

# Taking Families Seriously: Family Impact Analysis as an Essential Policy Tool

**The Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars**



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# Taking Families Seriously: Family Impact Analysis as an Essential Policy Tool

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paper prepared for expert meeting  
October 19-20, 1995, in Leuven, Belgium  
(Revised November 14, 1995)

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## Introduction

The Family Impact Seminar was founded in 1976 to explore the substantive, political, and administrative feasibility of family impact statements—viewed as a tool for promoting an increased focus on families and family life within government. Nearly two decades later, although policymakers interest in family policy is at an all time high, no family impact statement legislation is in place at the federal level, nor is any being proposed. And despite some intermittent interest in several of the states, there is no serious sustained family impact statement mechanism, to my knowledge, in any state government. Does this mean that the idea has no merit?

This paper provides a brief history of the family impact statement idea within the United States over the past two decades and shows how it has evolved and broadened. I then review the strong rationale for promoting a family focus in public policy, discuss what is meant by a family perspective, and outline the conceptual framework, tools, and methodology of family impact analysis (FIA) as developed by the Family Impact Seminar. Based largely on the Seminar’s experience, I suggest potential applications of FIA. I then suggest a few ideas about the questions any government should ask itself if it was considering implementing a family impact mechanism. In my conclusion I suggest that there needs to be more debate and discussion about who needs to be assigned the responsibility to implement “family impact” and employ the FIA tools both within and without government.

## History of Family Impact Assessment in the USA

In 1973, at a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth hearing on “American Families: Trends and Pressures,” chaired by Senator Walter Mondale (D-MN), several prominent scholars, including Margaret Mead and Urie Bronfenbrenner, recommended that family ‘impact statements become a required part of policymaking. (The environmental impact statement requirement and process, which had recently been enacted into federal law, was the dear analogy.) The various witnesses expressed a three-fold concern. First, unprecedented changes were taking place in family life and public policies were unresponsive to these changes. Second, a range of public policies and programs affected families, and these effects were often negative. Third, many individuals and organizations committed to helping children realized that child-focused programs, however well-intentioned, often were of limited success. They concluded that a more effective approach was to seek to strengthen and support parents rather than substitute for them. In Senator Mondale’s words, the hearings were predicated “upon the simple belief that nothing is more important to a child than healthy families ... We must start by asking to what extent Government policies are helping or hurting families...”

The Subcommittee members felt that the family impact concept had real promise but also could be misunderstood. Hence, they concluded that the idea should be carefully researched and reviewed before any decision could be made to introduce legislation to implement this idea.

In 1976, A. Sidney Johnson, the Subcommittee staff director, with the aid of private foundation funding, founded the Family Impact Seminar (FIS) to explore the substantive, political, and administrative feasibility of the proposal to require family impact statements. (FIS began as a program of the George Washington University, later moved to Catholic University of America, then to the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy Research and Education Foundation. In April 1995, FIS became incorporated as a separate, independent, non-profit policy institute).

Working with its prominent 24-member advisory group, the FIS director and staff spent the next few years exploring the substantive feasibility of family impact analysis. We developed and tested a conceptual framework and methodology for family impact analysis (FIA) by preparing three in-depth studies at the national level (resulting in three books) and twelve community level field projects. We also talked to many people about the experience with the environmental impact statement mechanism.

In 1980, the FIS summarized some of the lessons we had learned in a pamphlet, which was sent to all delegates to the White House Conference on Families. We concluded that “our experiences convince us that the process of family impact analysis is increasingly effective in revealing how public policies affect families and in recommending ways they can be improved.”

The pamphlet recommended that independent, nonpartisan Commissions for Families should be established at all levels of government and that one of their functions should be to prepare family impact analyses on a selected number of existing policies. It also recommended that advocacy and service organizations and organizations of consumers should undertake family impact assessments of programs, including self-assessments.

FIS did not make any recommendations at that time about how governments should institute the family impact idea because we believed that it should first be tested in the private sector on a voluntary basis. This sense of caution arose in part from our understanding of the negative reaction to the government-required environmental impact statement process, which was perceived as a highly regulatory, intrusive, and largely obstructive mechanism.

Nevertheless, in 1980 over 80% of the delegates to the White House Conference on Families voted for family impact legislation as their highest recommendation, indicating that the general ideas had broad support—at least among the family constituency.

The election of President Ronald Reagan stalled implementation of many of the constructive recommendations that came out of the White House Conference. Moreover, the family impact recommendations turned out to be premature. No policymaker gave them any sustained attention. Family issues were still considered too volatile and too private, and in the following decade they became highly politicized. “Family” became captured by the far political right. Moreover, the myriad ways in which government actions were deeply intertwined with family life were still little understood. Most of the advocacy groups and organizations concentrated on defending the needs of their individual constituents and the categorical programs that served them.

During the 1980s, the family impact idea was occasionally proposed in Washington in various versions, most often by conservative Republicans—for example, Senator Orrin Hatch’s (R-UT) Family Fairness Statement to be attached to pending bills, but was never implemented. In 1987, an executive order was issued by President Reagan that required all executive agencies to evaluate proposed regulations and legislation that would have significant potential impact on the family, using seven criteria. However, as far as we can tell, this order too was never seriously implemented.

Over the years we have intermittently become aware of several initiatives at federal, state, and local levels to institutionalize a family focus in policy through some kind of requirement for family impact statements. For example, in Illinois, at the initiative of a family service agency, state social services plan were required to include family impact statements. Such requirements have been enacted and implemented in a very cursory fashion by Governors' offices in Colorado and New York (to whom we had earlier sent some information). In Nebraska, New York, and Washington state, legislation has created guiding principles for family policy. In other states, we have heard of family impact legislation that has been proposed or introduced—for example, in California, Connecticut, Indiana and Virginia. While we have not had the resources to follow up on these various leads, it is our impression that most of these proposals were, once again, not implemented.

Meanwhile, at FIS, we had broadened and redefined our mission as being “to promote a family perspective in public policy and programs and to build capacity for family-centered policymaking.” We are currently engaged in a number of different activities focusing on the federal, state and local levels of policy, including:

- conducting a series of two-hour seminars or briefings in Washington for government staff and policy analysts on a wide range of family policy issues (37 since 1988);
- providing technical assistance to similar seminar series in five state capitals;
- conducting roundtable meetings for federal officials and representatives to help implement new family-centered legislation; and
- writing various reports and publications that analyze new approaches to designing and integrating family and child services and new methods of training front-line workers to work with troubled families.

The FIA framework—the FIA way of thinking—shapes everything we do, but only in a few of our publications have we systematically applied this framework to areas of public policy (see below).

**Books:** The FIA framework was used to design our first three in-depth staff studies using different methodologies. These were all published as academic books, and each included a chapter on the FIA framework and methodology. These studies were:

- an examination of the effects of the introduction of flex-time (flexible work hours) on family life through a survey of employees in two different branches of a government agency;
- an in-depth study of the implementation of the federal foster care program in one state, through interviews with policy officials, administrators, front line supervisors and caseworkers, and foster and biological families; and
- a comprehensive review of research programs and policies concerned with teenage pregnancy and parenting from a family perspective, through a series of commissioned papers and a conference.

In addition we have applied the FIA approach in the following activities resulting in written documents:

**Field Studies:** FIS collaborated with community based organizations in fourteen sites across the country to help them conduct state and community-wide family impact assessments of different policies and programs including foster care, sex education, parent involvement in schools. Each site produced a final report of their study.

**Commissioned Paper:** As part of a conference FIS co-sponsored on Women, Families and Tax Reform in 1986 we commissioned a paper from a congressional aide, one of the FIS advisors, to examine the impacts of seven different tax reform proposals on eight different types of families.

**Family Policy Reports:** In collaboration with the Coalition of Family Organizations, FIS wrote and published, six 8-page family impact assessments of proposed/pending new U.S. legislation, applying the family impact principles and questions.

**A Program Self-Assessment Checklist:** prepared for a government monograph on family-centered treatment of adolescents with alcohol, drug abuse and mental health problems.

These examples show that at FIS we now view FIA as a method and an analytic tool to be used in a variety of ways to help inject a strong family focus at different levels and stages of policymaking.

## The Rationale for a Family Perspective

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many public officials took the position that family was a private domain beyond the realm of government, and regarded many actual or proposed programs and services for families as unnecessary “intrusion.” Thus in the early years at the Seminar we focused primarily on illustrating the breadth and depth of government involvement in families lives—in spite of the lack of so-called explicit family policy—and illustrating the myriad ways in which policy had positive or negative family impact. (In 1977 we identified 275 federal assistance programs, i.e. direct benefits and services, that had direct impact on families. And this did not include domains such as tax policy.)

Another indirect attack on the family impact idea came from academic quarters who seemed uneasy with its elastic and “fuzzy” boundaries. Several scholars, notably Gilbert Steiner, claimed that a focus’ on family policy was “futile” because nearly all government actions had some effects on family life (direct or indirect), and therefore it was too broad a term to have a useful meaning.

We disagreed. At FIS, we drew the analogy between family and two other similarly broad terms: “the economy” or the “environment.” Most government actions have some effect on the well-being of the economy, and the physical environment but no one believes it is futile to discuss economic policy or environmental policy.

FIS, together with four other national family-related organizations known as the Coalition of Family Organizations (COFO), recommended that the term family policy be confined to four broad areas of functioning that were most important to the broader society: namely family composition and membership, economic support for dependents, child raising, and family caregiving (for adult frail and elderly dependents).

Many other current social problems, and the policies and programs dealing with them—such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, hunger, AIDS—or policy domains—such as tax, health, education, transportation policy—have important family dimensions, and could, and should, be examined from a family perspective.

Unlike many European countries, the USA still has no explicit, national family policy, nor governance units at the national level that have overall responsibility for defining and monitoring family policy. However, there has been some progress over the past two decades.

The first major barrier has been overcome: the family is now agreed by all to be a legitimate subject for policy attention. In contrast to the late seventies, policymakers, the media and the public now fully accept the idea that the strength and well-being of society's most important institution, the family, is a legitimate concern of government. There is widespread agreement that family life is showing signs of serious stress and families need more support, although there is, naturally, a lot of disagreement about what the appropriate remedies are. Democrats and Republicans alike frequently proclaim their commitment to "support and strengthen" families. Family is now included in the title of federal and state legislative committees and divisions of executive agencies. At the state level a couple of dozen new child and family collaborative state governance structures (Sub-Cabinets, Councils and Commissions) have been established, primarily to improve program coordination and give greater prominence to child and family issues.

Information about family demographic trends and economic circumstances is becoming much more available—provided by both government and private sector agencies—and is presented in a somewhat more sophisticated form, acknowledging the increased diversity of family structure, ethnicity, and gender roles. And, importantly, there is a growing movement to make drastic reforms in a wide range of child and family service programs, especially those for the poor, to make them more effective, defined as being more comprehensive, community based and family-centered (the most recent example is the new federal program entitled the Family Preservation and Support Services Program).

Nevertheless, in spite of these signs of progress towards a greater recognition of "family impact," family considerations are still rarely addressed in the normal processes of policymaking and policy analysis, whether at federal, state or local levels. Nor are the family unit and family relationships usually the focus of program evaluation or policy analysis which continue to measure outcomes of individuals. The concepts of "family strength" and "family support" remain highly abstract and are seldom operationalized.

## What Is Meant by “Family Perspective”?

For more than a decade, FIS has been developing the family impact framework and methodology to provide policymakers and program administrators with the analytic tools with which to apply a *family perspective*. As noted, we have “applied the framework and tools in a number of ways in our studies and publications and in designing our series of family policy seminar. What the family impact framework does is help to organize the vast, complex, and fragmented body of program information, data, and research related to families into categories and factors that have special relevance for policy and programs.

Before outlining this framework and tools, I need to discuss some other concepts that have influenced our general approach to this topic, which are, to some extent, shared by others working in this arena.

**Theory:** The FIS theoretical framework and methodology is highly eclectic. Our work is grounded in ecological, family systems theory—meaning that we believe that individuals can best be understood and served within the context of the immediate systems with which they interact. This is essentially an amalgam of developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner’s concentric nested circles representing the human ecology and Salvador Minuchin’s family systems theory (which, in turn, is based on systems/cybernetics theory in the biological and physical sciences). The most influential social system for nearly all individuals is their close family; the workplace, neighborhood, and community are others. The family system, in turn, is nested within a variety of other interacting systems. Chart I, attached, illustrates this conceptual approach as recently applied by the author to a current policy problem of nonmarital births (Ooms, 1995). This theoretical perspective has also been called the bio-psycho-social perspective on human behavior.

The FIS focus on family functions and roles is clearly borrowed from family sociology. However, we disagree with some sociologists who maintain the family has “lost” nearly all of its functions. In our view, it is much more accurate to say that what has happened is that the family now shares many of its traditional functions with other institutions and professionals—such as teachers, health care professionals, etc.—and has also acquired several new ones in this highly technical, information age. Nevertheless, too often the family retains the primary responsibility, but has little power and authority—the expectations and standards for families are typically prescribed by law and interpreted or imposed by professionals.

In the FIS approach, a major challenge in FIA is to examine the nature of families' partnerships with other institutions and to determine how well these partnerships are working and if they are effective (see Moroney, 1986). Typically, the family's role is undervalued if not actively ignored, demeaned, or abrogated by most human service professionals. Indeed, one of the new buzzwords in U.S. family policy is family "empowerment." This term means somewhat different things to different people but, at its core, has to do with respecting families' knowledge and expertise and their rights to make choices and decisions.

**The Question of Values:** In my view, the assumption that policy analysis and research are value-free has been highly detrimental to the field of family policy. Family issues arouse intense feelings and engender bitter and emotional value disputes. Liberals fear the family interest of conservatives, whose main goals, they believe, are to put mothers back in the home, reestablish patriarchy, and diminish the role of government. Conservatives, on the other hand, believe that liberals care more about alleviating the consequences of divorce than strengthening marriage, value teenagers' rights to autonomy more than parents' authority, and see little danger of government intrusion in the home. This polarization may be especially acute in the U.S. where, as many social commentators have noted, the American worship of individual rights has served as a major barrier to constructive debates about family policy.

And yet, in the scholarly community, the question of values is seldom dealt with directly. At FIS, we have consistently maintained that the value assumptions, goals, and criteria that underlie family research and policy need to be made explicit—and rigorously and calmly examined. Only when this is done can the value issues be disentangled from questions of fact.

However, the extent of value conflict about family life has been greatly exaggerated by some advocacy organizations and interests groups and by the media. There is growing evidence that a broad middle ground exists on many family policy goals among the public at large.

There are three overarching and complex value questions about the relationship of government policy to families that need much more explicit discussion and debate than they generally have received among policy analysts:

1. In what ways, if at all, should government attempt to influence family behavior? For example, should work/family policies aim to encourage or discourage maternal employment? Should tax and welfare policies aim explicitly to discourage out-of-wedlock childbearing? To strengthen and stabilize marital commitment?

2. What are the grounds for government intervention in parental autonomy and family/spouse privacy? For example, to what extent should government agents take positions on gender-role equity, intervene in family conflict, in adolescent reproductive health care, or in family decisions about life-prolonging medical care?
3. To what extent should government enforce or encourage family financial obligations? Should employers be required to garnish wages of absent parents who have never defaulted on their child support payments? Should elderly spouses have to deplete their assets before their partner is eligible for public aid? Should adult children be expected to contribute to the cost of caring for their aged parent?

These questions are increasingly in the background of current discussions among policymakers and in the media (such as in the much-discussed *Atlantic* magazine article, “Dan Quayle Was Right,” which reopened the debate about the effects of single parenthood on children), but policy analysts and researchers still tend to avoid confronting them directly.

As noted below, I was a member of an ad hoc family criteria task force composed of individuals representing somewhat diverse political perspectives, formed in 1987 as a result of a Republican Congressman’s interest in program evaluation. We met over a period of months and hammered out a set of six broad guiding principles for family policy that we believed would, achieve a broad consensus across the political spectrum. These principles, and the accompanying family impact questions, are summarized in a revised form as Tool #4 below.

**Definition of Family:** Many a meeting and conference has bogged down, and sometimes even broken up, over fruitless attempts to get agreement on a single definition of family. This seems to be because a question about definition becomes quickly transformed into a value question—that is, what is the ideal, normative-type of family?

Without wanting to get engaged in this value debate here, I shall simply say that FIS has taken the pragmatic, position that the definition of family will vary depending upon context and use. (It may be interesting to note that just as the word family is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, nor do any federal program authorizing statutes attempt to explicitly define family.)

For descriptive (not normative) public policy purposes, FIS defines family as “two or more individuals related by blood, marriage or adoption.” Unlike the U.S. Bureau definition most commonly used in government circles this does not confine the term family to those who reside together in a household. Nor does it restrict family to those families with child dependents—as does the media and most advocacy organizations in the U.S. This broad FIS descriptive definition may soon need to be revised now that increasingly some political jurisdictions are giving legal recognition to nonmarital, cohabiting unions (both heterosexual and homosexual)—so-called “domestic partnerships.”

**Conceptual Framework and Tools for Family Impact Analysis** The FIS framework has gradually evolved over the course of a variety of different studies and activities. The framework helps us organize and interrelate the vast, complex and fragmented body of child and family-related data and research, policy and program information. It also provides a set of value principles and tools—to serve as benchmarks—to conduct an evaluative assessment to determine if the positive and negative impacts.

FIS has been interested from the outset in issues of program implementation and the effectiveness of services. This led us quickly into the complex, and some would say murky, domain of policy and program implementation, which is a sub-field within public policy. It was very clear that simply studying the law and funding was not sufficient to determine family impact. Thus we became interested in identifying not only the dimensions of family life that were affected by policy, but also the components and dimensions of policy that determined the nature of the impact.

The FIA framework has several, core components summarized in schematic form. These “tools” can be used as checklists, to identify the factors or components that need further detailed study and exploration. The tools, which are attached to this paper, are the following:

### **Tool 1. Family Diversity and Contexts**

This table identifies the wide range of family forms, types, and contexts that have relevance for the assessment of policy and programs.

### **Tool 2. Family Functions and Roles**

This table summarizes the primary social functions of families that may be affected by policies and programs. Any particular program or policy may aim to directly affect one of these functions but may also have indirect effects on other functions.

### **Tool 3. Policy and Program Implementation Components**

This table summarizes the source, level, and dimensions of implementation of the policy, which determine the way the policy affects families. (For example, the FIS study of the implementation of foster care program in one state found high rates of unnecessary out-of-home placement. A few of the numerous factors that were identified as contributing to the result were: perverse fiscal incentives written into the federal law, inadequate program monitoring and case review; narrow interpretations of parental visiting policies, unrealistic caseloads, inefficient use of staff resources, media coverage of abuse and neglect cases, and caseworkers' and supervisors' judgmental attitudes towards biological families as well as their lack of training.)

### **Tool 4. Family Impact Questions**

Based on some of its early work in defining values and principles, FIS in collaboration with the Family Criteria Task Force and the Consortium of Family Organizations (COFO), developed a set of guiding principles under each a set of family impact questions. The family impact questions selected as being relevant to the topic help to frame the design of the study or analysis. Tools #1-3 sub-divide each overarching question and become more useful for specific policy and program assessments.

The family impact questions have been published and received a fairly wide distribution. They have been used and adapted in many communities by several organizations as far away as Quebec (where they were translated into French) and by the current family impact initiatives in Colorado and New York.

## Applications, Method and Potential Uses of FIA

It is our belief that the family impact framework and approach that FIS developed has the potential to be adapted and applied at many levels of policymaking and implementation. It can be incorporated into many different kinds of evaluation methodologies. It can be used to assess both current and proposed policies, programs and institutions in the public and private sector and is very helpful in pinpointing specific changes that need to be made. At any of these levels the family impact assessment or analysis process can range from a superficial, paper and pencil exercise—lasting a couple of hours—to an in-depth study that reviews existing data and gathers new information—which may take several months or even years.

The FIA framework may be adapted for the following uses:

- A legislative aide can prepare a set of family impact questions for the member to use in a hearing on proposed bill or reauthorizing legislation. (In such instances, the aide will draw upon existing and easily accessible information and best guesstimates.”)
- A policy analyst in an agency or research bureau can use the tools to analyze a policy proposal at an early stage of development, or to design or review a program evaluation. Depending on the turnaround time, s/he may have to rely upon existing data and information. If the impact to be measured is easily quantifiable (e.g., levels of financial benefits) computer modeling can be used to generate the family impact. But if the goal is to understand program effects from a more qualitative perspective, it is often possible to get new and valuable information from administrators, service providers, and consumer families in a short time frame.
- A policy researcher in a public agency or academic setting can use the framework to design a long-term research study which will generally require the collection of new data. A program evaluator can use FIA to help design long-term program evaluations.
- A public or private commission, set up to investigate and make recommendations on a broad policy problem such as prevention of adolescent pregnancy can use FIA to develop an overall design for its activities. This may include commissioning new research, reviewing existing studies, or gathering qualitative information from focus group discussions, and from interviews and hearings.
- A private or public program—such as a health care institution, a school, or a social work agency—can use FIA to conduct a self-assessment of the impact on families of the agency’s programs or the adequacy of a community’s response to a specific need of problem.

## Assessment of the Family Impact Statement Idea

The idea of proposing family impact statements is a disarmingly simple one. To ask “What effect will this proposal have on families and on the family as an institution?” sounds like an eminently sensible idea. The work of FIS and other related efforts have demonstrated that although the question sounds simple, the answers are very complicated. The goal remains dearly important. It surely makes sense to give at least as much attention to the human environment—of which the family is at the core—as we currently do to the physical environment. There may be many routes to achieve this goal. Family impact statements are only one but, as we have noted, it has not been seriously implemented at any level of government.

Our sense from an initial review of the family impact statements produced by the current family impact initiatives in Colorado and New York—who did adapt some of the FIS family impact questions—is that while the exercise was somewhat instructive the statements themselves were of limited value. They seem superficial and don’t shed much new light. We believe this may be for several reasons: the staff who did them were not specially trained or have access to experts in the family policy field. Another reason may be that they did not use the other tools of the FIA framework which, by sub-dividing the general questions, result in more specific and useful answers. However, it is important to note that many participants in the Colorado family impact process still agreed that the exercise had been useful in raising their awareness of several issues that they had not thought about before.

In FIS’s experience, family impact analysis is a technical exercise, that requires considerable expertise and knowledge of family research and programs. We found that even those with a strong, general family services background have difficulty initially learning to use the tools to analyze policies in any depth. Thus, instructing policy staff to prepare a family impact statement without providing them with any training or access to expertise is like asking a non-scientist to undertake preparing an environmental impact statement.

I have said little thus far about the major barrier to conducting FIA, namely the absence of the family related data and program information needed to answer many of the family impact questions. This has been a concern of the Family Impact Seminar since the beginning. It is a subject that cannot be adequately addressed in this paper, although I have written about it elsewhere (see Ooms, 1993). There are certainly many methodological complexities involved in considering the family, and family relationships as the unit and focus of data collection, research and program evaluation. However the potential gains from doing so are highly undervalued. The situation is improving somewhat, but there is still a long way to go.

Moreover we continue to hear of threats of cuts in major family statistical systems.

Any government contemplating the introduction of some kind of family impact mechanism needs to consider the scope, authority, design and agents who need to be involved. In particular the following questions will need to be addresses:

- Should family impact statements be required on all policies or only on a selected few—for example those coming under certain committee or departmental jurisdictions?
- At what stage in the legislative process would it be most useful?
- At what key points in the executive branch’s governing/implementation process would some kind of family impact requirement be constructive?
- Who should undertake to do the family impact statements?
- What kinds of training do they need to have?
- What level of resources should be expended on these statements or studies and therefore, in what depth should they be conducted?
- What value criteria and outcomes are going to guide these studies and who decides which they are?
- How can the objectivity of the research and analysis processes involved be assured?
- Finally, will the results be made public and open to comment and revision?

## Conclusion

In summary, in my view the Family Impact Statement idea as originally proposed is too limited a concept. We need to raise awareness and provide information about families and family impact at all levels and stages of policy development and implementation. To achieve this goal, the FIA approach as developed and used by the Family Impact Seminar can be used, adapted and modified by others.

Family well-being needs to become a central concern of the machinery of government. At present, families are everyone's concern but nobody's responsibility. There is no place policymakers can turn to obtain reliable information on families. To make wise policy decisions that affect family life policymakers need regular objective information and dispassionate analysis.

FIA, as broadly defined in this paper can be a useful tool for those working both inside and outside of government. But somebody has to decide whose responsibility it is to employ FIA. Clearly some kinds of new, or redefined existing units are required. Again, I like to use the analogy of the economy. In the U.S. government, many agencies have their own economic analysis unit, and within these economic specialists continuously inform the agency about the ways in which economic factors need to be taken into account. There is also a Council of Economic Advisors in the White House, which reports directly to the President, that conducts ongoing economic analyses for the nation as a whole and produces an invaluable economic report once a year.

In 1988, with COFO, we issued an *Open Letter to the Presidential Candidates*, recommending the creation of a Council of Family Advisers and of special family units within existing agency research and evaluation offices. We suggested that their function could be to:

1. Monitor, continuously and systematically, changing family trends and their implications for public policy.
2. Assess the impact of actual and proposed policies on family life.
3. Help develop and implement policies that are family-centered.

I still think that these recommendations make sense. But in the present U. S. political climate of downsizing the federal government, there is no chance that such recommendations will get a receptive hearing at the national level, although some state governments may move in this direction eventually. It is an encouraging sign that other governments are interested and I look forward to learning how the Belgian, or any other European government follows through with instituting a commitment to “family impact.”

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# Family Diversity and Contexts

*(Family Impact Assessment Tool #1)*

Policies and programs affect different aspects of family functioning for different kinds of families in different ways. This tool helps answer the question: What do we mean by the diversity of families? The schematic below lists the variety of family types, family contexts, and stages of the family life cycle.

## Family Types

### Socioeconomic Characteristics

- Education level
- Income level

### Structure

- Couple without dependent children
- married
- unmarried (cohabiting)
- Single-parent family household
  - never married
  - separated
  - divorced
  - widowed
- Two-parent family household
  - not married (cohabiting)
  - first marriage
  - remarriage/reconstituted family
- Foster family
- Adoptive family
- “Estranged” family
- Nuclear/extended/multigenerational household
- None/one/two/multiple wage earners

## **Family Life Cycle Stage**

(families can be at more than one stage at a time)

- No children
- Early formation—infants and preschoolers
- With school-age children
- With children in transition to adulthood
- With no dependent children
- With elderly dependents
- Elderly with adult children/grandchildren
- “Sandwich” generation—mid-life adults with both young and old dependents
- Families with a dependent with disabilities

## **Family Contexts**

- Ethnic/racial/cultural
- Religious
- Rural/suburban/urban
- Informal social network (friends and neighbors)

# Family Functions and Roles

## *(Family Impact Assessment Tool #2)*

Policies affect directly and indirectly many aspects of family functioning. Family impact assessments should analyze the effects of public policies on those aspects of family functioning that are valuable or important to the larger society. This tool helps answer: What are the primary social functions of families? Why do families matter to society? Those family functions not listed—like intimacy and emotional support—are dearly important, but are less likely to fall within the province of public policy. The primary social functions/roles of *families* are grouped into five broad categories:

- **Family Composition and Membership:** Families provide individuals with their basic personal identity, defining who they are and where they come from and assuring continuity across generations. (Government regulates this function through policies affecting childbirth, marriage, divorce, adoption, foster care, inheritance, etc.)
- **Economic Support:** Families provide economic support to meet their dependents' basic needs for shelter, food, clothing, and other expenses. (Government supplements this function for families at all income levels through various subsidies in the tax code and through income support and maintenance programs and in-kind subsidies.)
- **Childrearing:** Families rear and nurture the next generation to be productive members of society. Families are responsible for assuring children's safety, health, education, and general well-being and teaching them values and appropriate social behavior. (Government shares these responsibilities with families, sets minimal standards for parental behavior, and intervenes when these standards are not met.)
- **Protective Family Care Across the Life Cycle:** Although not required to by law, families still provide most of the care and concern for adults who are too frail, sick, or led to care for themselves. (Government supplements or supplants families who need help or are unwilling or unable to provide the care.)
- **Coordinating or Mediating Roles:** In order to carry out these various responsibilities, parents and other family members coordinate and manage complex relationships with a host of different providers of services. They must feel empowered to mediate these contacts to assure that the services are used effectively. (The highly professionalized, specialized, and categorical nature of many government programs can negatively affect families ability to coordinate and mediate these relationships.)

# Policy and Program Implementation

*(Family Impact Assessment Tool #3)*

Sources of Policy identifies the levels at which policies originate and, therefore, the primary levels points of intervention for change. Implementation Dimensions constitute the program components that shape the ways that policies are implemented—and, hence, the ways programs directly affect families.

## Sources of Policy (Levels and Points of Intervention)

Law	Federal, state, and local statutes /ordinances (and as interpreted by courts),
Regulations	Requirements that are promulgated in the executive branch (at federal, state, and local levels) to implement laws.
Budget	Actual allocations of money to different programs.
Administrative and Professional Practices	Memoranda and decisions that have no statutory or regulatory base; professional and bureaucratic traditions and procedures.

## Implementation Dimensions

Governance	Who makes the implementation decisions and how are the decisions made?
Mission and Goals	Statement of philosophy, goals, and objectives.
Financing	Nature and type of funding (e.g., open-ended entitlement, matching grants)
Administration	Contract, procurement, and personnel systems; supervisory and accountability structure.
Staffing	Qualifications and training of staff; job descriptions; staff development plans.
Service Models	Assumptions, targets, and models of service delivery.
Data Collection	Planning, monitoring, and accountability. What data are collected? How is it used? How does it coordinate with other related data?
Program Evaluation	What family benchmark and outcome measures are collected? What program benchmark and outcome measures?

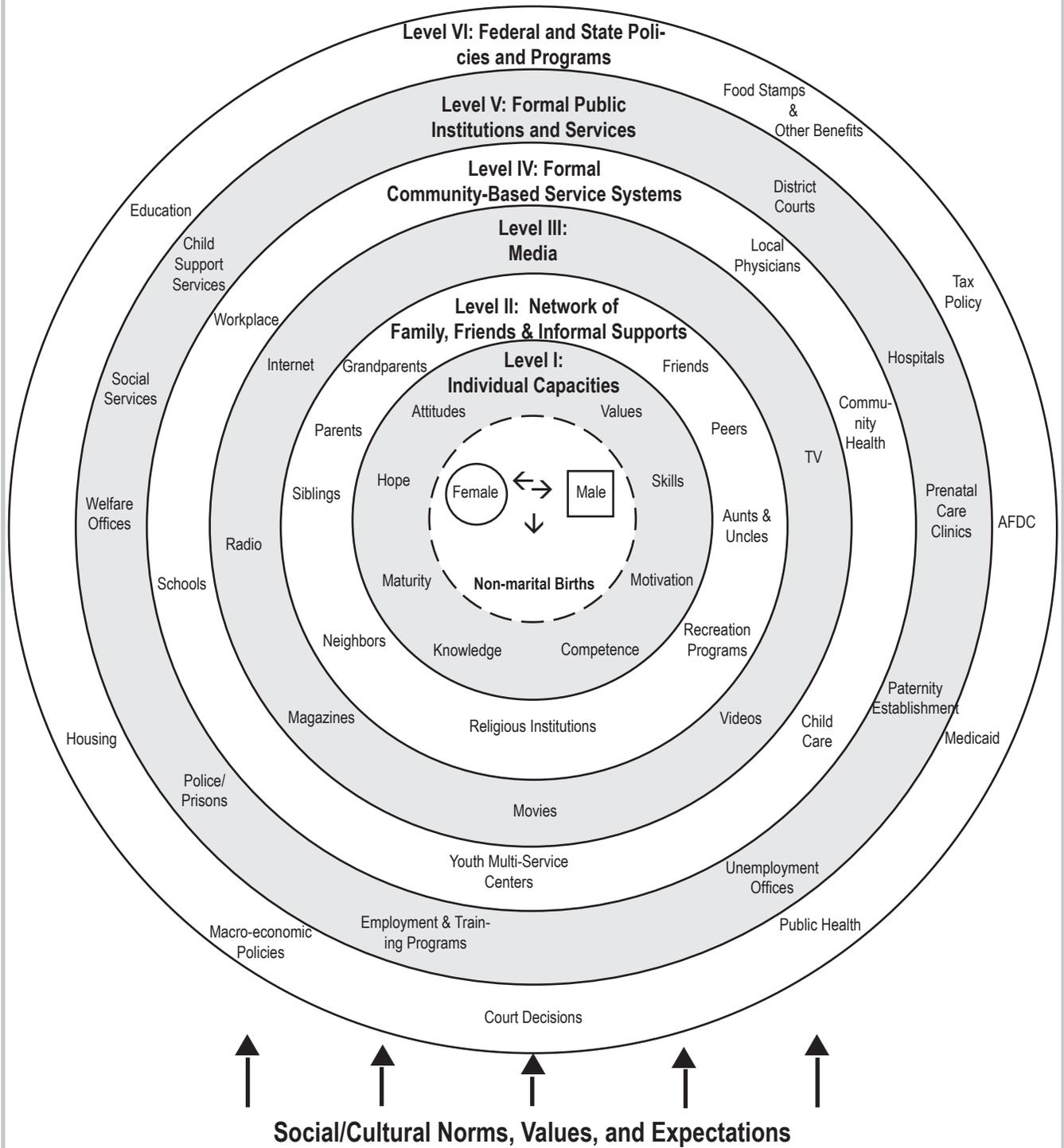
# **A Checklist for Assessing the Impact of Policies on Families**

*(Family Impact Assessment Tool #4)*

***Please go to:***

**[http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/fi\\_checklist\\_aipf.pdf](http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/fi_checklist_aipf.pdf)**

# Chart I Factors that Influence Non-marital Births: An Ecological Framework



From Ooms, T. (1995). "Strategies to Reduce Nonmarital Childbearing," in *Report to Congress on Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services.