

2023 Child Welfare Survey Results Georgia Report

PREPARED FOR:



PREPARED BY:



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Compared to adults nationally, adults in Georgia are more familiar overall, and report more personal experience, with the US child welfare system. Georgians seem to have a more “no nonsense” approach, as they are more likely to believe malintent is the driving factor behind abuse or neglect occurring and show less optimism that parents can get their situations straightened out.
- 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. Adults in Georgia, regardless of their parental status, say that parenting is a tough job, with almost half saying it’s the toughest job. With that, the majority also believe that parents should have the authority to parent their children how they please.
- The causes of child neglect and abuse are seen as fundamentally different among adults in Georgia. While child abuse is largely seen as stemming from the innate want to harm their child, neglect is seen with perhaps a softer or more understanding lens as stemming from ignorance, lack of financial resources, and unpreparedness. In both cases, however, the primary cause is related to the parent themselves and not the parents’ circumstances. Georgians do think parents who have previously been found abusive or neglect can redeem themselves, however they think it’s more likely for neglectful parents than abusive.
- Most Georgians are using news/media outlets and family members as their primary sources for information about the current child welfare system. Although Georgians lean towards a positive perception of the system, a similar proportion think the system is broken and not fixable. The perceived brokenness of the system is supported by lack of staff, limited funding, and lack of services to meet the needs of parents and children being seen as significant challenges the current system faces. However, a majority recognize that the system is simply overwhelmed and are faced with a seemingly impossible task of balancing the needs of families with the safety of children.
- Familiarity of the US child welfare system among adults in Georgia is relatively high, aligning with the fact that many have lived experience with the system. Georgians are split on what the purpose of the system should be in terms of strengthening families or ensuring the safety of children. Most Georgians would feel comfortable filing a report if they had first-hand knowledge of harm to a child, but a similar number would be comfortable if they had any reason to suspect harm. Georgians expect the system to be more proactive, however, when it comes to how it should handle investigations as they think every report should be investigated over only investigating reports with compelling evidence.
- Overall, Georgians see a need for a joint effort between government agencies and community / religious organizations when it comes to child welfare in the US. In their eyes, investigations and situations involving physical harm to a child fall under the purview of the government. However, when it comes to meeting the needs of children and parents, which can include addressing homelessness, poverty, hunger, or hygiene, Georgians look for a more holistic approach and expect both government and community / religious organizations to join forces.

- When it comes to the topic of child removal and family preservation, adults in Georgia lean towards keeping children with their families even when there are tradeoffs. Georgians tend to think that giving parents more time to address their challenges is a better option than minimizing the amount of time a child may spend in foster care if the end result is reunification. Additionally, a majority of Georgians say that extended family members should be used as a resource before turning to foster care, and that children should not be adopted to an adoptive family until extended family options have been exhausted. If adoption were to occur, Georgians are in favor of the child's being able to have an ongoing relationship with their biological family if it is safe.

*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

Adults in Georgia, regardless of their parental status, say that parenting is a tough job, with almost half saying it's the toughest job. With that, the majority also believe that parents should have the authority to parent their children how they please.

- Nearly all adults in Georgia (89%) believe that parenting is a tough job, with nearly half saying that it's the toughest job out there (48%). **(Q103)**
- When it comes to balancing parents' authority with the government's interest in ensuring the well-being of children, Georgians lean towards favoring parents, with nearly 3 in 5 (58%) saying so, compared to (37%) who favor the government's interest in ensuring a child's well-being. **(Q100)**



Beliefs on Root Causes About Issues of Child Abuse and Neglect

The causes of child neglect and abuse are seen as fundamentally different among adults in Georgia. While child abuse is largely seen as stemming from the innate want to harm their child, neglect is seen with perhaps a softer or more understanding lens as stemming from ignorance, lack of financial resources, and unpreparedness. In both cases, however, the primary cause is related to the parent themselves and not the parents' circumstances. Georgians do think parents who have previously been found abusive or neglect can redeem themselves, however they think it's more likely for neglectful parents than abusive.

- As seen nationally, Georgians have fundamentally different views on what attributes to abuse and neglect.
 - a. Child abuse is most commonly attributed to parents with ill intent or a desire to harm their child (78%), parents who use drugs / alcohol (73%) or parents with generational trauma patterns of their own (70%). Among those who reported ill intent as a cause of child abuse, 3 in 10 see it as the **primary** cause of child abuse (30%). **(Q200, Q205)**
 - b. Child neglect, however, is viewed with a different and perhaps more empathetic lens as most (67%) attributed parents who don't want to care for their child as a contributor, followed by lack of financial resources (63%) and parents being unprepared for parenthood or having an unplanned pregnancy (62%). Similar numbers are reported for parents being uninformed/uneducated (61%), parents with unresolved/untreated mental illness (61%), and lack of access to childcare (60%). Among those who report parents who don't want to care for their child as a cause of neglect, a quarter (26%) see it as the **primary** cause of child neglect. **(Q200, Q205)**
- Seven in 10 adults in Georgia (70%) agree that parents who have been neglectful can provide safe and nurturing care for their children when they receive needed supports. Though this opinion isn't as strong towards abusive parents, half (50%) still agree that these parents can provide the appropriate care when supported. **(Q215)**
 - a. Nearly two-thirds (64%) 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. However, this understanding does not seem to translate when considering the ultimate fault of abuse or neglect. Nearly 7 in 10 (68%) 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 (just 32% agree). **(Q215)**
- The situation a parent may find themselves in impacts how adults in Georgia view whether or not they are capable of turning things around and eventually ensuring their children are safe and appropriately care for if they were provided the appropriate supports.
 - a. Parents living in poverty or experiencing homelessness are seen as most likely to be able to ensure their children are safe and appropriately cared for if provided appropriate supports (71% say these individuals are somewhat/very likely). Georgians are least likely to see parents with a history of physically abuse behavior in particular as able to turn their situation around (only 39% likely). **(Q220)**

Perceptions of the Current System

Most Georgians are using news/media outlets and family members / friends as their primary sources for information about the current child welfare system. Although Georgians lean towards a positive perception of the system, a similar proportion think the system is broken and not fixable. The perceived brokenness of the system is supported by lack of staff, limited funding, and lack of services to meet the needs of parents and children being seen as significant challenges the current system faces. However, a majority recognize that the system is simply overwhelmed and is faced with a seemingly impossible task of balancing the needs of families with the safety of children.

- Georgians are equally as likely to report learning about the current child welfare system through their family and friends as they are through news/media outlets (46% each). Most, however, rely on news/media outlets as their primary source for their information (26%). **(Q500, Q505)**
- Adults in Georgia lean towards having a positive perception of the current child welfare system, with half (53%) saying so, and just under 4 in 10 (39%) saying their overall perception is negative.
 - a. Just under 1 in 10 aren't sure how they feel about the system (8%). **(Q510)**
- When it comes to rating the functionality of the current system, half (50%) think the system is broken. The other half is closely split between thinking the system functions the way it was designed to (25%) and thinking the system is high functioning (20%). **(Q525)**
- A majority recognize that the system faces many challenges, as 9 in 10 or more Georgians say incompetent/inexperienced workers (94%), lack of resources/staffing (92%), lack of services to meet the needs of parents/children (92%), limited funding (91%), and too much bureaucracy (90%) are challenges the current child welfare system faces. **(Q530)**
 - a. Additionally, three quarters (77%) agree that the child welfare system is simply overwhelmed and lacks resources, with a third (32%) *strongly* agreeing. **(Q535)**
- Most adults in Georgia understand that the child welfare system faces the nearly impossible task of balancing the needs of families with the safety of children (78% agree, 25% *strongly* agree) and that the system only gets attention when something bad happens (76% agree, 29% *strongly* agree). **(Q535)**
 - a. Nearly two-thirds agree that the system does more good than harm (63%), but Georgians also understand that the system may not have strong support from the community or the public (52% disagree that the system has this support). **(Q535)**
- Additionally, nearly half (47%) feel that the system is an example of government overreach, and slightly more than half say that the system does perpetuate the oppression of marginalized populations (54%). **(Q535)**

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

Familiarity of the US child welfare system among adults in Georgia is relatively high, aligning with the fact that many have lived experience with the system. Georgians are split on what the purpose of the system should be in terms of strengthening families or ensuring the safety of children. Most Georgians would feel comfortable filing a report if they had first-hand knowledge of harm to a child, but a similar number would be comfortable if they had any reason to suspect harm. Georgians expect the system to be more proactive, however, when it comes to how it should handle investigations as they think every report should be investigated over only investigating reports with compelling evidence.

- Georgians report being familiar with the current child welfare system more so than not, with 3 in 5 (62%) saying they are familiar (38% unfamiliar). Most, however, fall somewhere in the middle (somewhat familiar or not very familiar) as just 1 in 10 (12%) say they are very familiar or *not at all* familiar (11%). **(Q300)**
 - a. The high familiarity among Georgians may relate to the fact that just over 4 in 10 (41%) of adults in Georgia report having lived experience with the US child welfare system, with 1 in 5 (22%) reporting that they have personal experience. **(Q825)**
- When it comes to describing what the primary purpose of the child welfare system in this country should be in an ideal world, adults in Georgia are split nearly 50/50 but slightly lean towards the system primarily strengthening families' ability to care for their children (50%) over protecting children at risk of abuse or neglect by their families (47%). **(Q302)**
- 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 Georgians (31%) say that they would need first-hand knowledge that a child has been or is actively being harmed. Slightly less (28%) would just need a strong reason to suspect harm has occurred, but a similar number (26%) would feel comfortable filing a report given *any* reason to suspect harm. **(Q305)**
- When it comes to how the U.S. child welfare system should make decisions on whether or not to investigate reports, Georgians lean towards authorities investigating *every* report, even if that means that some parents might be investigated unnecessarily (60%) over only investigating reports with compelling evidence (36%). **(Q310)**

Overall, Georgians see a need for a joint effort between government agencies and community / religious organizations when it comes to child welfare in the US. In their eyes, investigations and situations involving physical harm to a child fall under the purview of the government. However, when it comes to meeting the needs of children and parents, which can include addressing homelessness, poverty, hunger, or hygiene, Georgians look for a more holistic approach and expect both government and community / religious organizations to join forces.

- When it comes to investigating scenarios of potential child endangerment, Georgians believe that the following situations warrant child welfare authorities to step in over government or community agencies: **(Q315)**
 - a. A child has bruises, cuts, burns, or other indications of physical harm (85%).
 - b. A newborn shows signs of exposure to substance use during pregnancy after being born (79%).

- c. There is evidence of domestic violence / spousal abuse occurring in the child's home (78%).
 - d. There is evidence of a child's parent abusing substances (77%).
 - e. A young child is left unattended or unsupervised for any extended period of time (69%).
- While child welfare authorities are looked to step in more than other government or community agencies for all scenarios presented, some scenarios did expect higher support from other agencies, including when: **(Q315)**
 - a. A family with children is experiencing homelessness (46% 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 (39%).
 - c. There is evidence that a child routinely lacks basic hygiene (38%).
- The shared responsibility of support and intervention is further supported by 3 in 5 Georgians (63%) saying that both governmental and community / religious organizations are needed to efficiently respond to concerns of child abuse and neglect, rather than one over the other. **(Q330)**
- Adults in Georgia see the responsibility of conducting investigations into allegations of abuse or neglect largely under the purview of government agencies (58%), compared to just (5%) who say it should fall to community / religious organizations. **(Q400)**
 - a. However, many other aspects of protecting children from abuse or neglect are again seen as a shared responsibility between government and community / religious organizations, including meeting the needs of children and parents who have been reported for abuse so that they can remain together (62%), ensuring temporary alternative homes for children who can't remain at home (59%), meeting the needs of families to prevent abuse or neglect (59%), and even finding permanent homes for children who can no longer be cared for by their parents (54%).
- Aligning with the minimum level of evidence Georgians would need themselves 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 (31%) or detailing first-hand knowledge of harm (26%), though 1 in 4 think that all that is needed is a report detailing any reason to suspect harm (25%). **(Q320)**
- While close to 3 in 5 Georgians (57%) agree that too often, decisions on whether the child welfare system should intervene in families are influenced by racial biases, even more agree when it comes to biases based on socioeconomic / poverty biases (70%). **(Q325)**

Perceptions on Child Removal / Family Preservation

When it comes to the topic of child removal and family preservation, adults in Georgia lean towards keeping children with their families even when there are tradeoffs. Georgians tend to think that giving parents more time to address their challenges is a better option than minimizing the amount of time a child may spend in foster care if the end result is reunification. Additionally, a majority of Georgians say that extended family members should be used as a resource before turning to foster care, and that children should not be adopted to an adoptive family until extended family options have been exhausted. If adoption were to occur, Georgians are in favor of the child's being able to have an ongoing relationship with their biological family if it is safe.

- When it comes to removing a child from their family once an investigation takes place, Georgians slightly lean towards favoring the system keeping the child *with* their family, even if risk of future harm is unclear (49%) over removing the child from their home (44%). **(Q605)**
 - a. This split is similar to the sentiment Georgians expressed when asked what the primary purpose of the child welfare system in this country should be, with a slight lean towards strengthening families. **(Q302)**
- Further highlighting the sentiment of keeping families together, Georgians favor the system giving parents more time to address challenges and reunify with their children (57%) over minimizing the amount of time that children remain in foster care (37%). **(Q620)**
- When presented with the standard amount of time that parents are given to address their issues though, most think that 15 months is the right amount of time (56%) while the rest are split between this being not enough time (21%) and too much time (22%). **(Q625)**
- Georgians overwhelmingly feel that extended family members should be identified to take in children when problems arise before turning to foster care (85% somewhat / *strongly* agree, 44% *strongly* agree). **(Q615)**
 - a. Most Georgians agree that children should not be adopted to an adoptive family until all extended family / kin options have been exhausted first (76% agree, 32% *strongly* agree). **(Q630)**
 - b. However, they also feel that extended family members should receive similar screening, support and resources as foster parents when taking care of children (86% agree, 51% *strongly* agree). **(Q615)**
- It seems that many Georgians may not agree with the idea of closed adoptions, as less than half say that once a child is adopted from foster care, it is better for them to avoid contact with their biological families (only 45% agree). **(Q630)**
 - a. Additionally, nearly two-thirds agree that adoptive parents should help their adopted children maintain ongoing and safe relationships with their biological families (64% agree) and 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 (64%).

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