers that have been responsible for doing harm to the children?

COHN: You know, it's an exceptionally bad case but it's not the only such bad case. You do find stories around the country of children dying in home day cares. And more broadly though, I do think it is representative of the state of day care in the United States, particularly of home day cares, but even of some day care centers where there is just not great care being provided. You see stories of neglect, you

hear about them, you talk to the inspectors. You know, I was, even I after reporting this story was a little stunned when I interviewed an inspector in Texas and she was telling me about all these places she would inspect and what she would see and the lousy conditions and the fact that, you know, clearly these kids weren't getting stimulation. They were not getting watched over that carefully. They would cite them on safety regulations whenever they could but sometimes it was stuff that it wasn't in the regulations, it just it was obvious they were getting lousy care. So I asked this inspector, I said just tell me. I said, you have kids. Of the places you see in the course of a year how many of them would you feel safe would you really trust your kids putting them in?

And she said 20 percent, so one in five. And let's assume she has a particularly bad group that she sees and maybe she's a little pessimistic still, I mean that's a really low number. And it is consistent with the data we have which shows that in general the quality of day care in this country is mediocre at best. There is a small percentage of day care that is very, very good, but there's an equally small percentage that is really, really bad, as in actually hazardous to children's health.

GROSS: Well, Jonathan Cohn, I want to thank you so much for talking with us.

COHN: Thanks for having me on the show.

GROSS: Jonathan Cohn's article "The Hell of American Day Care" is the cover story of the current edition of The New Republic. You'll find a link to the article on [The New Republic's website](#).

This is FRESH AIR.