

Council on Contemporary
Families Symposium
**Parents Can't Go It
Alone—They Never Have:
What to Do for Parents to
Help Our Next
Generation**

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CCF Symposium: Parents Can't Go It Alone

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Children Are Now Back at School, Time to Focus on What Their Parents Need Barbara J. Risman	3
Why No One Can “Have It All” and What to Do About It Kathleen Gerson	6
Work that Works for Low-Wage Workers Maureen Perry-Jenkins	10
Fears of Violence: Concerns of Middle-Class Latinx Parents Lorena Garcia	13
Mothering While Black Dawn Marie Dow	16
Dads Count Too: Family-Friendly Policies Must Include Fathers Stephanie Coontz	18
Raising a Village: Identifying Social Supports for All Kinds of Families Caitlyn Collins	21
FURTHER INFORMATION & CONTACT	25

Executive Summary: Parents Can't Go It Alone—They Never Have: What to Do for Parents to Help Our Next Generation.

**Executive summary prepared for CCF by Barbara J. Risman, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences Distinguished Professor, University of Illinois at Chicago.*

Children Are Now Back at School, Time to Focus on What Their Parents Need

The birth rate is falling throughout much of the world. Yet many people still want to be parents, and they invest great time, energy and love in their children. The essays in [this symposium](#) offer research evidence on the state of parenting among a diverse group of American parents. Each essay suggests possibilities for how our society might come to the aid of today's parents.

Kathleen Gerson [busts the myth that there is such a thing as “having it all.”](#) On the basis of interviews with 120 young adults (33–47 years old), she found four basic patterns for managing the conflicts between the world of work and raising children. Some are hyper-traditional, with men in very time-consuming jobs and women without paid work doing intensive mothering. Others opt out of the dilemma of balancing work and family problems by remaining single or childless. Another pattern Gerson found was in families where women “do it all” rather than have it all. In these families, both mothers and fathers work for pay, but mothers continue to do the primary parenting. Finally, about one-third of the people she talked to can be described as egalitarians, experimenting with building an equal partnership despite the obstacles. Only the egalitarians prefer the choice they have made; most of the others would prefer egalitarian relationships, but have not found a way to achieve them in a society that demands more from workers than ever before, and with a philosophy of childrearing that requires intensive attention. Gerson suggests that it's time to change the workplace, so that families can live the lives they desire.

Maureen Perry-Jenkins [offers some concrete suggestions for what needs to change so that low-wage workers can meet their families' needs.](#) In interviews with 360 low-income working families, a shortage of time was a recurring theme. Parents needed time to sleep, care for babies, and connect with their partner, but they also needed predictability in their schedules. Control over time makes it possible to have last-minute doctor appointments or a needed sick day. Jobs need to have predictable schedules. But beyond that, workers talk about the benefits of autonomy and the ability to get respect for taking initiatives at work. Conditions at work affect parents' mental health and their relationships with their children and partners. Perry-Jenkins suggests that to support today's families we must to improve workplaces and build cultures of respect and support. One way to support the next generation is to pay attention to the conditions of work for their parents. Work matters.

In the next essay, Lorena Garcia [argues that the world around us matters a great deal for our families.](#) Garcia interviewed 68 middle- and upper-middle-class Latinx parents in the Chicagoland area. What she found was both optimism and worry. The parents were optimistic that they had the knowledge and financial resources to help their children pursue their dreams.

Yet they worried, especially about their sons. They worried about the vulnerability of Black and Latino boys to gun violence in the city. Even though most did not live in high-crime neighborhoods, they worried about gang-related violence and violence at the hands of the police. They gave their sons a version of “the talk,” trying to help them reduce their vulnerability to police racism. Garcia reminds us that all parents are concerned for their children’s safety, but that particular worries vary by race and class. Despite economic privileges, the Latinx parents in her study had serious concerns about their sons’ physical safety. No parent should have to go to work worried about their children’s safety. Garcia shows us that good family policy must include reducing gang-violence and police racism.

Dawn Dow [offers a view of African-American mothering that is at odds with the presumption that all mothers similarly feel a conflict between paid work and parenting](#). In interviews with middle- and upper-middle-class African-American mothers, Dow found that working for pay is considered part of a mother’s responsibility—that financial support for children is part of mothering work. Indeed, stay-at-home mothers are more likely to have to explain their choice than are those in the labor force. What sets these mothers apart from how other American mothers talk about parenting is that they felt supported by their families and communities for their paid labor. They have often been raised in a household with two incomes and lived in communities where a woman's strength and independence are seen as virtues. Their families and communities provide emotional and instrumental support for employed mothers. Dow’s research reminds us that not only must we change the structures of workplaces to support parenting, but we must support cultural expectations and communities that validate parents’ ability to combine earning a living with caring for others.

Although some of the essays in this symposium are all about mothering, Stephanie Coontz [reminds us that dads count too](#). She suggests that a major obstacle to the successful coordination of work and family life is the assumption that the problem belongs only to mothers. If fathers were not presumed to be entitled to focus solely on earning a living, mothers would never be presumed to have to do it all. A historian, Coontz reminds us that this exemption of fathers from the demands of family life is not traditional at all. For millennia, fathers and mothers shared the duties of making sure everyone ate and supervising the children. Coontz provides data on the kinds of parental leave available to fathers, and shows the inequity of providing more or better leave to mothers. Coontz suggests, however, that when paternal leave taking becomes more normative, as in Denmark, it can lower the motherhood penalty in wages and increase household wages. Indeed, fathers who take parental leave raise more egalitarian sons. This suggests that feminists must work as strenuously for fair and generous paternal leaves as we do for maternal leaves.

In the final essay of the Symposium, Caitlyn Collins [takes us on a deep dive into the social policy that makes it easier or harder to be an employed parent](#). She interviewed 135 middle-class working mothers in Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States. The European countries have quite different social policies, but all have more family-related policies than does the United States, so employed mothering is less stressful in those countries than in the United States. The kinds of job protections that matter include parental leave for caretaking, maternity leave surrounding childbirth itself, paid vacations and holidays, mandatory sick days, and available and affordable child care. Collins ends by suggesting that the lack of policies in the

United States sends the message that our families are on our own—that the community owes nothing to those raising the next generation of citizens. The United States lags behind other societies and is exceptional for the lack of support for family life.

The essays in this symposium show why parents cannot do it alone, and why they should not have to. It is time to focus on what parents need from the rest of us to successfully raise the next generation. These essays suggest that parents need workplace policies that presume all workers are also caretakers at some point in their lives. Every child deserves a parent whose work does not challenge their mental health, a parent who can be effective at work while also providing caretaking, and neighborhoods that are safe. These essays show that the family policies we need include parental leave and workplace flexibility, but those alone are not sufficient. Reducing gun violence, reducing racism and its effects, and creating workplaces where employees feel respected are also among social policies needed to support American parents and their families. are also among social policies needed to support American parents and their families.

Why No One Can “Have It All” and What to Do About It

A briefing paper prepared by Kathleen Gerson, New York University, for the Council on Contemporary Families' Symposium Parents Can't Go It Alone—They Never Have.

If debates about women's rights, relationships between the sexes, and worsening conflicts between paid work and family life seem endless, that's because Americans can't agree on what is happening, much less on what to do about it. Some blame the problems on a “gender stall,” as women continue to hit glass ceilings at work and perform the lion's share of caregiving at home. Others focus on the decline of men's breadwinning as their earnings erode, their labor force participation drops, and they fall behind women in educational attainment and career aspirations. Progressives lament the lingering traditionalism that leaves women mired in second-class citizenship, while conservatives worry about the rise of a self-centered individualism that elevates personal freedom over lasting commitments to others.

To gain a more nuanced picture of how today's adults are negotiating work–family conflicts, I conducted face-to-face depth interviews with 120 (self-identified) women and men between the ages of 33 and 47 years—the years when most Americans face their peak challenges in building both their work and their family lives. I went to two different geographic areas, interviewing people living in the heart of the “new economy” in Silicon Valley (stretching from San Jose to the East Bay) and those living in or near America's biggest city, the New York metropolitan area. This approach yielded a group with diverse racial, economic, and educational backgrounds living in a variety of family arrangements, including singles, cohabiters, and married couples.

My interviews revealed four major patterns of response to the challenges of earning a living and caring for others. At one end of the spectrum, one-fifth of my participants adopted a “hyper-traditional” pattern that emphasized overwork for fathers and intensive parenting for mothers. Concerns about job security prompted husbands to put in very long work weeks (ranging from 60 to as many as 100 hours) to assure employers of their work commitment. In a parallel way, [concerns about living up to a standard of “intensive parenting” left wives with equally strong pressures to devote their utmost attention to childrearing.](#) Although these mothers and fathers felt overworked in their separate spheres and deprived of both personal time and time together as a couple, they did not believe they could risk doing anything else.

At the other end of the spectrum, 24 percent opted to remain “unencumbered.” These adults remained single and childless or became estranged from offspring in the wake of a breakup. A comparable percentage of women and men followed this path, but they did so for different reasons. The men were typically unable (or unwilling) to find steady work and concluded they could not afford to take on the financial or emotional responsibilities of marriage and parenthood. The women found they valued work too much to dilute their career commitment by taking on commitments to care for husbands and children.

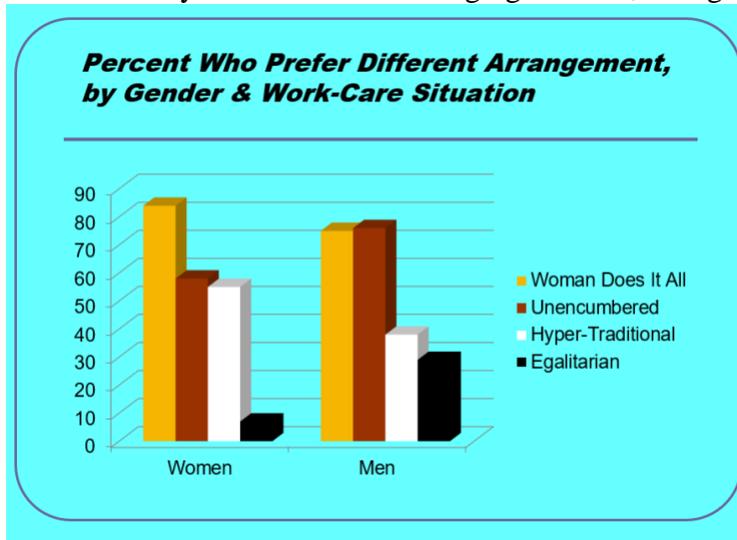
In a very real sense, the hyper-traditional couples are recreating traditional gender patterns in an especially extreme form, whereas the unencumbered are opting to preserve their independence by avoiding such traditional family commitments. Yet together these two extremes account for only 44 percent of my respondents. The remaining 56 percent comprises two additional groups.

About a quarter (26 percent) of my participants are in relationships that reflect the simultaneous decline of the male breadwinner wage and the persistence of the female caregiver norm. These families rely on the woman's earnings as much as they do on the man's (and sometimes more) but they also depend on her for the bulk of caregiving. In these cases, women do not "have it all" so much as they "do it all." It is hardly surprising that carrying the load as both a primary or co-breadwinner and the main caretaker leaves most of these women feeling tired, disheartened, and unappreciated—but they are not alone in their frustration. Most of the men in these relationships also express frustration, saying they wish they could do more caregiving, but fear that taking the necessary time would endanger their job security and prospects. What's more, these are not unrealistic fears. [Research has demonstrated that a "flexibility stigma" penalizes workers—especially professional men](#)—who choose to pull back even slightly to engage in care work at home.

The remaining 30 percent of my participants can be described as egalitarians—couples who are experimenting with building an equal partnership despite the obstacles. With no clear path to follow, they do so in varying ways and with varying degrees of success. A third of this group (about 12 percent of the entire sample) decided to avoid the difficulties of equal caretaking by forgoing parenthood altogether, with many looking to relatives, friends, and pets for other forms of caregiving ties. The rest were willing to limit their working time, risk their financial prospects, and forego sleep and personal time to try to divide work and caregiving equally. Yet the dearth of institutional supports has left many of the work-care egalitarians wondering how long and at what cost they can sustain their efforts.

Despite their differences, all these strategies are responses to a similar set of pressures and conflicts. Rising job insecurity has upped the ante for workers, forcing them to put in long hours or risk losing their employment or endangering their future security. On the home front, concerns about rising inequality and declining social mobility have upped the ante on childrearing, creating a sense that only intensive parenting can prepare children to navigate an uncertain future.

Each of the four strategies described inevitably produces some degree of dissatisfaction, but the one commonly seen as most challenging—that is, the egalitarian strategy—turns out to be most



preferred by those who practice it. Figure 1 shows that 55 percent of hyper-traditional women and 38 percent of hyper-traditional men would prefer a different arrangement, while 84 percent of the women who "do it all" and 75 percent of men who rely on a woman to do it all would also prefer a different arrangement. Among the unencumbered, 58 percent of women and 76 percent of men report that a different situation would be

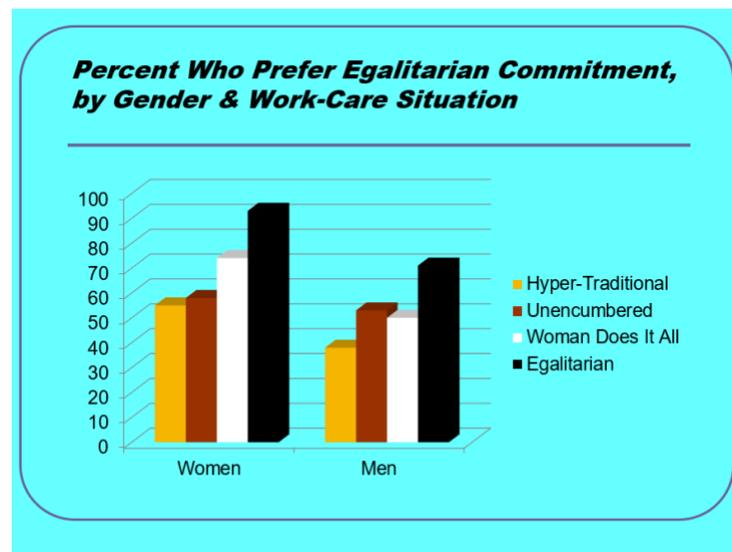
preferable. In contrast, those expressing the lowest desire for a different arrangement are the egalitarians, with only 7 percent of women and 29 percent of men saying they would prefer one of the other alternatives.

What arrangement do people prefer? Figure 2 shows that in addition to the egalitarians, where 93 percent of women and 71 percent of men prefer their situation, most of the rest of my interviewees also would prefer to share breadwinning and caregiving in an egalitarian way if that were a more realistic option. Women are understandably more likely to prefer sharing, with 74 percent of those currently “doing it all,” 58 percent of the unencumbered, and 55 percent of those in hyper-traditional relationships preferring more equal sharing. Although men expressed less enthusiasm for sharing, a significant minority—including nearly a third of hyper-traditional men, almost half of men who rely on a woman to do it all, and slightly more than half of unencumbered men—expressed a preference for an egalitarian partnership.

These findings make it clear that although *every* work–care strategy poses significant trade-offs and difficulties, people should not be forced to choose between hyper-traditionalism and hyper-

individualism. Given the realities of the new economy, which relies on women workers but rarely longer offers job security to anyone, regardless of their gender identity or class position, it is neither humane nor just to confine the measure a man’s worth to his ability to be a successful breadwinner or a woman’s worth to her willingness to be a selfless caregiver. The solution is not to shore up and intensify an outdated system, but to address the inequalities and insecurities that permeate the current one.

How can we get to a more reasonable future? The first step is to reframe the work–care debate. It is time to jettison the tired lens of “having it all”—a lens that sees earning and caregiving as incompatible goals and the people (read women) who seek it as selfish or unrealistic. Instead, it is time to build our work and caring institutions on the principles of gender justice and work–care integration. Concretely, this means regulating time norms at the workplace so no worker must choose between excessively long work weeks and job insecurity. In our communities, it means creating caretaking resources that extend beyond the privatized household for children of all ages. And in our political institutions, it means ensuring equal economic opportunities for women of all stripes, equal caregiving rights for fathers as well as mothers, and a strengthened safety net that provides everyone with the basics that fewer and fewer jobs provide, such as a livable income, decent health care, and access to supports for weathering the ups and downs of our increasingly uncertain economic and family lives.



The rise of the new precarious economy is as challenging as the rise of the industrial system was more than a century ago. This transformation calls for structural and cultural realignments as vast as the shifts they need to address. Judging from the responses of my informants, the costs of doing nothing are far greater than the costs of helping everyone—women and men alike—forge a more balanced, equal, and secure division of work and caregiving.

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Work that Works for Low-Wage Workers

A briefing paper prepared by Maureen Perry-Jenkins, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for the Council on Contemporary Families' Symposium Parents Can't Go It Alone—They Never Have.

Low-wage jobs may not be anyone's ideal for a career, but they are not going away anytime soon. The latest data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shown (Figure 1) show that nearly one out of four Americans works for low wages. Many are parents. It is critical for the quality of family life in America that we understand how working conditions, including hours and flexibility, affect parents' well-being, the quality of parenting, and, of course, the well-being of American children.

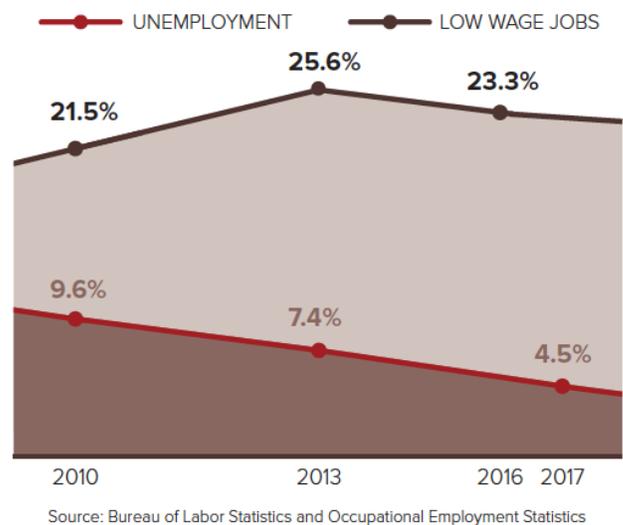
What are the problems for family life created by working conditions at low-wage jobs and what are some of the solutions to solve them? To understand what about low-wage work hurts families and what helps, we conducted interviews with 360 low-income, working families coping with new parenthood and old jobs.

Time was a theme that came up over and over again in our interviews with new parents. They talked about needing time to sleep, work, care for babies, connect with their partner, or simply to be alone. Parents also needed predictability in their time, meaning consistent and set hours. Parents with whom I talked also expressed the need for some control over their time, such as being able to make last-minute doctor appointments or take a needed sick day.

Parents need access to caregiving leaves, sick time, personal time, flexibility, and predictability—issues currently being addressed by policy initiatives across the country. But they also need better conditions of employment. In our efforts to support families by providing flexibility, predictability, and time away from work, we often overlook the impact of what happens during the 40+ hours per week spent “on the job.” Experiences on the factory floor, in the nursing home, or on food service lines that occur hourly, weekly, monthly, and year after year affect workers' mental health, emotional well-being, physical health, stress, and energy. Such experiences can either enable or disable workers' abilities to be engaged and sensitive parents. The question of how we “create” low-wage jobs that provide autonomy, meaning, and support requires listening to the workers themselves and understanding what about their work matters to them.

[Recent interventions aimed at improving workers' control over their schedules](#) and enhancing supervisor support have shown that [efforts to provide greater control and autonomy to workers](#)

UNEMPLOYMENT IS FALLING BUT LOW-WAGE JOBS REMAIN HIGH



[produce better mental and physical health in workers and less employee turnover](#). But how control and autonomy might look in low-wage jobs is not obvious. My research suggests that what actually matters for low-wage workers is being able to take some initiatives and being recognized for doing so. For example, one woman I interviewed, Linda, who worked in a candle-packing factory as an order packer, reported extremely high levels of job autonomy. We learned that when she first started packing orders for customers, she would slip in some new candle scents with each order with a note to customers about how they might enjoy this new product. Slowly customers began to specifically request her services. Her boss recognized her creativity and “autonomy” and had her train new workers on how to connect with customers. She felt valued and respected for her work. Others parents have described autonomy at work as having their opinions valued and having a voice in decision making.

Conditions on the job affect workers’ mental health, and that affects their relationships at home. Having autonomy and some control at work translates into more engaged parenting at home: Parents are more involved with their babies and exhibit more responsive and sensitive parenting. Jose, a young father who works as a line cook at a steak house, talks about work as fun and energizing; his boss lets him try out new recipes, plan items for the menu, and learn more about budgeting. He works long hours for minimum wage, but feels valued and sees a career trajectory ahead of him. He wants to succeed now that he is a father. When Jose walks in the door at home he completely engages as a parent, holding his son, singing and laughing. It is a pattern we saw time and time again. We also saw the other side: parents working at jobs that are rigid, boring, and disempowering—experiences that can translate to disengaged or often harsh and insensitive parenting at home.

Often when we evaluate the effectiveness of a new policy in the United States, such as the current paid leave policies popping up in states across the country, we demonstrate its success by proving to employers or policy makers that there was no financial fallout from instituting this policy. What if—instead or in addition—we measured success by a reduction in working parents’ stress or in the improved well-being of parents and children? Or what about happiness? A provocative study by [Glass, Simon, and Andersson](#) found that parents in the United States report the lowest levels of happiness among the 22 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries studied. We must continually solicit feedback from workers themselves about what policies and supports are most important to them. Their voices matter. Once a policy is instituted, we need to hear from them about the consequences. Did it help? Did it help some workers more than others? Should we try something new?

As we consider the solutions to better support working families in this country, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the economic and social inequality. Many of us feel powerless, seeing solutions embroiled in the slow-moving wheels of policy and government action. Yet my data and those of others suggest that today each of us could create ways to improve workplaces and build cultures of respect and support that hold implications for workers and their families, especially their children. Such simple interventions as giving workers some control over day-to-day operations, soliciting their feedback, understanding the challenges they may face at home, and respecting their contributions are concrete ways to improve work settings. If we are truly invested in giving the next generation of children in this country a healthy and equal start, perhaps the first place to look is at workplace. Work matters.

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Fears of Violence: Concerns of Middle-Class Latinx Parents

A briefing paper prepared by Lorena Garcia, University of Illinois at Chicago, for the Council on Contemporary Families' Symposium Parents Can't Go It Alone—They Never Have.

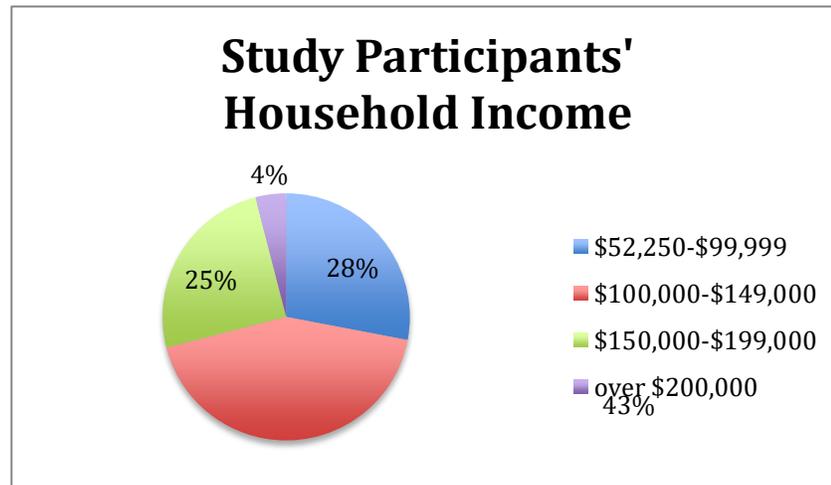
Who doesn't want their children to grow up happy and healthy? But different families face different challenges. I interviewed 68 newly middle-class Latinx parents in Chicagoland, and learned that one of their pressing concerns is how to shield their children from the possibility of violence in their daily lives. Most people I interviewed were themselves the children of immigrants who had little education and worked low-wage jobs to support their families. This made my interviewees' recently achieved middle-class status especially significant. They were able to raise their children in households with more than they had growing up. Three-fourths earned six figures. The majority were married couples where both parents worked for pay.

Optimism and Worry

Thanks to their upward mobility as adults, most interviewees reported feeling optimistic about raising their children. They had the money they needed, but could also transmit some knowledge and skills about how the United States worked. But these middle-class Latinx parents voiced serious concerns about the possibility of violence in their children's lives,

especially for their sons. They talked about the vulnerability of young men of color to all kinds of violence: gang-related violence perpetrated by other young men, gun violence, and violence at the hands of the police.

Latinx parents said they were worried because of what they see and had witnessed growing up in Chicago, especially how Black and Latino boys and men are disproportionately affected by the gun violence in the city. Local and national media coverage of shooting injuries and deaths in the city made them attuned to gun violence in Chicago. Chicago experienced an increased spike in violent crime rates in 2016, and 50 percent of shootings that year were concentrated in neighborhoods on the West and South sides of the city, such as Austin, North and South Lawndale, and [Humboldt Park](#).



Neighborhood Advantage Isn't Enough

Most of the people I talked to didn't live in high-crime neighborhoods. Even so, the upwardly mobile Latinx parents in my study did not believe that their neighborhood choices could necessarily protect their sons from other forms of violence, such as racial discrimination.

Parents described some strategies they drew on to minimize the chances of their sons' encounters with violence. They carefully chose where to live. Most of the Latinxs I interviewed lived in the city of Chicago, but a few lived in surrounding suburbs, citing gang and gun-related violence as a key reason for their decision to move. Yet those parents who lived in predominantly white suburbs understood that their sons ran the risk of being seen as a threat, particularly if they had dark skin tone. Just living in a suburb meant their sons could be [racially profiled by police](#).

Latinx Parents' Versions of "the Talk"

The suburban Latinx parents had to give their sons a version of "the talk." They gave them specific instructions to help them reduce their vulnerability to police racism. These strategies centered on [image and emotion management](#). They taught their sons to avoid oversized pants and shirts, not to cover their heads with hoodies while walking down the street especially at night, to make an effort to greet adults they met on the street, to avoid getting visibly angry or frustrated if questioned by other residents and police, and to follow directions if detained by police.

For parents who lived in the city, strategies to reduce the likelihood of sons' exposure to violence included choosing city neighborhoods away from the West and South sides of the city. This strategy only went so far, however, because most parents did [not think any neighborhood](#) in Chicago was immune to violence. The parents in my study who did live on the West and South sides chose certain streets in their neighborhood that seemed to have less threat of violence and gang-related activities; they believed the threat of violence varied "[block by block](#)." One father noted that it was possible for one neighborhood block to be generally "violent incident-free," while the next had more crime, including gang-related physical assaults or gun violence. Parents who lived in the city described particular socialization strategies to protect their sons from violence. These were similar to those used by the suburban parents in my study, such as not appearing defiant or resistant when in contact with police. But these parents had other strategies as well, including teaching their sons which streets and/or street corners to avoid, restricting when and where they walked in the area, disallowing them to wear certain color combinations associated with gangs. They even taught them to be mindful of how to wear their baseball hats and to avoid hand gestures that might be mistaken as signaling gang membership to gang members or to police.

Although parents I talked to were especially worried about their sons' vulnerability to violence, they also knew that their daughters were not exempt from gun violence or police brutality. Even so, their concerns for their daughters were more focused on sexual violence. They worried for sons because they were young Latino men, but worried for daughters as women vulnerable to sexual violence.

We won't understand working parents unless we recognize this: All parents have concerns for their children's safety, but what that means varies by [race](#) and [class](#). Despite the economic privileges of [reaching the middle class](#), the Latinx parents I talked to had serious worries about

the risk of violence in their sons' lives. These are stable two-parent families, where both parents work for pay; but they worry about how to keep their children safe when neither parent is around to enforce the rules that they believe will help their children avoid peer or police violence. They worry because no parent can be there around the clock to protect their children. Both academic and popular discussions of how families navigate the need to work outside the home should pay attention to what my research shows—that Latinx parents and other parents of color have additional worries. We need to realize that reducing violence in our cities and ending racism in our criminal justice system are policies needed to support working parents. No parents should have to worry when they go to work about their children experiencing violence.

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Mothering While Black

A briefing paper prepared by Dawn Marie Dow, the University of Maryland, for the Council on Contemporary Families' Symposium Parents Can't Go It Alone—They Never Have.

It is common for observers to talk about a “stalled revolution” in family life. [Most American mothers raising small children now work outside of the home](#), but the “ideal worker” remains a man who has no obligations at home because he has a wife to take care of them; and many Americans believe that the “ideal parent” is a mother who takes primary responsibility for the home. Much has been written about the guilt and conflict that mothers feel when they work for pay outside of the home. But for some mothers in America, working outside the home was not a revolution but a long-standing norm. Whereas significant numbers of middle-class white mothers joined the workforce only during World War II and again in the early 1960s, African-American mothers, including middle-class ones, have always worked for pay or as enslaved people. Thus, statements such as “mothers think,” “mothers feel,” or “mothers are seen” might be appropriate for racially, ethnically, or economically homogeneous nations, but not in the United States. Here, the impact of race and class on mothers’ experiences and perspectives makes such claims suspect.

For my new book, [Mothering While Black: Boundaries and Burdens of Middle-Class Parenthood](#), I interviewed 60 African-American middle-class mothers about their work, family, and parenting experiences. They talk very differently than white mothers about what it means to be a good mother. Although caregiving was an essential part of these mothers' identities, they and their communities often assumed they would work outside of the home. Although balancing the demands of paid employment and raising children did not become easier, this did mean that these mothers often viewed working outside of the home and economically providing for their families as part of the duties of motherhood, rather than as a detraction from them. Indeed, contrary to research and popular discourse that depicts working mothers as feeling compelled to justify their employment, these mothers generally did not do so. In fact, African-American middle-class stay-at-home mothers often felt as though they had to justify their decision *not* to work.

[Patricia Hill Collins](#) and [Bart Landry](#) have described how African-American women were historically not able or encouraged to reduce or eliminate their paid employment. In response, African-American women produced their own distinct and positive visions of womanhood and motherhood that incorporated the needs of their communities and supported their work outside of the home. Landry describes how, long before Betty Friedan and the Women’s Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, African-American female activists from the 19th and 20th centuries, such as Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Cooper, were proponents of an ideal of womanhood that combined family, career, and community and, in part, explained why African-American women’s rates of employment were higher than those of white women.

Indeed, the majority of African-American middle- and upper-middle-class mothers I talked to, either employed or stay-at-home, did not feel isolated in their mothering. Instead they experienced motherhood within a community they were already connected to or worked to

create. Many of the mothers I interviewed expected support from extended family and community members when raising their children. They felt secure having kin and community members care for their children, and that assistance facilitated their paid employment. Although these networks of care were not available to all mothers, those who had them generally used them. Research on middle-class families often focuses on self-sufficient traditional heterosexual nuclear families consisting of a mom, dad, and children, with extended kin called on only in emergencies. In my interviews, informants described extended family and community networks as sources of assistance that were valued for their own benefit, not merely used as backup. Such networks play an essential role in helping these women balance the competing demands of paid employment and raising children.

The middle- and upper-middle-class African-American mothers I studied made decisions about work and family against a familial and community backdrop that presumed working for pay was one aspect of mothering. They often grew up in households in which two or more incomes were necessary to counter racial discrimination in the labor force. They were connected to communities where being a strong independent woman is seen as a virtue. Their families and communities generally view positively their decision to engage in paid labor, and provide emotional and instrumental support by helping with child care. Indeed, instead of expressing guilt or ambivalence about their work, African-American mothers employed in middle-class professional careers described themselves as role models of female independence and self-reliance for both their sons and daughters. The positive expectation that mothering responsibilities include breadwinning supports their comfort with paid employment. Ironically, such expectations can also lead stay-at-home others to feel the need to explain their choice.

Of course, structural shifts such as changes in workplace functioning and new family-friendly laws and policies are necessary to reduce the challenges all parents face in the workplace. But my research with African-American middle-class mothers shows that it is also important to encourage cultural expectations and community supports that validate women's need and desire to combine paid work and caretaking.

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Dads Count Too: Family-Friendly Policies Must Include Fathers

A briefing paper prepared by Stephanie Coontz, Director of Research and Public Education for the Council on Contemporary Families, for the Council on Contemporary Families' Symposium Parents Can't Go It Alone—They Never Have.

A major obstacle to the successful coordination of work and family life in today's world is the assumption that this is primarily a woman's issue. Critics of U.S. social policy often point out how far we lag behind the rest of the world in providing maternity leave. That's true enough. Of 41 high- and middle-income countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the European Union (EU), the United States is [the only one](#) that does not have nationally mandated paid maternity leave.

But many other countries are just as neglectful as the United States when it comes to enabling *fathers* to integrate work and family life. Ten of those 41 countries fail to mandate *any* paid leave for fathers. Less than a handful make any serious effort to break the pattern whereby even fathers who have access to leave typically take very little, thus forgoing the opportunity to spend time bonding with their infants and to gain the skills associated with being a primary caregiver.

This exemption—or exclusion—of men from the routines of domestic life is not at all traditional. For millennia, fathers and mothers shared the duties of provisioning the family and organizing its daily activities. Involvement in production and exchange outside the household were seen as a central part of a wife's duties and household chores as a central part of a husband's. When a man referred to himself as a sole provider, that was not an affirmation of his masculine identity but a plea for sympathy because he was widowed or his wife was unable to contribute to the family's subsistence.

Premodern families made no pretense to egalitarianism, but men were not relegated to the sidelines of domestic life. In fact, the very word “domestic” was originally gender-neutral, referring to the industriousness expected of both sexes. Fathers were actively involved in home life, feeding the wood stoves in the kitchen, helping to fetch and carry water, teaching their children to read, and nurturing ties with kin and neighbors in order to sustain the wider social networks of reciprocity on which family well-being depended. Not until the 19th century did fathers begin to be conceptualized as uniquely responsible for earning money and mothers as uniquely responsible for parenting and for processing the goods purchased with the man's money. And not until the 1920s and 1930s, when children of working-class families started going to school instead of out to work, did a majority of children actually *grow up* in female-homemaker families.

Today, most children live in households where every adult works for pay, yet in dual-earner families it is women who generally take time off for family needs. This not only perpetuates gender inequality in the workforce but also promotes a division of domestic labor that fosters [marital discord](#), preventing heterosexual couples from achieving the kinds of egalitarian relationships that are now associated the [greatest marital satisfaction](#).

Our challenge is not just to reintegrate women into productive activity, but to reintegrate men into *reproductive* activity—raising children, caring for the ill and elderly, and tending to the kinship and friendship networks that we all depend upon for services and benefits that can't be purchased in the marketplace.

The benefits of maternal leave for the well-being of mothers and children are well established. When such leaves are the norm, they also lessen or even eliminate “the motherhood penalty” whereby mothers are paid and promoted at lower rates than childless women. In Norway between 1979 and the mid-1990s, a combination of paid family leave, subsidized child care, and more flexible work policies completely [eliminated the motherhood penalty for female employees](#) in workplaces where people did the same work for the same employer. It reduced that penalty by 75 percent in the workforce overall.

But maternal leave policies do not eliminate the pay and promotion advantages that accrue to husbands and fathers. In fact, maternal leaves, paid or unpaid, can perpetuate the pattern whereby wives essentially subsidize their partners' greater investment and rewards at work by freeing them from most [routine weekday housework](#) and [child care](#).

The expectation that men will increase their work commitment after marriage, especially after a child arrives, has become so entrenched that even when paternal leave is available, men seldom take all or even most of the time to which they are entitled. In part, they fail to do so because they fear being stigmatized as an uncommitted employee. But it is also eminently practical, given that most men earn more than their female partners. Forfeiting a substantial portion of the higher salary seems risky to parents facing the increased financial pressures of a new child. Yet when women reduce their work efforts to allow men to sustain or increase their labor market commitment, that not only contributes to the “motherhood penalty”; it increases the “fatherhood bonus,” which we might also call the “nonparenting incentive.” Such behaviors reinforce women's secondary position in the workplace and men's secondary position in the family.

Many men and women would like to break this cycle of gender specialization and inequality. And the good news is that when communities or governments offer generous pay replacement combined with use-it-or-lose-it policies that normalize the practice of paternal leave-taking, couples make different choices.

In Iceland in 2000, for example, men accounted for only 3 percent of all parental leave days taken. By 2007, after full implementation of a father's quota instituted in 2003, they took almost a third. By 2006, after Norway extended the father's leave quota to 6 weeks, 70 percent of eligible Norwegian fathers were taking almost all the time for which they were eligible. And when Quebec reserved a use-it-or-lose-it 5-week quota for fathers in 2006, [men's take-up rates](#) increased by 250 percent. By 2010, 80 percent of eligible men were using the leave, and the duration of their leaves had increased by 150 percent.

Paternal leave-taking reduces the degree of gender specialization in families. In Quebec, fathers who took leave increased their core domestic cooking and shopping even after returning to work, while mothers increased their paid labor hours. Norwegian couples who had a child after the introduction of more generous paternal leave policies were more likely to share domestic

duties—[and significantly less likely](#) to report conflicts over housework—than those who had their last child just before the reform.

Change never comes without cost. A father who takes parental leave [may miss some of the promotions and raises](#) associated with uninterrupted work, lowering the *marriage and fatherhood bonus* that most men now receive. Nevertheless, a recent study in Denmark suggests that when fathers' leaves allow mothers to develop a more consistent work history, this can lower the *motherhood penalty* enough to result in [increased total household wages](#).

Furthermore, paternal leave-taking paves the way for further progress in the next generation. In Norway, girls born after men started taking longer paternity leaves were assigned [fewer household chores](#) as teenagers—many years after their fathers had returned to work—than their counterparts born just before. Such a change could make a real difference in the United States, where teenage girls rehearse their futures by spending [twice as much time cleaning and cooking as teenage boys while receiving less than half as much in allowances!](#)

For their part, boys [who see their fathers](#) share housework and child care with their mother are much more likely to do the same when they grow up. [One U.S. study](#) found that the extent to which fathers participated in routine, stereotypically female tasks when their sons were very young had a strong influence on the sons' likelihood of sharing such tasks in their own households 30 years later—and it did so pretty much independently of the gender attitudes their parents espoused. Kids pay more attention to what parents practice than what they preach.

Feminists who believe in equal rights at home as well as work must practice what we preach, working as strenuously for fair and generous paternal leaves as we do for maternal ones.

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Raising a Village: Identifying Social Supports for All Kinds of Families

A briefing paper prepared by Caitlyn Collins, Washington University in St. Louis, for the Council on Contemporary Families' Symposium Parents Can't Go It Alone—They Never Have.

Two-thirds of mothers today work outside the home in wealthy Western countries. Despite this similarity, mothers' experiences managing their work and family commitments vary a lot from country to country. It's easier to be a working mother in some nations than others. Why? One main reason is that countries offer very different public policies to support families.

National governments offer different kinds and levels of policy supports because societies have diverse beliefs about who should work for pay and provide care to others. Such policies give us a glimpse into national culture: Policies are powerful symbols about what a nation thinks women and men are capable of, good at, and deserve. These policies matter. My research shows how.

I conducted interviews with 135 middle-class working mothers in Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States for my new book, *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving*. I wanted to understand what working mothers themselves say helps and hinders their work–family balance. It was immediately clear that moms in the United States were more stressed, guilty, overwhelmed, and fatigued than the mothers I spoke to in Europe. In the United States, managing family and paid work is seen as a personal struggle. In Sweden, Germany, and Italy, citizens think of childrearing and work–family reconciliation as matters of public concern. In these European countries, public policies help ensure that people have the time and resources needed to care for their loved ones. These policies vary in their effectiveness, but they exist. In the United States, adults are encouraged to find solely private solutions for childrearing and housework.

The United States has no national work–family policy to support caregiving. We are the only wealthy nation on the planet with no paid parental leave. No universal health care. No universal social insurance entitlement. No guaranteed income. No universal child care. And no minimum standard for vacation and sick days.

To be clear, mothers didn't say it was a breeze to work and raise kids in Europe. But it was far easier because of the various work–family policies available to women and their families in Sweden, Germany, and Italy. Let's take a close look at what these policies are exactly. This can help give a sense for what could be possible here in the United States.

Parental Leave (Job-protected Paid Leave Available to Both Parents)

After the addition of a new child to the family, parents' jobs are protected in the three European countries, and they are entitled to paid leave. The length of leave and wage replacement rate varies. In Sweden, couples have an entitlement to 16 months (480 days) paid at 80 percent of previous wages, up to a ceiling. This time is meant to be divided between parents, and it can be used flexibly until children are 8 years old. Each parent has an exclusive right to 3 of the 16 months. This “use it or lose it” model is meant to incentivize both parents to take time off. It

means that unless fathers take at least 3 months off, the family is entitled to only 13 months. In Germany, couples can take up to 12 months of paid parental leave total, paid at roughly two-thirds of their net earnings, also up to a ceiling. If moms and dads share parental leave, they get 2 bonus months, for a maximum of 14 months. As in Sweden, parents can take leave flexibly anytime until the child is 8 years old. In Italy, parents are each entitled to 6 months of parental leave at 30 percent pay. Parental leave is an individual, nontransferable entitlement, and families can take 10 months total. Again, parents can use these days flexibly at their discretion until their child is 8. If the dad takes at least 3 months' leave, the family gets an additional month for a total of 11 months. Of course, that means in Sweden and Germany, more families can afford to spend more time with newborns, whereas in Italy, only those who can afford to live on 30 percent pay can use the time allotted them. Although Italy may not be as generous as the other European countries I studied, it is far better than what we have here in the United States, which is no paid leave. The [Family and Medical Leave Act \(FMLA\)](#) gives eligible employees up to 12 weeks unpaid, job-protected leave to care for a new child or an ill family member, or to recover from an illness. Even that protection applies only to businesses with more than 50 employees, and workers must have worked for at least 12 months and a minimum of 1,250 hours to qualify.

Maternity Leave (Job-protected Paid Leave for Mothers Surrounding Childbirth)

In Sweden, mothers have the exclusive right to 3 of the 16 months' parental leave at 80 percent pay. Employed women in Germany may take maternity leave for up to 6 weeks before childbirth and are required to stay home for 8 weeks afterward, receiving full pay. Mothers in Italy are required to take 5 months of maternity leave at 80 percent pay. Although requiring women to remain home may seem paternal, it is surely more appreciated by families than no statutory entitlement at all, which is what we have in the United States: no right to paid maternity leave after the birth of a baby.

Paternity Leave (Job-protected Paid Leave for Fathers During or Following Childbirth)

Fathers in Sweden have the exclusive right to 3 of the 16 months parental leave at 80 percent pay. In Germany fathers have no entitlement to paternity leave for men. If both parents take at least 2 months parental leave, they earn 2 extra months paid leave, for a total of 14 months. In Italy, as of 2018, fathers have 4 days mandatory paternity leave at 100 percent pay. They are required to take these days within the first 5 months of birth while mothers are also on leave. Before 2013, there was no designated paternity leave whatsoever. Five days may not seem like much, but that's 5 more days than fathers have a right to in the United States.

Paid [Vacation](#) and Holidays

In Sweden all workers have 25 days per year paid vacation days. Many receive more as a result of union agreements. If a person falls ill while on vacation, those days aren't counted against the vacation allowance. Swedes get 11 paid holidays per year. In Germany, workers have a right to 20 days per year minimum. As a result of collective agreements, most receive 30 days. Those working less than full time get proportionally fewer days. Depending on the state, Germans enjoy between 9 and 13 paid holidays a year. In Italy workers are entitled to 20 days per year minimum. As in Sweden and Germany, because of collective bargaining agreements, most receive at least 25 days. Italians have 10 paid holidays annually. Once again, the U.S. has no minimum federal standard. The U.S. government designates 10 federal holidays per year, but paid holidays are at employers' discretion.

Paid Sick Days

In Sweden, if you have been employed for at least 1 month, an employee gets roughly 80 percent of income for the first 14 days of illness. After that the employer contacts the state, which works with the person's doctor to determine eligibility for extended sickness benefits. Unemployed or self-employed people get a sickness benefit from the government. And parents may stay home with a sick child for up to 120 days a year until children reach 12 years (paid at 80 percent of wages, up to a limit). For seriously ill children, there is no limit to the number of days parents can take off work. Workers in Germany may take as many personal sick days as needed over the course of a year at full wages. All employees get 10 days per year to tend to a sick child, at 70 percent pay. In Italy, parents can take unlimited unpaid days off work to care for ill children under 3 years, and 5 days unpaid annually for kids ages 3 to 8 years. For seriously ill family members, workers can take 2 years at full pay (with a cap) total. Here, too, the United States is the outlier, with no minimum federal standard. Eligible workers may use FMLA for their own serious illness, or to take care of a seriously ill family member, for up to 12 weeks, without pay.

Child Care

Sweden provides universal child care for children ages 1 to 12 years. The cost for parents is income-related up to a low ceiling, and it's free for low-income families. The maximum rate for even the wealthiest families is about [US\\$160 per month](#). In Germany, universal care is available for children ages 3 to 6 years. As of August 2013, all children older than 1 year are legally entitled to a child care space (although these are still difficult to come by in some places). A recent nationwide study found that in Germany day care costs families on average [US\\$192 per month](#). In Italy, child care is universally available for children ages 3 years and over, but is difficult to attain for children below 3 years. A recent survey found that child care costs families [US\\$343 monthly](#), on average. The United States has no state or federal child care systems. The limited federal child care provisions are means-tested for only the poorest families. The average cost of private child care is [US\\$799 per month](#) (\$9,589 a year)—more than the average cost of many in-state college tuition levels.

What Do U.S. Policies Imply about American Values?

Given all this, what message do you think the U.S. government sends to residents with these policies—or should I say, the lack of policies? You are on your own. You are owed nothing. Yet, regardless of marital or parental status, wealth, race, region, or religion, every single person needs care throughout their lives. No one is an island. Society would collapse without care. Other countries came to this realization a long time ago. The United States lags way behind: It is exceptional for its *lack* of policy support for caregiving and families. That's not a title we should be proud of.

The United States was [founded](#) on the belief that citizens have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that government is meant to protect these rights. If we truly believe this nation should be at the forefront of human rights—a country where residents can truly lead free and happy lives alongside those they care for and care about—then the path ahead is obvious. We don't need to start from scratch in envisioning better policy supports. The benefits already available in other countries are models from which to choose.

We need to pass robust, egalitarian work–family policies at a federal level. I suggest we start with paid family leave and affordable, high-quality child care and health care for all. We can do far more and far better for U.S. families. Our future depends on it.

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For Further Information

Barbara J. Risman convened and edited this symposium. She is available for further information.

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About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based at the University of Texas, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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