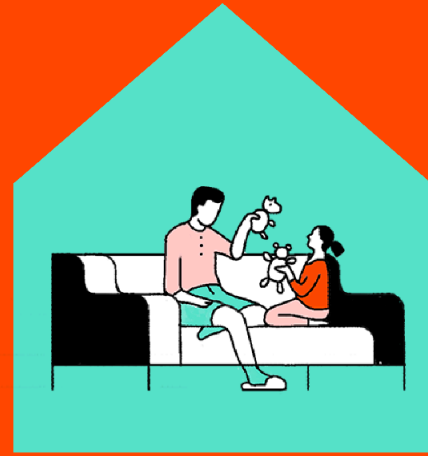


Invisible Labor, Visible Needs: Making Family Policy Work for Stay-At-Home (And All) Parents

By Ivana Greco and Elliot Haspel



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 in four respondents 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.

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- 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.

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Introduction

Stay-at-home parents occupy a strange place in modern American society. They number in the millions, yet their vital contributions to communities and economies go uncounted.¹ They provide an immense amount of child care every day, especially for infants and toddlers, yet they are largely ignored in child care and other family policy conversations. Their well-being has powerful ripple effects both within and beyond their families, yet little attention is paid to their well-being by our nation's leaders. At the same time, stay-at-home parents are often treated as political sabers, sometimes to cast doubt on proposals to strengthen external child care, sometimes to suggest that politicians want to pursue a retrograde agenda.

In all of these conversations, a crucial voice is missing: that of stay-at-home parents themselves. (We define stay-at-home parents as providers of primary care during the day for one or more children under 12; see the sidebar below for more detail.) A very different picture emerges when we listen to the stories, preferences, and needs of stay-at-home parents. Stay-at-home parents are a diverse group in every sense of the word. Some are home because of deeply held religious beliefs or because they have a child with a complex medical condition. Some are home because they cannot find an affordable child care situation that would allow them to work outside the home. What's more, being a stay-at-home parent is not a static state: life circumstances can, and frequently do, create a dynamic flow between staying home and working outside the home.

Most of all, stay-at-home parents want and deserve both societal respect and societal support. The title of this report comes from a stay-at-home dad in one of our focus groups, who told us: "I've done a lot of difficult things in my life. This is definitely the hardest, at least near the top, and it's invisible. That's the big thing." If America is to be a truly inclusive country with a family policy that, as the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once suggested, "promote[s] the stability and well-being of the American family,"² then the time has come to take stay-at-home parents on their own terms and to craft responsive public policy. This report is one part of a broader initiative to help the country do so.

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Indeed, the so-called Mommy Wars between stay-at-home and “working” mothers are misguided. Understanding stay-at-home parents, and creating public policy that allows them and their families to flourish, should be part of a comprehensive approach to family policy. This is not an entirely novel idea: over the last 25 years, members of both political parties have put forth proposals to support stay-at-home parents, though most have been lost to the dustbin of public policy history.

To be clear, nothing in this report should be construed as arguing against a robust external, choice-based system of licensed child care programs. These licensed programs exist in a state the U.S. Treasury Department calls “[market failure](#),”³ while the median wage of child care educators is among the [lowest 5% of all occupations](#);⁴ the system desperately needs support and reform. A truly pluralistic and inclusive family policy will honor both families with stay-at-home parents *and* those in which all available parents work outside the home.

We note that our existing system of support for stay-at-home parents, particularly portions of our federal tax code and the spousal Social Security retirement payment, may work well for wealthy families. They are not the target of this report. As discussed below, this system is not working well (or at all), for middle, working class, or lower-income families, who are also those [most likely](#) to want to have a parent caring for their children at home in the early years.

Similarly, the aim of our recommendations is not to guarantee that every family who wants to have a parent at home can do so (particularly outside of infancy or other special circumstances like the presence of a medically complex child). That may be a goal that policymakers or advocates elect to pursue. Our aim, rather, is to move toward a society that gives all families more flexibility and support in making choices that work for them—and in turn, strengthens all of society.

Sidebar:

DEFINING STAY-AT-HOME PARENTS

There is no single established definition of a stay-at-home parent. Is it someone who does zero paid work? What about a nurse or janitor who works a night shift and then is home during the day with their toddler? How about a homeschooling mom of elementary-aged children who also works a full-time remote job? Given our research interests and our focus on child care policy, we use the following working definition for this project:

A stay-at-home parent is a parent or legal guardian who provides primary care during the day for at least one child under the age of 12.

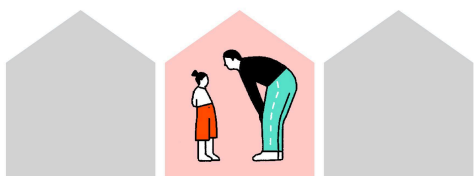
Our definition includes those who do some amount of paid work, so long as they are regularly providing substantial primary child care during daytime periods when the child would otherwise need a nonparental caregiver. We excluded individuals working full-time from the survey, but

included them in our focus groups. Under this definition, using available data sources, we estimate that approximately one-third of families in the U.S. with at least one child under the age of 12 have a stay-at-home parent, representing nearly 7.5 million families.⁵ There are relatively more stay-at-home parents among families with very young children. (We explore the demographics of stay-at-home parents in detail later in this report.)

We also note that even the terminology in this area is fraught. “Stay-at-home parent” does not capture the full breadth of contributions such an individual makes, and it stands in uncomfortable contrast to the

common phrase “working parent.” Alternatives such as “homemaker” also raise a variety of reactions. Thus, acknowledging its many imperfections, we have opted to use “stay-at-home parent” in this project.

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**

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Our research plan

This report summarizes the findings of phase one of our project. This phase involved level-setting research and analysis using four data sources:

- A survey of stay-at-home parents with children 0-12 years old was commissioned by Capita and administered by the polling firm Ipsos in May 2024. This survey reached a nationally representative sample of 1,502 stay-at-home parents and asked about their experiences and preferences. (Details about the survey methodology can be found in [Appendix 1](#).)
- Four focus groups of stay-at-home parents. The focus group protocol was developed by a qualitative research specialist at the consulting firm Openfields. The groups covered different populations: one for individuals in a rural community in North Carolina; one for Hispanic individuals in New Mexico (conducted in Spanish); and two virtual groups with individuals across the U.S. who report religious motivation as their primary reason for being a stay-at-home parent. (Details about the focus groups can be found in [Appendix 2](#).)
- Group conversations with national-level policy experts and advocates. We held separate small group meetings in August and September 2024 with representatives from organizations that are politically center to left of center (facilitated by Haspel) and center to right of center (facilitated by Greco), with the goal of uncovering these influential individuals' perspectives on stay-at-home parents. The conversations followed the Chatham House Rule, meaning that we report here general themes but, to ensure that people could give their honest views, do not identify any individuals or organizations.
- Desk research reviewing existing literature on stay-at-home parents, legislative history, and approaches taken by other countries.

This report synthesizes our findings. Additional study is needed. As this is only the first phase of a broader body of work, we therefore also suggest areas for future research. That said, we have enough data to put forth conclusions, as well as policy recommendations, with both intellectual humility and reasonable

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confidence. We look forward to conducting additional research in a second phase of this project, which should allow us to further confirm or adjust our findings.

Sidebar:

OUR BROADER PROJECT: HOW THIS REPORTS FITS IN

This paper focuses on public policy and offers recommendations for policymakers. We plan to publish follow-up briefs in the coming months that will explore ways that other groups across society, from employers to institutions of higher education to community-based organizations and more, can provide holistic support for families with a stay-at-home parent.

Sidebar:

A BIPARTISAN INITIATIVE

Capita is an independent, nonpartisan think tank. Given the deeply polarized nature of this topic, we thought it essential to bring together different perspectives for our exploration. To that end, the project is co-led by senior fellows Elliot Haspel and Ivana Greco. Haspel is a child care policy expert with a progressive viewpoint; Greco is a homeschooling mother, lawyer, and family policy scholar who comes from a conservative viewpoint. Despite their political differences, the pair sees common cause in the issue of stay-at-home parents, as well as opportunities to strengthen all American families by addressing these questions.

Stay-at-home parents and the American story

No understanding of the American story is complete without appreciating the key role of those committed to the work of the home. For most of American history, this critical work was almost always done by women.

Before the American Industrial Revolution, small farming families understood that the labor of housewives was integral to the family's household economy. As Ruth Schwartz Cowan explains in her classic text *More Work for Mother* (1983), the

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success of these small farms “depended on the hard work of both men and women.”⁶ Such families simply could not survive without the invaluable contributions of “women’s work,” which might include growing small kitchen gardens; preparing and preserving food; spinning wool; weaving cloth; milking the family cow; caring for babies, toddlers, the sick, and the elderly; and countless other tasks.

Indeed, the success of the American Revolutionary War was also due in part to the young country’s women, who (among other things) formed associations to support the Continental Army and spun wool to clothe its soldiers—and to disrupt British textile manufacturing. As Cokie Roberts points out in her 2004 book *Founding Mothers*, “It’s safe to say that most of the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, fought the Revolution, and formed the government couldn’t have done it without the women.”⁷ This unpaid family household labor was, of course, frequently either supplemented or replaced in wealthier families by the work of enslaved Black women or hired help. Still, the earliest years of the American Republic were deeply formed by the work of housewives and the extended female family in a household.

Once America industrialized, however, less value was put on the skilled work performed by women at home. As men left small farms to join the paid workforce, women and men began to operate in “separate spheres”: the commercial and the domestic. (Again, it should be noted that this separation articulated differently along lines of race and class: women of color, immigrant women, and poor women have long faced a conflicting set of societal expectations when it comes to commercial work.) Technological advancements and manufacturing began to replace the work women had traditionally done at home. At the same time, as scholar Erika Bachiochi has noted, there was “a loss of status for homemaking and a loss of identity and purpose for the homemaking mother.”⁸

Thus, by the time the United States became a fully industrial economy in the 20th century, household labor was not included in the key economic metrics that would form the GDP. The metric’s originator, Simon Kuznets, recognized that this was a significant omission, lamenting that he could not account for the “services of housewives and other members of the family.”⁹ As the U.S. Bureau of Economic

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Analysis has pointed out, household labor—if included—would add over *four trillion dollars* (in today's money) to our country's GDP.¹⁰ But, of course, it is not.

This literal and figurative devaluation of the work of the home meant that our social safety nets were generally developed without adequate protections for stay-at-home mothers. Among other things, mothers who remained out of the workforce were often disadvantaged when it came to accessing government or employee benefits if they became disabled, outlived their husbands, or got divorced. These impacts were also usually felt most acutely by those already socially disadvantaged, including women of color and immigrants.

Partially in response to the lack of social safety nets for moms at home—as well as the influence of other factors, such as structural economic shifts and changes in women's legal status—women began moving into the workforce in large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, many second-wave feminists—while rightly fighting for women's access to equal rights and equal opportunities in the workforce—devalued the work of caregiving and homemaking. Betty Friedan, for example, has been [criticized](#) because she “missed—indeed, she contributed to—the frustrations many women felt due to a cultural climate that constantly denigrated mothers and homemakers.”¹¹ There was a (unsuccessful) push for high-quality child care for working mothers, but no sustained efforts to respect or support those families who wanted or needed to care for their children at home. Instead, in the 1990s and 2000s, American women sometimes seemed torn apart by the “Mommy Wars,” in which mothers at home and mothers in the paid workforce saw themselves in conflict.

In 2024, the Mommy Wars may have died down, but many unresolved issues remain around child care and the work of the home. For instance, a majority of American women work outside the home—but simultaneously, many if not most children under a year old are cared for at home. The contours have also changed: there has been a significant rise in the number of stay-at-home fathers, and the COVID-19 pandemic threw into stark relief both the importance of home caregiving and issues of paid child care.

Indeed, both the Left and the Right increasingly recognize that while paid work is critically important, caregiving and the work of the home are also very important

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to many women—and many men. At the same time, the American economy continues to make it exceedingly difficult for most families to live on one earner's income. It is beyond the scope of this report to discuss all the ways that wages are kept artificially low, even as child care costs consume a great deal of a two-earner family's income (something identified by now-Senator Elizabeth Warren in 2004 as part of the "two-income trap"¹²). Yet the factors influencing income are a key contour shaping the choices—or lack of choices—facing American parents.¹³

Discussions about "work-life balance," respect for those who do unpaid work at home, and the key role of the family are kitchen table issues across the political spectrum. Yet both Democratic and Republican politicians have generally ignored the needs and wants of stay-at-home parents (with some exceptions we discuss below). The nation can do better.

Conclusion 1: Stay-at-home parents are not who conventional wisdom says they are

Our media often suggests that stay-at-home parents are wealthy (primarily white) women who stay home out of preference to enjoy a life of luxury. For example, the *Real Housewives* franchise has become tremendously popular since *The Real Housewives of Orange County* first began airing in 2006. The first season described "women who are living lives of privilege and indulgence, replete with gorgeous homes, privileged offspring, and fabulous bling."¹⁴

This view of stay-at-home moms and dads has little to do with reality. The "real" stay-at-home parents of America, in contrast to those on TV, are often struggling economically. They come from diverse backgrounds, as well as from all parts of the political spectrum. Most stay-at-home parents are also incredibly hardworking—often combining part-time (or even full-time!) jobs with the full-time care of their children.

Stay-at-home parents are tremendously diverse

As discussed above, we surveyed 1,502 stay-at-home parents with the aid of the survey firm Ipsos. Of our respondents, 54% were white, 21% were Hispanic, 10% were Asian, 10% were Black, and the remainder self-identified as "other." In

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general, this breakdown indicates that stay-at-home parents come from a wide variety of backgrounds and are not confined to one ethnic or racial group. Overall, the demographics of our surveyed parents were roughly similar to the general U.S. population of parents with children 0-12 years old, with possibly a slightly greater representation of Hispanic parents. This matches other research, including [research](#) indicating that Hispanic parents are particularly likely to want their children to be cared for at home—and least likely to use paid child care.¹⁵ Other research [also suggests](#) that around one-third of stay-at-home parents live below the poverty line and around one-third are immigrants.¹⁶

Sidebar:

SNAPSHOT OF AN IMMIGRANT STAY-AT-HOME MOM

In our focus groups, we spoke with many stay-at-home parents of diverse backgrounds. In our Spanish-language group, we got a picture of how important being a stay-at-home mom is to one woman who had immigrated to the United States from Guatemala, leaving behind her four-year-old daughter. She had not been able to participate much in her daughter's upbringing, making it particularly meaningful to her to be a stay-at-home mother to her young son, born in the U.S.

I'm from Guatemala, I have two children, the oldest is 24 and I have a nine-year-old boy....I had to leave my country and I had to leave my daughter when she was four. Honestly, I advise all parents to make the most of your time with your children. It was hard for me because I wasn't there while she was growing up and she needed me. I became an overprotective mother with my son, because I wanted to give him what I couldn't give her, being there for him like I couldn't with her.

Stay-at-home parents have a wide range of reasons for wanting to care for their children at home

The parents we spoke with reflected a wide range of reasons for staying home. Some had reasons that many parents can relate to, involving their desire to spend more time with their children, especially when the children are very young. Other reasons were particular to their family's needs. For instance, many reported having

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children with special needs or medical issues. One mother told us that it was particularly important to stay home because initially her daughter was in four therapy sessions a week. She said it “would’ve been a huge deal if I had to take four hours off a week for work and I don’t have to worry about balancing that.” Other parents spoke of having children with autism, birth injuries, and speech delays that required special care that would be hard to manage or provide if they had been working outside the home.

Another mother told us that her husband was in the armed forces. Due to frequent moves and the nature of her husband’s job, as well as the fact that they had 9 children, she and her husband decided it made sense for her to homeschool. This family considers their Jewish faith to be a core value but found it prohibitively expensive to send their children to Jewish day schools.

Over and over again, we heard from parents who considered being home with their children to be a special, irreplaceable experience. Some parents had always planned to stay home with their children. Others had initially planned to continue to work with their children in external child care, but found that separating from their infants was more painful than they expected. One mother told us that when she went back to work: “I was literally just in tears, in the car, just crying. And I never thought that would be me. I definitely thought that I was going to be a working mom.” She said that finding out that she wanted to stay home was “kind of a shock,” but being home with her young child was rewarding and meaningful.

Sidebar:

WHAT ARE PARENTS' PREFERENCES AROUND WORK AND CARE?

The best way to understand parents' preferences around working outside the home versus being a stay-at-home parent is to ask them. While it is difficult to get a clear answer (as so many variables go into the decision), a few surveys in recent years have made an attempt. The broad story they tell is one that runs throughout this report: parents' preferences vary widely, and one size will never fit all.

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For instance, in 2022 the center-right think tank Institute for Family Studies asked mothers for their “ideal situation.” (this question was asked of mothers with children under 18, not just under age 12, as in our project.) The survey found that 42% had an ideal of full-time work, 32% of part-time work, and 22% of no paid work.¹⁷ These numbers are similar to a 2019 Pew survey in which half of mothers said it would be “best for them” at the moment to be working full-time, 30% said working part-time, and around 20% said not working for pay.¹⁸ (This breakdown would not, of course, capture all the mothers we at Capita consider to be “stay-at-home” if they have primary daytime childcare responsibilities but also work either part-time or full-time).

The Institute for Family Studies survey also found a substantial variation by both education level and partisan identification. For instance, while 6% of Democratic mothers with a bachelor's degree or higher had an ideal of staying home, this was true for 15% of their Republican college-educated counterparts, 25% of Democratic mothers without a college degree, and 28% of Republican mothers without a college degree. This is an area where more detailed quantitative and qualitative research is desperately needed.

Many stay-at-home parents are now male

As we move through the 21st century, stay-at-home parents are no longer only women. Twenty-one percent of our survey respondents were men. This matches [other research](#) showing that an increasing number of stay-at-home parents are male.¹⁹ Both our survey and our focus groups indicated that stay-at-home fathers faced unique challenges and were looking for different support than stay-at-home moms. Of particular note, 76% of surveyed dads indicated that they would return to work if they had access to affordable child care. (They were not asked to indicate if their preference was for part- or full-time work.)

In our focus groups, we also spoke with fathers who did not want to return to work and were passionately committed to being home with their young children. Still, these dads reported serious challenges and concerns. Among other things, they reported feeling especially socially isolated because most stay-at-home parents are women. They noted that it was hard to join groups of moms, and that sometimes they were viewed with suspicion at playgrounds and libraries. These results are in line with other research that has found that stay-at-home fathers

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frequently derive great happiness and meaning from their time with their children, yet feel sad and stressed in adult contexts.²⁰ This indicates to us that society has not adjusted to the growing trend of stay-at-home fathers.

Sidebar:

SNAPSHOT OF A STAY-AT-HOME DAD

We spoke with one father who believed—along with his wife—that it was important that one parent be home full-time with the children. They decided it made sense for him to be the parent at home while his wife pursued her career. He felt that it was very challenging to be a stay-at-home dad:

I feel like in some ways I'm in this weird social black hole. I know obviously I see other dads here [in the focus group], but I don't know a single other stay-at-home dad in my family, in my community. And so sometimes I wonder if people are secretly judging me in that way. But let's just be out front about the fact that being a stay-at-home parent is ridiculously hard. I've done a lot of difficult things in my life. This is definitely the hardest, at least near the top, and it's invisible. That's the big thing.

Conclusion 2: Stay-at-home parents contribute significantly to society, yet feel undervalued and are struggling financially

Stay-at-home parents are tremendously valuable to our society. In addition to contributing to their own families, many of these parents also care for elderly relatives, participate in significant volunteer work, and even provide a sort of child care safety net for others, watching neighbors' or friends' children when school is closed or other unexpected care emergencies occur.

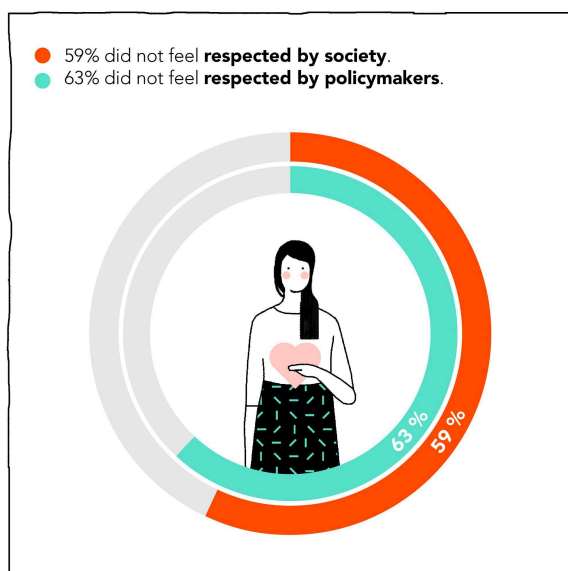
Indeed, if America's child care system is considered holistically, stay-at-home parents are among the largest "providers" of child care in the country. Fifty-eight percent of infants under one year old [have no regular weekly child care arrangement](#), meaning their child care likely involves a parent; the same goes for

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41% of all children five and under who are not yet in kindergarten.²¹ Our external child care system of licensed child care, preschool, etc. could be considered a “visible” child care system—but our economy and society depend heavily on the “invisible” system of child care provided by parents at home (as well as family, friends, and neighbors). Put another way, if all the parents currently at home suddenly decided to join the workforce and place their children in paid child care, the external child care system would fail.

Nevertheless, there is little recognition among policymakers or researchers of the key role parents at home play in the functioning of American business capacity, child development, or social cohesiveness. These impacts don’t usually appear in national metrics or statistics and so they mostly go ignored. Indeed, many of our survey respondents do paid work *in addition to* all the unpaid labor they provide for their families and the larger society. Twenty-seven percent of the parents we surveyed had either a part-time job or were self-employed. Our focus group participants reported working in a wide variety of occupations, including weekend factory shift work, ad hoc jobs like giving music lessons, or project-based work based on a prior full-time job.



Notably, our survey participants said they feel unappreciated. Fifty-nine percent did not feel respected by society. Sixty-three percent did not feel respected by policymakers. This is concordant with other research, such as a [2023 Mother/Untitled survey](#) of college-educated stay-at-home parents which found that nearly 80% agreed that “most people don’t understand the work that goes into being a stay-at-home mom,” while 68% felt underappreciated.²²

Many parents were clear with us that they were struggling.

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Sidebar:

STAY-AT-HOME PARENTS OFTEN STRUGGLE

Many of the stay-at-home parents we spoke with were candid that they struggle with day-to-day life, especially when their children are very young or after the birth of their first child. One mother of young children told us:

Because I think sometimes, at least for me, even though I was a stay-at-home mom, I was literally trying to keep my head above water every single day, and I really didn't. I felt like I didn't have time to sit on a computer after my kids had gone to bed to look up resources. Now I know we should be proactive and stuff, but it would've been nice or it would be nice to get some of that information from doctors' offices or even just a check-in like, Hey, how are you doing, mom? You're new at this. I get it.

In our survey, half of respondents said they could rarely or never meet an unexpected \$400 expense without dipping into savings. Both the survey and our focus groups indicated that poorer parents struggled particularly with making ends meet, finding good jobs, and affording housing. Parents with stronger finances struggled most with health care, affording retirement, and the lack of social respect they encountered.

Sidebar:

HOUSING AND MAKING ENDS MEET ARE A PARTICULAR CHALLENGE FOR FAMILIES WITH A STAY-AT-HOME PARENT AND MANY CHILDREN

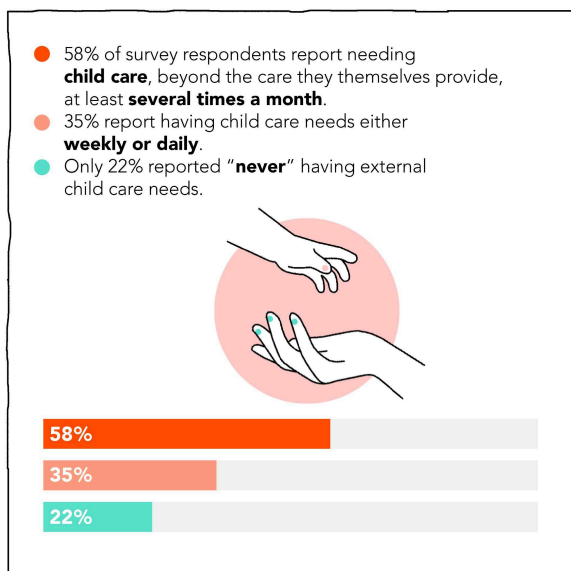
For families with many children that have a stay-at-home parent, the family budget is often very tight. A stay-at-home mother of 7 whose husband has an advanced degree and a stable job told us that her family still struggles to afford gas, groceries, and housing costs, even though they are very grateful to be covered by Medicaid:

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So we're a little bit stuck in terms of housing even though what we have is adequate for our needs now....We have four kids in one bedroom and three in the other. So it's a tight squeeze. My kids were like, What's going to happen when you have another baby? And I was like, I think we're going to have to start sharing beds. And my little daughter was like, I'll share a bed with the baby. And I was like, Oh, you're so sweet. So housing is kind of an issue. We're not saving for retirement at all. And then we still feel like a little bit of a pinch with groceries and just schooling. We homeschool, so we have a little bit of extra out-of-pocket expenses for books and tuition, but even gas, sometimes I'm like, I'm sorry, I can't come to that family gathering an hour and a half away. I literally just can't afford the gas to get there. So yeah, all of those other areas are a pain, but really, thankfully we're covered on the medical expenses and I do, like I say, I almost cry when I think about it because it's been huge.

Conclusion 3: Stay-at-home parents have child care needs too

Conventional wisdom holds that families with stay-at-home parents do not need child care outside of the family; seemingly, a parent is always available. At times, this construct can lead to perceived or actual societal disapproval of stay-at-home parents who use external child care.²³ As one stay-at-home mother told the news



site *Motherly*, "There is some judgment of why you would need child care if you aren't going to work. I think there is also the judgment that you chose to have children and stay at home so why do you need a break if this is what you wanted."²⁴

Our research reveals that stay-at-home parents in fact have widespread child care needs. Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents report needing child care, beyond the care they

themselves provide, at least several times a month. Thirty-five percent report having child care needs either weekly or daily. Only 22% reported “never” having external child care needs.

Stay-at-home parents’ child care needs are tied to the health and well-being of both adults and children

Our focus groups illustrate that the reasons behind these child care needs vary. Some parents report needing short-term care for older children while they recover from childbirth, while others need occasional care for date nights or to support a part-time job. A common reason was parents’ need to take care of their own health and well-being. As a parent said in one of the focus groups for religiously motivated individuals, “The hardest child care appointments to fill are when I have a doctor appointment that I’d really rather not bring a two-year-old to, and it’s in the middle of the day when my husband’s working; if his family’s not available, it gets really tricky.” Another mother told us she was concerned about becoming pregnant again without access to reliable child care because her pregnancies are so challenging. A related challenge cited by several participants across focus groups was the need for care for a given child’s siblings when that child had a medical appointment, particularly if the child had a condition that required recurring appointments.

It’s worth emphasizing that full-time parenting, while it may be motivated by love, is labor. Even without an appointment to make, stay-at-home parents sometimes need breaks, and breaks in this context require care from either family, friends, or some form of external child care. One participant of the Hispanic focus group noted that, “As full-time moms, even though we don’t go to work, and I talk from experience, it is hard to be home with three or four children from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. or whenever they finally get to sleep. It’s difficult not to have a moment for yourself, take a bath, eat a hot meal, without being interrupted.” The participant added shortly afterwards, “Nobody cares for the mental health of those mothers that live 24/7 at home with their children.”

Moreover, ensuring that stay-at-home parents have access to child care may improve not only their physical and mental health, but also the healthy development of their children. Research suggests that parents can experience an

“exhaustion effect” when they do not have access to high-quality help from others, which can lead to lower levels of parenting quality and a higher risk for child maltreatment and parental depression.²⁵ In contrast, one paper found that reducing parenting hours by 9 to 13 hours per week for parents who otherwise did not have help, by offering high-quality child care, had a substantial benefit for children’s outcomes. It concluded that for unsupported parents (particularly those who face other struggles), “allowing parents to parent less may allow them to parent better.”²⁶ The U.S. Surgeon General [noted in a 2024 advisory](#) the high levels of stress under which American parents operate and the many links between parents’ well-being and children’s well-being.²⁷

Finally, the lack of available and affordable child care can be a barrier to stay-at-home parents choosing the work-care situation that they consider ideal for them and their families. In our survey, around 70% of respondents said they would pick up more work outside the home if they had access to more affordable external child care. This finding calls for much further study—for instance, we did not ask respondents to detail their preferred number of paid work hours if such external child care were available—but it is clear that child care is a substantial influence on stay-at-home parents’ decision-making around paid work. Additional analysis of survey data indicated that certain demographic groups, such as Asian parents (86% of those surveyed), were particularly likely to want to participate in paid work if they had access to affordable child care. As discussed above, stay-at-home fathers (76% of surveyed dads) were also particularly likely to wish to return to work with access to affordable child care.

In our focus groups, several parents also spontaneously brought up concerns about returning to work once their children were older. Some parents were concerned that they would have difficulty finding a job if they wanted to return to the workforce.

What kind of child care do stay-at-home parents prefer?

While this question also requires further exploration, both the survey and focus groups revealed a consistent preference for and use of caregivers who are family, friends, or neighbors (FFNs). This preference was frequently related to questions of trust, although affordability also played a role; as one rural mother said, “If it wasn’t for grandmas, we couldn’t afford child care.” The mistrust of alternatives

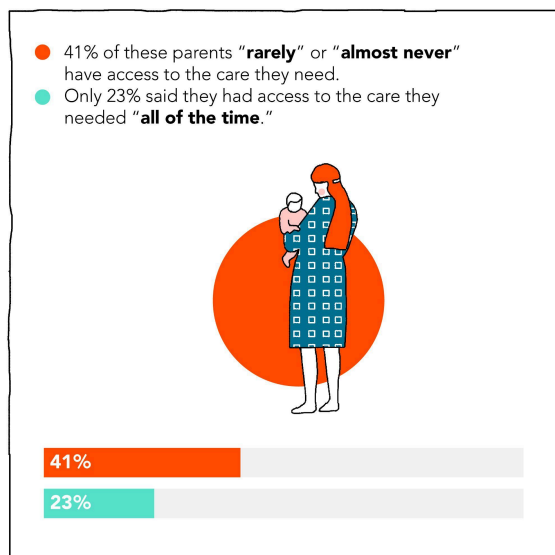
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stemmed from various sources, ranging from a bad experience in a licensed child care program to fear of leaving children with what are seen as near-strangers to concern about others' ability to effectively care for a child with special needs. As one mother in the rural focus group said, outside of the individuals in her community parent support group, "the only people I trust with my kids are my husband, my dad, and my stepmom."

That said, a fair number of stay-at-home parents also want, and do use, licensed child care programs. This appears to be particularly true for stay-at-home parents who work part-time or overnight shifts. One participant in the Hispanic focus group noted that after attending several subpar programs, her children had attended a publicly funded preschool center. She described it as "a beautiful place, excellent," adding that, "None of the teachers spoke Spanish, but they were lovely and kind with my children. They learned to speak English there."

Interestingly, some stay-at-home parents contribute to the broader child care sector by becoming FFN caregivers themselves (i.e., taking in a small number of unrelated children) or even registered family child care providers.²⁸ While existing data is not representative and should be interpreted with caution, one study found that one-third of current registered family child providers, and over half of former registered family child care providers, care or cared for their own children alongside those of other families.²⁹



The care needs of stay-at-home parents—whatever its source—are often irregular. They need more drop-in care or part-time hours compared to families where all parents work full-time outside the home. In seeking care, however, stay-at-home parents face major challenges. Our survey found that 41% of these parents "rarely" or "almost never" have access to the care they need. Only 23% said they had access to the care they needed "all of the time."

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This imbalance is partially caused by the fact that stay-at-home parents must reckon with the same broken child care marketplace that other parents face. As noted, the U.S. Treasury Department says child care [is in market failure](#) and has low supply despite high demand, while steep costs combined with limited public assistance put open slots out of reach for many families. Finding programs that are high quality and culturally responsive can be an extra challenge.

The U.S. child care system also has meager ad hoc care options. Some commentators have noted that gyms are arguably the nation's best source of drop-in care. It is rarely economically feasible to offer part-time child care, so many licensed child care programs do not offer this option. Programs dedicated to drop-in care do exist but are few and far between.

Finally, the U.S. provides exceptionally little support for FFN caregivers.³⁰ Fewer than two in 10 FFN caregivers receive any above-the-table pay. While these caregivers are technically eligible to receive government reimbursement through the Child Care and Development Fund if they are caring for a low-income child, the enrollment process is arduous and reimbursements can be as low as \$15 a day.³¹ The lack of robust support for FFNs can put a major strain on those individuals' own finances and well-being, making it difficult for them to offer consistent care.

Ultimately, stay-at-home parents—just like parents working outside the home—need a functional, adequately funded, pluralistic child care system. Meeting the care needs of stay-at-home parents will strengthen their families, their well-being, and in turn the health of their neighborhoods and communities.

Sidebar:

THE NORDIC APPROACH TO CHILD CARE FOR STAY-AT-HOME PARENTS

Nordic countries are widely acknowledged to have among the best external child care systems in the world.³² This is largely because they put a great deal of public money into heavily subsidized licensed child care, enabling a system with many high-quality options that are deeply

affordable if not free. At the same time, Nordic countries have a series of policy and cultural supports for stay-at-home parents and other informal caregivers.³³

In addition to offering cash stipends, most Nordic nations have a version of publicly supported “open centers,” which are drop-in child care centers staffed by trained educators. These open centers are widespread and generally either free or very low cost (less than US\$5 per visit). Some are co-located with other children’s services, such as health clinics.

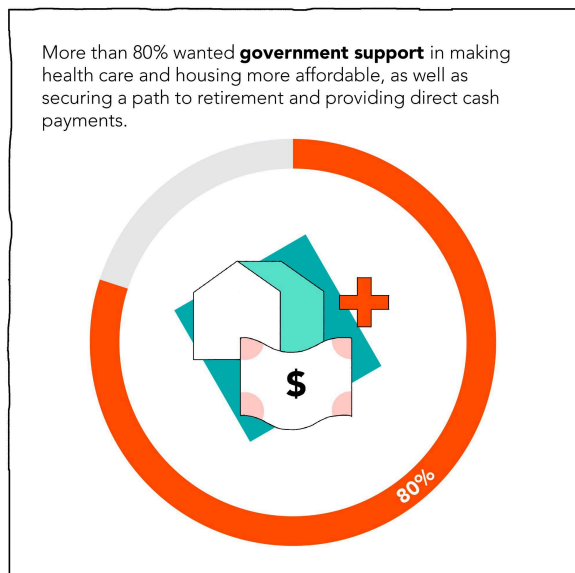
For children between the ages of two and school entry, countries like Finland offer free playgroup activities which run up to three hours a day and are staffed by municipal employees; activities range from open play to music to organized sports. Parents may be offered classes in infant massage or language (for immigrants). There are also publicly supported “family houses,” a form of community center, which offer short-term child care, as well as affordable paid “park auntie” programs in which young children can be dropped off for a few hours with a licensed caregiver. Notably, in 2024, Sweden [became the first country](#) to offer paid leave to grandparents to spend time caring for their grandchildren.³⁴

We recognize that a Nordic-style child care system is unlikely to be created in the near term in the U.S. due to a wide variety of factors, including differences in government and taxation structures and philosophy. Yet policymakers across the political spectrum should be intrigued by Nordic countries’ ability to fully embrace the presence of stay-at-home parents in their web of publicly supported child care options.

Conclusion 4: Stay-at-home parents have needs beyond child care

In addition to child care, stay-at-home parents have other critical household needs. Among the parents we surveyed, more than 80% wanted government support in making health care and housing more affordable, as well as securing a path to retirement and providing direct cash payments. One mother in our focus groups told us that she wished there was more recognition that “the labor of the home is a huge part of how we build communities and how we succeed. And some sort of acknowledgment of that in the form of assistance might be nice.”

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In our focus groups, lower-income parents repeatedly discussed how difficult it was to afford housing. Indeed, this was the number-one concern expressed by focus group participants. While unsure of what policy solutions could help solve their difficulties in affording a home, many parents spoke of their desire to become homeowners or to find a living situation that worked for their families. Parents also expressed interest in some sort of financial support from the government, particularly in the form of tax credits or tax rebates. One mother

mentioned that she knew her friend received a tax credit for child care costs (alluding to the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit) and expressed frustration that she could not access the same credit when caring for her own children. Several parents explicitly expressed a preference for aid in the form of tax credits or rebates over increased government programming.

Sidebar:

MANY PARENTS WOULD PREFER TAX CREDITS OR DIRECT AID

As we spoke with parents, we noted that many of them preferred direct cash aid or tax credits over increased funding for government programs. As one mother put it:

I would like the freedom to basically choose what to do with the money and how that best suits our family. And I just don't have a lot of faith that the government will fix it with something they create. And I don't love that money is tied to church and religion. I don't have a great feeling about that either. And so I would just love it to go directly to parents.

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Middle-income parents expressed particular concern about health care and retirement savings. When it comes to health care costs, this difference may stem from the fact that many lower-income participants in our focus groups were covered by Medicaid. In contrast, parents relying on employer-sponsored health care or insurance through ACA exchanges often found themselves in a more precarious position when faced with unexpected or large medical expenses, especially related to childbirth and routine childhood illnesses. Notably, concerns about the unexpected costs of childbirth for those with private insurance are [shared](#) by progressives and some social conservatives, offering a potential avenue for bipartisan collaboration.³⁵

We also note that many parents—particularly the rural parents we interviewed—reported struggling both with their mental health and access to adequate mental health care. One mother in a rural area reported that “Mental health is a huge thing for me. I just struggle really badly.” Despite these struggles, she had trouble finding a provider, both because of a lack of available therapists and because the limited formats and times available were difficult for her to attend as a busy mother.

Sidebar:

STAY-AT-HOME PARENTS WITH PRIVATE INSURANCE OFTEN STRUGGLE TO AFFORD THE COSTS OF CHILDBIRTH

Parents in our focus groups were particularly concerned about affording childbirth costs when they relied on employer-sponsored or ACA coverage. One mother told us of a harrowing struggle after she had a difficult birth and a child who needed to stay in a neonatal intensive care unit:

When my daughter was born, she had a traumatic birth and a NICU stay. And the initial health care expenses were a lot more than we planned on. So we planned on about \$3 to \$4,000 and it came in at like \$11,000. And that was after we fought the NICU. They wanted \$15,000 and they said it wasn't covered by insurance, it was medically unnecessary. And I'm like, It's a NICU stay—what are you talking about? So we applied for financial aid and basically we somehow sweet-talked the first hospital into writing off a hundred percent of the bill and then got insurance to cover all but \$3,000 of the NICU stay.

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Overarching conclusion: government should incorporate stay-at-home parents into a cohesive family policy; herein lies bipartisan hope

Family policy should start with the needs of the family, and families do not experience needs piecemeal—although U.S. family policy does not recognize this fact. Instead, it commonly operates program by program or funding stream by funding stream. A lower-income woman who becomes pregnant may variously encounter programs in health care, housing, nutrition, child care, and parenting support.³⁶ Some of these are targeted toward families with children, while others include such families as part of broader categories. This confusing alphabet soup of aid programs becomes even more confusing when stay-at-home parents are involved, because their eligibility varies wildly.

To remedy this, policymakers should consider ensuring that all legislation which covers families has a reasonable provision for families with a stay-at-home parent.

Bipartisan precedents

There have been policy attempts in the past aimed at supporting these families. For example, in 1999, a provision was added to a (vetoed) tax bill to make families with stay-at-home parents eligible for the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit during the first year of a child's life by assigning all such families a minimum claim of \$200 per month (around \$375 per month in 2024 dollars).³⁷ This idea—which came from both Republican leaders and the Clinton administration,³⁸ even meriting a reference in President Clinton's 1999 State of the Union Address³⁹—resurfaced in subsequent years, including in a 2007 proposal to offer this minimum claim up to a child's seventh birthday.⁴⁰ No such policy was ever enacted. Although versions of the concept were proposed in the 2000s by both Republican⁴¹ and Democratic⁴² legislators, it seemed to fall out of favor by the 2010s.

States have also from time to time [experimented with establishing](#) "at-home infant care" programs, in which households eligible for state child care assistance can opt to receive the subsidy as a cash payment for a set period.⁴³ This is, again, not an inherently partisan idea: two of the states which pioneered these programs are

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left-leaning Minnesota and right-leaning Montana. A [separate proposal was put forth](#) in 2019 by the center-left Economic Security Project to create, in essence, a caregiver earned income tax credit. This proposal would assign the full EITC credit to those caring full-time for a child under the age of 6 (or a disabled adult) who otherwise would not qualify for that amount due to low or no income.⁴⁴ [Polling on the proposal](#) found strong bipartisan backing, including one poll that showed support from 76% of likely Democratic and 71% of likely Republican voters.⁴⁵

A helpful analog to these policy efforts can be found in the elder care sector. Acknowledging that it is impossible to create a functional elder care system absent family caregivers, federal and state governments have implemented numerous policies that offer cash payments, respite care, and training opportunities to family members caring for their own relatives. This is seen as so normal and necessary that the National Institute of Aging (part of the National Institutes of Health) has multiple [webpages and resources](#) available to help these family caregivers.

The political path forward

Further work must be done to identify policy adaptations for stay-at-home parents. Importantly, including stay-at-home parents is a fruitful area for potential bipartisan cooperation in the 2020s. For example, in just the past few years, Congress has seen bills introduced that include proposals to:

- Protect parents who leave a job at the birth of a child, and then elect to stay home, from having to pay back health care premiums due to a clawback loophole in the Family and Medical Leave Act (Sen. J.D. Vance, R-OH)⁴⁶
- Offer individuals who provide primary care to a dependent at least 80 hours a month with up to five years' worth of wage credits for the purpose of social security calculations (Sen. Chris Murphy, D-CT)⁴⁷
- Allow certain stay-at-home parents to receive a stipend using a Child Care and Development Block Grant certificate (Sen. Marco Rubio, R-FL).⁴⁸
- Allow certain stay-at-home parents to receive a \$300 per month stipend via a newly created mechanism (Rep. Ro Khanna, D-CA).⁴⁹

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There is nothing inherently partisan about supporting stay-at-home parents, and it's worth reiterating that every politician has a solid number of constituents who are stay-at-home parents. In our survey, 40% of respondents (rounded) identified as Republicans, 37% as Democrats, and 24% as independents or "other."

Our conversations with national advocates confirm that the question of stay-at-home parents does not belong to one political party. In the group of center- to center-left organizations, the vast majority of participants agreed that as a philosophical matter, stay-at-home parents deserve public policy support. There was, notably, less consensus about whether stay-at-home parents fit within the realm of child care policy or if other avenues (such as the tax code or paid leave policies) would better meet their needs. This group also surfaced questions about whether policies aimed at supporting stay-at-home parents could equitably meet the needs of single parents (for more on this issue, see the corresponding sidebar).

Similarly, in the group of center- to center-right organizations, most participants preferred family policy that was neutral on whether or not a parent worked outside the home, therefore implicitly including stay-at-home parents. The group did not agree on whether the government could afford substantial policy interventions given the national debt and budget outlook—even while agreeing that the Republican Party was much more favorable toward significantly increased funding for parents than it had been in the past. One conservative participant suggested that Republicans should feel comfortable asserting that supporting parents and families is worthwhile on its own merits, regardless of impacts on traditional measures of economic growth or how it fits into the "logic of the market."

Even so, both parties face internal and external challenges in addressing stay-at-home parents. The left-leaning group hypothesized several reasons why this population has not, in recent years, been a policy priority for the Democratic Party:

- wariness of appearing to pursue a retrograde vision that pushes women not to work outside the home
- a tendency to focus on licensed external child care given scarce resources

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- the persistent failure of Congress and the states to adequately support such an external system
- tension with efforts to raise the stature of the child care profession and implement a set of professional standards and expectations for those working in licensed settings.

The right-leaning group shared the first concern: there was trepidation about opening conservatives to accusations of pushing a regressive agenda that does not support working women. Other concerns this group raised included:

- fear of triggering “negative polarization,” the phenomenon where opposition to a given proposal hardens as a response to the mere fact the other party supports it
- little appetite among some conservative lawmakers for benefits for stay-at-home parents due to budget and deficit constraints.

The points of contention that have been lifted up are real and valid. Yet they are not, in our estimation, insurmountable. Most disagreements and concerns do not surround questions of “first principles”; instead, they are questions about messaging, how new policies will be paid for, and technical policy design. These have traditionally been areas where politicians, when sufficiently motivated, are able to hammer out compromises. Given the potential benefits of finding a way forward—not just for families with stay-at-home parents, but for all families—our analysis suggests that policymakers of both parties should very seriously engage with the intersection of stay-at-home parents and public policy.

Sidebar:

WHAT ABOUT SINGLE PARENTS?

In the U.S., around 5.5 million single parents live with at least one child under the age of 12.⁵⁰ They are disproportionately Black, Hispanic, and Native American women. Few have a viable choice to be a stay-at-home parent, given the lack of a second potential income earner in the household.⁵¹ Moreover, work requirements and other conditions attached to public assistance

have often discouraged lower-income single-parent households from having a stay-at-home parent, particularly following the 1996 welfare reform legislation. The question over single parents and work remains live, as demonstrated by recent proposed policies supporting stay-at-home parents that explicitly tilt toward married couples (e.g. Sen. Rubio’s Respect Parents’ Childcare Choices Act of 2024).⁵²

The question of how to support single parents who want to stay at home with their children—above and beyond the broader support sketched out in this report—deserves further exploration. We believe it is possible to simultaneously support single stay-at-home parents and uphold the value of marriage—to say nothing of the fact that many single parents, especially single mothers, are single as a result of leaving an abusive relationship, the death of a partner, the incarceration of a partner, or other exceptionally difficult circumstances.

We further believe that the presence of single parents, and their need for additional targeted support, is not a reason in and of itself to avoid acting on the broader issue of stay-at-home parents. Similarly, low-income two-parent families, while benefiting from policies like a modest cash stipend or Social Security caregiver credits, would likely need additional income to have a parent at home. We should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Given that we are starting from a place where almost no public policy includes stay-at-home parents, moving in this direction will both provide some support for single parents who wish to stay home—perhaps allowing them to reduce their hours of paid work—and lay the groundwork for future policy innovations.

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, does not merely aim to create a relationship between isolated nuclear families and the state. Rather, it aims to 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 is what these families desire).⁵³ Indeed, supporting America’s vital extended family and community networks is a major societal benefit of making it easier for families to choose to have a stay-at-home parent.

Our analysis leads us to the following policy recommendations for lawmakers. In addition, we strongly believe that politicians and policymakers would significantly 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; our elected representatives should 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. Gathering this information will lay the groundwork for future policy proposals and ensure a common understanding of what stay-at-home parents look like in the 2020s and what they and their families need to thrive.
- 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 for stay-at-home parents when needs arise (and also benefit other informal caregivers, as well as all parents working

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part-time jobs). Yet because the economics make running drop-in or part-time programs so difficult, public support is likely required for the offerings to become widespread and widely affordable. Removing regulatory barriers that impact this type of care provider may also be necessary. Particular attention should be given to supporting community or faith-based programs that often find themselves struggling to compete with larger and sometimes [profit-maximizing child care chains](#).⁵⁴

- Governments at every level should strengthen family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers. These caregivers are frequently preferred by stay-at-home parents and have the benefit of strengthening extended family and community ties. Yet many would-be FFN caregivers are not able to serve in that role due to a lack of income and other support. Governments should consider existing precedents (e.g., the [Thriving Providers Project](#)⁵⁵ and Oklahoma’s pandemic-era [Kith.Care](#)⁵⁶ initiative), as well as ways to ease access to enrollment and increase reimbursement rates for FFNs in state child care subsidy programs. Supporting FFN caregivers has an added benefit of increasing child care options for the millions of families in which all available parents work outside the home, many of whom also report a preference for FFN care.
- Governments at all levels should be aware that a top priority for families with a stay-at-home parent is housing costs. While a full list of reforms that could result in more affordable housing is outside the scope of this paper, policymakers should know that for families with a parent at home, housing is perhaps the single most important pain point they face; policymakers should explore targeted support for these families within broader affordable housing strategies. One step that would benefit families with stay-at-home parents—as well [as licensed family child care providers](#) (who are sometimes one and the same)⁵⁷—has [increasing bipartisan support](#):⁵⁸ removing unnecessary permitting, zoning, and regulatory barriers to building new homes and modifications to existing residential structures. In particular, attention should be given to housing regulations that discourage family businesses (including in-home child care) and extended families from living together (like bans on accessory dwelling units).

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- 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](#).⁵⁹ Most paid family leave proposals on the table are for many fewer weeks and at lower wage replacement than these peers (e.g., 12 weeks versus six months to a year); most proposals also [lack a minimum benefit](#)⁶⁰ that would apply regardless of earning history. A robust paid family leave law would make being a stay-at-home parent far more viable for many families during the first months to year of a child's life. We believe this is particularly likely to be a fruitful area for bipartisan consensus in the near future.
- 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. We note, for example, that when the ACA reforms were implemented, families with a stay-at-home parent were excluded from some of the benefits due to what was called the [Family Glitch](#).⁶¹ While the Family Glitch was eventually resolved in 2022, it is critical that future reforms to health care take into account the needs of stay-at-home parents. These needs include helping to ensure that childbirth is affordable and that parents in rural areas can access adequate medical care, including mental health care. This is an area in which individual families and communities find it almost impossible to make an impact as they contend with larger hospital networks and insurers, and thus is a particularly promising target for robust government intervention.
- 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 consider direct payments to stay-at-home parents who elect not to use a publicly supported external child care system. These home care stipends are present in several Nordic countries and several German states. A more likely and politically popular first step could be providing federal funds for states to establish or expand "at-home infant care" programs for families who are eligible for a state child care subsidy. An earned income tax credit for caregivers also deserves consideration as an interim step.

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- Congress should provide stay-at-home parents with caregiver credits toward Social Security. By following the lead of [many peer nations](#) and offering caregiver credits with a minimum benefit level, Congress can ensure that stay-at-home parents are not damaging their future retirement prospects by choosing to provide primary child care for their child.⁶²
- Congress should make stay-at-home parents eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). As with Social Security retirement benefits, Congress should offer stay-at-home parents a caregiver credit that counts toward eligibility for SSDI, as such an individual becoming disabled will reliably disrupt their entire household's functioning.
- Congress should consider more fully incorporating stay-at-home parents into the tax code. There are areas of the tax code related to families with children that currently exclude families with stay-at-home parents. Most notable is the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), which has an income requirement. While some analysts [have argued](#) that the CDCTC is inefficient and should be rolled into an expanded Child Tax Credit, if the CDCTC is continued, Congress should consider ways to assign stay-at-home parents a minimum claimable level.⁶³ Such proposals would mesh well with current [bipartisan efforts](#) to remove "marriage penalties" from the tax code and social programs.⁶⁴

Further research needed

There are several fruitful areas for future research on stay-at-home parents, many of which Capita is planning to pursue in phase two of this project. These questions include:

- For stay-at-home parents who support government interventions, what does that look like in a granular sense? Is a particular package of family policies most appealing? How do stay-at-home parents feel about proposals to bolster the external, licensed child care system? Getting more specific with potential policies will provide a fuller picture to guide development of new policy proposals.

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- For stay-at-home parents who would return to work if more affordable external child care options were available, what does that mean? Do they want to return to part-time, full-time, or other work? What kind of child care do they want (family, in-home daycare, faith-based care, center-based care, etc.)?
- What are the experiences and needs of stay-at-home parents who have a child with special needs or a complex medical diagnosis?
- What are the experiences and needs of stay-at-home parents who come from refugee families?
- What are the experiences and needs of stay-at-home parents from different immigrant populations, and how are they the same or different?
- How might policy interventions be the same or different for stay-at-home parents in urban, suburban, and rural areas?
- What are the particular experiences and needs of stay-at-home fathers?

Closing summary

Policymakers from both parties often give lip service to the importance of supporting American families but have failed to ensure that “the rubber meets the road,” especially (but certainly not only) when it comes to families with a stay-at-home parent. Indeed, some politicians seem to prefer focusing on how families can best serve U.S. economic growth by producing the next generation of human capital, and in doing so setting family needs aside. Increasing our gross domestic product and developing our human capital are important issues, to be sure. But at Capita, we believe that the primary goal of good government is to serve families, not the other way around.

Healthy, vibrant families lead to healthy, vibrant communities and a healthy, vibrant nation (with a positive externality of a healthy, vibrant economy). As the philosopher Michael Novak once put it, “Political and social planning in a wise social order ought to begin with the axiom *What strengthens the family strengthens society*.”⁶⁵ Part of accomplishing that goal entails ensuring that families can raise their children in the care environments they prefer, and in partnership with the support system they want and need.

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Government must stop treating the decision for parents to stay home or work outside the home as a mere lifestyle choice divorced from public concern. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which the well-being of the American family is a public concern. To that end, government must begin supporting families that have, or want to have, a stay-at-home parent.

Notes and references

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Appendix 1: Survey instrument

The survey was conducted on Ipsos's non-probability iSay online panel in May 2024, with results analyzed from weighted responses of 1,287 parents of children ages 0-12 who report they are stay-at-home parents (defined as a parent that provides primary child care during the day for at least one child 12 or under). The starting sample was of parents of children ages 0-12, weighted by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and region.

QUESTIONNAIRE
<p>Do you consider yourself a stay-at-home parent, meaning do you provide primary child care during the day for at least one of your children who is age 12 or below? [SINGLE SELECT]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Yesb. No
<p>Which of the following would you describe as the MOST significant challenge faced by your family? [RANDOMIZE - SINGLE SELECT]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Housing costsb. Health care costsc. Lack of good jobsd. Lack of affordable child caree. Saving for retirementf. Other (please specify) <p>[INSERT TEXT BOX – ANCHOR]</p>

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How often, if at all, could your household meet an unexpected \$400 expense without having to dip into savings? [SINGLE SELECT]

- a. Often
- b. Sometimes
- c. Rarely
- d. Never

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
[PROGRESSIVE GRID – ROTATE 1-4; 4-1; SINGLE SELECT]

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Somewhat agree
- c. Somewhat disagree
- d. Strongly disagree
- e. Don't know [ANCHOR]

[RANDOMIZE]

- The government should do more to support families with a stay-at-home parent
- Stay-at-home parents are respected by policymakers
- Stay-at-home parents are respected by society

What are your current sources of child care during the day, outside of the care provided by yourself? (Mark all that apply) [MULTI-SELECT]

- My spouse or partner
- Relative(s)
- Neighbor(s)
- Friend(s)
- Member(s) of my faith community
- Paid child care (child care center, before- or after-school care, etc.)

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- Elementary and/or middle school
- Other (please specify) [INSERT TEXT BOX – ANCHOR]

How often do you need child care during the day, outside of the care provided by yourself? [SINGLE SELECT]

- Daily
- A few times a week
- A few times a month
- A few times a year
- Never

How would you describe your access to external child care (care not provided by yourself)? [SINGLE SELECT]

- a. I have access to the child care I need all of the time
- b. I have access to the child care I need some of the time
- c. I rarely have access to the child care I need
- d. I almost never have access to the child care I need

Would you want to work, or return to work, outside the home if you had access to more affordable paid (external) child care? [SINGLE SELECT]

- a. Yes
- b. No

How much would you support or oppose the following potential policies? [PROGRESSIVE GRID – ROTATE 1-4; 4-1; SINGLE SELECT]

- a. Strongly support
- b. Somewhat support
- c. Somewhat oppose
- d. Strongly oppose
- e. Don't know [ANCHOR]

[RANDOMIZE]

- The federal or state government providing direct cash payments to stay-at-home parents while their kids are below school age
- The federal or state government funding drop-in child care programs for households with a stay-at-home parent
- The federal or state government funding community programs focused on stay-at-home parents with young children such as "parents day out," playgroups, or other programs that aim to help stay-at-home parents connect with one another
- The federal or state government helping families with a stay-at-home parent afford health care
- The federal or state government helping families with a stay-at-home parent afford housing
- The federal or state government helping families with a stay-at-home parent have a secure path to retirement

Appendix 2: Focus group details

The four focus groups, held between May and August of 2024, were:

- *Rural Parents* – conducted in person with 9 female respondents and one male respondent who belonged to a parent support group in rural North Carolina;
- *Hispanic Parents* – conducted in person with 9 female respondents associated with a community organization in New Mexico;
- *Religious Parents #1* – conducted virtually with a group of 6 female respondents from around the United States; and
- *Religious Parents #2* – conducted virtually with a group of 3 male and 6 female respondents from around the United States

Note that focus groups are, by their nature, not representative data.

This first table shows data on the gender, age, race, educational attainment, and number of children for participants in all four groups who elected to fill out a demographic survey.

Group	Hispanic Mothers		Religious Parents #1		Religious Parents #2		Rural Parents	
	Count	% of Responses	Count	% of Responses	Count	% of Responses	Count	% of Responses
Total Responses	8	100%	6	100%	8	100%	9	100%
Gender								
Female	8	100%	6	100%	5	63%	5	56%
Male					3	38%		
NA							4	44%

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Age								
Under 25	2	25%					1	11%
25-34	3	38%	3	50%	7	88%	5	56%
35-44	2	25%	3	50%	1	13%	3	33%
45-54	1	13%						
Race / ethnicity								
Black or African American			1	17%				
Hispanic or Latino	8	100%						
White			5	83%	8	100%	6	67%
NA							3	33%
Education level								
Less than high school	1	13%						
High school graduate or equivalent	3	38%					6	67%
Some college, no degree	2	25%					3	33%
Associate's degree	1	13%						

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Undergraduate degree (Bachelor's)	1	13%	4	67%	2	25%		
Graduate Degree (Master's, J.D., Ph.D.)			2	33%	6	75%		
Number of children under age 12								
1	1	13%	1	17%	4	50%	3	33%
2	4	50%	2	33%	2	25%	6	67%
3	1	13%	1	17%	1	13%		
4	1	13%	1	17%	1	13%		
6			1	17%				
NA	1	13%						

The second table shows the household income and relationship status for the groups, with the Rural Parents group reported separately because the survey in that group used different response categories.

Group	Hispanic Mothers		Religious Mothers		Religious Parents	
	Count	% of Responses	Count	% of Responses	Count	% of Responses
Total responses	8	100%	6	100%	8	100%

Rural Parents	
Count	% of Responses
9	100%

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Household income									
Less than \$30,000	4	50%					Less than \$30,000	3	33%
\$30,000-\$50,000	4	50%			2	25%	\$30,000-\$50,000		
\$50,000-\$70,000							\$50,000-\$70,000	5	56%
\$70,000-\$100,000			3	50%	2	25%	\$70,000-\$100,000		
\$100,000-\$150,000			1	17%	2	25%	More than \$100,000	1	11%
\$150,000-\$200,000			2	33%	2	25%			
Relationship status									
Married, living with spouse	5	63%	6	1	8	1	Married	3	33%
Unmarried, living with partner	2	25%					Cohabiting / married	1	11%
NA	1	13%					Not married	5	56%

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