

2023 Child Welfare Survey Results

PREPARED FOR:



PREPARED BY:



August 1, 2023

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Detailed Findings	3
Overarching Value Systems About Parenting	3
Beliefs on Root Causes About Issues of Child Abuse and Neglect	4
Perceptions on Current System	5
Opinions on Path to Intervention and Ideal Child Welfare System	7
Perceptions on Child Removal / Family Preservation	8
Methods	9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In order to set the stage for some of the heavier topics surrounding child welfare in America, respondents were introduced with a few questions around parenting generally and what role, if any, the government should play in parenting. Largely, American adults, whether they are parents or not, understand that parenting is a difficult job and the majority tend to think that parents should have the authority to parent their children how they please.
- The causes of child neglect and abuse can be nuanced, and US adults appear to view these two scenarios differently. While child *abuse* is largely seen as an outcome of parents who want to harm their child, there is more room for redemption and second chances for *neglectful* parents, as these situations are seen as outcomes of parental ignorance, mental health, and substance abuse issues. Ultimately though, two-thirds of Americans think that overall child neglect and abuse is intentional or willful on the parents' part, not simply a product of circumstances.
- Most Americans know what they know about the US child welfare system through the media. While they lean slightly more positively than negatively in their overall perception of the system, most err towards thinking that the system is broken and incapable of being fixed due to challenges including funding, resources, and too much bureaucracy. The American public understands that the system is overwhelmed and that most media coverage of the system only takes place when something bad happens, while ultimately the system does more good than harm.
- The American general public is split 50/50 in terms of familiarity with the US child welfare system and appear similarly divided as to how the system should operate in an ideal world in terms of strengthening families vs. protecting children. Most Americans think that they themselves and child welfare authorities should need first-hand knowledge or a strong reason to suspect harm to a child in order to justify a report / investigation. However, when presented with the tradeoffs and the gray area that authorities often face, they err on the safe side, saying that authorities should investigate *all* reports.
- Overall, US adults see child welfare as a joint responsibility between government agencies and community / religious organizations. Scenarios of abuse, however, are more straightforward – investigations and instances involving physical harm to a child are perceived to fall under the responsibility of the government, whereas support in meeting the needs of children and parents (including homelessness, poverty, hunger, and hygiene) should be a joint effort in the eyes of the public.
- The US public appears to empathize with parents involved in the welfare system when it comes to child removal and family preservation – they tend to think that the system should keep children with their families and that parents should have more time to address challenges, though many think that the current amount of time given to parents is sufficient. Before moving on to permanent rehoming, Americans feel strongly that any suitable extended family / kin options be exhausted first. Further, if adoption must take place, biological parents should still be able to maintain safe and ongoing relationships with their children.

*Throughout the report, * indicates a small base size (<n=100) and that data should be viewed as directional in nature*

DETAILED FINDINGS

Overarching Value Systems About Parenting

American adults, whether they are parents or not, understand that parenting is a difficult job and the majority tend to think that parents should have the authority to parent their children how they please.

- Nearly all U.S. adults (89%) believe that parenting is a tough job, with close to half saying that it's the toughest job out there (43%). **(Q103)**
- When it comes to the role that the government should play in how parents parent their children, despite the fact that the government can and does impose restrictions on parenting to ensure children's well-being, the majority of adults (58%) lean towards favoring parents' authority to raise their children as they see fit. **(Q100)**



Beliefs on Root Causes About Issues of Child Abuse and Neglect

The causes of child neglect and abuse can be nuanced, and US adults appear to view these two topics differently. While child abuse is largely seen as an outcome of parents who simply want to harm their child, there is more room for redemption and second chances for neglectful parents, as these situations are seen as outcomes of parental ignorance, mental health and substance abuse issues. Ultimately though, two-thirds of Americans think that overall child neglect and abuse is intentional or willful on the parents' part, not simply a product of circumstances.

- Americans view the root causes of child abuse and child neglect as fundamentally different. Most appear to attribute these situations to more than just one thing, as they identify multiple causes for both neglect and abuse.
 - a. Child abuse is most commonly attributed to parents with ill intent or a desire to harm their child (82%), parents who use drugs / alcohol (75%) or parents with generational trauma patterns of their own (73%). Further, among those who reported ill intent as a cause of child abuse, 3 in 10 see it as the **primary** cause of child abuse (28%). **(Q200, Q205)**
 - b. Child neglect on the other hand, is mostly attributed to parents who don't want to care for their child (72%) and those who use drugs / alcohol (69%). A similarly high proportion also attribute neglect to lack of knowledge and mental health - parents who are uninformed or uneducated about how to parent (65%), and those with untreated or unresolved mental illness (65%). Ill intent or a desire to harm their child is the least selected attribute when it comes to child neglect (40%). 1 in 4 see parents who don't want to care for their child as the **primary** cause of child neglect (23%). **(Q200, Q205)**
- Three quarters of Americans (75%) agree that parents who have been neglectful can provide safe and nurturing care for their children when they receive needed supports. Though this sentiment isn't as strong towards abusive parents, still around half of Americans (53%) agree that these parents can provide the appropriate care when supported. **(Q215)**
 - a. Further, nearly 3 in 4 (70%) say that they are more understanding of parents involved in cases of child abuse or neglect if they know they are trying to get help or find a way out of their situation. **(Q215)**
 - b. However, that altruism and empathy seem to fade when considering the ultimate fault of abuse or neglect. A whopping 2 in 3 adults (65%) agree that most acts of child neglect or abuse are intentional or willful on the parent's part and are less likely to agree that these acts usually aren't the parent's fault, but rather a product of unfortunate circumstances (only 31% agree). **(Q215)**
- Parents' situations certainly impact how the general public views whether or not they are worthy of redemption, or if redemption is even possible. The general public considers redemption differently based on a parents' situation.
 - a. U.S. adults are far more likely to see parents living in poverty or experiencing homelessness as likely to be able to ensure their children are safe and appropriately cared for if provided appropriate supports (72% say these individuals are somewhat or very likely) and are less likely to see parents with a history of physically abuse behavior in particular as able to turn their behavior around (42%). **(Q220)**

Perceptions of the Current System

Most Americans know what they know about the US child welfare system through the media. While they lean slightly more positively than negatively in their overall perception of the system, most err towards thinking that the system is broken and incapable of being fixed due to challenges including funding, resources, and too much bureaucracy. The American public understands that the system is overwhelmed and that most media coverage of the system only takes place when something bad happens, though ultimately the system does more good than harm.

- Americans mostly have learned what they know about the current child welfare system through news / media outlets (45%) and their friends or family (41%), relying mostly on news / media outlets to inform them (28%). **(Q500, Q505)**
- Though U.S. adults lean slightly more positively (48%) than negatively (43%) in terms of their perceptions of the current child welfare system in this country, most fall somewhere in the middle.
 - a. Notably, 1 in 10 aren't sure how they feel about the system (9%). **(Q510)**
- In terms of the functionality of the current system, however, at best, most think that the system functions the way that it was designed to operate (38%), with a high proportion leaning towards the system being broken and cannot be fixed (53%). **(Q525)**
- Challenges identified that the system faces are largely centered around limited funding (57% say this is a significant challenge), lack of resources / staffing (54%), and too much bureaucracy (52%), though many also see incompetent / inexperienced caseworkers (44%) and incompetent leadership (43%) as significant challenges. **(Q530)**
- The majority understand that the child welfare system faces the nearly impossible task of balancing the needs of families with the safety of children (81% somewhat / strongly agree, 27% strongly agree) and agree that the system only gets attention when something bad happens (82% agree, 31% strongly agree).
 - a. Similar proportions feel that the child welfare system is simply overwhelmed and lacks resources (82% agree, 37% strongly agree).
 - b. Around 2 in 3 agree that the system does more good than harm (63%), yet Americans recognize that the system may not have strong community and public support (54% disagree). **(Q535)**
- Further, nearly 3 in 5 disagree that the welfare system is government overreach (57%), though over half say that the system does perpetuate the oppression of marginalized populations (55%). **(Q535)**

Opinions on the Path to Intervention and an Ideal Child Welfare System

The American general public is split 50/50 in terms of familiarity with the US child welfare system and appear similarly divided as to how the system should operate in an ideal world in terms of strengthening families vs. protecting children. Most Americans think that they themselves and child welfare authorities should need first-hand knowledge or a strong reason to suspect harm to a child in order to justify a report / investigation. However, when presented with the tradeoffs and the gray area that authorities often face, they err on the safe side, saying that authorities should investigate all reports.

- Familiarity with the child welfare system varies – around half of Americans say they are familiar (53%) while another half say they are not at all or not very familiar with the system (47%).
 - a. Few, only around 1 in 8, say they are very familiar with the system (14%). **(Q300)**
- When it comes to describing what the primary purpose of the child welfare system in this country should be, though relatively split, Americans slightly lean towards the system primarily strengthening families' ability to care for their children (51%) over primarily protecting children at risk of abuse or neglect by their families (44%). **(Q302)**
- In order to feel comfortable filing a report themselves in a situation where they suspected or knew that a child was being or had been abused or neglected, most say that they would at minimum need either a strong reason to suspect that a child has already been harmed (35 %) or first-hand knowledge (27%). 1 in 4, though, would feel comfortable reporting with any reason to suspect harm or potential harm. **(Q305)**
- When it comes to how the U.S. child welfare system should make decisions on whether or not to investigate reports, Americans lean towards authorities investigating every report, even if that means that some parents might be investigated unnecessarily (61%) over only investigating reports with compelling evidence (36%). **(Q310)**

Overall, US adults see child welfare as a joint responsibility between government agencies and community / religious organizations. Scenarios of abuse, however, are more straightforward – investigations and instances involving physical harm to a child are perceived to fall under the responsibility of the government, whereas support in meeting the needs of children and parents (including homelessness, poverty, hunger, and hygiene) should be a joint effort in the eyes of the public.

- Scenarios that the public deems as warranting child welfare authorities' intervention vary. Overwhelmingly, Americans believe that child welfare authorities should investigate over other government or community agencies when: **(Q315)**
 - a. A child has bruises, cuts, burns, or other indications of physical harm (88%).
 - b. A newborn shows signs of exposure to substance use during pregnancy after being born (81%).
 - c. There is evidence of domestic violence / spousal abuse occurring in the child's home (79%).
 - d. There is evidence of a child's parent abusing substances (76%).
 - e. A young child is left unattended or unsupervised for any extended period of time (69%).

- But in other scenarios, U.S. adults are split on whether another government or community agency should offer support or child welfare authorities should investigate, including when: **(Q315)**
 - a. A family with children is experiencing homelessness (49% say another government or community agency should offer support).
 - b. A child regularly says they have to skip meals because there isn't any food at home (40%).
 - c. There is evidence that a child routinely lacks basic hygiene (36%).
- The shared responsibility of support and intervention is further supported by 2 in 3 Americans (66%) saying that both governmental and community / religious organizations are needed to effectively respond to concerns of child abuse and neglect, rather than one or the other. **(Q330)**
- Perhaps unsurprisingly, U.S. adults see the responsibility of conducting investigations into allegations of abuse or neglect largely as that of government agencies (56%) over that of community / religious organizations (5%). **(Q400)**
 - a. However, many aspects of protecting children in need are seen as shared responsibilities in the public's eyes between government agencies and community / religious organizations, namely meeting the needs of families to prevent abuse or neglect (65% say this is equally the responsibility of government agencies and community / religious orgs.), meeting the needs of children and parents who have been reported for abuse so that they can remain together (64%), finding permanent homes for children who can no longer be cared for by their parents (58%), and even ensuring temporary alternative homes for children who can't remain at home (57%).
- In congruence with the minimum level of evidence Americans themselves would feel they need in order to file a report, most think that child welfare authorities would need at least a report detailing a strong reason to suspect that a child has already been harmed or is actively being harmed (38%) or detailing first-hand knowledge of harm (22%), though 1 in 5 think that all that is needed is a report detailing any reason to suspect harm (22%). **(Q320)**
- While 3 in 5 Americans (60%) agree that too often, decisions on whether the child welfare system should intervene in families are influenced by racial biases, this sentiment is even stronger when it comes to socioeconomic / poverty biases (73%). **(Q325)**

Perceptions on Child Removal / Family Preservation

The US public appears to empathize with parents involved in the welfare system when it comes to child removal and family preservation. Americans tend to think that the system should keep children with their families and that parents should have more time to address challenges. However, many think that the current amount of time given to parents is sufficient. Before moving on to permanent rehoming, Americans feel strongly that any suitable extended family / kin options be exhausted first. Further, if adoption must take place, biological parents should still be able to maintain safe and ongoing relationships with their children.

- When it comes to removing a child from their family once an investigation takes place, Americans lean towards favoring the system keeping the child *with* their family, even if risk of future harm is unclear (53%) over removing the child from their home (39%). **(Q605)**
- Further, U.S. adults favor the system giving parents more time to address challenges and reunify with their children, even if it means that children spend more time in foster care (55%) over minimizing the amount of time that children remain in foster care (36%).
 - a. Notably, 1 in 10 aren't sure how they feel about the system (8%). **(Q620)**
- However, when presented with the standard amount of time that parents are given to address their issues, more than half think that 15 months is the right amount of time (57%) and another quarter think that this is too much time (25% a bit too much / far too much time). **(Q625)**
- Americans overwhelmingly feel that extended family members should be identified to take in children when problems arise before resorting to foster care (90% somewhat / strongly agree, 43% strongly agree). **(Q615)**
 - a. Further, most agree that children should not be adopted to an adoptive family until all extended family / kin options have been exhausted first (76% agree, 31% strongly agree).
 - b. However, they also feel that extended family members should receive similar screening, support and resources as foster parents when taking care of children (90%). **(Q630)**
- It seems that many Americans may not agree with closed adoptions, as less than half agree that once a child is adopted from foster care, it is better for them to avoid contact with their biological families (47%). **(Q630)**
 - a. In fact, around 3 in 4 agree that adoptive parents should help their adopted children maintain ongoing and safe relationships with their biological families (71% agree).
 - b. Further, 2 in 3 feel that adoption agencies should make every effort to recruit families that share the race / ethnicity of the child before placing them with a family of a different race (67%).

METHODS *(To be included in all materials for public release)*

The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bipartisan Policy Center among 3,635 US adults aged 18+. The sample was divided into three groups: The national sample which included 2,013 respondents from all over the U.S., Georgia oversample which included 813 Georgia residents, and Ohio oversample with 809 Ohio residents. The survey was conducted from June 29 – July 19, 2023.

Data for the main sample is weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, household income, and propensity to be online to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Data for Georgia and Ohio oversamples is weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, marital status, household size, household income, and propensity to be online to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within the following percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

- Main sample, accurate to within ± 2.9 percentage points
- Georgia Oversample, accurate to within ± 4.6 percentage points
- Ohio Oversample, accurate to within ± 4.8 percentage points

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Abbreviated method statement available upon request