



Family Matters

Update on Families

Volume 2 Issue 2

A Family Impact Seminar Newsletter for Wisconsin Policymakers

October 2002

Families High on Policymaker and Public Agendas

Political interest in children and families ebbs and flows. Yet it may now be at its highest peak in the last 20 years among policymakers and the public alike.¹ In studies, the leaders of state legislatures rank child and family issues as high priorities.²

Families are also valued by the general public. In a nationally representative poll,³ 91% of Americans reported that loving family relationships are extremely important to them—twice as important as their job (49%) and one third more important than financial security (61%).

Recent evidence suggests that families matter. Americans who report that their family life is going well are more satisfied with their life in general, their job performance, financial security, parenting competence, and physical health.⁴

Yet, despite this enthusiasm, Americans express grave reservations about the state of families. For the first time in 50 years of Gallup polls, Americans ranked family decline, ethics and morality as the most important problems facing the country today.⁵ Notably these concerns were expressed by families with children of all ages and crossed the usual divides of income, education, ethnicity, and race.⁶

In recent studies, the concern voiced most often by parents is conflict between work and family, aptly coined “the double squeeze”.⁷ Families are experiencing a squeeze on economic resources and a simultaneous squeeze on the time and energy needed for family and community commitments.⁸ Parents highly value spending time with their children, yet given their bloated schedules they say family time is in chronic undersupply.

Although most Americans would probably agree that childrearing is primarily the responsibility of families, they also acknowledge how government shapes the conditions that make it easier or harder for parents to do a good job. In the first nationwide poll of parenting by independent pollster Penn & Schoen, parents report that government at all levels could be doing more than it presently does. When parents were asked how much their government was doing to help them, only 6% said *a great deal*. Yet parents were eight times more likely (47%) to say that government was *capable of doing a great deal* for them.⁹ This newsletter describes how family structure has changed in Wisconsin and provides updates on two family functions—providing economic support and educating children.

¹Hutchins, J. (1998). *Coming together for children and families: How cabinet-level collaboration is changing state policymaking*. Washington, DC: Family Impact Seminar.

²State Legislative Leaders Foundation (1995). *Keys to effective legislation for children and families*. Centerville, MA: Author.

³Bennett, Petts, & Blumenthal (1999) *Adult attitudes towards sexual problems: National survey of American adults aged 25 and older*. Conducted during March 25-31, 1999 for the Gender and Human Sexuality: A Continuing Medical Education Conference held April 30, 1999, Washington, DC.

⁴Zill, N. (1993). A family-based approach to analyzing social problems. In G. E. Hendershot & F. B. LeClere (Eds.), *Family health: From data to policy* (pp. 32-42). Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations.

⁵What's the Problem? (1999, August 1). *New York Times* (p. 4).

⁶The Finance Project (1996). *Building strong communities: Crafting a legislative foundation*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁷Moen, P., & Jull, M. M. (1995). Informing family policies: The uses of social research. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 16(1), 79-107.

⁸Skocpol, T. (1997). A partnership with American families. In S. B. Greenberg & T. Skocpol (Eds.), *The new majority: Toward a popular progressive politics* (pp. 104-129). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

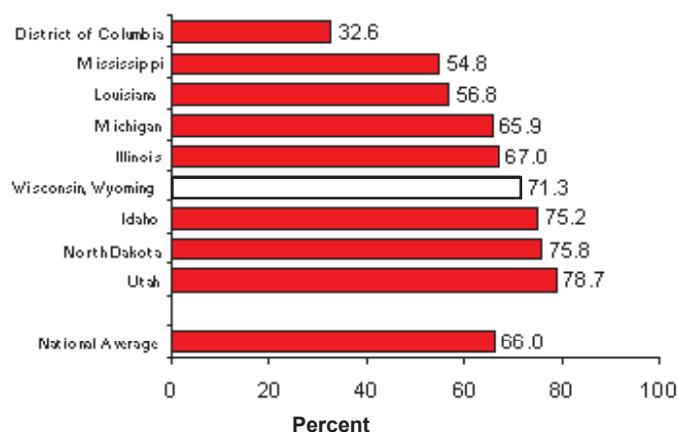
⁹Hewlett, S.A., & West, C. (1998). *The war against parents: What we can do for America's beleaguered moms and dads*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

What Are Families Like in Wisconsin?

Increasing numbers of single parents, rising divorce rates, and a spike in the numbers of couples who choose cohabitation over marriage have led to widespread discussions about changes in family life. Are these trends reflected in Wisconsin families?

Out of 5.4 million people living in Wisconsin, about one quarter is under the age of 18. Almost three quarters of Wisconsin's children (71.3%) live in married-couple households. This number has decreased since 1990 (76.2%), but is higher than the national average (66.0%).¹ This is good news for Wisconsin's children who, according to a recent study by the Urban Institute, significantly benefit from living in married households due to a more stable home environment and less poverty.² Children living in high-conflict marriages, with a stepparent, or with cohabiting parents generally have lower levels of well-being than children in families with both biological parents in a low conflict marriage.⁴

Wisconsin's Percent of Own Children in Married-Couple Households Higher Than the National Average, 2000



For more than 80 years the divorce rate in Wisconsin has been lower than the national average.³ A total of 17,457 divorces occurred in Wisconsin in 2001, for a divorce rate of 3.3 per 1,000 total population, compared to 4.0 for the United States. In spite of the lower divorce rate, 55% of all Wisconsin divorces in 2001 involved families with children under 18 years of age, and each divorce affected, on average, almost two children (1.8).³ Divorce has been linked to a variety of problems for children's behavior, mental health, and school success.⁴

The percentage of children living with a single parent increased from 18.1% in 1990 to 21.7% in 2000, but is slightly lower than the national average (23.3%). Wisconsin ranks 12th lowest in the country, with Utah having the lowest percent of children in single-parent homes (13.6%) and the District of Columbia the highest (44.7%).¹

¹Annie E. Casey Foundation (2001). *Kids Count Census Data Online, 2001*. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/census/>

²Urban Institute (2002, September 5). *Wedding Bells Ring in Stability and Economic Gains for Mothers and Children*. Washington, DC: Author Retrieved from <http://www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=7858>

³Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, Division of Health Care Financing, Bureau of Health Information (2002) *Wisconsin Marriages and Divorces 2001* (PHC 5333). Retrieved from <http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/stats/pdf/01mardiv.pdf>

⁴Child Trends. (2002). *Marriage from a Child's Perspective: How does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can We Do about it?* *Research Brief*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/PDF/MarriageRB602.pdf>





Family Matters
Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars
University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension
1300 Linden Drive, Room 130
Madison, WI 53706-1524



Family Matters is a newsletter for state policymakers published by the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars (WISFIS). WISFIS connects research and policymaking, and examines the impact of policies on families. The seminars

provide objective, state-of-the-art information on a range of policy options. WISFIS is a joint effort of University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Center for Excellence in Family Studies in the School of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

This newsletter was written by Beth Gross, Bettina Friese, Carol Johnson, Jennifer Reiner, and Karen Bogenschneider. The designer is Meg Wall-Wild. The director of WISFIS is Professor Karen Bogenschneider and the state coordinator is Carol Johnson.

For further information, contact the Family Impact Seminar Office at (608)262-5779, fis@ssc.wisc.edu, or Karen at (608)262-4070, kpbogens@facstaff.wisc.edu. You can access WISFIS briefing reports on the web at:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/wisconsin.htm>

Family Matters is on the web at:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/newsletters.htm>

This newsletter can be copied and distributed without permission. Please notify the authors of how this newsletter is used.

Unemployment Rates Vary Across State

Research shows that parents' loss of employment can lead to higher rates of child abuse and neglect.¹ When looking at unemployment rates in Wisconsin, counties across the state differ widely. Overall, the Wisconsin rate of unemployment for August is 5.2%; this is up .4% from July. Based on not seasonally adjusted 2001 data, the Department of Workforce Development reports that the average annual unemployment rate of Dane County is the lowest (2.0%). Other counties with low unemployment rates in 2001 include Ozaukee (3.0%) and Waukesha (3.3%). Menominee reported the highest rate of unemployment for 2001 (11.6%), followed by Juneau (9.1%) and Langlade (7.8%).

(www.dwd.state.wi.us/lmi/laus_ann_avg_1990.htm)

¹Steinberg, L., Catalano, R., & Dooley, D. (1981). Economic antecedents of child abuse and neglect. *Child Development*, 52(3), 975-985.

Long Term or Short Term: Education Pays Off

Families are a powerful influence on school success, which in turn impacts future economic outcomes.¹ According to a recent study by the U.S. Census Bureau, not only does getting a degree earn workers more money, but the benefits of educational attainment compound over time. Researchers found that over the course of their work-lives, individuals with a bachelor's degree earn

-  nearly one third more than workers who do not finish college,
-  almost twice as much as those with a high school diploma, and
-  more than two times as much as high school dropouts.¹

In Wisconsin, like the U.S. in general, 85% of adults 25 years and older have at least completed high school—an all time high. Additionally, two out of every ten Wisconsin adults hold at least a Bachelor's degree. According to U.S. Census estimates, over the course of their lives these individuals will earn from \$1.2 million for high school graduates to \$2.1 million for those with a college degree.²

Yet these outcomes are not the same for everyone, and not all degree recipients look alike. The Census data show that

Check Out These Websites Child Trends

<http://childtrends.org>

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to studying children and families. This site includes research briefs and comprehensive research reviews on topics directly influencing children's well being. "What Works" tables provide summaries of what works and what doesn't on topics such as adolescent reproductive health, early childhood care and education, education, emotional and mental health, and social skills and relationships.

<http://childtrends.databank.org>

A new service of Child Trends provides data on over 70 key indicators of child and youth well being. Both Child Trends and Child Trends Databank have user friendly e-newsletters to keep subscribers informed on recent research briefs. Subscribe at:

<http://www.childtrends.org/JoinListServe.asp>



Connecting with UW Faculty

Questions on families and family policy? Contact:

Professor Karen Bogenschneider

Karen Bogenschneider is a Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at UW-Madison and a Family Policy Specialist in University Extension. She has directed the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars since their inception in 1993. She also directs the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars, which provides technical assistance to 11 states conducting seminars for state policymakers. Her book, "Family Policy Matters," was recently released. She studies family policy and parenting of adolescents, particularly parent influences on teen substance use. Contact her at: kpbogens@facstaff.wisc.edu or (608)262-4070.

whites earn more than Blacks or Hispanics at every level of educational attainment.² What's more, according to a Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction report, the graduation rates for many of Wisconsin's minority students lag behind those for whites. While 94% of white students and 90% of Asian students graduate from high school, only 78% of Native Americans, 70% of Hispanics, and 55% of African American students do.³

Education remains a key factor in closing the income gap between the rich and the poor. As the Census data show, educational attainment translates to higher levels of income regardless of race or ethnicity.

For more information on educational attainment and achievement programs, see Child Trends' "What Works" tables http://www.childtrends.org/whatworks_intro.asp. These tables present clear summaries of the best available research and evaluations about what works, what doesn't work, and what are the "best bets" for improving outcomes for youth.

¹ McMurrer, D.P., & Sawhill, I.V. (1998). *Getting ahead: Economic and social mobility in America*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

² Day, J., & Newburger, E. (July, 2002). *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*. Current Population Reports. U.S. Bureau of the Census: Author.

³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2001). *Guide to the Achievement Gap*. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Author.