

# The False Divide Between "Working" and "Stay-at-Home" Parents

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## Idea in Brief

- The U.S. lacks a coherent family policy. Our federal family policy initiatives are often scattered and disconnected. As a result, they overlook many families. In this report, we examine one such kind of overlooked family: those with a stay-at-home parent.
- Understanding these parents offers invaluable insights into how many ordinary families think about work, child care, and work-life balance.
- Many stay-at-home parents deeply desire to be home with their children, but others are home mainly because of challenging questions about the cost and availability of quality child care.
- Families with stay-at-home parents—like all families—are facing a serious affordability crisis.
- Supporting stay-at-home parents alongside licensed care options is a political winner that draws strong support from across the ideological spectrum.

## How to Use This Report

- To help advocates, funders, policymakers, and others rethink assumptions about stay-at-home parents and what these families need.
- To show politicians that supporting stay-at-home parents alongside families where all parents work outside the home is a political winner with little risk.
- To explain why a comprehensive, inclusive family policy is a better way to achieve the goal of healthy children, families, communities, and economies than narrow, disconnected approaches.

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## Introduction

Strong families are the foundation of a strong society; as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [states](#), “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” Yet U.S. family policy isn’t designed to support strong families. In truth, there is hardly a U.S. family policy to speak of: it is fragmented and managed through a patchwork of programs that too often treat family members as isolated economic units rather than an interdependent whole. In an era of mounting uncertainty and the convergence of geopolitical, technological, environmental, and demographic challenges, resilient families are a stabilizing social force and an imperative for our future. Designing policies to help strengthen families begins with recognizing families as they actually are, in all their variety, including the stay-at-home parents that policy has long ignored and who represent a powerful entry point for this new approach.

Capita believes that the best U.S. family policy will recognize that stay-at-home parents perform vital, socially useful work and seek to deeply understand their preferences, choices, and needs. Misconceptions exist at all points along the political spectrum. We conducted granular interviews and careful polling to highlight the voices of these parents themselves to understand what they want from policymakers and why.

Many policymakers, and much of the public, think of “stay-at-home parents” and “working parents” as a binary. Frequently, the two are pitted against each other in divisive debates that obscure the common challenges all parents face. Our research shows this is wrongheaded. Capita’s first report on stay-at-home parents, [Invisible Labor: Visible Needs: Making Family Policy Work for Stay-At-Home \(And All\) Parents](#) (2024), demonstrated that a majority of stay-at-home parents do at least some work for pay. It also showed that almost all stay-at-home parents need additional child care, beyond what they themselves provide, and that there is no easy line to draw between families with and without a stay-at-home parent.

This new report, based on parent roundtables and a commissioned YouGov survey, goes deeper into how stay-at-home parents perceive work and care and how the experience differs for the specific subgroups of stay-at-home parents we studied (stay-at-home fathers, rural parents, military families, and families of children with complex medical needs). To our knowledge, this is one of the first reports to delve deeply into this set of questions. We reveal what policymakers are missing and recommend concrete actions to strengthen all families by rebuilding the intermediary institutions—from the home to the neighborhood—that allow families to flourish.

Stay-at-home parents make critical contributions to the common good and our shared prosperity. They’re caring for children with disabilities. They’re enabling spouses to

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deploy overseas, to climb utility poles after storms, to work the crucial jobs that don't come with predictable hours. They are in many cases quiet architects of the nurturing relationships on which our societal resilience depends. Many stay-at-home parents are themselves contributing both as caregivers and employees, and plenty would like to work more hours. Others still feel compelled to work outside the home, incurring stress and sacrificing their own well-being to provide for their families, often because a single-income household is no longer economically viable.

Simplistic views of stay-at-home parents reflect overly narrow views of American families overall, and the inadequate policy and cultural responses to supporting them reveal deep flaws at the heart of U.S. family policy. Supporting all families, however they're structured, will strengthen the nation.

This report challenges misconceptions, offering a roadmap for policy that re-centers the family as the essential unit of a stable society and demonstrating a better, more humane path forward for all families.

## Methodology

We partnered with YouGov to conduct a national survey of 1,000 parents with children under 12 who met our definition of stay-at-home parenthood, including oversampling parents in North Carolina, Michigan, and New Jersey. We also hosted a series of roundtable discussions, as well as interviews, with stay-at-home parents across the country to better understand the complex lives of their families and the factors shaping their work and care decisions. We paid particular attention to four subgroups—stay-at-home fathers, rural families, parents in military families, and those caring for medically complex children—to shed light on the unique, often invisible challenges these families may face. More details can be found in the appendix.

## Defining “Stay-at-Home Parent”: Not as Easy as it Seems

Who counts as a stay-at-home parent? There is no clear, agreed-on answer. Many assume a stay-at-home parent does no paid work. But what about a parent who cares for children during the day, then works the night shift? Or a parent who cares for children while working remotely?

Capita uses a definition that includes parents who do some amount of paid work, as long as they regularly provide primary child care during the day, when the child would otherwise need a nonparental caregiver:

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

The term “stay-at-home parent” is not perfect. It is an uncomfortable contrast to “working parent,” for instance. But alternatives, such as “homemaker,” raise their own objections. So despite its imperfections, we use “stay-at-home parent” in our work.

Another caveat: Although every parent we surveyed meets our definition of a stay-at-home parent, only 58% identify themselves this way. This could be, in part, because many parents who engage in some form of paid work do not feel the stay-at-home label applies to them.

## Part I: Preferences Around Work and Care

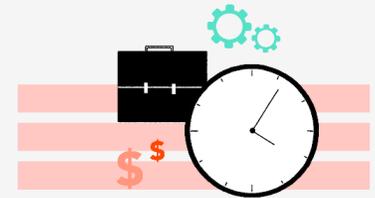
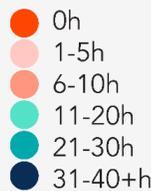
Stay-at-home parenthood is often framed as a clear-cut choice driven by values. Popular narratives depict being a stay-at-home parent as “the most important job in the world” or “a dream job.” It’s true that for many parents, staying home is a deeply intentional decision grounded in how they want to care for their children and their desire to spend as much time as possible with them while they are young. Our findings, however, suggest a more complex reality. Contrary to common narratives, many stay-at-home parents do not arrive at their decision from a position of privilege or preference, but rather through a series of trade-offs shaped by rising costs and household finances, inaccessible and unaffordable child care, and inflexible work options. They feel like they are walking a tightrope, and their choices may not fully align with their desires or needs.

## Paid Work Is Common, and Many Parents Would Work More If They Could

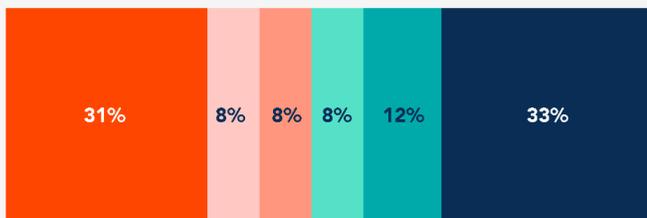
Of the stay-at-home parents we surveyed, 70% engage in paid work in some capacity, often part-time and in some cases full-time, in addition to the substantial unpaid caregiving labor they perform at home. Most expressed a desire to work more than they already do, though they generally prefer part-time arrangements. Improving household income and meeting basic family needs are the primary motivations for wanting to work more.

### Weekly paid work hours:

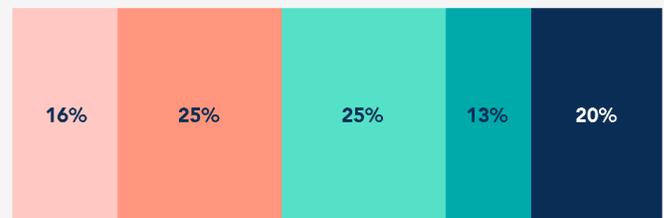
Current levels vs. desired increases with improved child care affordability



Current hours of paid work, on average

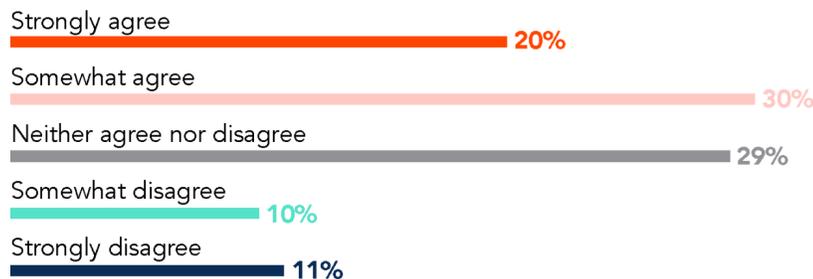


Additional desired hours of paid work if given more access to more affordable nonparental child care options



Access to and costs of child care play a significant role in decisions on whether to stay at home. Consistent with our previous findings, most respondents (70%) said they would begin or engage in more paid work if more affordable nonparental child care was available. In fact, half of the stay-at-home parents we surveyed said they wanted a paid job but were at least partially stymied by the lack of affordable and accessible child care.

### To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "I would prefer to have a paid job, but a lack of affordable and available child care options means being a stay-at-home parent is what makes the most sense for my family."



"I've worked throughout all six years that I've had kids, up until this year. It was a tough decision for me to stay home, because financially it's really scary to take the leap to single income, especially with inflation and living costs, and just things that arise that need to be fixed around the house. It's stressful when you're living on one salary, but the biggest factor was child care costs."

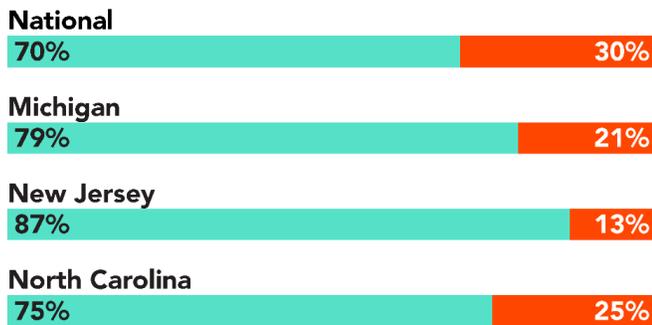
Parent roundtable participant

Would you want to begin doing **paid work**, or do more hours of paid work, if you had access to more **affordable nonparental child care options**?

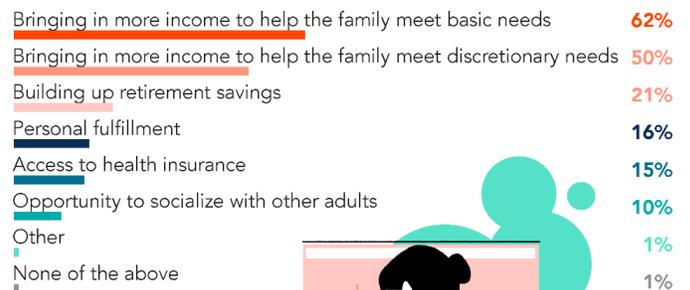


Yes

No



What are the **top two reasons** you would want to begin paid work or increase **paid work hours**?



N=684 National SAHP who want to increase their working hours  
Percents do not add to 100 due to multiple responses

Ultimately, these findings challenge common portrayals of stay-at-home parents. Most are not wealthy, and many face significant financial strain; they are on the front line of the affordability crisis. Half of respondents in our 2024 report said they could rarely or never meet an unexpected \$400 expense without dipping into their savings. Rising living costs, limited income, and unavailable or unaffordable child care are central stressors that shape, and in some cases force, work and care decisions for these families.

What are the largest sources of **stress** in your life that, if addressed, would most significantly improve your life satisfaction?

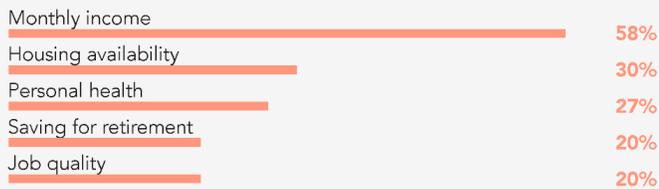
Choose your top three.



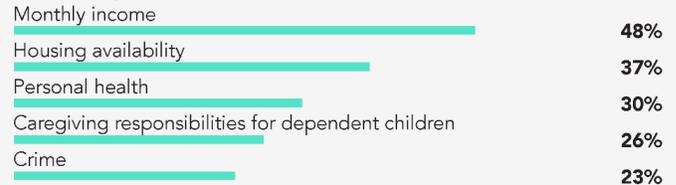
## National



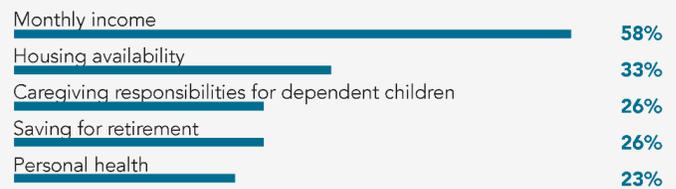
## Michigan



## New Jersey



## North Carolina



National SAHP (N=1000)  
MI/NJ/NC (N=200)

## Child Care Options Do Not Match What Many Parents Want or Need

Child care access and affordability pose significant barriers for stay-at-home parents, which raises important questions: What can stay-at-home parents afford to spend on child care? What kind of child care do they prefer? How do our existing systems succeed or fail in meeting their needs?

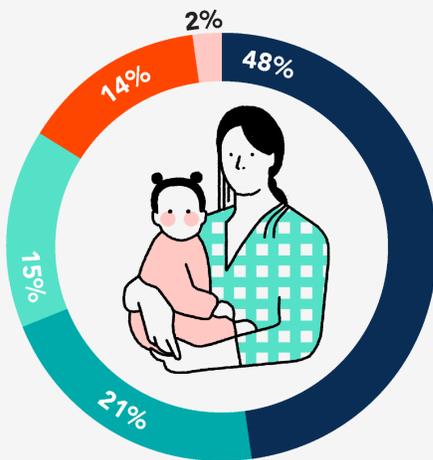
A clear majority (69%) of parents surveyed indicated that no more than \$300 per month is what they consider affordable, with nearly half of those (31% overall) reporting affordable child care would need to be \$100 per month or less. The average cost of child care, however, is over double this figure even in the lowest-cost states, and frequently soars to **\$1,500 or more per month**. Child care prices are **outpacing inflation** and **are more than rent** in most states. Families today spend an even larger share of their annual household income on child care than in the past, placing additional strain on households already facing rising housing, utility, and grocery bills. For some, having a parent stay home to cut child care costs may be the only viable option for staying financially afloat. The decision, therefore, is often strongly motivated by economic hardship rather than values, beliefs, or desire.

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What's more, scarcity is a problem: in many areas the availability of licensed slots is extremely limited, even if families could afford one. Child care waitlists can stretch for months, or even years, leaving families with few viable care options and forcing them to make decisions with little warning.

**"Abruptly, our daycare announced they were closing, and they gave us a 30-day notice....Child care in Cincinnati is insane. The waitlists are years out. We did some calling around as soon as we found out they were closing, and there was just nowhere we were going to be able to get a spot for a year, if not longer. That kind of forced me into staying home."**  
Parent roundtable participant

Assuming all the options met your definition of "affordable," what type of **nonparental child care** would you most prefer to utilize?



- A family member, friend, or neighbor providing care
- A licensed child care (daycare) center
- A licensed child care home\*
- After school enrichment programs
- Other

\*that is, someone who runs a business providing care for unrelated children in their home

N=1157 national SAHP

The problem may lie not only in the costs of child care but also in a mismatch between the type of care offered and what families actually want. While stay-at-home parents indicate a wide range of child care preferences, nearly half (48%) prefer a family, friend, or neighbor (FFN) caregiver, even when other options also meet their definition of affordability. This consistent and clear preference for FFN care among stay-at-home parents is also echoed in other surveys of families, including those in which all available parents work outside of the home.

Despite the preference for FFN care, many child care policies and proposals focus heavily on full-time licensed programs and leave FFN caregivers out. This makes it very difficult for FFN caregivers to earn a living wage, take part in the formal economy, and provide consistent care without risking their own

well-being. Ultimately, it reduces the number of FFN caregivers, creating a shortage of this form of care.

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Unlike families in which all parents work outside the home, and who generally need consistent daily child care, stay-at-home parents often need care irregularly or for shorter periods. But it is challenging to find drop-in or part-time care or options for care outside of traditional hours. This is partially because it is not economically feasible for most providers to offer these options, and even less feasible to have sufficient staff willing to implement them.

While proposals to expand drop-in child care options may address some of these issues, a significant share of the parents we spoke to indicated they would not be willing to use drop-in care even if it became more available. They told us they would need care for longer than the typical few hours offered to run errands or go to appointments without worrying about rushing back for pick-up.

“Drop-in child care—I feel like that's...such a great idea in theory, but I will never use that. It's usually a two-hour block maximum, and I need more time.”

Parent roundtable participant

They were also apprehensive about leaving their children with caregivers they do not know well and who might change every time they used this option. Further study is necessary to assess the feasibility of extended drop-in care and the investment required to make it a regular, consistent option that aligns with parents' preferences.

“We've never used [drop-in care]. I don't think my kids would tolerate being dropped off somewhere with strangers for an hour.”

Parent roundtable participant

## Labor Markets Have Not Fully Adapted to Workers with Caregiving Roles

Parents tell us there is too little flexibility or choice in how to structure their lives. Our acute affordability crisis makes living on a single income incredibly difficult for most families, thus preventing families who might otherwise prefer to have a parent stay home from doing so. At the same time, many stay-at-home parents want to engage in some form of paid work, but in a way that aligns with their family's needs. Some told us they would consider returning to work if more flexible options were available, including part-time, remote, or hybrid roles. This points to a clear demand for “in-between” options rooted in flexibility.

Yet these options may be shrinking. Many large employers have begun increasing the number of required in-office days or eliminating remote work altogether, closing off pathways for parents who already work from home or would consider doing so in the

future. According to data from the [Pew Research Center](#), nearly half of workers who work remotely at least some of the time say they would be unlikely to remain in their current job if they were no longer allowed to work from home. The loss of remote work not only limits parents' choices but also threatens their connection to the labor force, especially for mothers, and may intensify care challenges for the stay-at-home parents we identified who are already juggling full-time work and full-time caregiving responsibilities.

Another obstacle is the prevalence of "greedy jobs" that offer high salaries but demand long, inflexible hours and near-constant availability, which do not align with caregiving. These jobs essentially require a division of labor in which one parent, most often a mother, stays at home to manage care and household responsibilities. It is women who often enter and exit the workforce in response to family needs (a pattern that is becoming harder to sustain in today's labor market), contributing not only to the gender pay gap but also to work and care arrangements that may fall short of what families actually want, and also what the economy needs.

## Full-Time Work Without Outside Care: An Invisible and Unsustainable Arrangement

What happens when families cannot afford to live on one income but also cannot find the child care arrangement they need at a rate they can afford? For some parents, the answer is to act as primary caregiver for their children during the day while also working full-time. One-third (34%) of the stay-at-home parents we surveyed work full-time (31-40+ hours per week).

This raises important questions that warrant further study. What does this work-care arrangement look like, and how are parents managing? Are they working early morning or overnight shifts? Are they working remotely while simultaneously watching their children? We spoke to a few moms who fall into the latter category, using remote work as a fragile coping mechanism for the absence of a formal child care arrangement. Flexible jobs with infrequent "camera-on" meetings enable them to be the primary caretakers of their young children during the day while maintaining full-time jobs. But this is a difficult balancing act that involves extending work well beyond traditional hours, such as squeezing it in during naptime and after putting children to bed. While this arrangement may be more feasible with an infant, it will undoubtedly present new challenges for parents caring for older children.

"The only reason I'm still working is because I have an incredibly flexible schedule. I just need to get in 8 hours, between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., and I don't even really need to as long as I'm hitting metrics....I have the freedom to be able to take care of my son's needs as they arise. I can put him down for naps, but things take a little longer than they should....I have that freedom and flexibility to do it. It's still really hard sometimes to be able to focus and get work done with him, and I think about quitting."

Parent roundtable participant

Studies consistently show that stressed parents mean stressed kids. Juggling full-time remote work with no child care is a recipe for burnout. As parents discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic, when child care programs shuttered overnight, managing demanding jobs while parenting full-time is both difficult and unsustainable.

The post-pandemic surge in remote work may have made it more prevalent. Research from the Institute for Family Studies shows that nearly [one million mothers transitioned from in-person to remote work](#) between 2019 and 2023. Among mothers, those with children under five have the highest rates of remote work, with nearly one in three employed in this category. While most remote workers likely do not see remote work as a substitute for external child care, some do. Among this group, being full-time workers and full-time caregivers may not have stopped since 2020. For many, this is not a deliberate choice, but rather a result of limited access and economic circumstances. According to U.S. Census Bureau survey data, 10% of parents reported not having a child care arrangement because it was unavailable, unaffordable, or unsafe. Among those parents, [nearly one in three](#) reported supervising their children while working. This arrangement is largely invisible in labor statistics.

"We cannot go down to one salary. I also just graduated. I have a bunch of student loans. I would hate not to use my degree that I just worked really hard for."

Parent roundtable participant

...

Our findings reveal a simple truth: families need genuine options, not impossible choices. Parents want the freedom to work and raise their children in ways that align with their values rather than being forced into rigid and unsuitable systems that dictate their choices. What parents are asking for should be basic: more time, more options, and the opportunity to make decisions rooted in their values and what is best for their family, rather than out of compulsion or, in some cases, desperation. This is not just

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about meeting personal preferences for stay-at-home parents, but also whether our economic and care systems can provide families with the stability, dignity, and predictability required for our nation to thrive.

## Part II: Roundtables: What We Heard from Four Subgroups of Stay-at-Home Parents

In addition to our polling, we conducted roundtables and interviews with stay-at-home parents, focusing primarily on four subgroups: military families, rural families, those caring for medically complex children, and stay-at-home fathers. We picked these subgroups because they reflected the general concerns of many stay-at-home parents across the board but also offered important insights into their unique struggles and challenges.

We found that these parents—like the parents in our poll—suffered significantly from concerns about isolation and disrespect. We also found significant concerns about preparing for the future. However, these subgroups also have distinct needs that should invite the interest of politicians and policymakers.

### Overlapping Concerns: Different Families, Shared Struggles

#### The cost and difficulty of finding quality child care

Our roundtable participants and interviewees again reflected that stay-at-home parents often want and need affordable, quality child care. Yet many of these parents find it challenging and stressful to access this care. For example, a parent married to a member of the armed forces shared that, due to deployments, it is hard to know whom to trust for ad hoc child care when on a new base or deployment location. This problem was even more acute for families with medically complex children. One mother of a child with global developmental delays who needs 24/7 supportive care told us that finding skilled caregivers is a major and stressful challenge. In her family, they often must rely on older or adult siblings if the parents are to leave, which is challenging for the whole family and also guilt-inducing for the parents. This mother worries because her children have “carried a much heavier burden than a lot of their peers.” The expense of finding caregivers to support their medically complex child has interfered with their other financial goals: “It is a significant chunk of my husband's income for the last, really, five, six years especially, has gone to that instead of going towards our other kids, college tuition or our retirement fund or any of these other places where it could have gone.”

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One parent we interviewed in a rural area confirmed the critical challenge of securing child care, stating that the search requires exhausting every available option: “You have to reach out to...all your resources, and it’s just sometimes stressful.”

Of course, these parents also consistently emphasized the joy and fulfillment they found in caring for their children at home, even under difficult circumstances. One dad told us about his happiness that his son, home on college vacation, wants to spend time with him in part due to the close relationship they developed while he was a stay-at-home dad. However, even for deeply dedicated parents who enjoy spending all day with their children, regularly scheduled breaks are a must, along with trusted babysitters, to go to doctor appointments, get important paperwork done, and accomplish countless other tasks. In the words of one stay-at-home father, “It’s a marathon...[It’s] the one thing that I was not ready for in becoming a stay-at-home dad.”

## Concerns about isolation and lack of social connections

Many of the parents we spoke to also talked about feeling isolated from their wider communities. In particular, the stay-at-home dads we interviewed indicated that because of gender dynamics, they often have difficulty fitting in with the existing social groups available for stay-at-home parents. Even stepping a little outside of the mainstream—having Dad at home and not Mom—made it hard to join mostly female playgroups or library meetups. We were especially struck by one dad who reported: “The hardest one for me was...just the pure isolation in the beginning...There was probably a two-year period where I would go weeks and months, talking to no other adult other than my wife or my parents.”

In this, we see a link to Capita’s larger work on loneliness and social isolation. Americans in 2026 are struggling deeply with connection and closeness, a problem our former surgeon general [labeled](#) a “loneliness epidemic.”

The parents of children with medically complex needs echoed this experience. Nearly all described the profound isolation that comes with caring for a child with significant medical or behavioral challenges. Some detailed how caregiving pressures had strained their marriages and other family relationships. These parents also told us about how much time and energy go into caring for their children. There is extensive hands-on care for their child. However, there are also tremendous bureaucratic and paperwork challenges in ensuring that all the care is delivered. One mother told us about “the number of hours I spend on the phone with insurance, the number of not just hours, but days or even weeks.” This demand on these families’ time means it is more difficult to engage in ordinary social activities.

The parents we spoke to in rural areas also faced challenges in connecting with others. One parent who had moved to a rural community told us about the difficulty of

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breaking into a tight-knit community: “There’s a lot of people who grew up around here who are from here, and so they...have their roots....For that first year [after I moved], I tried really hard. I...went to all the things, and I just never felt like I found...a group of people.”

In addition, many people have important social connections through their work. Without that critical social outlet, many stay-at-home parents struggle, reflecting a lack of underlying social connections in many communities.

## Concerns about financial security and retirement

Many of the parents we spoke to had significant concerns about financial security and retirement. For many of these families, having a parent at home came with substantial financial sacrifice; though they were also clear that if they returned to work, the cost of child care would eat up their paycheck or cost more than they would make in the paid workforce. Some of the parents we talked to said that they would welcome additional support from the government. One mother cautioned that she wanted to make sure that any such support would not be subjected to fraud and abuse by people who should not be entitled to benefits. However, many parents were like the stay-at-home dad who told us: “I would ask for and encourage our lawmakers, our movers and shakers in our society, [to ask themselves],...What else can we do to make it easier for people to exist as single-income families?”

We received the firm sense that while many stay-at-home parents are interested in increasing their work hours, many others (or sometimes even the same people) have conflicting and complex desires and goals. Financial factors may be pushing some parents to return to work, but other factors militate in favor of staying home, including the joy of spending time with their children. Based on these discussions, we caution that our polling, like all polling, can tell part of the story, but truly understanding what these parents want requires in-depth conversation. Even parents that affirmatively want to increase their work hours may say that if balancing the budget were not a challenge for their family, they’d prefer to be home...or not. Perhaps they miss the social connection and challenge of a workplace.

Almost every parent we spoke to raised concerns about finances, but the parents of medically complex children expressed the most significant concerns about the future. For many of these parents, the needs of their children will continue to grow as time goes on, rather than decrease. For example, we spoke with several mothers of children with very significant global disabilities who require round-the-clock assistance. These children may engage in aggressive behavior or self-harming activities. The older their children get, the more physically demanding it is to care for them. One mother spoke to us about the difficulties of bathing her son—as he approached adulthood, he had grown heavy and strong, making basic hygiene tasks increasingly challenging. She was

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also aware that as she ages and loses physical strength, these challenges will continue to increase. Two mothers told us that they simply could not bear to think much about the future. They were unsure about what the next decades might hold, who would care for their children, and how they would take care of themselves as they aged.

## Concerns about a lack of respect in society

Finally, almost all the parent groups we spoke with felt undervalued and underappreciated by the wider community. In the words of one mom we spoke to who lived in a rural area, “Stay-at-home parents [are] so integral...[but] the people running the country...don’t really do anything to recognize it.” This lack of respect from the wider community seems to have real impacts on stay-at-home parents. For some parents, it can contribute to a lack of self-worth. For others, it can contribute to feelings of isolation and alienation. One stay-at-home dad we talked to said, “I think that we, as a society, have stopped looking at that as being an actual job because it isn’t directly compensated.”

Here we note a link to another overarching problem in the twenty-first century: the “depersonalization crisis,” in which people [struggle to be seen](#) as human beings. Without a career, some of these parents struggle to be recognized as having value.

## Concerns Specific to Our Subgroups

In addition to the overarching concerns shared among the different subgroups we interviewed, there were distinct concerns among each group.

### Parents of medically complex children

This subgroup exhibited the highest distress and described the most acute challenges of all the parents we spoke with. For many of these parents, caregiving is an almost all-consuming task that they expect to span decades. The public school system can offer significant support while their children are minors, but the future often looks extremely uncertain. For these parents, respite care, assistance to ensure they remain financially stable and prepare for retirement, and help navigating complex medical bureaucracies are critical. These parents care for their children out of love but desperately need additional help so they can continue caring for their medically complex children, any other children, and themselves.

### Rural parents

For many rural families, the availability of any form of quality, responsive child care is a crap shoot: sometimes they roll the dice and come up with a winner, but too often the odds are stacked against them. These parents spoke to us about the difficulty of finding reliable part-time or flexible child care, or indeed any child care at all. Child care providers in rural areas are sometimes few and far between, forcing parents into long

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drives to find care that is a good fit. These findings replicate work done by the Bipartisan Policy Center, which [found](#) in 2023: “Gaps in child care supply and the economic impact of those gaps are larger in rural America than in urban areas.” Rural parents likewise told us it was difficult to make friends and often suffered from significant social isolation.

## Military families

For these families, switching from base to base often makes it difficult to form social connections and often requires moving away from extended family. The resulting social isolation makes it difficult to find reliable ad hoc child care. One mother told us that an older family member sometimes had to fly in to help care for her kids.

However, the interviews with military families did shine a light on what responsive, dedicated policy can achieve. The armed forces understand the difficulties experienced by many families and offer resources that are more generous than those available to the civilian population. The U.S. military [touts](#) its efforts to offer quality, standardized child care to its servicemembers: “The War Department knows that affordable, quality child care is critical to the well-being of military parents. The department is committed to meeting the growing and diverse child care needs of military families and takes pride in providing quality services on and off installations worldwide.”

Many of the parents we spoke with appreciated the military’s effort to offer child care, sometimes including at unusual hours, as well as assistance in supporting families and spouses through deployments and moves, in addition to generous family benefits.

## Stay-at-home fathers

Finally, the stay-at-home dads we spoke with seemed to experience a distinct form of alienation, as men are still less likely to become stay-at-home parents than women. In the words of one dad, “In the spaces where I take my kids, or where we go, to do mid-day parent things, it’s all moms. They look at me like, ‘I don’t know what to do with you here.’”

These fathers sometimes have difficulty making social connections because they feel actively excluded from traditional playgroups, library meet-ups, and other gatherings. However, as dads continue to make up a [larger percentage](#) of stay-at-home parents, it seems likely that these social norms and tensions will evolve.

## Recommendations: How Government Can Support Stay-at-Home Parents

Supporting stay-at-home parents is a political winner. Voters do not see supporting parents who work outside the home and supporting stay-at-home parents as a zero-sum equation. According to our survey, a majority of voters—including 60% of Democrats and nearly half of Republicans (43%)—say they would be more likely to back legislation designed to help parents access outside care options if it included support for stay-at-home parents.

Only 7% of voters, across parties, said it would reduce their backing of child care legislation. Similarly, half (51%) of stay-at-home parents themselves said they would be more likely to back a Congressional candidate who pursued that type of policy.

In short, advancing support for stay-at-home parents in the context of comprehensive child care reform is desired by voters and carries minimal political risk.

### Our recommendations

We offer 6 concrete recommendations for steps the federal government (and, in many cases, state or local government) should consider to ensure all families, including those with stay-at-home parents, are treated fairly and have the support they need to thrive.

Our overarching recommendation is to expand the resources devoted to supporting families while integrating stay-at-home parents into policies that have long ignored them. It is untenable to try squeezing more out of a system that is already starved for resources. We advocate that going forward, policymakers strive to craft legislation and initiatives that are *neutral* on whether a family chooses to have a stay-at-home parent or not, rather than putting a thumb on the scale one way or another. Neutral does not mean identical; good policy in this area supports families in making their own decisions, and that will require different forms of support for different care options.

In addition, we encourage all individuals who speak publicly about stay-at-home parents—politicians, advocates, media figures, and others—to acknowledge the lived realities and diversity of this population and to push back against stereotypes and mischaracterizations.

- Surge resources to support family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers: Our research reinforces that FFN caregivers are [among the most desired sources of child care](#) for stay-at-home parents, as well as families in which all parents work outside the home. However, these caregivers face unnecessary and onerous barriers to receiving public support. Many states [have no mechanism](#) for compensating FFNs

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and others reimburse FFN providers as low as \$15 or \$20 a day. There are also often limited ways for these providers to access voluntary training or workshops.

Policymakers at every level of government should identify barriers to FFN support in their jurisdictions and ensure that all who wish to become FFN providers can, within reason, do so easily. These steps might include streamlining registration processes for FFN providers, increasing reimbursement rates, and making FFN providers eligible for income tax credits, as Colorado does with its [Care Worker Tax Credit](#).

- **Strengthen drop-in child care options:** The U.S. lacks sufficient drop-in child care, where parents can leave children with trusted caregivers for a few hours as needed. One reason is that drop-in child care often isn't fully included in state child care systems, and the way these programs operate doesn't fit well with existing funding streams. Policymakers should strengthen drop-in child care by offering grants to nonprofit child care operators who may be able to attach a drop-in classroom to an existing program, which could help alleviate the concerns parents expressed about leaving children with caregivers they don't know well. Policymakers might also identify geographic areas of particular need (such as areas near healthcare facilities) and offer tax incentives for opening drop-in programs in those areas.
- **Pass Social Security caregiver credits:** When parents step away from the labor force to provide care for dependents, their retirement security can suffer. The Social Security Administration calculates old-age benefits based on an individual's 35 highest-earnings years, so having years with \$0 earnings can have significantly negative impacts on benefit amounts. [Caregiver credits](#)—common in other nations, and occasionally proposed in Congress—assign a standard amount of earnings for full-time caregivers, usually for up to five years. These credits can help smooth the long-term financial picture for stay-at-home parents, honoring their labor and making the option more viable. Polling [shows that this idea is popular](#). As policymakers begin to wrestle with the need for a comprehensive Social Security reform package in the face of the program's precarious financial situation, they should incorporate Social Security caregiver credits in any relevant legislation.
- **Make At-Home Infant Care initiatives an allowable use of federal child care funding:** In the late 1990s, states such as Minnesota and Montana [experimented](#) with At-Home Infant Care programs (AHICs). These programs rested on the idea that low- and moderate-income parents with very young children (below ages two or one) should have the option to pay themselves for child care. The amounts paid were equivalent or nearly equivalent to the amount of a child care voucher they would otherwise use to purchase external care. The concept had bipartisan Congressional support into the early 2000s, although no federal actions were passed. Under current federal law, however, AHICs are not an allowable use of Child Care and Development Fund monies (the primary source of federal child care

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funding). Enabling states to pursue AHICs would enhance the financial stability of households with a stay-at-home parent. Importantly, AHICs *must* be pursued in conjunction with robust funding of licensed child care programs and should be designed to complement, rather than supplant, paid family leave policies. Advancing AHICs without these components would result in harm.

- **Improve the quality and viability of part-time work:** Stay-at-home parents in our survey expressed a strong preference for part-time work. Two-thirds (66%) of those who wanted to work more paid hours desired 20 hours or less of additional paid work. However, part-time work in the U.S. is often precarious, with [research suggesting](#) 34% of part-time workers have “low-quality” schedules marked by a lack of predictability and control, compared to 25% of full-time workers. Part-time work also frequently lacks benefits like health insurance or retirement plans. Policymakers should improve part-time work by adopting fair workweek laws that give employees [more predictable schedules](#), offering incentives to extend prorated benefits to those below the 30-hour-a-week threshold, easing the path for part-time workers to voluntarily join unions, creating incentives for businesses to hire parents seeking to rejoin the workforce, and encouraging job sharing and work-from-home options where appropriate.
- **Identify specific interventions for stay-at-home fathers, military families, families with children who have disabilities or medical complexities, and rural families:** Our research reveals that parents in these groups need targeted support. Policymakers should consult people from these communities to develop practical solutions, then provide funding to test new programs and initiatives.

While these recommendations can be implemented right away, policymakers should also support research and new policies that create broader support for stay-at-home parents, such as monthly payments to stay-at-home parents who care for their children. In future publications, we hope to expand on specific policy recommendations for the subgroups that we studied.

The bottom line: the family remains the basic unit of our society, and any comprehensive family policy or child care reform must include measures that help families with stay-at-home parents flourish.

## Appendix: Methodology

### Survey

On behalf of Capita, YouGov conducted two national surveys totaling 3,203 parents with children under age 12, including oversamples in North Carolina, Michigan, and New Jersey. Additional screening criteria were used to identify and survey 1,000 stay-at-home parents nationally, including oversamples in the selected states. The surveys were fielded from October 7 to November 6, 2025 and from October 31 to November 13, 2025. [The survey cross-tabs are available HERE.](#)

### Questionnaire:

*[Basic demographic info, including party ID]*

- Age (18-33, 34-38, 39-44, 45+)
- Gender (male, female)
- Race (black, white, hispanic, other)
- Education (HS or less, some college and 2-year degree, 4-year degree, post-grad degree)
- Region (northeast, midwest, south, west)
- Urbanicity (city, suburb, town, rural area, other)
- Party identification (Democrat, Republican, Independent)

Please indicate if you are a parent or guardian of children in any of the following age ranges (select all that apply):

- 0 to 12 years old
- 13 to 18 years old
- Over 18 years old
- I am not a parent or guardian

*[RESPONDENT TERMINATES IF NOT A PARENT TO AT LEAST ONE CHILD YOUNGER THAN 12]*

### *Introduction*

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The purpose of the research study is to gain an understanding of parents' opinions on a variety of topics, including experiences with child care.

If you agree to be in this study, you will receive 250-500 points credited to your YouGov account in exchange for your participation, depending on your total survey time.  
{end Introduction}

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## [QUESTIONS FOR ALL]

In the long run, do you think the use of AI in the workplace will lead to ...

- a. More economic security for your family
- b. Less economic security for your family
- c. It won't make a difference to the economic security of my family.

What are the largest sources of stress in your life that, if addressed, would most significantly improve your life satisfaction? (Choose your top three)

- Housing availability/costs
- Personal health/health care costs
- Monthly income
- Caregiving responsibilities for dependent children, and related costs
- Caregiving responsibilities for dependent adults, and related costs
- Job quality
- Transportation
- Lack of time/predictability in your weekly schedule
- Crime / public safety
- Saving for retirement
- Loneliness/lack of social connections
- Lack of meaning/purpose in life
- Unfulfilled family formation (for instance, not being married or having the number of desired children)
- Other [stress\_sources\_other]{open}
- None of the above

Imagine that there was legislation designed to support parents with accessing non-parental childcare options (e.g., licensed childcare/daycare programs). Would you be more, less, or equally likely to support that legislation if it also included support for stay-at-home parents?

## [RANDOMIZE]

- a. More likely
- b. Equally likely
- c. Less likely
- d. No opinion

## [SCREENER QUESTION]

On a typical weekday between 9am and 5pm, how many hours do you spend as the primary daytime care provider for one or more children under the age of 12 living in your household? Please include primary daytime care provided in person, whether or not you are also employed in other work.

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- a. 8 hours or more
- b. 5 to less than 8 hours
- c. 2 to less than 5 hours
- d. 1 hour or less than 2 hours
- e. 0 to less than 1 hours

*[RESPONDENT DEFINED AS STAY-AT-HOME PARENT IF THEY PROVIDE AT LEAST 5 HOURS OF PRIMARY DAYTIME CARE]*

*[RESPONDENT TERMINATES IF NOT 5-8 HOURS OT MORE; ONLY STAY-AT-HOME PARENTS FROM HERE]*

Do you consider yourself a stay-at-home parent?

- a. Yes
- b. No

How many hours of paid work do you currently do per week, on average?

- a. 0 hours a week
- b. 1-5 hours a week
- c. 6-10 hours a week
- d. 11-20 hours a week
- e. 21-30 hours a week
- f. 31-40+ hours a week

Would you want to begin doing paid work, or do more hours of paid work, if you had access to more affordable non-parental child care options?

- a. Yes
- b. No

*[IF "NO," SKIP TO NEXT QUESTION]*

*[IF "YES"]*

How many more hours of paid work would you want to do if you had access to more affordable non-parental child care options?

- a. Add 1-5 hours a week
- b. Add 6-10 hours a week
- c. Add 11-20 hours a week
- d. Add 21-30 hours a week
- e. Add 31-40+ hours a week

What is the highest monthly per-child cost that you would describe as "affordable" child care for your family, meaning it would still allow you to meet your ideal number of work hours?

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- a. <\$100 a month
- b. \$101-\$300 a month
- c. \$301-\$500 a month
- d. \$501-\$1,000 a month
- e. \$1,001-\$2,000 a month

Assuming all the options met your definition of “affordable,” what type of non-parental child care would you most prefer to utilize?

- a. A family member, friend, or neighbor providing care
- b. A licensed child care home (that is, someone who runs a business providing care for unrelated children in their home)
- c. A licensed child care (daycare) center [affordable\_type:daycaretype]{popup}  
Would you prefer a  
[If chosen]
  - a. A religiously-based center (that is, affiliated with a house of worship like a church, synagogue, or mosque)
  - b. Standalone secular center
- d. After-school enrichment programs
- e. Other (please specify)

What are the top two reasons you would want to begin paid work, or increase paid work hours?

- Bringing in more income to help the family meet <u>basic needs</u> (for instance: food, housing, clothing, health care)
- Personal fulfillment
- To build up retirement savings
- Access to health insurance
- Opportunity to socialize with other adults
- Bringing in more income to help the family meet <u>discretionary needs</u> (for instance: buying items for children’s extracurricular activities, going on vacation)
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? “I enjoy being a stay-at-home parent and would like to continue in that role, but feel financial pressure to find ways to earn income.”

[RANDOMIZE]

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Somewhat agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree

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- d. Somewhat disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "I would prefer to have a paid job, but a lack of affordable and available child care options means being a stay-at-home parent is what makes the most sense for my family."

[RANDOMIZE]

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Somewhat agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Somewhat disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

Imagine there is a Congressional candidate who promotes policies supporting stay-at-home parents alongside support for non-parental child care options (such as licensed child care / daycare programs) Would you be more, less, or equally likely to vote for such a candidate?

[RANDOMIZE]

- a. More likely
- b. Equally likely
- c. Less likely
- d. No opinion

Thank you for your participation. If you have any additional thoughts you would like to share with the researchers, please write them here.

## Parent Roundtables

We held 6 parent roundtables between June and September 2025, as well as a series of interviews:

- Military families: Conducted virtually on June 16, 2025
- Stay-at-home fathers: Conducted virtually on July 21, 2025
- Rural families: Conducted in person on August 6 and 7, 2025
- Stay-at-home mothers: Conducted virtually on August 21, 2025
- Parents of medically complex children: Interviews conducted virtually throughout 2025

In addition, our analyses from these structured conversations are bolstered by ongoing informal conversations with parents across the country. Note that parent roundtables and interviews are, by their nature, qualitative rather than quantitative data.