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Point of View

Where child care fits into new NC job picture

By Joseph Polich

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While visiting family recently, I had what turned out to be a timely discussion about how the family's small town in Iowa had changed over the years. My aunt reminisced about her kids running around her neighborhood – including a nearby park – until dusk, playing ball games or tag. The kids, she sighed, seem to stay inside these days playing games on cell phones or consoles. The park stays empty, mostly. It's too hot, maybe.

I thought on the plane ride home that if I ever have kids, I hope I encourage them to play outside. Go to the park and get mud on their clothes. Stuff I did when I was younger.

Or maybe not. Upon my return, I read about Debra Harrell – the mother of a 9-year-old girl and a shift manager at a McDonald's in South Carolina – in the eye of a hurricane of online debate after she was arrested for leaving her child alone in a nearby park as she worked. Her daughter used to spend her days in the restaurant on a laptop, but it was stolen. She was given the option to play at a nearby park if she

took a cell phone with her. On her third day of being in the park alone, her mother was charged with child neglect, spent 17 days in jail and temporarily lost custody of her child.

The incident sparked endless debate about government overreach, about how young is too young to be left alone and about whether kids are safer now or whether the world is just too crazy to let kids play outside (I vote to let them play). I also had an internal debate about whether I, as a professional-class white hypothetical parent, would have gotten the same treatment as Harrell, an African-American working-class single mom.

For North Carolina, Debra Harrell might be a sign of things to come for these reasons:

- Child care is expensive here. According to Child Care Aware USA, the average annual cost of an infant's care at a center in our state is about \$8,868, or 12.10 percent of the state's median income of a married couple or 41.5 percent of the median state income for a single-mother family.
- Debra Harrell's job at McDonald's represents the type of job on which more and more North Carolinians rely. Between January 2010 and June 2014, North Carolina added approximately 276,000 jobs. Service-producing industries, which are on average lower-paying than goods-producing industries (manufacturing and construction), comprise nearly the entirety of those gains. Of particular note is the Accommodation and Food Service sector, which generated 48,100 jobs and paid an average of \$349 a week last year in North Carolina. These wages do not allow a parent to pay for child care.
- The state budget purports to shift funding away from child-care subsidies for school-aged children like Harrell's daughter and toward children below 5 years old. Additionally, the budget would tighten eligibility for all child care subsidy applicants.

While a focus on early childhood education should be applauded, my cheers are muted by the current legislature's less-than-enthusiastic support of other early childhood education programs, namely NC Pre-K and Smart Start.

So what is the plan for the increasing number of North Carolina children who will be raised by parents with low-wage, part-time and off-shift jobs? A statewide policy that simply says "show the kids the door" might make some folks uneasy – and if we were to emulate our Southern neighbors, it would require a lot of funds to arrest and adjudicate the offending parents.

Increasing the funding for child care subsidies would be a start – the wait list topped 30,000 last year. Additionally, it is a double-jobs program. More North Carolinians could be hired to take care of and educate children so that other North Carolinians could have the opportunity to work and provide for their families.

All the while, our young Tar Heels reap the research-backed, life-long benefits of high quality care.

Joseph Polich is a postdoctoral research fellow at the UNC Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity in Chapel Hill.

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