



Families High on Policymaker and Public Agendas

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Political interest in children and families ebbs and flows. Yet it may now be at its highest peak in the last 20 years among policymakers and the public alike.¹ In studies, the leaders of state legislatures rank child and family issues as high priorities.²

Families are also valued by the general public. In a nationally representative poll,³ 91% of Americans reported that loving family relationships are extremely important to them—twice as important as their job (49%) and one third more important than financial security (61%).

Recent evidence suggests that families matter. Americans who report that their family life is going well are more satisfied with their life in general, their job performance, financial security, parenting competence, and physical health.⁴

Yet, despite this enthusiasm, Americans express grave reservations about the state of families. For the first time in 50 years of Gallup polls, Americans ranked family decline, ethics and morality as the most important problems facing the country today.⁵ Notably these concerns were expressed by families with children of all ages and crossed the usual divides of income, education, ethnicity, and race.⁶

In recent studies, the concern voiced most often by parents is conflict between work and family, aptly coined “the double squeeze”.⁷ Families are experiencing a squeeze on economic resources and a simultaneous squeeze on the time and energy needed for family and community commitments.⁸ Parents highly value spending time with their children, yet given their bloated schedules they say family time is in chronic undersupply.

Although most Americans would probably agree that childrearing is primarily the responsibility of families, they also acknowledge how government shapes the conditions that make it easier or harder for parents to do a good job. In the first nationwide poll of parenting by independent pollster Penn & Schoen, parents report that government at all levels could be doing more than it presently does. When parents were asked how much their government was doing to help them, only 6% said *a great deal*. Yet parents were eight times more likely (47%) to say that government was *capable of doing a great deal* for them.⁹ This newsletter describes how family structure has changed in Wisconsin and provides updates on two family functions—providing economic support and educating children. ■

References

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