

# How Do Public Institutions Handle Family/Youth Issues?

## A Review of Public Opinion Data

**T**he Local Collaboration for Children and Youth has begun to confront many questions about the future of American families and the roles that local, state, and federal governments have in enhancing that future.

A great deal of public opinion survey research has been conducted in the past few years that documents the public's attitudes on many issues affecting youth and families. To aid in understanding the public's perception of these issues, the Local Collaboration for Children and Youth asked Belden & Russonello, a Washington, D.C., firm specializing in research and communications, to review recent public opinion survey data on a host of related topics, including attitudes about the state of the family today and the roles governments have in meeting needs in a number of issue areas.

This article summarizes what some of the existing public opinion data since 1992—drawn from many sources—tell us. The summary addresses two broad topics:

- What are Americans' opinions about the state of the family in our nation? Where do they think we are going? What

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- do they believe the needs are?
- What do people believe public institutions should and can do to help children, youth, and families today?

## Overview of Findings

Americans are unhappy about the state of the family. They see their economic future as uncertain. They fear that their children and youth are in danger at school, at home, and on the streets. Education is a top priority and concern.

The public clearly believes that government has an important role to play in supporting activities that help families thrive, such as public education, child care, public safety, and providing a safety net for poor people. Americans also believe the most appropriate and effective solutions to the needs of families often are local or state-based solutions, rather than national, reflecting disappointment with the federal government.

### 1. What are Americans' opinions about the state of the family in the nation?

*Americans believe families and youth are in danger:*

- Seven in 10 adults (69 percent) believe things are getting worse for the average American family (Yankelovich Partners, Inc., August 1993).
- Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64 percent) say that family life has gotten worse since the time when they were growing up (L. H. Research, April 1993).

*Why?*

**First concern:** Families live in fear for their physical safety because of crime, violence, and drugs.

- Fully 90 percent of adults called an increase in crime and violence, and 85 percent called the availability of drugs, big problems for American families today (Yankelovich Partners, Inc., August 1993).

- When parents are asked about five potential dangers for their children, exposure to drugs at schools is the number-one concern (75 percent say they are very concerned about this) (Yankelovich Partners, Inc., August 1993).

**Second concern:** Families are troubled because of an uncertain economic future for their children.

- Many Americans no longer believe that their children will enjoy a higher standard of living than they themselves did. As recently as 1990, six in 10 American adults said they expected their children's generation to enjoy a higher standard of living. That figure had fallen to only 48 percent by 1994. About an equal number—46 percent—said they do not expect their children to enjoy improved circumstances (Hart and Teeter Research Companies, December 1994).

**Third concern:** Families are in trouble because they have lost a moral compass.

- Seventy-seven percent of Americans say that a breakdown in the family has led to low moral and personal character (Princeton Survey Research Associates, June 1994).
- Three-quarters of Americans say we are losing ground when it comes to families staying together—a six-point increase from when the question was asked in 1994 (Princeton Survey Research Associates, April 1995 and March 1994).

**Fourth concern:** Families want more from the educational system. Of the many issues that affect families and youth, the public considers education one of the most important.

- Six in 10 adults (63 percent) say the quality of education worries them a lot (Yankelovich Partners, Inc., January 1995).

- Six in 10 adults (60 percent) say we are losing ground on the quality of education (Princeton Survey Research Associates, April 1995).

### 2. What do people believe public institutions should and can do to help children, youth, and families today?

*Government does have a role but is viewed more as part of the problem than as the solution.* Although Americans believe that individuals and families themselves bear the primary responsibility for improving values and strengthening families, they want the public sector to reinforce values for society, and many say that it should “do more to help families.”

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**In general, which do you believe is more true: the government should be doing more to help families, the government is doing about the right amount now, or the government is doing too much already? (Yankelovich Partners, Inc., August 1993)**

Do more	47%
Right amount	23%
Too much	22%
Not sure	7%

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However, the public often views government as part of the problem rather than as contributing to solutions for families. The public perceives government as ineffective, wasteful, and downright harmful.

- Fifty-six percent say they think government programs and policies do more to hinder rather than to help the family “in trying to achieve the American dream” (Hart and Teeter Research Companies, March 1995).

In particular, the federal government is rated poorly on many different measures, while state government is some-

what more favorably viewed, and local government is generally seen the most favorably.

there is a need for government safety nets. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) say it is the government's responsibility to

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**I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Would you tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one: a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little confidence? (Hart and Teeter Research Companies, March 1995)**

	Great deal/A lot of confidence	Some confidence	Very little confidence
The military	59%	29%	9%
The church or organized religion	56%	27%	14%
Your local or community government	31%	46%	21%
Your state government	23%	53%	23%
National news media	19%	38%	41%
Federal government	15%	47%	37%

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**3. What is the role of government in addressing the specific needs of families and children?**

*Education.* Education of the nation's children is a top priority and concern for Americans. Schools are seen as important places in helping parents raise children. Next to family, schools are considered the institution that has the most influence. A majority (55 percent) think schools help bring up children, followed by grandparents (44 percent) and brothers and sisters (26 percent) (Roper Organization, October 1992).

Education is an area that most people feel benefits from local decision making and local government. As the accompanying box shows, the public trusts parents and teachers the most to make the decisions about running schools.

On the other hand, more than half of Americans (58 percent) are distrustful of "elected officials in Washington," and four in 10 (41 percent) are distrustful of their states' governors when it comes to making decisions about how public schools are run (CRC Information Systems, August 1994).

*Providing for poor families and children.* On the one hand, the public believes

help people who can't help themselves (ABC News, January 1995).

At the same time, 67 percent believe we are losing ground in solving the problems associated with welfare (Princeton Survey Research Associates, April 1995).

Specific federal programs concerning assistance to the poor for which the public believes responsibility should be turned over to the states include these:

- Seventy-three percent favor shifting control and management of low-income housing assistance to the states (Louis Harris and Associates, January 1995).
- Seventy-seven percent support shifting responsibility for medical care for the poor to the states (Louis Harris and Associates, January 1995).
- Six in 10 (61 percent) support shifting responsibility for food stamp programs to the states (Princeton Survey Research Associates, April 1995).

*Child care.* Child care issues are a personal worry to about a third of Americans (34 percent), who say they are con-

**I'd like you to tell me how much you trust each of these groups of people to make decisions about how the public schools in your community should be run. Please use a scale of 1 to 5, in which 5 means that you would trust that group a great deal and 1 means that you would not trust that group at all.**

	Trust a great deal (5 or 4)	Not trust at all (2 or 1)
Parents in your community	67%	7%
Teachers in your local public schools	64%	7%
Local public school principals and school board members	54%	14%
Taxpayers in your community	52%	15%
Education experts from throughout the country	47%	18%
Local religious leaders	42%	25%
Local leaders of minority groups	35%	20%
Business leaders	30%	32%
Elected officials in your community	29%	33%
Your state's governor	28%	41%
Teachers' union representatives	27%	34%
Elected officials in Washington, D.C.	15%	58%

cerned that they will not be able to find adequate child care in the future (Princeton Survey Research Associates, March 1994). A broader segment of the population also acknowledges the continuing, unmet need for affordable and available child care.

The public believes it is principally parents' responsibility to find child care, with some help from employers and the government. Even though close to two-thirds say they support federally subsidized child care for working parents, 85 percent believe that the parents should pay for some part of the cost, depending on their ability to pay (Gallup Organization, May 1992).

- A majority believes that the government should play a role in providing child care assistance to help strengthen the American family. In 1992, 59 percent of adults said the government should have a role in providing daycare; this figure was 55 percent in 1993 (Gallup Organization, October 1993).

The public wants government to set standards on child care.

- A majority (54 percent) believe the federal government should require the states to set minimum standards of health and safety for child care facilities, rather than leaving it up to the discretion of the states (Research/Strategy/Management, March 1995).
- More than three-quarters (84 percent) favor the government (in general) setting minimum standards for health and safety at child care facilities, with 35 percent strongly favoring and 49 percent somewhat favoring (Gallup Organization, October 1993).

*Personal safety.* Americans' distress over safety for themselves and their families is great. Sixty-one percent say that crime in their communities has increased, and violence and drugs are key worries in schools (Hart and Teeter, March 1995).

Americans fear that many of our children live with danger at every turn, be-

lieving that many children are not even safe at school or getting there, or in their own neighborhoods and homes.

As the accompanying box shows, half of the public would divide its efforts evenly between enforcement (including

**How many children in America do you think . . . most, some, few, or hardly any? (L. H. Research, April 1993)**

	Most	Some	Few	Hardly any
Are physically safe going to and from school	39%	30%	17%	10%
Get medical treatment when needed	35%	33%	21%	8%
Live in homes safe from violence	30%	41%	19%	6%
Are safe from violence in the schools	29%	32%	23%	14%
Live in safe neighborhoods	25%	41%	21%	7%

What are possible solutions? Americans want tough answers to the serious problems of violence. They believe more police (80 percent), harsher sentences (65 percent), and gun control (60 percent) would decrease crime (Yankelovich Partners, Inc., August 1993).

When offered various policy options, however, the preponderance of opinion is that a focus on prevention is the best way to attack the problems of crime and violence.

**Methodology**

The polling data in this report were compiled and analyzed by Belden & Russonello. In looking for existing research sources, B&R requested a search of public opinion data since 1992 from The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, a nonprofit research library that houses the most complete database of publicly available survey research materials. B&R also inquired of numerous other survey organizations and interest groups, and searched its own collection of related reports. Most of the surveys reviewed in this summary are based on national, representative samples.


punishment) and prevention. A third would put most of its resources behind prevention, and only 19 percent would invest most in punishment (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, February 1994).

**Let's suppose for a moment that you were in charge of deciding how to spend an extra \$10 million to fight the drug problem in your community. In which one of the following ways would you spend that extra \$10 million? (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, February 1994).**

Half on law enforcement, and half on prevention, education, and treatment	46%
Three-fourths on prevention, education, and treatment, and one-fourth on law enforcement	18%
All of it on prevention, education, and treatment	14%
Three-fourths on law enforcement, and one-fourth on prevention, education, and treatment	12%
All of it on law enforcement	7%
None	1%

**For More Information**

The Local Collaboration for Children and Youth is composed of six national organizations, listed below, representing local government and school systems in the United States. The objectives of the Local Collaboration are to increase public awareness of the needs of children and youth, to increase public knowledge of and support for community collaborations that respond to the needs of children and youth, to raise the visibility of the benefits of developing community collaborations for children and youth, and to promote broader implementation and/or replication of successful collaborations for children and youth.

The results of the survey are available in brochure form. For more information on the brochure *Views on Family and Youth Issues and the Role of Public Institutions in Strengthening the Family* or on activities of the Local Collaboration for Children and Youth, contact Will Fischer at the International City/County Management Association, 202/962-3506; Shirley Kennedy Keller at the American Association of School Administrators, 703/875-0706; John E. Kyle at the National League of Cities, 202/626-3030; Sandra Reinsel Markwood at the National Association of Counties, 202/942-4235; Laura Waxman at the United States Conference of Mayors, 202/861-6707; or Laurie Westley at the National School Boards Association, 703/838-6703. 

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