

# Family



AMERICAN  
COMPASS

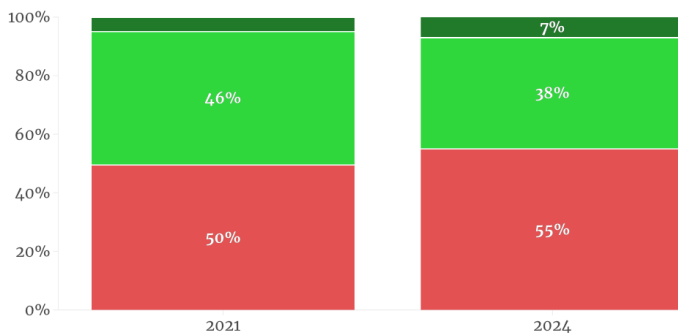
Responsive Politics

Most parenting-age Americans say they have had fewer children than they would like, and reason they most often cite is that they don't think they could afford to have more. The cost of achieving middle-class security has risen much faster than the typical wage, and now the nation's fertility rate is plummeting.

## A RISING SHARE OF AMERICANS HAVE HAD FEWER CHILDREN THAN THEY WANT

Total children compared to ideal number of children

Unmet Met Exceeded



Source: American Compass Family Survey (2024), N = 882 Americans age 18-50; American Compass Family Survey (2021), N = 1,826 Americans age 18-50  
Note: Excludes respondents who say that "my family is still growing."

## WHY IT MATTERS:

The family is the indispensable institution, the only one capable of producing a next generation and preparing it for the burdens of productive citizenship. Its ongoing collapse poses the greatest threat to American liberty and prosperity.

Beginning in the 1960s, a rising share of children have been born to single mothers and raised in unstable households. More recently, marriage and fertility rates have fallen to the point that more 30-year-olds are living with their parents than are married and parents themselves. In 2020, only 2.1 million American children were born annually into married families, compared to 3.1 million in the late 1960s, though the population has nearly doubled over that period.

Meanwhile, and relatedly, supporting a family has become more difficult. Middle-class wages have stagnated and costs have risen, so that the essentials of housing, health care, transportation, education, and food that would have cost a typical earner 40 weeks of income in 1985 now consume more

## WHAT VOTERS SAY:

64%

of conservative Americans say the federal government should provide more support to families with children.

Nearly two-thirds of conservative and very conservative parenting-age Americans say the federal government should provide more support to families with children; that figure has increased by 13 points in less than three years.

59%

of American parents say families sending a second earner into the labor market to help ends meet is "a big problem."

Just under 60% of American parents say families sending a second earner into the labor market to help ends meet is "a big problem. Many families have lost the choice they want, and once had, to live a middle-class lifestyle on one income." Only 24% say, "This is not a big problem. It is how the economy is supposed to work. Parents are choosing to work more and consume more, and if they want they can also choose to work less and consume less."

than an entire year's income. Many families have adjusted by having both parents work, and work more hours, and the steady drumbeat of proposals for subsidized childcare and paid leave aim to universalize that model. But most families would prefer to have a parent staying home with the young kids they have, and financial constraints are the most commonly cited obstacle to having more.

Public policy can do many things to help families flourish. While Americans don't want to provide a handout, and families don't want one, most people agree that the government provider greater support to parents who are also working to support themselves. Family policy can also make an enormous difference by creating a social environment conducive to child-rearing. The advent of social media and the migration of many activities on to the Internet has opened entirely new spaces that, from the perspective of child welfare, are currently ungoverned. Families need a world safe for children, and that must now extend to the online world as well.

# Political Leaders

## WHAT TO TALK ABOUT

- **The Indispensable Role of the Family.** The decision to form a family and raise children is not a consumption choice—merely an experience, to be weighed against a nice vacation or more time for gardening. It is the basic obligation of life and citizenship, incurred by virtue of having been born and raised oneself, and of enjoying liberty and prosperity in a nation built through that same work performed countless times across generations.
- **The Cost of Thriving.** Economists insist that families have never had it easier... so long as what those families want is a 1950s lifestyle. But achieving middle-class security in the 21st century requires much more and, with wages having stagnated, families struggle to make ends meet. They still figure it out, of course, whether by having both parents work or by relying more on government subsidies. But in either case, the choice, flexibility, and self-sufficiency central to a thriving middle class have been lost.
- **A New Social Compact.** Providing support to families who are working to support themselves is not welfare. It represents the foundation of an essential social compact, in which those bearing the burdens of raising children receive support during those most challenging years, which they are able to repay as support to the next generation as it does the same.

# Media

## WHAT TO ASK

- Getting more second earners into the workforce is an effective way to drive economic growth. Should getting more parents working be a priority?
- Right now, childcare and paid leave benefits only help parents who are working or plan to return to work soon. Why are they more deserving of assistance than families where a parent stays home with young children?
- What is the appropriate ratio of public spending on children and families to public spending on the elderly?

## POLICY PROPOSALS

1. **Family Income Supplemental Credit.** Working families should receive support in the form of a monthly per-child payment, beginning during pregnancy. The total benefit that a family can receive in a year should be capped at the family's income from the prior year, ensuring that even very low-income households can receive the full value, but a household entirely disconnected from work for an extended period cannot.
2. **Family-Friendly Benefits.** Many programs provided both by the government and employers are geared only toward supporting individual workers and leave stay-at-home parents behind. Public policies should be reformed so that a married couple benefits fully so long as one member is working, and employers should implement family-friendly programs that consider the needs of a worker's spouse and children.
3. **Protecting Children Online.** The first step in protecting children online is to know who is a child online. Public policy long ago provided for means of identification in the physical world. The pervasiveness of the digital world now necessitates a comparable method for age verification in particular. Once online platforms have a reliable method for establishing the age of users, they should be required to limit access to minors and protect them from obscene content, and they should be held liable when they fail to do so.

## ASSIGNMENT DESK

- What is the full range of childcare arrangements employed by the families in a neighborhood and how many of them are helped, ignored, or hindered by public policy?
- How would it look if a family attempted to replicate a 1950s middle-class standard of living? Is it even possible? What would be different now than it was then?
- Parents are overwhelmingly unhappy with their children's access to and use of social media, yet they continue to enable it. What forces lead them to do so and what help do they need to do otherwise?