

# THE FAMILY IMPACT GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS

## Viewing Policies Through the Family Impact Lens



- ▶ Most policymakers would not think of passing a bill without asking, **“What’s the economic impact?”**
- ▶ This guide encourages policymakers to ask, **“What is the impact of this policy on families?”** **“Would involving families result in more effective and efficient policies?”**

When economic questions arise, economists are routinely consulted for economic data and forecasts. When family questions arise, policymakers can turn to family scientists for data and forecasts to make evidence-informed decisions. The Family Impact Seminars developed this guide to highlight the importance of families and the value of bringing the lens of family impact to policy decisions.

### WHY FAMILY IMPACT IS IMPORTANT TO POLICYMAKERS

Families are the most humane and economical way known for raising the next generation. Families financially support their members, and care for those who cannot always care for themselves—the elderly, frail, ill, and those with developmental disabilities. Yet families can be harmed by stressful conditions—the inability to find a job, afford health insurance, secure quality child care, and send their kids to good schools. Policymakers can use research evidence to invest in family policies that work, and to cut those that don’t. Keeping the family foundation strong today pays off tomorrow. Families are a cornerstone for raising responsible children who become caring, committed contributors to a strong democracy, and competent workers in a sound economy.<sup>1</sup>

State legislators report that youth and family issues are less polarized and more research-based than other issues<sup>2</sup>. Except for two weeks, family-oriented words appeared every week Congress was in session for over a decade. And mentions of *family* cut across gender and political party.<sup>3</sup> In policy debate, the iconic image of *family* is a shared value that can be used to rise above partisan politics and come to common ground. However, family considerations are not systematically raised in the normal routines of policymaking.

### HOW THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS HAS BENEFITED POLICY DECISIONS

- ▶ In one Midwestern state, using the family impact lens revealed differences in program eligibility depending on marital status. For example, seniors were less apt to be eligible for the state’s prescription drug program if they were married than if they were unmarried but living together.
- ▶ A rigorous cost-benefit analysis of 571 criminal justice programs revealed those most cost-beneficial in reducing future crime were targeted at juveniles. Of these, a family impact analysis found that the five most cost-beneficial rehabilitation programs and the single most cost-beneficial prevention program were family-focused approaches.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ For youth substance use prevention, programs that changed family dynamics were found to be, on average, over nine times more effective than programs that focused only on youth.<sup>5</sup>

### QUESTIONS POLICYMAKERS CAN ASK TO BRING THE FAMILY IMPACT LENS TO POLICY DECISIONS:

- ▶ How are families affected by the issue?
- ▶ In what ways, if any, do families contribute to the issue?
- ▶ Would involving families result in more effective and efficient policies and programs?



## HOW POLICYMAKERS CAN EXAMINE THE FAMILY IMPACTS OF POLICY DECISIONS

Many policy decisions have an effect on family life. Some decisions affect families directly (e.g., child support or long-term care), and some indirectly (e.g., corrections or jobs). The family impact discussion starters below can help policymakers figure out what those family impacts are and how family considerations can be taken into account as policies are debated and designed.

### FAMILY IMPACT DISCUSSION STARTERS

How will the policy, program, or practice:

- ▶ support rather than substitute for family members' responsibilities to one another?
- ▶ reinforce family members' commitment to each other and to the stability of the family unit?
- ▶ recognize the power and persistence of family ties, and promote healthy couple, marital, and parental relationships?
- ▶ acknowledge and respect the diversity of family life (e.g., different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds; various geographic locations and socioeconomic statuses; families with members who have developmental disabilities, and families at different stages of the life cycle)?
- ▶ engage and work in partnership with families?



### Ask for a full Family Impact Analysis

Some issues warrant a full family impact analysis to more deeply examine the intended and unintended consequences of policies on family well-being. To conduct an analysis requires the expertise of both *family scientists* who understand family dynamics and *policy analysts* who understand the specifics of the policy or program.

- ▶ Family scientists in your state can be found at the Family Impact Seminars or at local colleges and universities.
- ▶ Policy analysts can be found on your staff, in legislative nonpartisan service agencies, at university policy schools, etc.

### Apply the Results

Viewing issues through the family impact lens rarely results in overwhelming support for or opposition to a policy or program. Instead, it can identify how specific family forms and particular family functions are affected. These results raise considerations that policymakers can use to make policy decisions that strengthen the many contributions that families make for the benefit of their members and the good of society.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Several family impact tools, checklists, and procedures are available on the website of the Family Impact Institute at <https://evidence2impact.psu.edu/what-we-do/research-translation-platform/family-impact-institute/>

- <sup>1</sup> Bogenschneider, K. (2024). *Family policy matters: How policymaking affects families and what professionals can do* (4th edition). New York: Routledge Books, Taylor and Francis Group.
- <sup>2</sup> Bogenschneider, K., Day, E., Bogenschneider, B. N. (2021). A window into youth and family policy: State policymaker views on polarization and research utilization. *American Psychologist*, 76(7), 1143–1158. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp00006>
- <sup>3</sup> Strach, P. (2007). *All in the family: The private roots of American public policy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- <sup>4</sup> Aos, S., Miller, M., & Drake, E. (2006). *Evidenced-based public policy options to reduce future prison construction, criminal justice costs, and crime rates*. Olympia: WA State Inst. for Public Policy [www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/952](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/952)
- <sup>5</sup> Kumpfer, K. L., Alvarado, R., & Whiteside, H. O. (2003). Family-based interventions for substance use and misuse prevention. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 38, 1759-1789. DOI: [10.1081/ja-120024240](https://doi.org/10.1081/ja-120024240)

