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# Reducing the Stresses of Parenting Belongs on the Policy Agenda

## In a Nutshell

- Parents in the United States report higher levels of stress than non-parents, even when controlling for factors like income and race.
- Stress has significant negative health effects on both parents and their children, but it also has downstream consequences for society.
- Many different policies are likely to contribute to a reduction in parenting stress, including ones that decrease financial burdens, improve flexibility in taking time off, promote social connection, and improve mental health care.

In late August, the U.S. Surgeon General published an advisory highlighting the mental health challenges facing parents across the country and calling for better support for parents, caregivers, and families. The reality that parents experience higher levels of stress than non-parents is not new, but the share of parents reporting stress has been on the rise in the last few years. This has drawn attention to a significant public health problem affecting individuals and the wider public.

High levels of parenting stress should be of particular interest to policymakers in Michigan. This stress has direct health impacts on parents and caregivers, frequently leads to health and development problems for children, and negatively affects the broader economy through lost productivity and higher health care utilization. All of these consequences are worth addressing in the present, but they are also relevant in the context of Michigan’s stagnant population growth. From 2000 to 2020, only one state’s population grew more slowly than Michigan’s and projections show that the state’s demographic issues are likely to continue over the next few decades. If Michigan aims to reverse this trajectory, it will need people – both existing residents and newcomers – to start and grow families in the state. Making parenting less stressful is central to this goal, as the factors that contribute to parenting stress are closely aligned with the reasons people offer about why they are hesitant to have children.

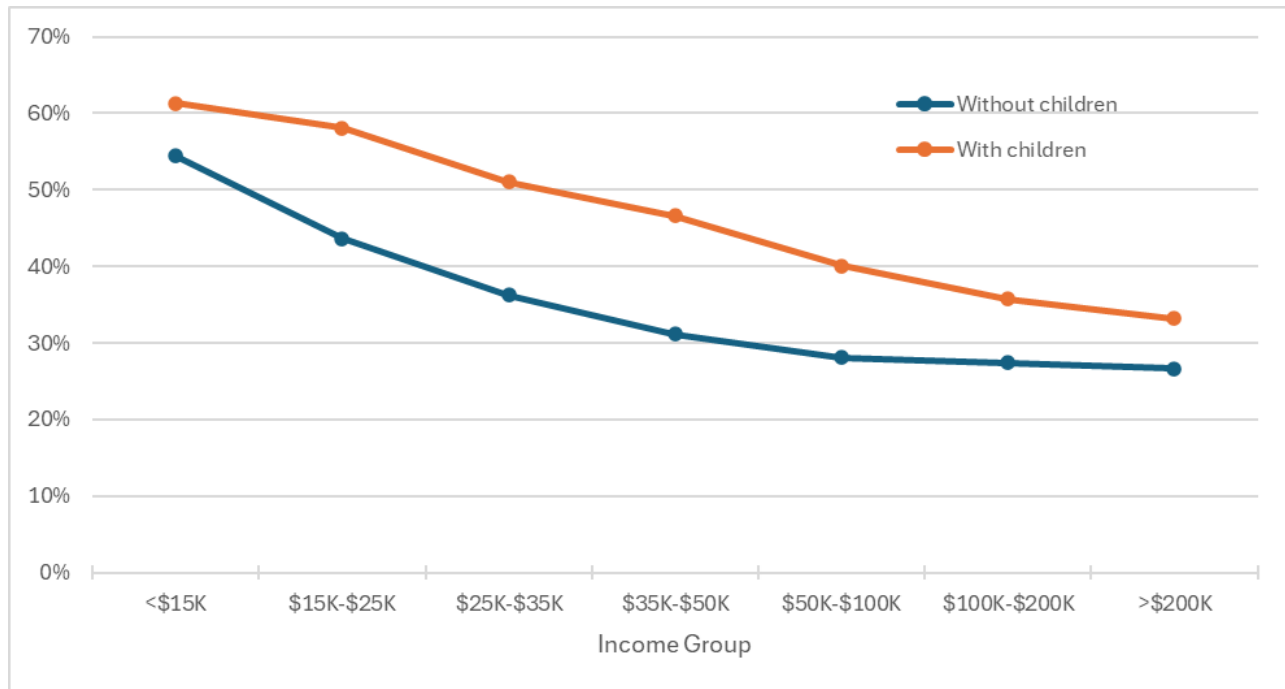
While part of the solution is likely to be shifting cultural norms and values, policymakers have a variety of different options to enact policies that are likely to decrease the stress felt by parents. Among these options are ones that decrease financial burdens of parenthood, improve flexibility in taking time off, promote social connection, and improve mental health care. No single policy is likely to solve the problem, but making the reduction of parenting stress a consideration in many different policy areas can lead to progress.

## American Parents are Stressed Out

Around 60 million parents in the United States are living with children under 18, and while a host of socioeconomic and demographic factors beyond having children contribute to the stress felt by parents, it is clear that parents are under more stress than their non-parent counterparts. The advisory cites an American Psychological Association survey in which 33 percent of parents reported high levels of stress in 2023, compared to

20 percent of non-parents. Over the last decade, 15 to 20 percent of non-parents have reported high stress levels, while 24 to 34 percent of parents have reported high stress levels. Other survey data supports this finding. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) monthly Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey found that 42 percent of people in households with children reported high stress levels in 2023, compared to 32 percent in households without children. Interestingly, the CDC data shows stress levels are not affected by the number of children in the household. Stress is higher among parents than non-parents across all income levels, although the gap narrows for the highest earning households, indicating that poverty plays a key role.

### Share Reporting Stress, by Households With and Without Children, by Income Group, 2023



Source: BRFFS Data, CDC. [https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/annual\\_data/annual\\_2023.html](https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/annual_data/annual_2023.html) (Calculations and groupings by ParentData <https://parentdata.org/are-parents-really-more-stressed/>)

White and Black parents are more stressed than their non-parent counterparts, although the gap is slightly larger for White parents. Hispanic/Latino parents report slightly less stress than their non-parent counterparts. (Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents report higher levels of stress overall than their White counterparts in both the parent and non-parent categories.) The CDC’s “stress” question was new in 2023, but the survey has asked about poor mental health days for many years. This metric also shows parents with consistently worse mental health than non-parents, with a largely proportional uptick in the share of people in both categories reporting poor mental health over the last several years.

### Stress is Bad for Individual Health and the Public

Stress, particularly prolonged stress, can have significant health effects, including anxiety, depression, digestive issues, headaches, muscle tension and pain, heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, stroke, sleep problems, weight gain, and memory and concentration impairment, and worse immune performance. Further, research consistently shows that children of parents with mental health conditions are at greater risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. All of these negative health effects are individually undesirable, but also have downstream impacts on society through higher health care utilization, lost economic output, and crime, among other pathways. More broadly, one of the goals of civil society is the welfare of its people and it should be striving for good mental health as an end in and of itself, not just as a route to physical health and better productivity.

## Parenting Stress is Worth Addressing

The idea that being a parent is stressful is certainly not a novel one. Along with the general caregiving demands and challenges, the Surgeon General calls attention to stressors such as “financial strain and economic instability, time demands, concerns about children’s health and safety, parental isolation and loneliness, difficulty managing technology and social media, and cultural pressures.” The impact of these stressors on parents is illustrated by their responses to more detailed survey questions. For instance, 48 percent of parents said their stress is completely overwhelming, compared to 26 percent of non-parents. Similarly, 41 percent of parents said most days they are so stressed that they cannot function, compared to just 20 percent of non-parents. Sixty-six percent of parents felt consumed by worries regarding money, while only 39 percent of non-parents said the same.

The stress of parenting is something worth reducing for the sake of those affected by the stress in the present, but it is also important to make sure that people do not opt out of becoming parents because of the stress and deleterious mental health impact. This is again important because of the downstream effects of Michigan’s stagnant population growth, but also because the state has an interest in people living fulfilling and meaningful lives. Policy and culture should be oriented around making these kinds of choices about what people want out of life and not only questions of whether they can handle or afford the costliness of parenthood. Michigan policymakers should be particularly attuned to these concerns, as the state’s population trajectory requires it to take every opportunity to do better than the national average over the next few decades.

## Making Life Less Stressful on Parents

Reducing the stress felt by parents is a complicated social problem that cannot be easily solved with a couple of simple policy fixes, but policy change is part of the equation, as are efforts to shift cultural norms and values. The Surgeon General’s advisory points to a series of high-level goals that different stakeholders can pursue, including policymakers at all levels, employers, communities and schools, health and social service professionals, researchers, families and friends, and parents and caregivers.

### Direct Policy Action

Policymakers can contribute to reducing parenting stress in several tangible ways, according to the advisory. One stream of policy options for states includes promoting and expanding funding for programs that support parents and caregivers and their families. Potential policies include increased funding for childcare, larger child tax credits, universal pre-kindergarten, and early childhood education programs, among others. This set of policy options focuses on the underlying financial stressors of parenthood, although broader policies that foster better economic outcomes for everyone would also put a dent in the financial stress felt by parents.

Another policy option is paid family and medical leave, both for new parent leave and for traditional sick time. The time after birth can be incredibly stressful and demanding, but the difficulty of juggling illness and work during the early years of a child’s life also takes its toll. Certainly, the new parent component of the policy would be specific to parents, but broader sick leave policy impacts the rest of the population as well. The advisory puts forward the idea of a national program, but many states have adopted their own versions.

Building social infrastructure that fosters community support is a way in which local government policymakers can contribute. Parenthood is often isolating, and it can be difficult to identify sources of support. Better and more accessible public places and community programs that allow for parents to make connections and receive support are a key component of parental well-being.

Finally, policymakers have a role in ensuring parents have access to quality mental health care. This includes ensuring access to health care coverage, establishing mental health coverage parity, and developing a large enough mental health care workforce to meet the demands of the population.

Michigan has not been ignoring these important issues, but addressing parenting stress through policy requires ongoing and continued efforts. In recent years, the state has made childcare investments, expanded tax

credits, and added funding to work towards universal pre-K, although much of these efforts will require reauthorization and continued investment. The state is also on the cusp of implementing an expanded sick leave law, although new parent leave – which is guaranteed in about one-third of states – remains at the discretion of employers in Michigan. Overall, Michigan has reasonably high health care coverage rates compared to the national average, but many people remain without coverage. Mental health parity legislation was recently enacted, although the full benefits will require continued efforts to grow the workforce in the state.

In addition to the direct policy levers, policymakers can also play a role in supporting other stakeholders in their efforts to alleviate parenting stress. Short of mandating new parent leave, the state may be able to foster or incentivize businesses to adopt policies that make taking leave easier and more affordable. Similarly, engaging in policies that push employers to offer more generous health care benefits could be an effective tool. Community organizations and schools offer support to parents in many ways, and policymakers can provide funding and other assistance for these efforts. The government may also be able to make it easier for health and social service providers to address parent mental health. It is also likely that policymakers can promote better research through funding and improved data collection initiatives.

The question for policymakers should be less about the exact policy changes or initiatives and more about considering all of the different avenues to making a dent in the problem of parenting stress. Many of the options detailed above have independent constituencies. Universal pre-K is talked about as education policy, but it has an impact on parent mental health. Tax credits are thought of as economic growth tools but are also about parent mental health. In places where policy can make a difference on the stress levels faced by parents, it should be part of the cost-benefit analysis.

## **Shifting Norms and Values**

While parenting stress is something that can be addressed with tangible policies, cultural norms and values are also a major factor. Policy change can often shape culture, but it should not be lost on policymakers or the broader public that some of the work will need to focus on shaping our understanding of parenthood and the role of parents in society.

A society that values the time spent parenting equally to the time spent working, talks openly about the challenges of parenting, and seeks to foster a connection among isolated parents is likely one that will see lower levels of parenting stress. Those efforts are not necessarily things that can be achieved with direct policy actions, but policymakers and those working on these issues certainly have the ability to set the tone about norms and values and should think about how they can shape the way the public sees parenthood.

## **Conclusion**

Parents in the United States are under more stress than similarly situated non-parents. This is not a new problem, but increased levels of stress and alarming responses to surveys about parent mental health have led to increased attention to the problem.

Policymakers and the public should prioritize reducing parenting stress, not just for the well-being of parents and caregivers, but also for the downstream effects that this stress can have on individuals and society. This includes the potential that parenting stress will decrease the number of people who choose to become parents, which should be a significant concern to those concerned about Michigan's stagnant population growth.

Policy is only part of the solution, but many avenues exist toward reducing parenting stress, including policies that make the economics of parenthood easier, increase the availability of time off, promote better and more accessible mental health care, and aid in social connection. While it is not the government's role to push people into parenthood, we should strive for a society that makes the decision to become parents about individual preferences rather than the structural impediments.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Karley Abramson joined the Research Council in 2022 as a Research Associate focusing on health policy. Previously, Karley was a nonpartisan Research Analyst at the Michigan Legislative Service Bureau where she specialized in the policy areas of public health, human services, education, civil rights, and family law. Karley has worked as a research fellow for various state and national organizations, including the National Institutes of Health and the ACLU of Michigan. She is a three-time Wolverine with a bachelor's degree in sociology, a master's of public health, and a juris doctor from the University of Michigan.

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