

As a nation, we have an opportunity and obligation to unlock the full potential of all Americans. This work involves making sure that children and the adults in their lives have the materials and support to build wellbeing – and stepping in to restore and repair wellbeing where it has been eroded.

Just as no-one builds wellbeing on their own, decision makers cannot build sound policies or programs on their own. The voices and perspectives of people affected by policies and programs are essential elements of making them work. The words of parents animate and reinforce what we learn from the data and the facts on the ground about these policies.

To capture parent voices and perspectives, Ascend, working with Lake Research Partners, conducted 12 online focus groups in fall 2020 to ask parents with young children how they were experiencing this unique moment in our history. Ascend then supported a bipartisan Election omnibus poll of 1200 voters fielded October 31 - November 3, 2020 by Lake Research and their partner Republican firm The Tarrance Group to gauge voter support on the two-generation (2Gen) approach and policy options.

Here's what we learned.

## **Parents think expansively about what “family wellbeing” means: it’s financial, emotional, and more. Voters agree.**

### **Financial**

The expenses that parents of young children bear – especially child care – are major sources of stress and financial strain.

- The need for quality, affordable child care remains paramount, even as top concerns shift to safety and cleanliness in the COVID-19 context.
- Daycares have closed, and there is an ongoing issue of parents having difficulties finding child care that is both high-quality and affordable, which was hard before the pandemic and is even more difficult now.
  - Seven-in-ten voters (70%) favor making parents enrolled in college or workforce training programs eligible for state-funded child care subsidies.
  - Majority support crosses partisanship; this reaches a majority of Trump (57%) and Biden (80%) voters.
- Stimulus checks opened parents' eyes to the role that government could play in more actively supporting financial stability. About half (49%) of all voters, and a majority of women (53%) and parents with children under 18 at home (53%), favor providing \$1,000 per month for a year through direct cash deposits with a to shore up financial stability.

### **Emotional**

Parents are wildly in favor of increasing access to emotional and mental health services for children and parents.

- More than seven-in-ten voters (72%) agree that emotional and mental health screenings and services should be available to parents and children together, even if only one is enrolled in a health insurance plan. This has bipartisan appeal and appeals to Trump (59%) and Biden voters (85%).
- Across groups, parents see the benefit of increasing access to these services to help people cope and to teach people parenting strategies. They see the pandemic as all the more reason to increase access to these services. Parents believe that this type of shared family care would strengthen relationships and create a healthier emotional environment for the family.

### **Structural**

Voters want to see policies and programs pay more attention to the whole family – including fathers.

## Programs for Dads:

- Parents really see a need to create more programs that support fathers in their role as parents, in addition to the ones we have for mothers.
  - A majority of voters (78%), including majorities across demographic and partisan groups favor creating more programs that support fathers in their role as parents.
    - There is strong bipartisan support among Democrats (87%), Republicans (71%) and Independents (74%).
    - Support is particularly strong among Black women (86%), Black men (82%), white college educated women (85%), women Biden voters (90%).
- The most acutely concerned about the struggles of parents of young children are women who voted for Biden, Black voters, Latinx voters, and Democrats.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic has added stress to parents' lives, eroding family well-being.**

- With the anxieties and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, parents are feeling overwhelmed, worried, frustrated, and stressed.
- They are busy and stretched for time, and distance learning is difficult for those who have school-aged children, too.
- They feel judged for their parenting choices, and the pandemic exacerbates that.
- While parents face challenges, many see additional family time as a silver lining.
- Parents have a somewhat different and more expansive view of the role of government in light of the pandemic.

## **Structural racism is a persistent threat to the well-being of Black families and families of color.**

- The sudden national focus on racism, police brutality, and racial justice issues put into focus the personal experiences with racism that many Black, Latinx, Asian American, and Native American parents face.
- Across groups, Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native American parents are concerned about how racism impacts their children, but have strategies and interventions prepared for when their children inevitably face prejudice or racism.
- The Black moms and dads experience racism now and they always have, but they feel that tensions are higher now across the U.S., and in their own cities.
- The Latino moms and dads say they have experienced racism, some with racial profiling and judgement for speaking Spanish.
- The Asian moms personally have experienced racism and say Asian people are being blamed for COVID-19.
- The Native American moms talk about how racism has always been a problem in their communities and there is renewed attention. Black moms and dads and Latino dads spoke explicitly about the impact of police brutality on their communities, their families, and themselves.
  - The increased attention and scrutiny on police brutality mirrors Black and Latino parents' own experiences and amplifies their justifiable fears for their loved ones and their communities.
- Many white parents – especially white parents of multi-racial children – acknowledge that racism is systemic and enduring. Some have mixed feelings about structural racism and some blame racial tensions on Black movements, communities, and people.

## **Policy and program leaders should focus on removing barriers that families encounter in accessing existing supports and services for family wellbeing.**

- Some of the parents are familiar with and have experience with programs from government, schools and non-profit organizations, but there is not a great deal of awareness.
- The existing programs parents reference include therapy, food pantries, rental assistance, utility assistance, summer meal programs, and increasing SNAP benefits due to the pandemic.
- They describe difficulties signing up for or getting assistance with government and social programs. Getting assistance can feel unpredictable and arbitrary; it can often feel like it comes down to luck or knowing the right person.

## **Americans – whether or not they have children – believe that we should be offering more support to families with young children.**

- Parents are concerned that their kids aren't getting what they need, and at the same time, many working families cannot stop meeting work, financial, or family obligations which in turn exacerbates families' stress and mental health struggles.
  - If parents were in charge, across groups they say they would create affordable or even no-cost child care. Other programs they'd institute include affordable housing, distribution of baby and toddler supplies, universal health care, financial literacy classes and support, maternity and paternity leave, and mental health support.
  - A strong majority of voters are personally concerned that parents of young children are struggling with a range of issues – including childcare, COVID-19 complications, economic security and mental health.

## **Voters across the board strongly value the 2Gen approach – large majorities of both Republicans and Democrats strongly agree that it makes sense to support children and the adults in their lives together.**

- A majority of all voters (78%), including majorities across demographics agree with designing programs to increase family well-being by supporting children and parents intentionally and simultaneously together.
- Voter support for 2Gen continues to grow.
  - In 2012, 81% of voters favored programs designed to help children and families who are living in poverty get out of poverty by targeting both parents and their children with parents getting education and skills training to get a better job and children getting a good start with Head Start, early education, and quality schools. In 2020, this percentage grew to 85%.
  - Voters are tax sensitive, but a majority (71%) still strongly favor 2Gen programs even if it increased their taxes.
- The bipartisan support of the two-generation approach is especially notable given that many other key issues do not enjoy bipartisan support.
  - A majority of Biden voters (94%) and Trump voters (75%) favor a two-generation approach.
  - The policies that represent the two-generation approach are very popular among political partisans and Independents. A solid majority of Democrats (91%), Independents (84%), and Republicans (79%) favor a two-generation approach.

## Messaging Guidance:

### As you advocate for 2Gen policies and programs, here are insights from Parent Voices that can strengthen your efforts to advance your policy goals.

- When discussing broad support for 2Gen policies, begin with parent views and voice and then mention strong, bipartisan voter support.
  - Here's why: This ordering helps us to reinforce the principle that programs and policies should respond first and foremost to the needs and concerns of the families they affect.
- When you present data on the impact of policies on families in your community, pair it with authentic quotes, statements or views of parents whenever possible.
  - Here's why: Using parent voice to animate the data reinforces that improving family well being and parents' lives are at the heart of the policy change you are advocating.
- 2Gen Programs should redouble efforts to build awareness of existing supports -especially for approaches beyond direct services.
  - Here's why: A broad, holistic approach to building family wellbeing encompasses more than direct services; it includes prevention efforts, leadership opportunities, social capital networks and more. Our messaging must consistently mention approaches beyond direct service that build support for every aspect of family wellbeing.
- When discussing the goal, emphasize *family wellbeing* (rather than family success, stability, or self-sufficiency) and define it more broadly than finances alone.
  - Here's why: Research shows that people associate the terms "family success", "family stability", and "family self-sufficiency" with financial status – a more narrow definition of "doing well" than we seek. By using the term "wellbeing," we invite people to think more expansively about what families say they need and want.

\*The 12 online focus groups covered the following states: Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington.