

Testimony for the Record Submitted to:
The United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry

For the Hearing:
“Rural Quality of Life: Challenges and Opportunities for the Rural Care Economy”

Tuesday, March 22, 2022 at 10:00am EST
562 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Shoshanah Inwood, PhD

Associate Professor of Community, Food, and Economic Development
School of Environment and Natural Resources
College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences
The Ohio State University

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman, for focusing on the rural care economy and for the opportunity to testify today. My comments today are based on over a decade of USDA and more recent CDC funded research examining how childcare affects the economic development and quality of life of America’s farmers and ranchers, and our rural communities. As a land-grant university scientist, I have had the privilege of traveling across the country, interviewing, and surveying thousands of farmers and ranchers across our great nation; my testimony today reflects their lived realities. Today I am going to share the findings of these national qualitative and quantitative research studies that examine how the availability, affordability and quality of childcare affect the economic development and quality of life of America’s farmers and ranchers.

The results of our research indicate that first and foremost, farm parents are working parents. Childcare is a critical yet undervalued workforce attraction and retention issue in the farm sector that has the potential to undercut Congress’s investments in growing the next generation of farmers and building prosperous rural communities. In response to the shrinking and aging farm population, Congress has invested millions in the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and Farm Credit programs targeting young farmers aged 18-35. The majority of these programs focus on access to land and capital, production skills and market development, all of which are important. However, farms and ranches are not just economic enterprises; they are also family-based businesses. Successfully recruiting and retaining farmers requires recognizing the fact that many young people are in their prime childbearing years, have children and struggle to meet their obligations on the farm, at their off-farm jobs, and at home.

As parents across the country discovered during the pandemic, productivity can suffer when working from home with children around. For farm parents this has always been the reality and like all American parents they must navigate the complex and costly world of childcare. Our pre-pandemic USDA funded researchⁱⁱⁱ asked how does childcare affect farm economic development and quality of life?

In this national survey of farm households, we found almost two-thirds of all farm families with children under 18 report childcare difficulties due to affordability, availability, and quality. We found childcare has direct economic impacts by affecting the farm's production system and marketing channels which in turn affects farm viability, risk management, farm safety, farmer mental health, and farm family quality of life. Our research has consistently found childcare is an issue that affects all of agriculture regardless of farm size, production system or geographic location.

While childcare is an issue for all farmers it is particularly significant for beginning, first-generation, and women farmers. Nationally, over 67% of first-generation farmers experience childcare problems. Women are one of the fastest-growing groups of farmers, who are still doing the lion's share of household chores, childcare and family emotional work. In our research, women were almost twice as likely as men to report that childcare was an important factor in farm decisions, 44% compared to 24% among men.

There are many benefits to growing up on a farm, and farmers consistently shared with us how much they love to both live and work on the farm with their children, however, childcare accommodations of some kind are necessary to ensure farm work can get done in addition to ensuring farm safety. For example, a first-generation farm father, whose wife works off the farm, had hoped for his young son "to be my little sidekick and ... do everything I did." However, he found reality was much different, and admitted he "didn't think about a baby not being able to be out in the sun all day," and was struggling to balance care work and farm work.

Across the country farm families shared their struggles to find affordable, high quality childcare care. Childcare is expensive, in my home state of Ohio, it cost on average \$9,919 per year for an infant. In the state of Vermont, where I started this research, it cost \$13,914 per year for an infant. Rural areas suffer from a scarcity of essential services, including childcare. Before COVID decimated the childcare sector, a 2018 national studyⁱⁱⁱ found that 3 in 5 rural communities across the country lacked adequate childcare supply.

Farm families seeking off-farm care described how difficult it is to find childcare, with many communities lacking childcare options. One farm mother shared "You get a farm, especially if you're young, where you can afford it. And where you can afford a farm is not going to be a place where there's a lot of resources." In other cases, farmers shared the childcare and schooling options available in their community was so low quality they would not send their children. Farm families reported driving up to thirty minutes to a childcare provider they trust and explained that the time-costs of driving so far were more of a burden and had a bigger negative impact on the farm than the financial costs of childcare. Formal daycare providers are typically structured to accommodate a conventional workweek schedule, with hours ranging from 7:30 am to 5:30 pm, Monday through Friday, being closed on weekends. Yet the rhythms of farming rarely correlate to this rigid schedule. For farmer-parents taking advantage of off-farm childcare, including camps, daycares, or schools, the strictness of pick-up and drop-off times combined with the distance to reach their provider negatively impacts production, marketing, farm income, and family quality of life. Other farm families expressed their frustration that the low returns from farming made high quality childcare unaffordable even when it was available in their community. Our research revealed how childcare can create high levels of stress in farm

families. USDA has spent millions of dollars on farm stress programs, however, there has been little discussion of how childcare issues contribute to and exacerbate farm stress.

Our research identified the ways in which childcare limits the ability of farmers to grow their businesses. Farmers described to us how childcare influences and shapes their business decisions, approaches to production, marketing, and overall enterprise growth trajectories. For example, initiatives to create direct marketing opportunities for farmers rarely consider how family schedules and childcare correlate with market schedules. A farm family running a diversified horticultural operation spoke frankly about their decision to drop a market because of childcare. Although they could pick up their daughter from daycare in time to set up before the market's 12pm start time, the market manager refused to bend a rule requiring all vendors to report on-site by 11am. However, their daycare only ran from 9am-11:30am, picking up early enough to accommodate the manager's rule made no sense for their logistics, they decided to drop the market and lost sales and income. Additionally, our research revealed how deeply intertwined the relationship between childcare and health insurance are with farm families across the country reporting feeling trapped between needing to prioritize access to health insurance for their children, while also trying to find income to support the farm, and affordable childcare.

Farm families are making difficult labor cost calculations as they evaluate whether to hire childcare or hire additional farm labor. On one hand, hiring farm labor would let them spend time with their children on the farm, but childcare would let them do the fieldwork themselves, more quickly and accurately than a typical employee. While some families felt that "it would be better to spend money on childcare than to spend the money on an employee" others shared the low returns from farming made this choice unattractive, one farm mother explained that paying a babysitter the going rate of \$15 an hour to allow her to do fieldwork alone amounted to "paying to work" and that was hard to justify. The impacts of COVID-19 have exacerbated the long-standing childcare issues farm families have faced. New research from the National Farm Medicine Center^{iv} found that in the early months of COVID-19, as day care and schools shut down, 58% of farmers reported that taking care of the children became harder, and 57% respondents reported that changes in childcare and schooling negatively affected their ability to get the farm work done.

Family care is a highly desired care arrangement and works well for farmers with able family nearby. However, a significant number of farmers shared that while they had hoped their parents could help with childcare, their own parents age and declining health limited their capacity to care for kids. One farmer who relied on her mother for childcare described how, upon returning home from the fields, she found her daughter's diaper had not been changed for six hours. She came to realize her mother suffered from dementia, yet she still needed her mother to watch her young daughter. She shared her stress at her mother's tendency to wander and become lost on the farm. The farmer could not afford to hire outside help, and found herself in the 'sandwich generation,' caught between taking care of her children, aging parents, and the farm operation. Children with disabilities often require specialized or in-home care, and finding, much less affording, the necessary expert care can be extra challenging for rural residents with disabilities. For example, one farm mother whose toddler had special needs shared she could not find anyone in their community safely able to provide care. Another mother shared when she did find a

provider for her autistic son they refused to work at the farm because they were afraid of working around animals.

As a public servant in the land-grant university system, I often ask myself what is to be done. First, I would like to applaud the recently released USDA HHS *Joint Resource Guide: To Strengthen and Expand Child Care Facilities in Rural Communities* as an excellent first step to addressing the childcare conundrum in rural communities. The guide does an excellent job of identifying opportunities and strategies for building the physical infrastructure needed for rural childcare. We have heard over and over again from farm parents that the issues of availability, quality, and cost also need to be tackled. As we address rural broad band connectivity, we can improve the quality of rural childcare by implementing innovative approaches to childcare provider training through on-line courses. There is a tremendous opportunity to leverage our Cooperative Extension System to deliver in-person adult education and provider professional development across rural communities.

To address the non-traditional hours of farmers we can look at childcare providers who meet the needs of hospitals, for example at OSU the childcare center runs until 9 pm to meet the needs of second shift Medical Center staff. Many rural communities have manufacturing facilities that run 24 hours a day, these workers also need access to quality affordable childcare^v. We can look at the innovative approaches the military has taken to childcare to meet the needs of national guard and military families on bases who also keep non-traditional hours.

To increase the availability of childcare and as a broader economic development strategy we must simultaneously increase the pay for childcare providers while lowering the childcare costs of families. These investments can create good quality jobs for rural residents, improve rural child development, and mobilize the parental workforce, while building more robust and prosperous rural communities.

The consequences of not making these investments is a threat to America's food, fiber and fuel supply. We have stories of how the pressure to juggle young children and farm demands was too much - leading some farmers to divorce and others to exit from agriculture. Other farmers shared they have purposefully decided not to have children for fear that they could not raise both a child and a farm. Even for farmers deeply committed to raising their children on farms, accessing, arranging, and negotiating childcare introduces new social stresses. These dynamics may exacerbate tensions in the household and the farm business. Childcare is an 'ordinary stressor' with the power to amplify 'extraordinary stressors', such as extreme weather, commodity market volatility, or public health issues.

In every research project, I ask participants what do you want decision-makers to know? Farm parents have consistently said – 'if America wants farms and farm families, we need help and support with childcare, eldercare and health insurance'. In the midst of the Civil War Abraham Lincoln created USDA and referred to the agency as "the People's Department." As such we need people-centered policies and programs to be the foundation for supporting the next generation of farmers and ranchers, for building prosperous vibrant rural communities, and for ensuring the nation's food, fiber, and fuel supply.

ⁱ Inwood, S., & Stengel, E. (2020). Working Households: Challenges in Balancing Young Children and the Farm Enterprise. *Community Development*, 51(5), 499-517.

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2020.1800772>

ⁱⁱ Rissing, A., Inwood, S., & Stengel, E. (2021). The invisible labor and multidimensional impacts of negotiating childcare on farms. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 38, 431-447. Doi :

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10162-1>

ⁱⁱⁱ Malik, R., et al., *America's Child Care Deserts in 2018*. 2018, Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

^{iv} Becot, F. (In Press). "Children, work, and safety on the farm during COVID-19: A harder juggling act." *Journal of Agromedicine*.

^v Bipartisan Policy Center. 2021. Child Care in Rural America – What Have We Learned?