

# HANGING BY A THREAD!

Los Angeles Garment Workers' Struggle to  
Access Quality Care for their Children



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**A report by the Garment Worker Center, Research Action Design  
and the UCLA Labor Center**

**2015**

## Executive Summary

Every day working parents in the U.S. struggle to find quality, affordable child care. These families are often trapped by the work demands of an unequal global economy and the pressing need to provide care for their young children. The tensions between work and family are clearly felt by workers everywhere and are especially prominent amongst low-wage garment workers in Los Angeles, the largest manufacturing center in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

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Many of the industrial jobs in the greater Los Angeles region are in the garment sector, which accounts for more than 45,000 of the area's 500,000 manufacturing positions.<sup>2</sup> In the region's Downtown Fashion District, a vast network of garment factories and sweatshops anchor the fast fashion production end of a global supply chain in which massive quantities of overseas fabrics are assembled by recently arrived Latino and Asian immigrant workers. Notable fashion labels like Forever 21, Charlotte Russe, Papaya, and Wet Seal are just a few of the brands these garment workers sew every day.

With funding support from the Ms. Foundation for Women, the Garment Worker Center, the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (UCLA Labor Center), and Research Action Design surveyed 82 garment workers in LA's iconic garment district about their experiences accessing child care. The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of child care demands on low-wage workers in the garment industry, in order to inform policy makers and the public about the needs of low-income working families. Workers' responses offer a glimpse into the difficult choices working parents, particularly immigrant women, face as they attempt to care for their children and earn a living in the shadows of the 21st century global economy.

Survey respondents were employed in the Los Angeles Downtown Fashion District. The district is located around major transportation hubs, apparel wholesalers, and around a readily available pool of recently arrived immigrants, often undocumented workers. Women, predominantly immigrants from Mexico, comprised 80 percent of survey respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> Hsu, Tiffany. "Los Angeles is the largest manufacturing center in the US, government says." Los Angeles Times. 1 Sept. 2014. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2011 County Business Patterns 1 Jan. 2011. Web. 8 May 2014. <http://censtats.census.gov/cgi-bin/msanaic/msadetl.pl>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.





**Photo by:** Raising California Together

These figures correspond with regional demographics that show immigrants and their children, (primarily from Latin American and Asian countries), make up 52 percent of the population in the Greater Los Angeles area.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the flow of migrants to California since the 1970s has been highly feminized and according to the University of Southern California's Center for Immigrant Integration, nearly 1 in 10 workers in the state are undocumented. Undocumented immigrants generate \$130 billion of the annual gross domestic product, and their labor is vital to the high profits the garment industry reaps in Los Angeles.<sup>4</sup>

While Los Angeles has experienced significant demographic changes over the past 20 years, it has also been the site of increasingly high levels of economic inequality, an inequality that is growing at a faster rate than many other U.S. cities.<sup>5</sup> Many studies document the rampant wage theft, low wages, and poor working conditions that are common in the Los Angeles garment industry.<sup>6</sup> However, this is the first study that examines the challenges LA garment workers face when accessing child care.

**Rampant wage theft, low wages, and poor working conditions are common in the Los Angeles garment industry. Garment workers face major challenges when accessing child care.**

3 Sanchez, Jared et al. Looking Forward: Immigrants Contribution to the Golden State. Los Angeles: USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Intergration (CSII) and the California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC), 2014.

4 Ibid.

5 Berube, Alan. "All Cities Are Not Created Unequal." Brookings Institute Metropolitan Opportunity Series, 51. February 20, 2014. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/02/cities-unequal-berube>

6 Hsu, Tiffany and Chris Kirham. "Southern California is a hotbed for wage theft in garment industry." Los Angeles Times. 15 Nov. 2014.

**Surveyed garment workers spend one-third of their weekly income on child care.**

**Many workers compensate their providers by paying their utility and grocery bills or by engaging in other informal exchanges.**

The garment workers we surveyed reported that the cost of child care consumed one-third of their weekly income, a significant portion of their salaries considering most garment workers earn wages well below the minimum wage. As a result, workers stated they were often unable to pay their child care providers and instead compensated them for their services with food, by paying for utility bills or through other exchanges.

For many garment workers, accessing quality and affordable child care is further complicated by the mixed citizenship and immigration status of their family members, as well as language, literacy and cultural barriers.

In addition to the difficulties garment workers experience when navigating the child care system, most receive little to no financial support to manage their child care needs. Only 4 percent of surveyed workers access government subsidies or other assistance programs to pay for child care, and a small 1 percent utilize federally-subsidized Head Start programs despite qualifying for these programs. Only 6 percent of garment workers access day care centers altogether. To manage the demands of family and work, garment workers depend on friends and neighbors (43%), and relatives (40%) to provide child care. Yet, the majority of respondents expressed the need and desire for their children to be in child care programs with structured learning activities.

Garment workers also spoke of the unreliability of depending on relatives, friends and neighbors to provide child care. Forty-two percent of those surveyed missed work because their child care providers were not available or canceled during their work hours.

This report provides a window into the growing crisis of affordability and access to child care in the U.S. As women continue to enter the workforce at historically high levels, national child care policies have not fully addressed the growing need for affordable and accessible child care services. Instead child care costs have risen over the last few decades, outpacing college tuition.<sup>7</sup> This situation is made worse by shrinking federal block grants for child care subsidies in the wake of government budget cuts following the 2008 economic recession. California alone cut 1 billion dollars in early childhood education funds and more than 300,000 parents and children are currently on the waiting list for child care subsidies.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Child Care Aware of America. "Parents and the High Cost of Child Care." 2013. Web 1 Sept. 2014. [http://usa.childcareaware.org/sites/default/files/cost\\_of\\_care\\_2013\\_103113\\_0.pdf](http://usa.childcareaware.org/sites/default/files/cost_of_care_2013_103113_0.pdf)

8 National Women's Law Center. "Additional Child Care Funding is Essential to Stop State Cuts." Washington DC: NWLC, 12 July 2012. Web 1 Sept. 2014. <http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/childcarecutsfactsheetjune2012.pdf>



**Photo by:** Raising California Together

The child care crisis has become too large of a problem to ignore and it has garnered national attention. In 2012, the Obama Administration launched the Race to the Top Fund - Early Learning Challenge that aims to increase access to high-quality, early education programs and services for low income and English language learners who are infants and toddlers. Unfortunately, these federal programs have been limited in scope and are spread thin across many communities in need. As a response to the needs of low-wage workers in the garment sector and beyond, we conclude with the following key recommendations:

- Promote child care assistance programs through public education and outreach programs that are linguistically and culturally appropriate for immigrant communities.
- Increase funding for child care subsidies to ensure low income families receive assistance to pay for child care.
- Raise the minimum wage to ensure low-income households are able to afford child care.
- Expand enforcement of labor laws in the garment industry and similar sectors to improve working conditions; including paid sick leave, wage and hour standards, and health and safety conditions in the workplace.
- Increase access to certification, educational opportunities and subsidies for informal child care providers.
- Integrate child care centers into local economic policy and urban planning processes.

We hope these recommendations, based on research and best practices, will respond to the immediate needs of working families and set the standards needed for a more just and robust economy that benefits workers.

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