As the COVID-19 pandemic waned, the U.S. had an opportunity to permanently elevate the way we treat kids. Creative solutions to the lockdown’s economic and other challenges lifted millions of children out of poverty, kept children insured, and stabilized the country’s long-faltering child care system.

For a hot second, it looked like we might — possibly, maybe — think about giving children the same rights and privileges we give seniors, wealthy Americans, middle-class taxpayers and all of the country’s other voters. Alas.

We have allowed children to go from that crossroads to a crisis.

By allowing the expiration of funding for food, education, child care, health care, rent and the overwhelming expenses associated with raising a child, Congress exercised benign neglect. By specifically singling out children for the deepest cuts in those very same areas — by deliberately targeting them in current appropriations bills — lawmakers might be guilty of actual abuse.

Here are some of the facts:

- **Infant mortality, already higher than in other wealthy nations, has increased for the first time in two decades:** The overall U.S. infant mortality rate rose by 3% from 2021 to 2022. Infant deaths due to maternal complications shot up by 8%, indicating a lack of appropriate care for pregnant women and new mothers. As is often the case, these rates were higher for babies and moms of color.

*Meanwhile, lawmakers propose deeps cuts to food subsidies for newborns and their moms:* The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) already reaches only half of the babies and moms who are eligible. Without full funding ($7.7 billion), the program will have to waitlist 600,000 toddlers and pre-schoolers. In addition, current funding proposals slash the fruit and vegetable benefit by 56% for children.
Deaths among children and teens increased by 20% between 2019 and 2021, the largest increase in 50 years: These figures follow a previous study that found U.S. children had a 70% greater chance of dying in childhood than kids born in other wealthy countries. Notable: The mental health crisis ravaging our kids has helped make suicide the second leading cause of childhood death. Firearms are the first. Sidenote: Global vaccination rates for children have fallen to 2008 levels, with long-forgotten diseases including measles and polio surging in the United States for the first time in decades.

Meanwhile, at least 2 million children have lost Medicaid coverage this year — many of whom are actually still eligible – and experts predict this figure will soon rise to 3 million: The figures likely are a significant undercount. And the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which covers children whose families make too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford private insurance, remains the only federal health insurance program that regularly expires. These two programs cover more than half of all U.S. children.

U.S. students are struggling through learning loss, increased inequity, prioritization of adults over children, a mental health crisis and a movement to eradicate public education.

Meanwhile, lawmakers propose a 29% cut in Department of Education funding and an 80% cut in the program that that ensures schools with high proportions of low-income students receive the resources they need.

The crisis in early childhood care and education forces roughly 100,000 Americans (mostly moms) to stay home from work each month, costing the U.S. economy $122 billion each year.

Meanwhile, lawmakers would extract $750 million in cuts from Head Start, which would cost 80,000 children and their families access to the vital early learning and wrap-around services provided by the program. Analysts and advocates, including First Focus on Children, estimate that the U.S. child care system needs a $16 billion infusion just to keep from failing. The United States already invests fewer public dollars in early childhood education and care relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than almost all other developed nations, ranking 35th out of 37 countries tracked by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Children are bearing the brunt of the world’s political dysfunction in the Middle East, Sudan, Ukraine, and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, political infighting in the U.S. has delayed more than $1 billion in funding for the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and allowed its 10% set aside for orphans and vulnerable children to expire.

At a bare minimum, lawmakers must use the current government funding negotiations to stabilize our early learning system with a $16 billion infusion and to deliver the benefits of the Child Tax Credit to the nation’s poorest children.

Our children are experiencing a crisis. We need to treat it like one.
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