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A Cross-National, Historical Analysis of Early Childhood Worker Conditions across North America and Europe

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Executive Summary

This paper examines how ECW pay, benefits, child-to-worker ratios, and education requirements in the U.S. compare to those in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Canada. It also tracks these measures over time in the U.S., beginning in 1934, when the federal government funded an emergency nursery school system to combat the great depression. Median salary data for ECWs and comparable occupations were collected and annualized using national workweek standards, equated to U.S. dollars using PPP conversion factors, and adjusted to 2025 figures using the U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI). In the U.S., Early Childhood Worker purchasing power varied over time, peaking in 1977. Although ECW pay in the U.S. has increased over the past 30 years, early childhood workers in the U.S. still experience the lowest absolute and relative pay among all nations studied. Moreover, in the U.S., childcare workers require the lowest level of education and face the highest child-to-worker ratios.

Introduction

In 2025, the average annual price for childcare in the U.S. was $13,184 (Child Care Aware® of America 2026). In contrast, the only European Union countries where a childcare gap does not exist are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Slovenia, and Sweden (Serapioni 2025). In Canada, universal child care has been instituted in Quebec since 1997.

However, childcare in the United States was not always as expensive as it is today. In 1933, to create job opportunities for teachers, improve the well-being of underprivileged children, and assist parents in raising their offspring, the U.S. government established a federally funded Emergency Nursery School (ENS) system through its Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA, an organization established to combat unemployment during the Great Depression, launched the ENS program in all 48 U.S. states at the time (National Advisory Committee on Emergency Nursery Schools 1935). Enrollment in ENSs was limited to young children aged 2 to 4 from low- income and unemployed families (Sablik 2024).

After the economy recovered from the Great Depression, emergency nursery schools were reduced in number. Following the termination of WPA funding in 1942, many nurseries were repurposed under the Lanham Act— a childcare program designed to enable women to enter the wartime labor force. The federal government funded approximately 65% of Lanham Act costs, and parents 20%, with the rest covered by firms, charities, states, and local governments. Unlike the WPA nursery schools, Lanham Act preschools were available to the children of all working parents. With the conclusion of the war, the Lanham facilities ceased operation in 1946 (Goldin et al. 2025).

In the United States today, even with substantial costs of childcare, ECWs are among the lowest-paid occupational groups, especially relative to the value of their contributions to society (Vogtman 2017). In Quebec, the 5 EU nations, and the U.S., early childhood workers face considerably different situations.

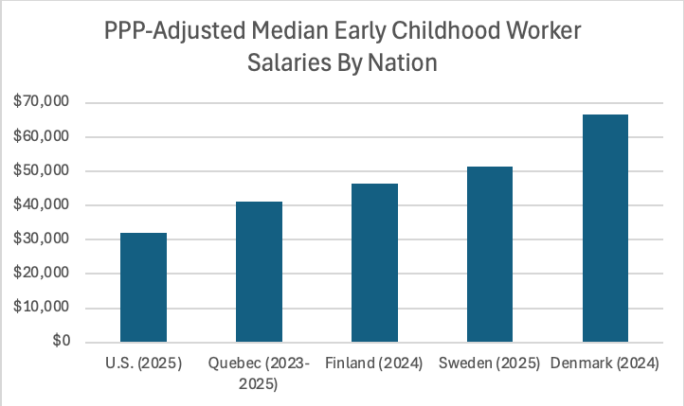
Empirical Evidence

ENS salary data were obtained from a 1935 report administered by the U.S Office of Education. From the report, median salary data were sourced for head and assistant teachers in the ENS system, along with head and assistant teachers, nurses, cooks, and housekeepers who did not work in emergency nursery schools. Head and assistant teacher salary data were averaged into a single figure to obtain an overall median early childhood educator salary. For present-day comparisons, salary data were collected for early childhood workers, elementary school teachers, registered nurses, cooks, and housekeepers/cleaners. When occupational wage data listed several cook categories, restaurant cook salaries were selected for representation. Elementary school teachers were used as a contemporary educator comparison because a significant portion of teachers employed in the ENS system worked in elementary schools before the Great Depression (Whitebook et al. 2022). Other U.S. wage data were collected from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. EU early childhood worker and elementary school teacher salary data were obtained from Eurydice Open Data, an official network of data on EU education systems. Other EU wage data were obtained from the statistical offices of each country observed. Wage data were also sourced from Quebec's government information and services, which provided median occupational wages from 2023 to 2025. Educator wage data for Estonia were unavailable in EU or national databases, and Slovenia did not provide specific occupational wage data by profession. Therefore, the two nations were excluded from comparison.

To standardize data into a common unit, hourly wage data were, when required, converted to annual salaries using national standards for working hours ("Work-Life Balance," n.d.; Canada 2015; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). To normalize international salaries, each country's household Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) conversion factor was used (World Bank Open Data 2025). Moreover, early childhood worker wages were examined over time, beginning with WPA-era figures, followed by 1977 and 1988 hourly wages from Whitebook et al.'s 1989 study on national child care staffing, succeeded by 1998 occupational wage data. Although the BLS first recorded occupation-specific wage data in 1997, 1998 was the earliest year for which data were available across all professions observed in this study. The analysis proceeded in 10-year increments before 2025 (the most recent year for which occupational wage data are available). Wages were adjusted to 2026 dollars using the U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI). CPI is the only inflation measure available back to 1934, ensuring a uniform metric throughout comparisons. United States CPI data approximated a cumulative inflation adjustment of 2,417% from 1934 to 2025, 135% since 2015, 165% since 2005, 197% since 1998, and 265% since 1988 (Bur. Labor Stat. 2026).

This allowed standards of living to be observed and compared on a uniform scale. Adjusted salaries were compared between countries, and a separate analysis examined absolute and relative earnings within the U.S. over time. Also reviewed are child-to-worker ratios, worker benefits, and occupational education requirements by country and time period.

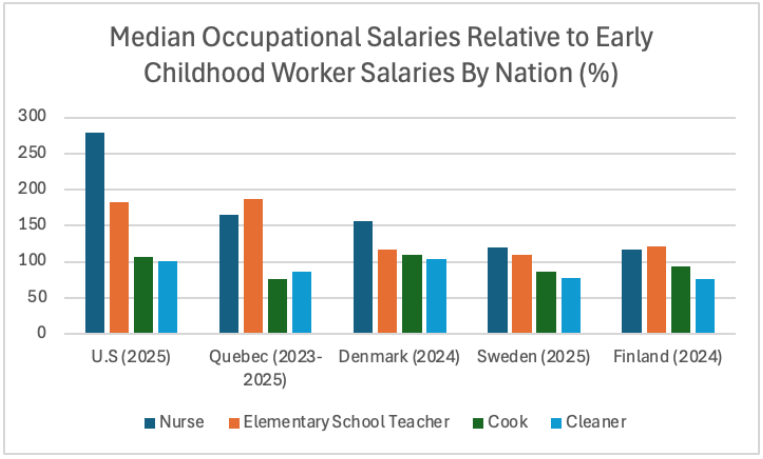
Figure 1: Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) Adjusted Early Childhood Worker Salaries By Nation



Sources: (Bur. Labor Stat. 2025; Gouv. Qué. 2026; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2024b),

The U.S. ranks lowest in early childhood worker compensation, paying workers a median salary of $34,980 per year. Quebec presents an adjusted median ECW salary of $41,067 per year. Denmark ranks highest among European jurisdictions in terms of adjusted annual salary, $66,603 per year, providing early childhood workers with nearly twice the purchasing power they would receive in the U.S. Following Denmark, Sweden supplies the second-highest adjusted annual salary, $54,191, and Finland provides $46,445 per year. Overall, Early Childhood Educators' purchasing power is higher in Nordic countries than in North America, and countries with present-day universal childcare programs pay childcare workers a greater absolute wage than in the U.S, where universal childcare is not available nationwide.

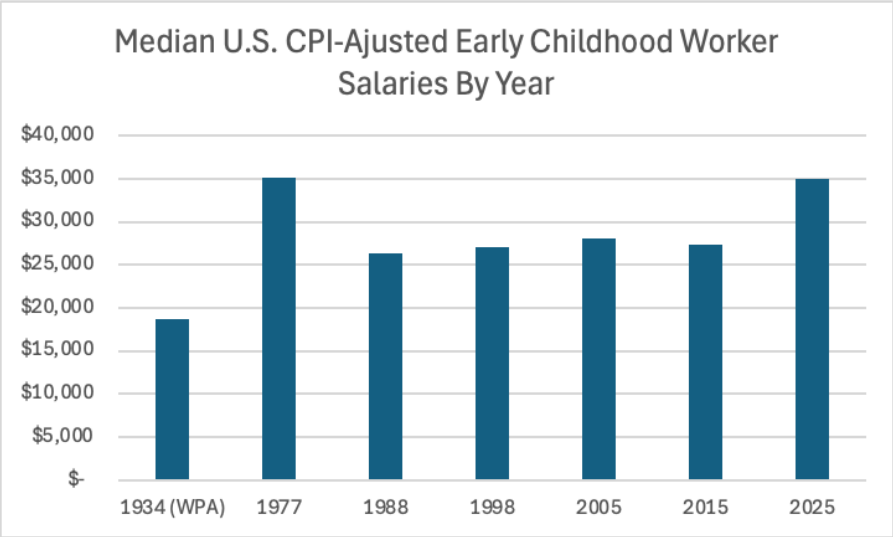
Figure 2: Median Occupational Salaries as a Percentage of Early Childcare Worker Salaries By Nation.



Sources: (Bur. Labor Stat. 2025; Gouv. Qué. 2026; Stat. Den. 2024; Stat. SCB 2025; Tilastokeskus 2024)

Compared with European countries, early childhood workers in the U.S. experience substantially larger salary disparities than other professions, particularly relative to elementary school teachers and nurses. In the U.S., nurses earn 279% of early childhood worker salaries, while elementary school teachers earn 182% of ECW salaries. In Quebec, elementary school teachers earn nearly twice as much as early childhood workers, earning 186% of ECW salaries. Furthermore, Quebec offers the highest compensation for early childhood workers compared to cooks, who earn 76% of ECW salaries. Denmark, Finland, and Sweden experience smaller salary gaps across occupations. In Denmark, nurses are paid 156% of early childcare workers' salaries, the highest figure among observed EU countries; yet, this figure remains lower than in the U.S. and Quebec. In Sweden, elementary school teachers are paid 109% of ECW salaries, the lowest gap between elementary school teachers and ECWs. In Finland, nurses are paid 117% of early childhood workers' salaries (the lowest observed gap between nurses and ECWs), and elementary school teachers make 21% more than ECWs. The U.S and Denmark are the only two nations observed where ECWs earned lower median salaries than both cooks and cleaners. Childcare workers have a stronger relative wage position in these European nations, followed by Quebec, with the contemporary United States exhibiting the most substantial occupational wage disparities.

Figure 3: Median Consumer Price Index (CPI)-Adjusted Early Childhood Worker Salaries Over Time in the United States.

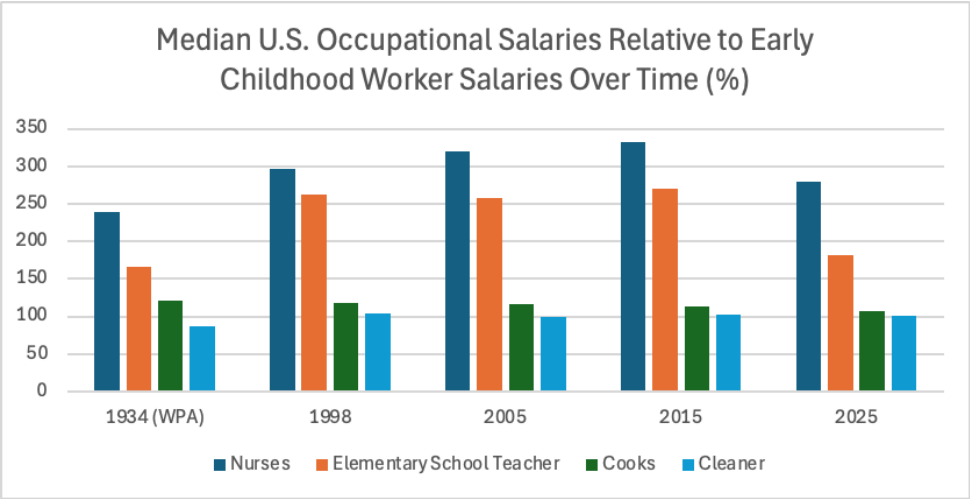


Sources: (National Advisory Committee On Emergency Nursery Schools 1935; Whitebook et al. 1989; Bur. Labor Stat. 2025; Bur. Labor Stat. 2026)

Early childhood workers' purchasing power has nearly doubled since 1934 and has generally increased over time. Workers in the WPA nursery schools' purchasing power would be equivalent to earning $18,642 in 2025. In 1977, early childhood workers earned an equivalent of $35,686 in 2025, the highest real wage of all years examined. Between 1977 and 1988, real hourly wages fell 27% (Whitebook et al. 1989). ECW-adjusted annual salary decreased to

approximately $26,393. In 1998, early childhood workers earned an equivalent of $27,088. In 2005, their purchasing power increased to an equivalent of $28,133, and fell to $27,432 in 2015. In 2025, early childhood worker compensation was $34,980 per year. Despite a net real wage increase over the past 30 years, early childhood workers earn less than employees in 97% of all other occupations (“Early Educator Pay & Economic Insecurity Across the States” 2024).

Figure 4: Median Occupational Salaries in the United States as a Percentage of Early Childcare Worker Salaries Over Time.



Sources: (National Advisory Committee On Emergency Nursery Schools 1935; Bur. Labor Stat. 2025)

In the WPA ENS system, the pay gap for early childhood workers relative to elementary school teachers and nurses was the smallest. Nurses earned 239% of ECW salaries, and elementary school teachers were paid 166% of ECW salaries. The childcare worker pay gap with respect to nurses increased between 1998 and 2015. Nurses earned 295.93% of ECW salaries in 1998, 321% in 2005, and 332% in 2015, respectively. Elementary school teachers earned 263% of ECW salaries in 1998, 258% in 2005, and 270% in 2015. Although the childhood worker pay gap remains substantial in 2025, it has reduced since 2015. In 2025, nurses earned 279% of ECW salaries, and elementary school teachers earned 182%. In the WPA era, cooks made the most compared to childcare workers (121%), and cleaners made the least (88%). In 2025, the U.S. salary gap between cooks and early childhood workers was the smallest, with cooks earning 107% of early childhood workers' salaries. Since 1998, early childhood worker salaries have been closest to cleaners, whose salaries have ranged from 100% to 103% of ECW salaries in the years studied.

Benefits

In addition to lower absolute and relative salaries, early childhood workers in the United States receive far fewer benefits than their counterparts in other nations. In the U.S, it is common for early childhood workers in non-public facilities to lack health insurance and retirement benefits (this is not the case for public school ECWs, due to collective bargaining agreements) (“Early Educator Pay & Economic Insecurity Across the States” 2024). Workers are

permitted 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year for severe cases (for example, birth and care of a newborn child, and medical leave due to severe health conditions). Moreover, in the U.S., there is no mandated vacation amount for ECWs (US Dep. Labor 2009). By contrast, in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Quebec, workers receive a pension following retirement (Canada Childcare 2022; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2025a; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2025b; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2025c). In Denmark, Finland, and Quebec, healthcare is universal, and in Sweden, it is heavily subsidized. In Sweden, workers receive 25-32 days of paid holidays per year, 6 weeks in Denmark, and 2-5 weeks in Quebec (Canada Childcare 2022; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2025a; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2025c). Besides earning higher absolute and relative pay than their U.S counterparts, ECWs in Quebec, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland receive working benefits that far outweigh those in the U.S.

Figure 5: Early Childhood Child-to-Worker Ratios By Nation and Age Group

Country	Year	Age Group	Child-to-Worker Ratio
U.S.	2023	3-5Y	14
Sweden	2023	0-3Y	13
		3-5Y	14
Denmark	2023	0-3Y	5
		3-5Y	10
Finland	2023	3-5Y	8
Quebec	2026	0-18M	5
		18M-4Y	8
		4-5Y	10

Sources: (OECD 2025; Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development 2026)

In all observed nations, the pre-primary school child-to-worker ratio increases as children grow older. Both Quebec and Denmark both have a child-to-worker ratio of 5:1 for the youngest age group. In Sweden, the child-to-worker ratio is 13:1 for children aged 0-3 and 14:1 for ages 3-5. For ages 3-5, the U.S also presents a 14:1 ratio. Finland provides the lowest child-to-worker ratio for children aged 3-5, 8:1, along with Quebec, which provides an 8:1 ratio for children aged 18 months- 4 years and a 10:1 ratio for children aged 4-5.

Figure 6: Education Requirements By Occupation and Nation

Country/Region	Early Childhood Worker (ECW)	Elementary School Teacher	Cook	Nurse	Cleaner
Denmark	3.5-year bachelor's degree, practical training	4-year bachelor's degree, practical training	None	3-year bachelor's degree, 4,600 hours of clinical training	None
Finland	3-year bachelor's degree, practical training	5-year bachelor's + Masters degree, practical training	2-Year Vocational	3-year bachelor's degree, 4,600 hours of clinical training	None
Sweden	3-year bachelor's degree	4-year bachelor's degree + pedagogical training	3-Year Vocational	3-year bachelor's degree, 4,600 hours of clinical training	None
United States	High school	Bachelor's degree	High school	4-Year bachelor's degree	None
WPA	2-year postsecondary program, specialized training	2-year postsecondary program	-	3-year apprenticeship	None
Quebec	Pre-university studies	3-Year bachelor's degree	3-Month Vocational	2-Year Bachelor's degree	None

Sources: (European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2026a; SIRI 2026; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2024a; “Cook,” n.d.; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2026b; Kristianstad University, n.d.; McConnell 1934; United States Department of Labor, n.d.; Buffalo State Univ. 2021; University of Pennsylvania, n.d.; Oram 2020; Gouv. Qué. 2026)

Summary

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the absolute and relative compensation of early childhood workers across the modern-day U.S, Quebec, and selected EU countries with no childcare gap. Contemporary adjusted annual salaries for early childhood workers were lowest in the U.S and highest in the Nordic countries, with Denmark ranking first. Moreover, ECWs in the present-day United States endure the largest salary disparity relative to nurses and elementary school teachers; European countries experience a more balanced wage allocation. Relative to other jobs, and at absolute levels, Quebec presents an intermediary case between the U.S. and the Nordic countries. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the absolute and relative compensation of early childhood workers across the United States over time. Adjusted annual salaries for early childcare workers in the U.S were lowest in the WPA ENS system, highest in 1977, and nearly equaled that figure in 2025. In 2015, childcare workers in the United States experienced the largest salary disparity relative to nurses and elementary school teachers, a gap that has decreased but remains far from that of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. In addition to receiving lower relative wages, childcare workers in the U.S. receive far fewer employment benefits than in Nordic countries and Quebec. Furthermore, Child-to-worker ratios were higher in the U.S. than in other countries observed, except for Sweden for children aged 3-5. Moreover, Education requirements for childcare workers are lower in the United States and Quebec than in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. Compared to their European counterparts, early childhood workers in the United States are held to lower education requirements, subject to lower compensation, and higher child-to-worker ratios, despite the substantial costs of childcare in the U.S.

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Other Tables:

Table 1: PPP-Adjusted Median Early Childhood Worker Salaries by Nation

Location	Early Childhood Worker
U.S. (2025)	$32,050
Quebec (2023-2025)	$41,067
Finland (2024)	$46,455
Sweden (2025)	$51,492
Denmark (2024)	$66,603

Sources: (Bur. Labor Stat. 2025; Gouv. Qué. 2026; European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2024b)

Table 2: Median Occupational Salaries Relative to Early Childhood Worker Salaries by Nation (%)

Location	Nurse	Elementary School Teacher	Cook	Cleaner
U.S. (2025)	279	182	107	102
Quebec (2023-2025)	165	186	77	86
Denmark (2024)	156	117	109	104
Sweden (2025)	120	109	86	77
Finland (2024)	117	121	93	77

Sources: (Bur. Labor Stat. 2025; Gouv. Qué. 2026; Stat. Den. 2024; Stat. SCB 2025; Tilastokeskus 2024)

Table 3: Median U.S. CPI-Adjusted Early Childhood Worker Salaries by Year

Year	Early Childhood Worker
1934 (WPA)	$18,643
1977	$35,203
1988	$26,393
1998	$27,088
2005	$28,133
2015	$27,432
2025	$34,980

Sources: (Bur. Labor Stat., n.d.; National Advisory Committee On Emergency Nursery Schools 1935; Bur. Labor Stat. 2025)

Table 4: Median U.S. Occupational Salaries Relative to Early Childhood Worker Salaries Over Time (%)

Year	Nurse	Elementary School Teacher	Cook	Cleaner
1934 (WPA)	239	166	121	88
1998	296	263	118	103
2005	321	258	116	100
2015	332	270	114	102
2025	279	182	107	102

Sources: (National Advisory Committee On Emergency Nursery Schools 1935; Bur. Labor Stat. 2025)

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