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**Testimony for the Record by
Bruce Lesley, President of First Focus on Children**

**House Judiciary Committee,
Subcommittee on The Constitution and Limited Government**

The Status of Our Nation's Children

April 9, 2025

Chairman Roy, Ranking Member Scanlon, and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate your invitation to testify on behalf of First Focus on Children, a bipartisan organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions.

I am grateful for the opportunity today to testify about the plight of our nation's children and why you, as members of the House Judiciary Committee, should be concerned about our failed attention to and investment in our nation's children and grandchildren and how that impacts both their and our nation's future.

I come before you today – not as a doctor or lawyer – but as someone who has worked in the health care system, the country government in El Paso, Texas, Texas state government on behalf of both Democratic and Republican leadership, staff in the House and Senate in Congress, and nearly 20 years as a child advocate.

First Focus on Children was initially founded by Colin and Alma Powell as part of America's Promise. In our 20 years of operation, we have always operated under the premise that children's issues are bipartisan and should always be so. During my time on Capitol Hill, I worked on a number of bipartisan initiatives related to improvements to Medicaid, the creation of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and to other children's issues, such as ensuring that medical research involving children include assent and consent, and that organ donation rules in this country must consider the unique needs of children.

This year is our 20th Anniversary, and over those two decades, we have worked with both Republicans and Democrats to present data about how children are faring in this country and to offer policy solutions. I would like to share with you examples of this work – including our annual Children's Budget report,¹ our research hub,² and the Children's Agenda from our sister organization, First Focus Campaign for Children.³

These are resources that we have provided to your offices to help provide you with data and evidence about children in America, along with policy options we believe would improve the status of children.

As you know, children do not vote, they do not have political action committees (PACs), and they lack a cadre of paid lobbyists that can demand attention to their issues. Despite representing nearly one-quarter of the population, one U.S. senator told me that she can go weeks, if not months, without hearing any conversation in the halls of Congress about the needs of children.

Fatherly reported that the U.S. Senate failed to pass or even have a single vote on an issue affecting children in 2019, despite having numerous bipartisan and noncontroversial bills pending before the body.⁴ That makes it all the more imperative that members of this body look at issues, such as the federal budget, and consider whether policy is

shortchanging children's needs because they lack the political power that monied interests can demand of the political system.

We Must Do Better By Our Children

Children are not asking for luxury. They are not lobbying for tax shelters or asking for loopholes. Their needs are focused on their health, education, development, safety, and well-being. They and their families are asking for stability, safety, and a fair chance for an opportunity to thrive. These are basic and urgent building blocks of human development but are being systemically denied and left unmet.

The list of issues threatening today's children is staggering — and it's growing:

- **Infant mortality is rising:** For the first time in decades, infant deaths are climbing. This is not just a public health disaster; it's a moral failure.⁵
- **Child mortality is rising:** This problem is being driven by gun violence, rising suicide rates, and a mental health crisis that has gone unaddressed.⁶
- **Child poverty is rising:** After historic reductions due to pandemic-era relief, poverty has more than doubled since 2021 after supports were withdrawn or left to expire.⁷
- **Uninsured rates for children are rising and access to care has declined:** Hospital capacities for children were shifted to adults during the pandemic but have not shifted back and pandemic health coverage protections for children have been allowed to expire.⁸
- **The children's mental health crises is soaring:** Every measure of this crisis has been rising.⁹
- **Measles and other preventable diseases are back:** The erosion of public health capacity and increased disinformation has opened the door to old vaccine-preventable illnesses and dangers. The Chairman's State of Texas has a spreading epidemic of measles with nearly 500 cases with more than 70% harming children, including two deaths.¹⁰ The Speaker's State of Louisiana recently had two deaths associated with pertussis or whooping cough and cases nationwide as 25 times higher than they were at the same time in 2023.¹¹
- **Homelessness is up:** Record numbers of children and families are living without stable and affordable housing.¹²
- **Hunger is surging:** Food insecurity has returned with a vengeance as SNAP and school meal programs have been reduced.¹³
- **Child care is in crisis:** The American child care system faces challenges with respect to costs, limited access, and a shortage of providers, impacting families, public resources, and the economy.¹⁴
- **Child abuse deaths are increasing:** Families are stressed, services are stretched, and kids are paying the price.¹⁵
- **School shootings are a never-ending threat and crisis.** The rate of school shooting victims, wounded, and fatalities among children has risen dramatically in recent years.¹⁶

- **Immigrant children are living in fear:** Raids, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and exclusionary policies have increased both fear and trauma in children.¹⁷

These are not niche or isolated problems. These are the foundational issues of childhood and human development going unmet, and worse, symptoms of how we are neglecting and failing our youngest citizens.

Why These Indicators Are of Importance to the House Judiciary Committee

Although many of these trends and issues are not directly under the jurisdiction of the House Judiciary Committee, they are all important because the children who come to the attention of this Committee, such as those in either the juvenile justice system or whose constitutional rights are threatened, have often been repeatedly failed elsewhere. The presence of children in our courtrooms, detention facilities, asylum hearings, or even in headline-grabbing controversies is rarely the result of their own actions. Rather, it is the predictable outcome of our failure to prioritize and invest in their health, education, development, safety, and well-being.

Children are not abstractions. They are human beings with real names, real families, and real needs — and many of the decisions made in this room and in the halls of Congress echo through their lives, for better or worse.

Here are a few examples:

- A 14-year-old girl in foster care with a long history of trauma and undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is moved between multiple placements in a single year. Her behavior escalates — not because she is delinquent, but because she is in need of a child welfare system that meets her needs, including mental health and substance abuse services. With no access to trauma-informed care or a stable home, she ends up in juvenile or adult detention and her incarceration compounds the harm.¹⁸ She's not a threat to society; she's a victim of it. This Committee oversees the juvenile justice system and adult prisons, but the crisis began with a lack of family support and in the child welfare and health health systems.
- An unaccompanied 10-year-old boy from Honduras arrives at the southern border, having fled gang violence after witnessing the murder of his cousin. He is held in a detention facility for weeks with no formal guardian and limited access to legal counsel. His case becomes one of thousands in a backlog before immigration courts. But what brought him here was not the border — it was the failure of U.S. foreign and humanitarian policy to protect vulnerable children before they migrate, and of domestic systems to treat them with dignity upon arrival.¹⁹
- A teenager with learning disabilities and anxiety falls behind during the pandemic. He begins missing school and is picked up for truancy, minor infractions, and is referred to the court system. His entry into the school-to-prison pipeline is not the

result of criminal intent — it is the direct product of educational inequity and a mental health care gap that failed him.

- A 7-year-old boy in rural America lives with his grandmother because both of his parents are struggling with opioid addiction.²⁰ He suffers from developmental delays but cannot access consistent care due to a lack of local providers. When his grandmother becomes overwhelmed, child welfare intervenes.²¹ He is removed from the only caregiver he knows — not because she is abusive, but because she lacks support.
- A 10-year-old girl in a low-income family faces persistent hunger and housing instability. After her family's SNAP benefits were cut and eviction protections expired, she begins missing school, which triggers a truancy proceeding. Her life is now tied to the courts, not because of misbehavior, but because of poverty.²²

Each of these children ends up entangled in issues before the Judiciary Committee — civil rights, constitutional protections, immigration, law enforcement — because public policy failed to meet their needs upstream.

When we underfund mental health care, ignore child poverty, fail to provide inclusive education, and politicize children's issues, we create crises that spill over into our legal and judicial systems. Children are the canaries in the coal mine. And when we fail to hear them – to truly listen to them – our entire system of justice is weakened.

Speaking for myself, I certainly do not personally understand what it is like to be a child in an era of school shootings and the advent of social media and artificial intelligence in society. However, to reach a better understanding, I have listened closely to children impacted by those issues, my own children, parents, and other experts about these issues and the unique challenges they present to children and families.

Understanding and truly listening to kids themselves is important to help build a nation that treats children with dignity and understanding. At their core, kids need our love, compassion, and support.

Shortchanging Our Children and Grandchildren Fails Both Them and the Country

Budgets, whether a family's budget or that of the federal government, can tell us a great deal about what we value and whether we are making wise investments toward the future.

When it comes to children, study after study demonstrates that “money matters” and the “return on investment” (ROI) in them is among the highest that society can make toward its future.

Investing early in our children leads to better health outcomes, higher educational attainment, and increased earnings as adults. Every parent inherently understands this.

In an analysis of the effectiveness of 133 policy changes over the last 50 years by co-authors Nathaniel Hendren and Ben Sprung-Keyser, the findings were clear and stark. Public investments in children often pay for themselves and those investments have, by far, the best ROI or marginal value of public funds (MVPF). There are no other investments that perform as well as those in children.²³

Hendren explains:

*The policies that have historically invested in kids tend to be the ones that have the biggest bang for the buck. Because, oftentimes when you put in a dollar when a kid is young, it can have impact that then pays us back when those kids grow up.*²⁴

Failing to invest in children limits their short-term and life-long opportunities and is costly to society. As noted above, NASEM estimates the societal cost of child poverty to be as much as \$1.1 trillion annually.²⁵ Unfortunately, the youngest and most vulnerable children in our society have the highest poverty rates, and we know that negatively impacts every aspect of their lives.

Robert Orr, formerly with the Niskanen Center and more recently as a policy director for both Senator J.D. Vance (R-OH) and Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO), explains:

*Young parents with fewer financial resources are less capable of investing in their child's needs. The stresses associated with financial hardship may also impede child development. As a result, children who grow up in poverty fare worse on various metrics, including educational attainment, physical health, and emotional well-being.*²⁶

Numerous other studies find that government investments in children often have short- and long-term benefits that return up to \$10 for every dollar invested in kids.²⁷

Yet, as our annual report *Children's Budget* finds, the federal budget has presented an ever-declining share of federal spending dedicated to children. Although there are moments of attention and increase in funding to children, such as in 1997 with the passage of CHIP, the long-term trend returns to one of a pattern of decline.

A Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (CRFB) report, *Budgeting for the Next Generation: Does the Budget Process Prioritize Children?*, finds that the budget process systemically disadvantages and shortchanges our nation's children.²⁸

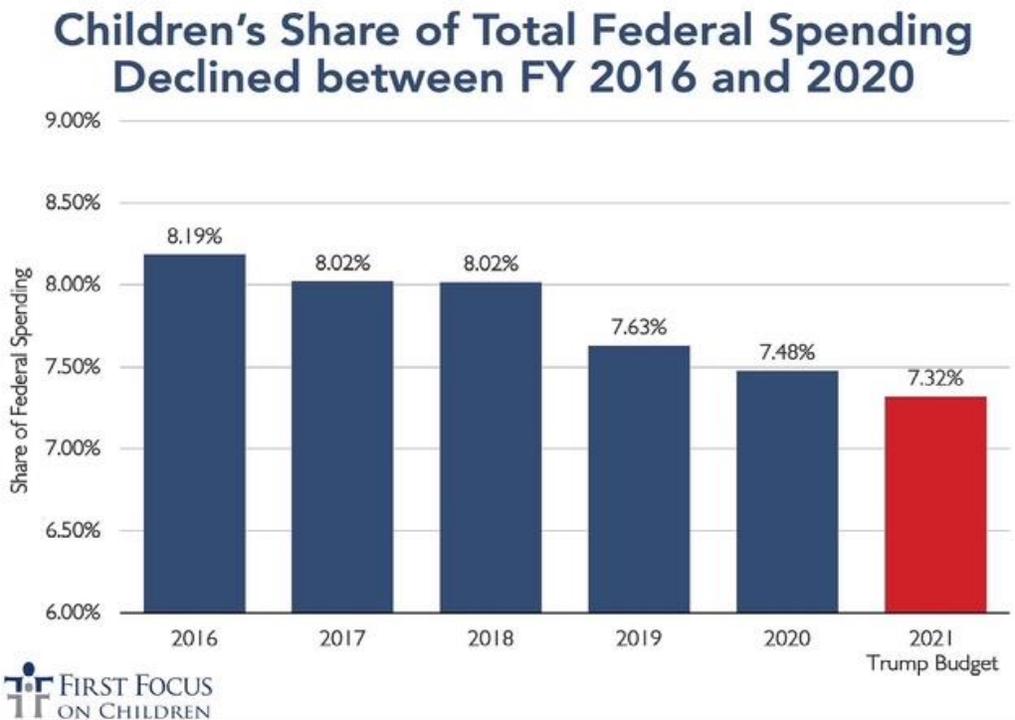
CRFB's analysis concluded:

- While much of spending on adults is mandatory, spending on children is disproportionately discretionary and thus must be reviewed and renewed with other appropriations.

- Spending on children is disproportionately temporary, and it requires far more regular reauthorization and appropriation than programs for adults.
- Spending on adults is rarely limited while spending on children is often capped, constraining what can be spent for most major children’s programs.
- Most programs for children lack built-in growth, leading spending on children to erode relative to spending on adults and relative to the economy.
- Programs for children lack dedicated revenue and thus lack the political advantage and protection of programs for seniors that enjoy this benefit.
- Growing spending on adults is burdening younger generations by driving up debt and thus reducing future income and increasing costs.²⁹

CRFB adds, “These features of the current budget process are increasingly leading spending on children to be crowded out, as the burden we place on children rises.”³⁰

For example, the share of federal investment in children during the first Trump Administration declined from 8.19% in 2016 to 7.48% in 2020, and the proposed budget by Trump for FY 2021 was 7.32% – which represents a decline of 11% over the period.³¹



The year 2021 represented one of those moments of increased investment in children. Due to increased investments in the Child Tax Credit, child care, paid leave, education programs, and children’s health, the share of investment increased to 11.99%. However, the share declined to 8.84% in the current fiscal year after many of those one-year investments expired.³²

The “kids’ share” is currently higher than its 2020 low, but the long-term budget prospects are one of continued decline.

According to the Urban Institute’s *Kids’ Share* estimates, based on policies in place at the time of the report’s analysis, the federal share of spending dedicated to children would drop to just 6% by 2034.³³ Consequently, children’s short- and long-term outcomes would worsen.

According to economist and former Reagan Administration official C. Eugene Steuerle, we should envision a different direction. In his words:

By shifting the budget toward investment in education, early childhood development, and other priorities set by evidence of high potential impact, we would promote growth for both the nation and its people over the long term. Think of the twenty-first century as doing for the young what the twentieth did for the elderly, only with a focus this time on opportunity and potential....³⁴

The Administration’s Actions Present a Troubling Future for Children

Despite pronouncements from some Administration officials, such as Vice President Vance and the DOGE’s Elon Musk, about the need to promote more births in the U.S. and support for families to ensure our long-term economic prosperity,³⁵ the actions and policy proposals coming out of this Administration indicate that children are likely to be targeted for significant program and funding cuts.

Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Director Russ Vought proposed significant cuts to the share of investments in children in the first Trump term and has made other statements that indicate austerity for children and families will be a priority now. In Vought’s own words, “I get excited about cutting the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services.”³⁶ Those two agencies are where the bulk of investments in children are made.

Furthermore, in a budget proposal that Vought wrote for the Center for Renewing America, he targeted children’s programs for enormous cuts, including:

- Hundreds of billions of dollars in cuts to Medicaid, which is described as allowing states to “refocus their efforts on the most vulnerable populations – including the aged, blind, and disabled – for whom Medicaid was originally designed to assist.” This description disturbingly fails to mention children and seems to give a nod to targeting kids for billions in health care cuts.
- Cuts of more than \$500 billion to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and consolidation and reductions in funding to child nutrition programs.
- A 40.6% cut to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which includes a 50% cut to Head Start.
- Billions in cuts to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to which 70% of current beneficiaries are children.

- Elimination of the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) to states, which again disproportionately serves children.³⁷

These cuts to children are playing out in this week's House vote on the budget resolution and would be devastating to children.³⁸

For example, with respect to the \$880 billion proposed for the House Energy and Commerce Committee to cut, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) recently confirmed that 96% of the available cuts are to Medicaid and CHIP.³⁹ For the over 37 million children who rely upon Medicaid for their health coverage, these programs serve as a lifeline, particularly for the 41% of babies born with Medicaid coverage, the 50% of children with special health care needs who rely upon Medicaid, and the 99% of children in foster care who are covered by Medicaid.⁴⁰

Consequently, well over 300 organizations at the federal, state, and local levels have co-signed a letter in opposition to the proposed Medicaid and CHIP cuts in the budget resolution.⁴¹

If past is prologue, in the 2017 debate to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act (ACA), over \$800 billion in cuts were proposed to Medicaid. Child advocates predicted that cuts would disproportionately harm children, and as the legislation moved from the House to the Senate, that fear became a reality. An analysis of the Senate bill found that the Medicaid cuts would have resulted in a 1.9% reduction in funding for senior citizens, 15% in cuts to people with disabilities, and an astounding 31% cut to children.⁴²

Children are also being negatively impacted by the actions of the DOGE, OMB, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), as significant cuts are being imposed on programs, services, and personnel of importance to children.

For example, on the domestic side of the budget, the agency most heavily targeted for cuts or outright repeal is the one federal department whose focus is predominately children – the Department of Education.⁴³ This proposal would effectively eliminate the one seat at the table of the President's Cabinet that is primarily focused on children.

If Rep. Nathaniel Moran's bill (H.R. 2456) is a template for how the functions of the Department of Education might be eliminated or reallocated, an Office of Education would be established in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) along with programs like the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Title I, afterschool programs, and the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program.

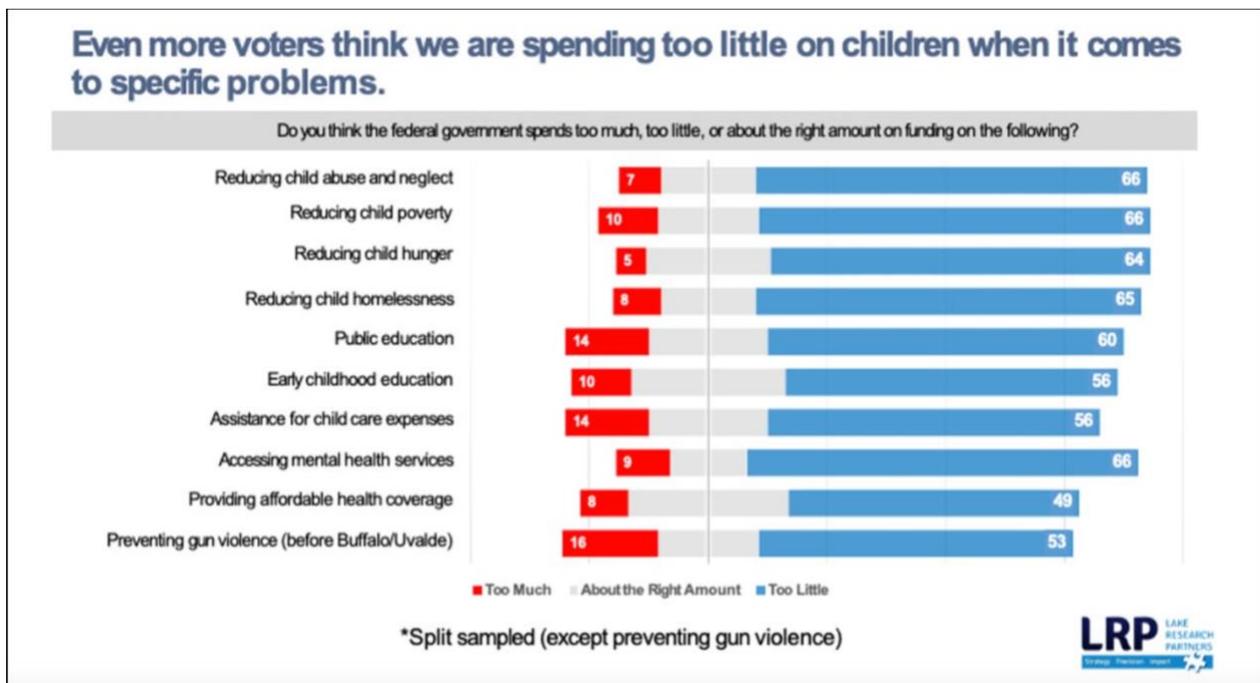
Other programs would be transferred to the National Science Foundation, the Interior Department, the Department of Treasury, the Department of Defense, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Justice. Schools seeking federal funding would find themselves having to contact no less than seven new agencies in order to draw down federal funding.

As for HHS, Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. has discussed options for making food healthier with a focus on chronic illness that could prove beneficial, but the program funding suspensions, anti-vaccine orientation, and slashing of personnel, including cuts to Head Start, child care, lead abatement, and other offices of critical importance to children are deeply troubling.⁴⁴

The American People Support Investments in Children, Not Cuts

In poll after poll, the American people overwhelmingly express their support for making investments in children rather than cuts. These values are not being reflected in many of the policies being proposed.

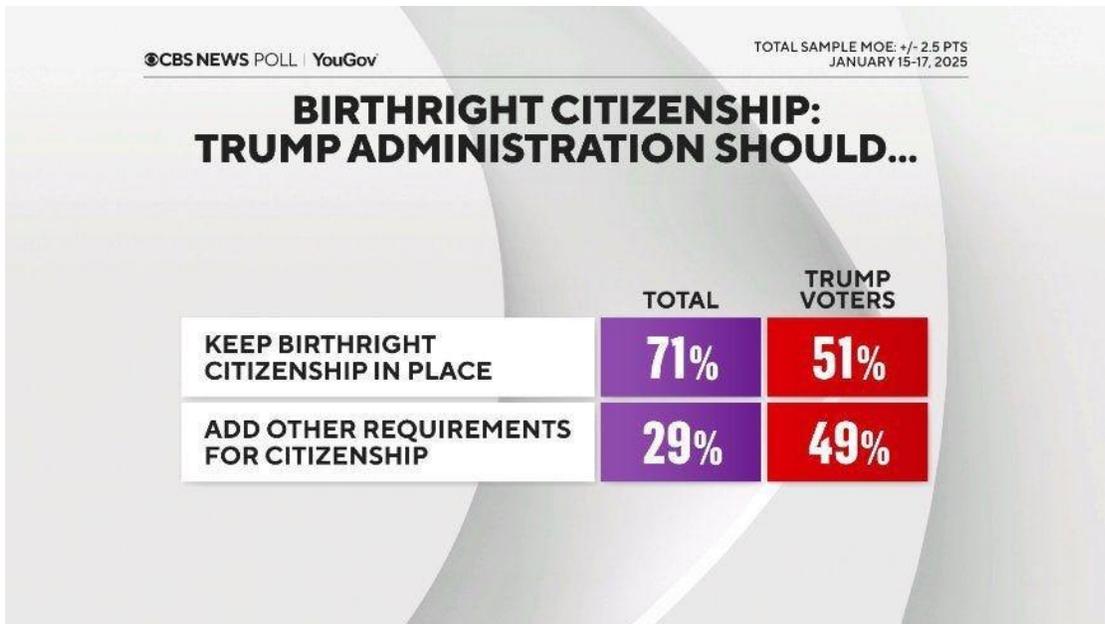
For example, in a Lake Research Partners poll,⁴⁵ voters expressed their concern that we are *investing too little rather than too much* in addressing children’s policy issues.



While much of the tax debate has been focused on extending and cutting taxes for our nation’s corporations and the wealthiest among us, the same poll found overwhelming support (72-21%) for improving and expanding the Child Tax Credit in ways that would dramatically cut child poverty.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, by a 2-to-1 margin (58-29%), an All4Ed poll found that Americans oppose dismantling the Department of Education.⁴⁷

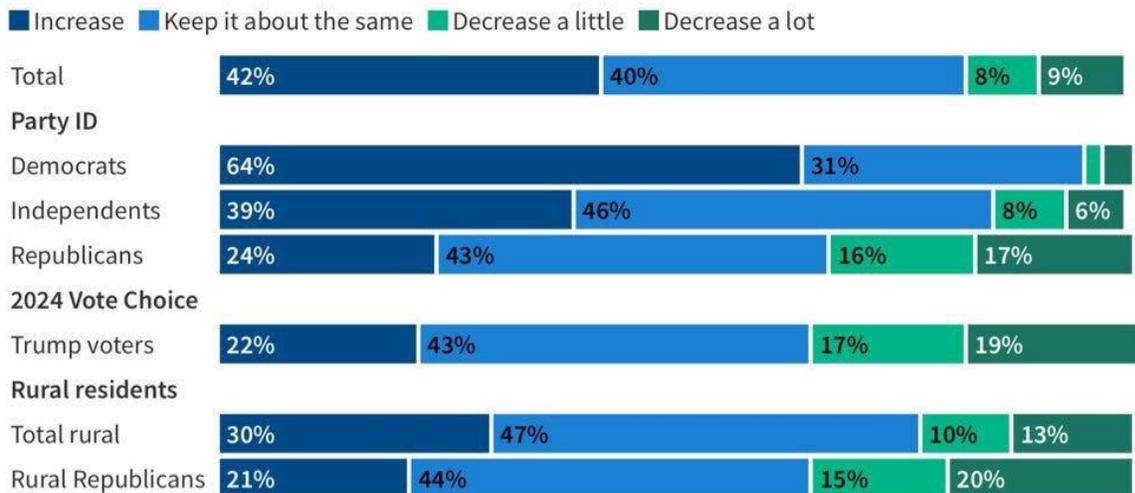
The public also opposes harming babies, such as with proposals to undermine the Constitution’s birthright citizenship clause. In fact, by a 71-29% margin, the American people oppose gutting birthright citizenship, according to a CBS News/YouGov poll.⁴⁸



Furthermore, in a recent KFF poll, 83% of Americans said Medicaid should be expanded or maintained, and only 17% believe it should be cut.⁴⁹

Large Shares Across Groups Want Congress To Increase or Maintain Spending on Medicaid

Do you want to see Congress increase spending on Medicaid, decrease spending, or keep it about the same? *IF DECREASE:* Would you like to see Congress decrease spending by a lot or a little?



Note: See topline for full question wording.

Source: KFF Health Tracking Poll (Feb. 18-25, 2025) • [Get the data](#) • [Download PNG](#)

KFF

A poll by FabrizioWard last week finds that “super majorities of voters oppose both cuts to Medicaid [and CHIP] overall as well as cutting specific aspects of Medicaid. Additionally, large majorities of Swing voters oppose Medicaid cuts, with Trump voters also opposed to

cuts on each option.”⁵⁰ In that poll, when voters were asked if they support or oppose making the following spending cuts to pay for tax cuts, they offered overwhelming negative responses:

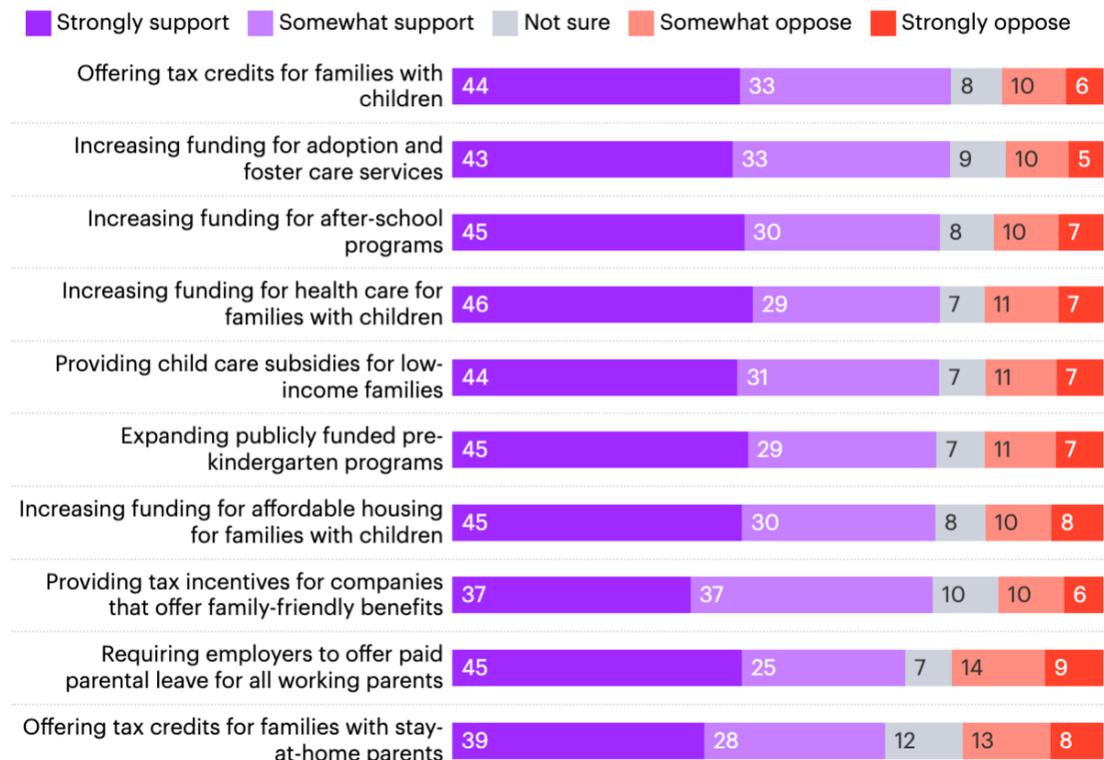
- Cutting funding to the Children’s Health Insurance Program: 19-71%
- Cutting Medicaid: 23-69%
- Cutting federal funding that pays for prenatal, delivery, and post-partum care for low-income mothers: 31-64%

Opposition grows to 81% when voters are told Medicaid provides coverage to 1 in 3 children diagnosed with cancer.⁵¹

Meanwhile, a YouGov poll also finds that the public supports a whole range of other child- and family-friendly policies.⁵²

Majorities of Americans support Congress passing 10 family-friendly policies

Would you support or oppose Congress doing the following? (% of U.S. adult citizens)



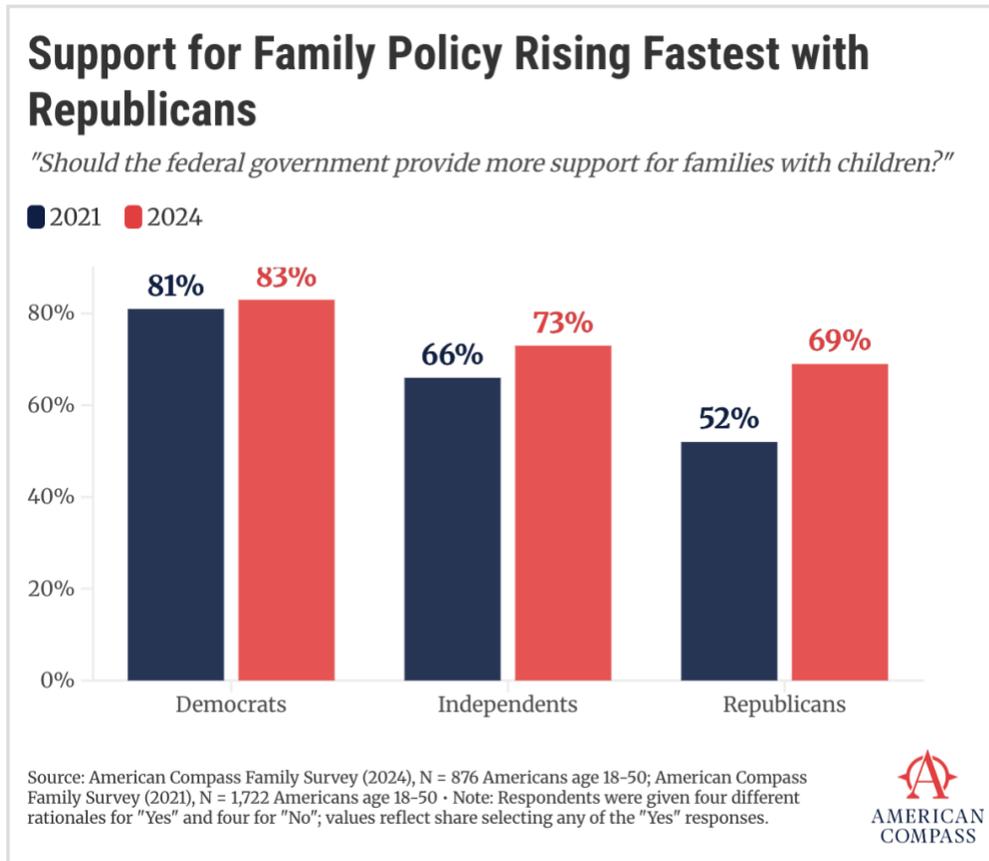
YouGov

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Finally, support for children is growing, especially among Republicans.

An American Compass survey cited by House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Jason Smith (R-MO)⁵³ found that support is rising when respondents are asked whether “the federal government should provide more support for families with children.”

Between 2021 and 2024, support grew among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans – but it rose by 17 percentage points among Republicans over the period.



Enhancing Civil Liberties, Protecting Minors, and Recognizing Child Rights

As Rep. Jamie Raskin (MD) reminds us in his outstanding book *We the Students*, the Constitution does not begin at adulthood.⁵⁴ Students have exercised their rights in landmark cases involving free speech, search and seizure, due process, equal protection, and birthright citizenship. Yet these rights are inconsistently applied, often vulnerable to the same forces of political and institutional issues this hearing seeks to examine.

There is a difficult balancing act when it comes to children’s rights, which must weigh the either affirming or conflicting roles of parents and government.

Despite being citizens who have fundamental rights, children and their voices are often locked out of political arenas and decision-making processes that impact their lives.

It is imperative that when a child cries out for help – whether it is a sick child, an abused child, a hungry child, a homeless child, or a victim of gun violence – adults should listen.

In too many cases, decisions that profoundly impact children’s lives are made without their input, often resulting in policies and practices that fail to address their real needs. This exclusion from decision-making processes diminishes policies’ effectiveness and strips children of their fundamental right to be heard.

Too often, discussions of civil liberties ignore children, as if constitutional rights only begin at age 18. But minors are citizens, too. They are entitled to protections under the First, Fourth, Fifth, and Fourteenth Amendments, and those fundamental rights should not be ignored simply because children lack political power.

ENDNOTES

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