The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out of the Storm?

This report has been prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute by John Doble Research Associates of Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.
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What Matters Most:

While the people who deliberated in the 1995-1996 forums on The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out of the Storm agreed that the American family is in crisis, they did not view the issue in ideological or political terms. Rather, the focus of their concern was on the future of our children. Forum participants said that a host of social problems including youth violence, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy stem from the weakening or breakdown of the family and the erosion of family values. Parents should be held more accountable for their children's actions, participants said. But they questioned how to do this without punishing those who have done their best.

While saying that children should, ideally, be reared in families with both a mother and a father, participants felt that we cannot turn back the clock, we cannot return to the family of the 1950s which was, they said, an idealization, more a fiction than a reality. The country, participants said, has experienced irreversible economic and social change. Rather than going back in time, participants wanted to do all we can to strengthen today's families and make sure that every child has the opportunity to succeed. To accomplish these goals, they said, we should rely on, in addition to federal government programs, the resources of our community groups, religious institutions, schools, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations.

1. The American family is a weakened and troubled institution.

The vast majority of the participants in the 1995-1996 National Issues Forums felt that the American family is undergoing turmoil. “There is a widespread belief that the family is in crisis,” said a woman who moderated a number of forums in Charleston, West Virginia. "In our forums, everyone agreed that is the case."

The issue of the weakening or breakdown of the family is comparatively new, forum participants said. In the years immediately after World War II, divorce was rare and families were stable because couples remained married — even when, participants said, their relationship was loveless. But today, such couples are likely to divorce, which means more single parents. Participants said that single parents in particular often find it especially demanding to teach children what they need to learn or to shield them from such negative influences as drugs, gangs, and media sex and violence.

Some participants said that what we are witnessing is nothing less than a deterioration of family values. A moderator from Charleston said the
participants in her community's forums felt that, as a people, "We have lost our moral compass." This thought was echoed by a man from Columbia, South Carolina, who said:

Our whole society is too permissive. Our priorities are screwed up. Nobody is teaching the work ethic [or other] things we took for granted when we were growing up.

Forum participants named three fundamental factors contributing to the weakening of the family: first, whether due to career reasons or economic necessity, millions of mothers have gone to work and are not at home to raise their children; second, social mobility—people moving away, taking new jobs, relocating across the country—has weakened our ties with our extended family and our community; third, our tax policies, instead of strengthening families, "provide fewer and fewer benefits for families with children," according to 53 percent of the participants after the forums.

In the best of all possible worlds, participants said, children should be raised by caring parents. "It'd be great if all kids had a father and a mother who loved them," said a man from Dayton, Ohio. But, he added, "that's just not how things are a lot of the time." More and more children, participants said, are raised by single parents, especially single mothers. In the pre-forum balloting, 60 percent said they were "very concerned" about "the increasing number of children who grow up without fathers." To a lot of nodding heads, a man from Columbia, South Carolina, said that without a father in the home, "teenage boys in particular can be a real burden on a mother."

But the solution to America's family problems is not, people felt, a return to the traditional two-parent family of the 1950s. Why not? First, people said, the family of the 1950s was often more an idealization than an ideal. Many of the problems afflicting us existed then too, people said, but were kept under the rug. But, participants said, even if family life in the 1950s was part of a golden age, we cannot go backward: social forces once unleashed can never be harnessed again; the dream of a return to the past is just that—a dream, a fantasy, an illusion that has no future.

2. Strengthen our families, don't turn back the clock.

People in the forums said it would be foolish to try to return to the way things were 40 years ago for three reasons:

• First, they said, too much has changed. The number of working women will always be high, participants said, if for nothing other than economic reasons. "In order not to sink into total poverty," said a woman from El Paso, "[a family] needs two paychecks coming in." A woman in Columbia agreed, saying, "Women leave their kids home because they're trying to make ends meet." A moderator from Wallace, Kansas, said her group felt that "it is unrealistic to think that women would ever stay home again."

• Second, participants said that certain social changes, especially improvements in the status of women and the acknowledgement of
spousal abuse, are something we should not forfeit. "There are problems we used to pretend didn't exist," said a woman from Sacramento.

- Third, many said the ideal family of the 1950s was a fiction and that attempting to turn back the clock is like chasing a mirage. "Our group agreed that the idealistic 1950s never existed," said a moderator from Dayton. A woman from El Paso said:

We have a tendency to think it used to be so wonderful, but it wasn't. Wife beating, child abuse, intolerance about sexual orientation, people getting married under terrible circumstances -- things were not the way we sometimes like to think they were.

It is ultimately a waste of time, people said, to lament how things have changed or to wish families were as they used to be. Because of our increased social mobility, extended families who live in the same community are now the exception, not the rule. People who relocate do not always develop deep community ties. A Louisville moderator whose forum was conducted in conjunction with a church said the Catholic participants in his forum "are aware of and honor other types of families besides the traditional one." The new realities, forum participants said, are here to stay. Therefore, we must do all we can to support and strengthen the families that exist. But, said a number of participants, instead of making it easier on families, our laws increase the pressure and strain.

### 3. Participants do not see the issue in ideological terms.

The issue of the family is, at the national level, sometimes framed in ideological terms, pitting defenders of traditional values and the nuclear or two-parent family against "new values" types who are accused of contributing to, if not causing, the breakdown of the family by promoting feminism, championing the use of day care, and legitimizing, if not glorifying, single parenthood along with an array of alternative life-styles such as gay parents. But terms and ideas that have long been part of the national debate were used by people in the forums without ideological or political connotations. For example:

- When people spoke of "family values" or "traditional values," the terms were devoid of political meaning. People were mainly referring to unexceptionable basics, such as the importance of perseverance, honesty, self-respect and respect for others, respect for authority and the import of obeying the law, putting duty before pleasure and delaying gratification, and so forth.

- People's use of terms can be confusing. When, for example, people spoke of "single-parent families," they did not always mean just that. In a forum in Columbia, South Carolina, a middle-aged man blamed an array of social problems on what he called "single-parent families." When he finished, the woman next to him said, "Excuse me, sir, but I'm a single parent and both my daughters are college graduates." The man was deeply embarrassed but also startled that he'd been so badly misunderstood. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't
mean you!" Which was true. He truly did not mean that that woman or "single parents" in an across-the-board sense were equally to blame. What he meant to say but did not, until he was called on it, was "single parents who do not responsibly rear their children." Those are the ones he saw as culpable.

• The controversy following former Vice President Dan Quayle's criticism of Murphy Brown, a television character who had a child out of wedlock, does not coincide with what people are most concerned about. While they would certainly prefer that all expectant women be married, most participants were not overly concerned about the well-being of children raised by single parents who are as successful, economically secure, and well adjusted as the fictional TV newswoman. The focus of public concern is children who are economically and educationally at risk.

4. Our main concern is children.

People in the forums were less concerned about the family per se than about the effects of what a deteriorating family structure is doing to our children. The issue of teen pregnancy, of children having children, was, for many, the most troubling aspect of this issue. The past two decades have witnessed an explosion in the number of teenage mothers. Participants said that teenage girls with their own crying emotional needs cannot provide their children with the nurturing they need. How can mothers who have not completed high school, people asked, instill in their children a love of learning and a sense of the importance of education? How can teens without job skills provide their children with an economically secure upbringing?

Some, including participants in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, blamed eroding values: a "welfare mentality," a diminished sense of personal responsibility, and the lessening of the stigma of having children out of wedlock. Others said the problem of teen pregnancy is not limited to children whose families are poor or on welfare, adding the problem is compounded by fathers, often teenagers too, who assume no responsibility for raising the child.

The odds against the children of children growing up to become well-adjusted, productive adults are formidable, people said. A teacher from El Paso said, "The kids who get pregnant [in our school] usually come from dysfunctional families." A moderator from Wallace, Kansas, said there are "many teenage pregnancies in rural areas too." A Sacramento woman said, "One of my daughter's friends came from a broken home and felt she needed someone to love. So she got pregnant and now is stuck in an abusive relationship." A Long Island-area man said:

A 15 year old on TV was asked if she were glad she was pregnant. "Yes," she said, "because I'll never be lonely again." I wanted to cry. You shouldn't have a baby because you want someone to keep you company! What kind of reason is that to bring a life into the world?
The welfare system, some felt, exacerbates the problem by "rewarding" unwed mothers who have additional children. Instead of helping them out of dependency, the system, people said, encourages them to stay where they are. A Columbia, South Carolina, woman said, "I don't think we should give cash to welfare mothers. Take care of their needs, but don't give them money." But most participants were more concerned about the children. And so, despite their concern about welfare's effects, participants after the forums rejected, by a margin of 54 percent to 24, the idea of limiting public support for unwed mothers, fearing this would do more harm than good.

Some were concerned about the "sexual revolution," the broad acceptance of sex outside of marriage. A man from Columbia, South Carolina, said, "Now, even the women run off and leave their families. Anything goes."

People also criticized the media. In the post-forum ballot, 50 percent said they were "very concerned" about an entertainment industry that glamorizes single parenthood and sexual freedom. In forum after forum, people talked about children being exposed to more than is appropriate at an early age. "When they advertise jeans," a Sacramento woman asked, "how many times do you see the woman or man with no shirt on?" In Louisville, people said the media "goes overboard" on violence, adding that what children see has a definite effect on them. A man from Columbia agreed, saying:

> How many times have you seen the Power Rangers say, "Oh, we need to work this out" rather than kick you in the face?

**5. Family breakdowns cause social problems — and vice versa.**

Almost without exception, people in the forums said many of our most serious social problems — including crime, youth violence and gang activity, drug abuse, school failure, and teen pregnancy — are due to our families' collective inability to adequately nurture, care for, educate, and rear our young people. After the forums, 88 percent said they were very concerned about "rising social problems such as juvenile crime, teen pregnancies, divorce, and child poverty."

When asked if the weakening or breakdown of the family leads to other social problems, a woman in a Sacramento forum asked:

> Is it the chicken or the egg? People don't have good jobs, and then they fight at home [because they don't have enough money]. One thing leads to another.

A woman in Columbia said, "What concerns me most is teen violence. You can just see the anger in their faces." A moderator from Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, said, "The kids [who get in trouble] have parents who are irresponsible or abandoned them."

**6. We need more emphasis on quality parenting.**
Many participants said that two-parent families often have their own problems, adding they’d rather see a child grow up in a single-parent home with quality parenting than in a troubled two-parent home. "Don't stigmatize single parents," a Charleston woman said. A Sacramento man said, "Two parents aren't the solution to everything; they can raise drug addicts too." In Athens, Georgia, the moderator of a forum with university students said:

The students were offended by the claim that single parents don't provide a good upbringing. Many of them are from divorced families and they are the cream of the crop [at the university]. They weren't harmed by [their parents' divorce], they're better off because of it.

Quality parenting, people said, has to do with teaching children basic values and skills, including how to make good decisions, seeing that actions have consequences, developing respect for others, seeing that life is not always easy and that people must learn to deal with its ups and downs. Somehow, people said, we must return to instilling in our children these basic tenets. Yet our values, some said, sometimes lead us in the opposite direction. A Dayton woman asked, "Why aren't parents who choose to stay home to raise their children applauded like other professionals?" A woman from El Paso said she no longer likes going to parties because people, especially other women, move away from her when, after asking "What do you do?" she says, "I stay home to raise my children."

Suggesting that she and her husband had accepted a trade-off that others refuse to make, a woman from Columbia, South Carolina, said:

I stay at home, and we make it from paycheck to paycheck. But I'm there when my kids need me. People today are greedy. There are no morals anymore.

Some blamed today's family problems on selfish, self-absorbed parents who neglect their duty. A Sacramento woman said:

The people of the 1960s grew up doing what felt good, focusing on pleasing themselves. Today, as parents, they don't know what it means to sacrifice or make commitments.

A moderator from Wallace, Kansas, said people in her group agreed that we have become too materialistic and short-sighted, saying:

The American Dream is more important [to most people] than the American family. People forget about the responsibility of bringing children into the world. It's not the high cost of living, it's the cost of living high. Being a parent is the first job.

People in Louisville "felt like there ought to be training before you could have a child," the moderator reported. He said his group felt that "you have to pass a driver's license to drive. Maybe there ought to be training in parenting before you can have children." But his group, he said, abandoned the idea because "they didn't know how to do it." In Athens, a moderator reported a similar result: her group said children learn to become parents by watching and imitating their own parents. Children from dysfunctional families have to learn how to be good parents from someone else. "But
while the group liked the idea of teaching parenting," she said. "they also said it is not the role of government to force [people] into counseling."

7. **There is disagreement about changing the divorce laws.**

Forum participants considered an array of proposals to strengthen the family, including whether to make divorce harder by "making marriage a commitment parents cannot easily break." Some favored repealing no-fault divorce laws or otherwise making it harder for couples to get a divorce. A Columbia man said, "No-fault divorce is ridiculous. To be able to dissolve so quickly something that's so fundamental to society is crazy."

Many, however, said it is unrealistic to make divorce more difficult. The moderator reporting on a forum in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, said, "Yes, there was a little support for repealing no-fault laws. [But most people felt that] a bad marriage is worse." A Sacramento woman said, "It's hideous to force people who are in a troubled marriage to stay together." In forums everywhere people talked about the family of the 1950s, saying there were many cases when the children and the partners themselves would have been better off with a divorce. In the post-forum balloting, a minority, 36 percent, was very concerned about "divorce laws that make it easy for families to break up."

The more people deliberated the more the focus of the conversation turned from troubled marriages to the children of a troubled marriage. People said that as the divorce rate climbs, no one suffers more than children. But they also said that children suffer when a marriage is held together only for their sake. A Sacramento man said: ~

> I've heard people say, "We stayed married for the kids." But if you asked their kids [what they wanted their parents to do], they'd probably say, "Get a divorce! Get a divorce!" You need to be aware of the costs of everything.

People recognized the difficulties of family life today. They expressed widespread concern over "quickie" divorces, but they were even more worried about forcing couples to remain joined together in painful, unhealthy marriages that might turn into abusive relationships. Determining when or when not to get a divorce, they felt, is a highly personal decision, a choice that only the people in the relationship can make.

People also thought that a lot of the problems associated with marriages today could be avoided if couples would, before marrying, do a better job of getting to know one another and take the time to learn what marriage is all about. They said they hoped that more couples would seek premarital counseling; yet, here again, they did not want it to be mandatory.

8. **Crack down on deadbeat dads.**

There was consensus-level support for the idea of forcing noncustodial fathers to pay child support adequate to the needs of their children. Most
participants favored an approach similar to the California law requiring a noncustodial parent to pay 25 percent of his net monthly income to support one child, with the percentage increasing with more children. A moderator from El Paso said her groups felt that "the full force of the law needs to fall on the father. The father is never held responsible." A moderator from Charleston, West Virginia, said that in her forum, "people favored holding males more responsible in the case of an illegitimate birth — the boys should have to take responsibility financially and emotionally." A Columbia man said:

The law should be that even if you don't want the kids, you have to pay for them because you had them. Don't let [fathers] just dump their kids off on society. Figure out the cost of bringing up those kids and make [fathers] pay for it.

9. People want to hold parents accountable but don't know how to do so.

Another idea people considered was that when parents fail to raise their children responsibly, they should be held accountable. Participants liked this idea, especially in light of their emphasis on quality parenting. After the forum, 82 percent said that "making parents more accountable for the well-being of their children" is a very important principle, but only 24 percent said it is strongly reflected in our public policies, a gap of 58 points. The ballots also show that 63 percent would support action against parents who make no effort to guide and instruct their children.

But what the ballot outcomes do not show is how uncertain people were about exactly when and how parents should be held liable. While they liked the concept, people were uncertain how to develop and apply it. Some argued that even the most concerned parents may raise children who, for whatever reasons, get into trouble or chronically break the law. Should they be liable? A Sacramento woman said:

There's a girl who kept running away and getting into trouble so her parents chained her to her bed. They were [rightfully] hauled into court for that. But you can understand why they might do something like that.

Others expressed a different view. "How can they hold us liable when they restrict my ability to discipline my child?" an El Paso man asked. "They should just leave us alone."

In Athens, Georgia, a moderator said her group also found it hard to resolve the conflict, saying:

There was general support for the idea of promoting parental responsibility. But when it came to actions, they were leery. They can see that good parents can have bad kids. There comes a point where children should be held responsible for their own actions.

10. It takes a community . . .
When people in the forums tried to solve the problems plaguing families, they reflected on their own childhood for answers. Many of the participants over 40 recalled that families used to have a support system that does not exist today. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and neighbors often helped guide and discipline us when we were young, people said. To understand the breakdown of the family, they said, we must understand the weakening of the village, adding:

- People often relocate and, as a result, don't have the same ties to a place they used to;
- People do not get involved in raising other people’s children, in part because of the fear of being sued;
- There has been a breakdown of neighborhoods and the weakening of the feeling of community; and
- The increased size of communities, more working mothers, and advances in technology make it increasingly difficult for people to get involved in community activities and know their neighbors as they used to.

A man from Louisville said, "The family has unraveled because the interworking community groups have unraveled." A moderator from Charleston said, "People need to take more responsibility for other people's children who aren't being taken care of." A Sacramento man echoed these sentiments:

A traditional family to me meant all the family members and the neighbors. If you grow up in a small town, everyone knows what you did. When ~ was growing up, it was all right for an adult to poke at me and correct me. Now, because of [the way] parents and laws [have changed], you can't do this.

A man from Dayton said:

Everyone should pitch in to raise children. That's how it used to be. But when kids leave home today, they're anonymous. The neighbors don't know them anymore.

A man from E1 Paso said that in the 1950s:

The community cared for the child. If you did something wrong, everybody knew about it. Now, because we're a mobile society, the family is like a little island - isolated, cut off.

11. Children should have equal opportunity.

In the forums, people were concerned about families primarily because of their belief that "as goes the family, so go the children." They saw it as their obligation as citizens to aid our young people, with many advocating increased spending if that were necessary. In particular, people expressed support for a number of programs, including:
• More prenatal care, to make sure that infants are healthy at birth. A Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, woman said, "People were concerned that the families that need help get it. They don't want children to get hurt."

• Expanding Head Start and other early education programs for disadvantaged children to give them a greater chance to succeed in school. A woman from Charleston said that in her forum, "people said we should do more with preventative programs such as Head Start. We can't afford not to."

• Paid maternity leave so that mothers, and fathers, can stay home with newborn infants. A man from Louisville said, "Maternity leave affirms the need for the mother to take time off [after giving birth]."

• Increased options for child care so that working mothers have more choices. "I raised 11 children," said an El Paso man. "We do need day care because everybody needs to work nowadays. If women had a place to put children, they could work."

• Flextime and part-time jobs so that mothers can work but still be home to take care of their children after school. A moderator from Athens said that a group of University of Georgia students agreed that:

  Businesses' pro-family stance is not really mirrored in their actions. You must make sacrifices when you enter the corporate culture. The mechanisms aren't there to make the family successful.

Beyond expressing support for specific programs, people, as a rule, favored helping families that are striving to help themselves. An Hispanic man said, "The people who really need help can't get it." People wanted to help the working poor, saying public programs designed to support families work best when families do their best to stand on their own.

12. Look to community as well as the government.

People who favored greater assistance and new programs to help the family were asked about government involvement. While nearly everyone wanted the services, the last thing many participants wanted was to add to the size of what they saw as an already too large government. A moderator from Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, said that in her forum, "There was a sentiment that ran through [our whole forum]—antigovernment. It is too big, too intrusive, causes problems, and costs too much money." A moderator from Charleston, West Virginia said, "There was a wariness [in our forum] and frustration with the efficiency of government."

Others said that the welfare rules contribute to the problem. An El Paso woman said, "AFDC destroys families because [if you're a recipient], you can't have a man in the house." A moderator from Dayton agreed, saying that in her forum, "Most people [felt that] welfare discouraged two-parent families."
Rather than just looking to the national government, people wanted churches and other religious institutions, schools, community groups, businesses, and not-for-profit agencies to take on a greater role. A moderator from Wallace, Kansas, reported that people in his forum said that the federal government may be part of the answer "but it's seldom the solution. Homes aren't doing the job. So our schools and churches should respond."
### The 1995-1996 National Issues Forums
**The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out of the Storm?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>1. The Public Approach</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How does the public approach the issue?</strong></td>
<td>Holistically. Instead of through an ideological lens, participants approach the issue pragmatically, seeing a variety of aspects and causes, many of which are interrelated, and a variety of imperfect, partial solutions. Times have changed, people said; we must be realistic about our problems and the kinds of families we have. People were far less interested in persuading each other than they were in hearing each other out, largely because of what is at stake—our children.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Does the public connect to the issue as the conventional wisdom suggests?</strong></td>
<td>No. The conventional wisdom suggests that the troubled American family is an ideologically divisive issue that pits those who believe in the “traditional family” against those who are scornful of “family values” and concerned instead with so-called women’s issues, sexual freedom, and the rights of gay men and lesbians. But forum participants across the country connected to the issue in nonideological, apolitical terms. Participants agreed the family is in crisis; they agreed about the nature and causes of the problem; and they agreed that there are no easy answers, no short cuts that will make the problem go away.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Are there dimensions of the issue the public sees that others don’t?</strong></td>
<td>There are two. First, people believe the stakes are higher than ever. Problems related to the family and quality parenting are more urgent now than they’ve ever been. AIDS and other STDs, youth violence and gangs, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse are growing ever more perilous and grave. Our economy offers bleak prospects to young people who do not finish high school. These issues are all related to and stem from the troubled American family. Second, if we are going to make any progress with this issue, the community, as well as the government, must have an active role in promoting opportunity for children.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What values were at play in the public discussions?</strong></td>
<td>Uppermost in people’s minds is concern about our children, making sure they get the parenting they need to become responsible adults and parents themselves. Participants were greatly concerned about the social effects of the troubled family —of youth violence, drug abuse, and other</td>
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problems. People were concerned about teen pregnancy, about children having children, and what will happen to the youngsters. Finally, people saw the value of community, saying the community must do its part for families to be strengthened.

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<tr>
<th>What effect did deliberation have?</th>
<th>Deliberation led people away from what might be called easy answers. In particular, the more they thought about it, the more they said the 1950s were an idealization, not an ideal, and that returning to the family of the 1950s was wishful thinking. A two-parent family is no panacea. Also, as they deliberated, people quickly saw how many aspects there are to the issue and how those aspects are interconnected: How society’s ideas about the changing role of women coupled with the economic imperative of having two incomes have led millions of mothers into the workplace. How the sexual revolution and society’s willingness to acknowledge such problems as spousal abuse has led to what may be an irreversible increase in the divorce rate. They also realized that while it is easy to say “We don’t want unfit parents,” it is hard to come up with a measure of just what good parenting is. Finally, deliberation led people to discuss the relationship between community and government and to think about the roles each must play to help strengthen the family.</th>
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| Was any firm common ground for action revealed? | Yes. People want to:
- Hold parents accountable for the well-being and misbehavior of their children;
- Crack down on “deadbeat dads,” fathers who do not provide for their children;
- Design public policies to stop teens from having children;
- Strengthen social disapproval of premarital sex and unwed mothers; and
- Make marriage a more serious commitment.

Most do not want to:
- Limit support to unwed mothers (out of concern that it would harm the children). |
**NIF Ballot Outcomes**

Before and after deliberating the issue, participants are asked to fill out a pre and post-forum ballot. In the following tables, we report the outcomes of each ballot item, using the precise question wording.

There is broad agreement about the importance of two principles: making parents more accountable for the well-being of their children and designing public policies to discourage teens from having children. After the forums, there is a call for more involvement by the community and increased support for assisting parents with children.

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### Table 1
**Very Important Principles (Pre-forum)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Pre-forum (%)</th>
<th>Post-forum (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make parents more accountable for the well-being of their children.</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design public policies to discourage teens from having children.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make marriage a more serious commitment that parents cannot easily break.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen social disapproval of premarital sex, unwed mothers, and divorce.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase government responsibility for the health and well-being of children.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist parents with children because they cannot do it alone.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
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Q: Here is a list of principles on which proposals to strengthen the American family and society might be based. How important do you think each one should be in making public policy affecting families? Very important, somewhat important, or not at all important?

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In two areas in particular, there is a gap between what people feel should be the principle that serves as the basis of policy and what policy is: making parents accountable for their children and designing policy to discourage teens from having children.

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### Table 2
**The Gap between What People Want and Public Policy, as They See It (Post-forum)**
Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Very Important Principle (Post-forum) %</th>
<th>This Principle Is Strongly Reflected in Policy (Post-forum) %</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make parents more accountable for the well-being of their children.</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>-58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design public policies to discourage teens from having children.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase government responsibility for the health and well-being of children.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen social disapproval of premarital sex, unwed mothers, and divorce.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make marriage a more serious commitment that parents cannot easily break.</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist parents with children because they cannot do it alone.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q: Here is a list of principles on which proposals to strengthen the American family and society might be based. How important do you think each one should be in making policy affecting families? Very important, somewhat important, or not at all important?

Q: How strongly is each principle actually reflected in our current policy? Strongly, somewhat, or not at all?

n= 1118

Before and after deliberating, people's concern about this issue focuses on the social problems related to a weakening of the family, namely; crime, teen pregnancy, divorce, and children living in poverty.

Table 3
People's Level of Concern About Different Aspects of the Issue (Pre-forum compared to Post-forum)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Concerned About</th>
<th>Pre-forum (%)</th>
<th>Post-forum (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rising social problems such as juvenile crime, teen pregnancies, divorce, and child poverty.</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The increasing number of children who grow up without fathers at home.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax policies that provide fewer and fewer benefits for families with children.</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An entertainment industry that glamorizes single parenthood and sexual freedom. 46 50

Divorce laws that make it easy for families to break up. 34 36

Intolerance for gay parents. 24 25

Q: How concerned are you about the issues listed below? Very concerned, somewhat concerned, or not at all concerned?

n= 1118

After deliberating, people favor holding parents accountable and oppose limiting public support for unwed mothers. A near majority, 48 percent, up 7 points from the pre-forum total, calls for new benefits and programs for families, even if that meant higher taxes.

Table 4
Views about Policy Changes (Pre-forum compared to Post-forum)
In Favor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Pre-forum (%)</th>
<th>Post-forum (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The government should hold parents accountable for their children’s behavior, EVEN IF this means punishing some parents.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The U.S. should provide new benefits and programs for families, EVEN IF this means higher taxes for most Americans.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government should limit public support for unwed mothers, EVEN IF this will harm many children.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q: How do you feel about these approaches to making policy dealing with family issues? Favor or oppose?

n= 1118
Methodology

The National Issues Forums are held around the country, convened by an array of colleges, universities and community colleges, libraries, high schools, literacy programs, and religious organizations and community groups. In preparing this analysis of what happened in the forums, John Doble Research, a firm that specializes in analyzing public opinion about pressing policy issues from a nonpartisan perspective, relied on four research methods described below.

1. Field Research: We monitored two NIF forums, listening closely to how participants approached the issue and identifying the values brought to bear as they deliberated. After these forums, we interviewed for about 30 minutes 2 participants who had made especially thoughtful comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forums:</th>
<th>Moderator</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date of Forum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Linda Smith</td>
<td>Dayton, OH</td>
<td>April 12, 1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Moderator Interviews: We conducted 5 telephone interviews, lasting up to 60 minutes, with moderators who led forums across the country. We asked the moderators to describe at length what happened in their forums: What were people’s main concerns? How did they approach the issue? What measures did they accept and reject, and why? Was there a shared sense of direction about how to proceed on the issue by the end of the forums?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews:</th>
<th>Moderator</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Betty Knighton</td>
<td>Charleston, WV</td>
<td>April 4, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Margie Loyacano</td>
<td>Dayton, OH</td>
<td>April 8, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Tim Grove</td>
<td>Louisville, KY</td>
<td>April 8, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Patty Dineen</td>
<td>Gibsonia, PA</td>
<td>April 25, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Susan Taylor</td>
<td>Athens, GA</td>
<td>May 3, 1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Research Forums/Focus Groups: We conducted three research forum/focus groups, two with a demographically representative cross section of about a dozen people, and one, in Englewood, New Jersey, with African-American and Hispanic respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Forums/Focus Groups:</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date of Forum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Columbia, SC</td>
<td>March 20, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Sacramento, CA</td>
<td>April 16, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Englewood, NJ</td>
<td>June 18, 1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Ballot outcomes: We analyzed a total of 1181 pre- and post-forum ballots sent in by NIF moderators across the country to National Issues Forums Research, before a predetermined cutoff date of May 1, 1996. Those who filled out ballots are a self-selected group and thus the ballot outcomes should not be construed as polling data using a probability sample that would yield a statistically precise margin of sampling error. Rather, these numbers should be understood, in conjunction with the qualitative analysis, as an indicator on how a diverse group of Americans felt about this issue before and after deliberating about it.