

KEY MESSAGES
RECOMMENDATIONS

Invisible Labor, Visible Needs: Making Family Policy Work for Stay-At-Home (And All) Parents

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Stay-at-home parents provide incredibly valuable services to their families, the U.S. economy, and the country at large:

- They care for many of America's children, help provide the social infrastructure that strengthens families and communities, and frequently serve as an informal social safety net—such as by caring for the elderly and contributing through volunteer work.
- However, their value is largely invisible: policymakers rarely recognize it, it's omitted from key economic indicators, and it's often overlooked in discussions of family policy.
- The report aims to make these invisible parents “visible.” We prioritized speaking and surveying stay-at-home parents themselves to understand their needs and concerns, who they are, and the vital role they play.

2. To continue providing care to their families and communities, stay-at-home parents want and need government support:

- At least three-quarters expressed a desire for government action, whether through targeted support for health care and housing, more community-based drop-in child care options, or direct cash stipends.
- Notably, nearly 60% of those surveyed need external child care monthly or more frequently.
- Our focus groups indicated that many parents need care to attend medical appointments or maintain their well-being and connections to others.
- Both stay-at-home parents and working parents need the U.S. to have a functional child care system—one that offers viable, high-quality options, is appropriately funded, and is adaptable to families' needs and preferences.

3. Today's stay-at-home parents are not who conventional wisdom says they are:

- They are demographically diverse—nearly half are people of color, about one-third are immigrants, and a third live below the poverty line. Politically, in our survey they were nearly evenly split between Democrats, Republicans, and a significant number of independents.
- Nearly one in five stay-at-home parents is a father.
- Parents' motivations for staying home are varied, from deeply held religious beliefs to the unaffordably high cost of external child care or having a child with a complex medical condition.

4. Supporting stay-at-home parents represents a rare opportunity for bipartisan cooperation:

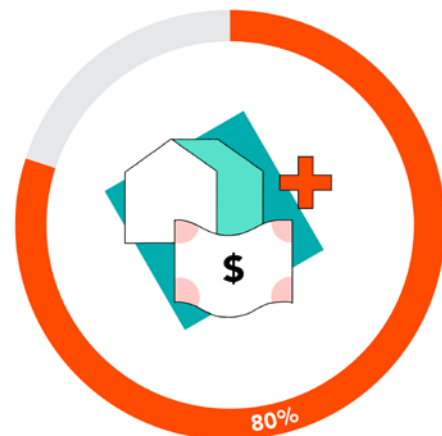
- All politicians have constituents who are stay-at-home parents.
- Our conversations with left-leaning and right-leaning child care and family policy experts and advocates reveal a broad philosophical openness to considering policy options that include stay-at-home parents.
- While the groups disagree on specifics, there is potential for common ground on a stronger overall family policy that begins with including stay-at-home parents.

One-third of families in the U.S. with at least one child under 12 have a **stay-at-home parent** providing primary child care during the day, whether or not they do paid work. That's nearly 7.5 million families.



7.5 million families

More than 80% of parents we surveyed wanted **government support** in making health care and housing more affordable, as well as securing a path to retirement and providing direct cash payments.



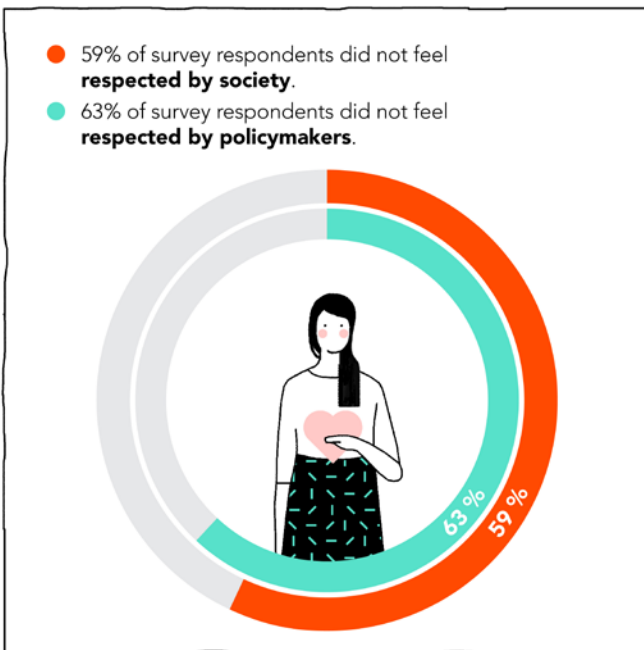
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING STAY-AT-HOME PARENTS

As we considered what policies should be adopted to support stay-at-home parents, we were careful to consider these parents as members of larger communities: families, extended families, neighborhoods, social and religious groups, etc.

Good family policy, in our view, shouldn't just connect isolated nuclear families to the state. It should empower and support social connections among and between families and their larger communities in ways that promote agency, resilience, and flourishing. Thus, as we considered policy objectives and the mechanisms to achieve them, we focused on allowing families to make decisions for themselves—with true choices, not the illusion of choices—and to form tight community bonds (which our research shows they deeply value). Making it easier for families to choose a stay-at-home parent also strengthens America's extended family and community networks, which is a crucial societal benefit.

Our analysis leads to the following policy recommendations for lawmakers. We also strongly believe that politicians and policymakers can greatly support these families merely by discussing them and the social resources they contribute as they consider policy reforms. Stay-at-home parents have long been invisible; it's time for our elected representatives to help make them visible.

As a final reminder, this report focuses on public policy and thus our recommendations are targeted toward the makers of public policy.



Our recommendations:

- Congress should commission studies and/or hold hearings on stay-at-home parents and their needs.
- Governments at every level should work with communities to strengthen drop-in and part-time child care offerings. These programs create a key source of ad hoc child care.
- Governments at every level should strengthen family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers. These caregivers are frequently preferred and utilized by stay-at-home parents.
- Governments at all levels should be aware that a top priority for families with a stay-at-home parent is housing costs.
- Congress and the states should continue to explore well-designed paid family leave laws. The U.S. is a major outlier among peer nations in having no national paid family leave law.
- As Congress and federal administrative agencies tackle health care reforms, they should ensure that the reforms benefit both families with parents working outside the home and those with a parent at home. Areas of focus might include making birth more affordable and ensuring rural parents can access physical and mental health care.
- Congress should consider offering a home care stipend or other direct payments to stay-at-home parents, above and beyond the Child Tax Credit.
- Congress should provide stay-at-home parents with caregiver credits toward Social Security.
- Congress should make stay-at-home parents eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).
- Congress should consider more fully incorporating stay-at-home parents into the tax code, most notably including them in any upcoming reforms to the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit.



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