

THE NATIONAL BENCHMARK OF U.S. MOTHERS · WAVE 1

# Mothers See It First

Wave 1 of a recurring, nationally representative survey of U.S. mothers. Mothers see family strain before institutions do, across the places it lands: the family budget, the doctor's office, and the online and commercial world their children grow up in. These findings show where that strain falls, how it changes with the age of the child and with income, and where it holds across the political spectrum, from the care mothers skip for themselves, to their distrust of AI companies, to the products marketed to their children.

## SIX FINDINGS, AND WHY EACH ONE IS NEW

**5 to 1**

**When a family cannot afford all the care it needs, the mother's care is what goes.** Over the past year, nearly a third of mothers (32%) put off their own health or mental health care, and not their child's, because of cost, about five times the share who put off their child's and not their own.

*Why it is new:* the first national, representative measure of where a family's care shortfall lands. When a mother skips care, she leaves no record, so the system almost never sees this.

**41%**

**Among mothers whose youngest child is 13 to 15, 41% say a single surprise \$500 bill would put them into debt.** That is the thinnest savings cushion at any age of childhood.

*Why it is new:* financial fragility shown by the age of the child. Families are most exposed in the early-teen years, not the baby years, when day-to-day stress runs highest and childcare weighs most heavily on the families who pay for it. A national average hides this.

**47%**

**Among mothers whose child needed mental health support, 47% had difficulty getting it.** Nearly 4 in 10 mothers (39%) say their child needed mental, emotional, or behavioral help this past year.

*Why it is new:* a view of children's unmet mental health need from the home, before it ever reaches a clinic, with the size of the access problem attached.

**65%**

**Most mothers (65%) have little or no trust in AI companies to act in children's interests.** That is the lowest of eleven institutions tested, below social media and the federal government, and the distrust holds across the political spectrum.

*Why it is new:* a ranking of eleven named institutions on one scale, framed around children's interests, with AI companies at the bottom, consistent across every political group.

**62%**

**Mothers say AI may make it harder for their children to build thinking skills.** Among mothers whose children use AI for more than entertainment, 62% agree it may make it harder for their child to learn problem-solving and independent thinking.

*Why it is new:* it puts national, representative numbers on a concern that has had little data behind it, measured while AI is reaching children quickly, through schools and personal devices, faster than safety review and regulation can keep up.

**32%**

**About a third of mothers (32%) say their child has been marketed a product that is illegal to sell to a minor, such as vapes, gambling, alcohol, cannabis, or pornography.** More than half (55%) report at least one harmful or age-inappropriate product, and that share rises with the child's age.

*Why it is new:* a representative read on the commercial world reaching children, named product by product and reported from what mothers can actually see, including products that cannot legally be sold to minors.

## WHY IT MATTERS

The National Benchmark is a recurring, nationally representative measure of five conditions that shape family life: the strain mothers carry, the money pressure on families, what children meet in the world and online, whether children can get help, and how much families trust the institutions around them. These five were not chosen in the abstract; they are the concerns mothers themselves raised across more than three years of earlier Count on Mothers surveys. The Benchmark now tracks all five at once, on the same mothers, so it can show how these pressures overlap rather than one issue at a time. Most research sees one of these at a time. This sees them together. Wave 1 sets the baseline, and because the same questions repeat every wave, every number here becomes a trend to watch.

## THE NUMBERS BEHIND IT

**2,818**

mothers surveyed

**±2.3 pts**

margin of error

**Weighted**

nationally  
representative

**UCL**

academic research  
partner

## ABOUT THE DATA

The National Benchmark of U.S. Mothers (Wave 1, fielded May 2026; 2,818 mothers of children under 21; weighted to U.S. population targets; margin of error  $\pm 2.3$  points) tracks the conditions shaping mothers and families, and repeats every wave. This report leads with the underlying item-level numbers; combined index scores become most useful as a trend from Wave 2.

## INDEPENDENCE

Count on Mothers is an independent, nonpartisan research organization. Our research partners at University College London, who sit on the Benchmark's Methodology Advisory Board, advised on the design of the survey instrument. The CoM research team sets the questions, runs the analysis, and decides what is reported; no outside party approves or can change a finding. The Benchmark is built to be cited across the political spectrum.

**Full findings and charts available on request.** Complete methodology at [countonmothers.org/methodology](https://countonmothers.org/methodology).

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