

Zohran Mamdani's transformative child care plan builds on a history of NYC social innovations

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Published: November 5, 2025 7:19am EDT



Assembly member Zohran Mamdani attends a news conference on universal child care at Columbus Park Playground on Nov. 19, 2024, in New York City.

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Zohran Mamdani, the 34-year-old New York State Assembly member and democratic socialist, was elected New York City's mayor on Nov. 4, 2025, after pledging to make the city more affordable through policies that include freezing rents, providing free public buses and a network of city-owned grocery stores.

During his campaign, Mamdani's promises clearly resonated with New Yorkers struggling with the high cost of living.

Of all of Mamdani's campaign commitments, free high-quality child care for every New Yorker from 6 weeks to 5 years old – while boosting child care workers' wages to match that of the city's public school teachers – could be the most transformative.

The cost of child care in New York City is expensive. More than 80% of families with young children cannot afford the average annual cost of US\$26,000 for center-based care. A recent study found that families with young children are twice as likely to leave the city as those without children. The study identified housing and child care costs as key drivers of migration out of the city.

New York's child care problem mirrors a nationwide system that is seen by many experts as broken. U.S. families spend between 8.9% and 16% of their median income on full-day care for one child. And prices have been rising: Between 1990 and 2024, the cost of day care and preschool rose 263%, much faster than overall inflation.

Despite high prices, child care workers are poorly paid: In 2024, the median pay for child care workers, who are mostly women and often women of color, was \$15.41 an hour, or \$32,050 a year. That's nearly at the bottom of all occupations when ranked by annual pay. Additionally, child care programs face high turnover, and it's difficult for them to recruit and retain qualified staff. Program quality suffers as a result.

As a feminist scholar who has written extensively about child care, I believe Mamdani's promise of free universal child care, with decent pay for child care staff, could transform the politics and the reality of child care in New York and beyond.

An example to the nation

During the Great Depression, the Works Projects Administration, a New Deal agency created to combat unemployment, established 14 emergency nursery schools in New York. Opened between 1933 and 1934, these schools were primarily intended to offer employment opportunities to unemployed teachers, but they also became a form of de facto child care for parents employed on various work-relief projects.

With the onset of World War II, rising numbers of women took up jobs in the city's war industries.

In 1941, the lack of adequate child care prompted the administration of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia to fund a handful of already existing nursery schools, including the New Deal nurseries whose federal funding had dried up. New York became the only U.S. city to provide publicly subsidized child care services.

New York provided an example to the nation, and between 1943 and 1945, wartime child care centers were established in hundreds of cities under the federal government's Lanham Act of 1941. It's the closest the U.S. has come to establishing a universal child care system.

While most wartime child care centers were shuttered at war's end, in New York a citywide grassroots mobilization of parents forced the city to keep its centers operating. It marked the first peacetime allocation of municipal tax dollars for child care programs.



People hold signs as they attend a news conference at Columbus Park Playground, Nov. 19, 2024, in New York City.

Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

Building blocks

In the 1960s, under the liberal administration of Mayor John Lindsay, public child care in New York City was expanded, and in 1967 child care workers organized a union, AFSCME Local 205 Day Care Employees.

After a bitter three-week strike in 1969 to protest low wages and poor working conditions, child care workers won a contract that included a wage scale comparable to that of elementary school teachers in the city's public school system. The contract also included a training program that allowed them to upgrade their skills and get credit for it.

When President Richard Nixon vetoed federal child care legislation in 1971 that would have provided federal funding for child care programs across the nation, New York's child care movement took to the streets to demand universal child care, even if the federal government refused to fund it. Groups like the Day Care Forum and the Committee for Community Controlled Child Care staged demonstrations on the city's Triborough Bridge – since renamed the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge – and set up a one-day “model day care center” on the lawn of City Hall.

Public child care services survived the city's fiscal crisis of 1975, largely due to the activism of working-class communities who fought against day care closures.

Though far from universal, the child care system in New York today boasts the largest publicly supported system in the country, and can serve as the building blocks for Mamdani's plan.

Transformative beyond New York

Mamdani's campaign estimated that his universal child care plan would cost \$6 billion annually. To fund his policies, Mamdani has proposed an increase of the state's corporate tax rate and raising the city's income tax by 2 percentage points on New Yorkers earning more than \$1 million a year. While Mamdani will need the assistance of Gov. Kathy Hochul to raise taxes, Hochul supports universal child care, even if she disagrees on how to pay for it.

Universal child care has positive economic impacts, including more women in the workforce and more money in the pockets of parents to spend in the economy. Research from the liberal Center for American Progress concluded that the availability of affordable high-quality child care would lead 51% of stay-at-home parents to find work, and about a third of employed parents to work more hours.

In New York, the disposable income of families could increase by up to \$1.9 billion due to the avoidance of child care costs.

One year from the U.S. midterms, Americans remain worried about the cost of basic needs. And majorities of both Democrat and Republican voters say the cost of child care is a major problem, and they want government to prioritize helping families pay for it.

If he can find the money to pay for it, with universal child care, Mamdani could blaze a trail that other policymakers follow.

Simon Black does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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