THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY
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POSITION PAPER

The First Institution

A Framework for American Family Policy

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> *"The family is the first school of those social virtues which every society requires."*
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> — Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

A NOTE ON THIS PAPER

This paper is issued by the Center for Public Responsibility, the independent intellectual and ethical center of The American Council. It addresses a question of growing public urgency: what an American family policy grounded in moral seriousness, rather than partisan convenience, would actually look like. We write from a conviction that the family is the first institution of a flourishing society, that its weakening has consequences no economy or government can compensate for, and that its renewal is a work worthy of the best thinking Americans across the political spectrum can bring to it.

We do not offer a partisan platform. We do offer a framework — a set of principles and their policy implications — for Americans who recognize that neither the current market-oriented neglect of the family nor its bureaucratic replacement by the state is equal to the moment we are in. The paper argues that a better way is available, that it is grounded in claims about the human person that ought to be recognizable to Americans of many traditions, and that the costs of continuing to avoid the question are no longer acceptable.

I. The Family as the First Institution

Political communities do not begin with governments. They begin with families. Long before any state is constituted, the human person is already being shaped — welcomed, named, fed, spoken to, corrected, comforted — within the first community he or she encounters. This observation is ancient. Aristotle identified the household as the foundational unit from which the political community is built up. Augustine saw the family as the site where the person is first introduced to love, order, and moral obligation. The framers of the American republic, drawing on both classical and biblical sources, took for granted that self-government at the level of the nation depended on self-government at the level of the home.

This is not a sentimental claim. It is a claim about the structure of human formation. The family is where the moral imagination is first cultivated. It is where the meaning of responsibility, fidelity, sacrifice, and mercy is first experienced — or, when it is absent, first missed. Every other institution, from the school to the workplace to the legislature, inherits the men and women the family has formed. A nation cannot sustain civic virtues its families are no longer producing.

The Christian tradition affirms this with particular force. Scripture opens with the formation of a family, and the moral vision of both the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament treats the household as a central theater of righteousness and injustice alike. But the recognition that the family is foundational does not belong to any single religious tradition. It is the near-universal testimony of human experience, confirmed by the full range of social-scientific evidence and echoed by moral thinkers from Confucius to Cicero to Edmund Burke. It is, in the older sense of the word, common knowledge.

What follows from this recognition is a principle with direct implications for public policy: the family is pre-political. It is not the creation of the state, and it cannot be reduced to a legal construct convenient to administration. The state's posture toward the family should therefore be one of recognition and support — recognizing what the family is, and supporting what it actually does. The alternative is a politics that builds on a foundation it did not lay and may not understand.

II. The State of the American Family

Any serious policy conversation must begin with an honest diagnosis. The American family is under considerable strain, and the evidence is broad and deep.

Fertility in the United States has fallen below the replacement rate and continues to decline. The marriage rate is near a historic low. A substantial share of American children are born to unmarried parents, and a comparable share will spend part of childhood in a household where one or both biological parents are absent. The number of Americans living alone has risen steadily over the past several decades, and the number reporting a close personal friendship has fallen. Deaths of despair — from suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol-related causes — have risen sharply, particularly among working-class Americans whose access to stable family and community life has been most disrupted.

These trends are not evenly distributed. They fall with disproportionate weight on working-class Americans, who are far more likely than their college-educated neighbors to experience family instability, single parenthood, and social isolation. The result is what scholars across the political spectrum — from Charles Murray to Robert Putnam to W. Bradford Wilcox — have described in different idioms as a divergence: an America in which the affluent continue to enjoy the benefits of stable family formation, even as they promote cultural narratives suggesting that such stability is neither necessary nor available to everyone else. It is one of the defining moral failures of our age.

This is not a matter of nostalgia for an idealized past. American families in every generation have faced real difficulties, and the temptation to romanticize some vanished golden age does no service to the present. But the honest naming of present difficulties is the precondition of addressing them. A nation cannot repair what it refuses to name.

The costs of family decline are paid, disproportionately, by children. Those raised apart from one or both of their parents face measurably higher risks across nearly every outcome public policy claims to care about — educational attainment, economic mobility, mental health, involvement with the criminal justice system. These are not moralistic pronouncements. They are findings of decades of social-scientific research, and they demand that we take seriously the question of whether our public arrangements support or undermine the conditions under which children can flourish.

III. Two Failing Paradigms

American public policy toward the family has, for the past several decades, oscillated between two failing paradigms. Both have their partisans. Neither is adequate to the moment.

The First Paradigm: Family-Blind Economism

The first paradigm treats the family as a private matter lying outside the proper concern of public policy. In this view, the real work of governance is economic — to maximize growth, efficiency, and individual choice — and the family is expected to adapt itself to whatever the market and the labor force require. When this approach acknowledges the family at all, it tends to subordinate its well-being to labor-market flexibility, reducing the family to a unit of consumption and production rather than a first institution of formation.

The characteristic error of this paradigm is to treat the market economy as self-sustaining. It is not. Market economies depend on the moral and social capital that only healthy families and communities can produce — the habits of honesty, responsibility, deferred gratification, and trust that no corporation and no government can manufacture. The family is not a byproduct of prosperity. It is a precondition.

The Second Paradigm: Expressive Individualism and Administrative Substitution

The second paradigm treats the family, in its traditional form, as simply one arrangement among many — a private lifestyle choice whose forms are infinitely revisable according to individual preference, and whose practical functions can be assumed by the state when individual arrangements prove insufficient. Its characteristic error is to treat the family as a merely chosen association, failing to recognize that the bond between parent and child involves obligations and goods that cannot be reconstructed by choice alone and cannot be replaced by bureaucratic provision.

Childcare is not equivalent to parental care. A social worker, however well-intentioned, is not a grandparent. The state is not the village. The effort to treat public institutions as interchangeable with familial ones — an effort driven, in many cases, by the genuine and honorable desire to help struggling families — ends by weakening the very institutions it was meant to serve.

A Shared Deeper Error

It should be noted that these two paradigms, though typically associated with opposing political coalitions, share a deeper error. Both accept the reduction of the person to the individual — an autonomous, contract-making unit whose relationships are matters of preference. Both, in different ways, treat the family as either invisible or incidental to the real business of governance. And both fail the same people: the children who depend on stable family life, the parents struggling

to provide it, and the communities in which families either thrive or unravel together.

A renewed family policy must begin by rejecting this shared premise. The human person is not first an individual who then chooses to enter a family. The human person is first born into a family, and from within that first community comes to be a person at all.

IV. Principles for a Renewed Family Policy

What would an American family policy worthy of serious moral attention look like? We propose five principles. They are not exhaustive, but they are foundational — and together they describe a coherent posture from which concrete policy can be built.

1. Subsidiarity

Decisions should be made, and responsibilities exercised, at the lowest level capable of genuine competence. Families should be allowed to do what families can do. Neighborhoods, congregations, schools, and voluntary associations should be supported in doing what they can do. Higher levels of government should intervene where necessary, but with a posture of support rather than replacement. Subsidiarity is not an argument against government. It is an argument for government that understands its proper role — and its proper limits.

2. Support, Not Substitution

The state cannot raise children. It cannot love them, teach them the meaning of a promise, or sit with them in grief. What the state can do is create conditions under which families — including struggling families, single-parent families, and families of every economic circumstance — can carry out their work more effectively. A paid family leave policy that allows parents to be present with a newborn is support. A system that assumes families will outsource their formative responsibilities is substitution. A family policy worthy of the name will reliably distinguish the two.

3. Neutrality Is a Fiction; Clarity Is a Duty

Public policy cannot avoid taking a view on the family. A tax code is never neutral between marriage and its alternatives; it always incentivizes one or another arrangement. A public school curriculum is never neutral on parental authority; it either honors parents or displaces them. A housing policy is never neutral on the conditions of family formation; it either makes such formation feasible for

ordinary Americans or it does not. The proper question, therefore, is not whether public policy will express a view on the family, but which view it will express. Honest debate begins with this admission.

4. Honor the Long Horizon

Families are multi-generational institutions. Policy that serves the family must think in multi-generational terms. This is difficult in a political system oriented toward two- and four-year electoral cycles, but the costs of short-term thinking are paid by children who cannot vote. A serious family policy holds itself accountable to outcomes measured over twenty and fifty years, not only over the next campaign.

5. The Common Good

The family exists within a community, and its well-being is bound up with the well-being of its neighbors. No family can flourish in isolation. Policies that fragment communities, hollow out civil society, or concentrate opportunity in a handful of places at the expense of many, damage the conditions under which families live — even when the policies in question are not ostensibly about the family. The common good is not the sum of private goods. It is the shared conditions within which private goods are pursued, and the American family depends on it.

V. Policy Applications

These principles are not abstractions. They have concrete applications across the full range of policy areas that touch the American family. What follows is not an exhaustive platform but a set of illustrations — six areas in which the principles above yield recognizable commitments, and in which serious Americans of different political traditions can find shared ground.

Tax and Economic Policy

The tax code should not penalize marriage, and it should meaningfully recognize the contributions and costs of raising children. A well-designed child tax credit — one that reaches working families, rewards rather than penalizes work and family formation, and is indexed honestly against the real costs of raising children — represents one of the most direct policy levers available to support the American family. Equally important are structural reforms to housing, zoning, and labor markets that make it economically feasible for working-class Americans to form stable families in the first place. A young couple priced out of the possibility of family formation is not a lifestyle statistic. It is a policy failure.

Education and Parental Rights

Public education is one of the most significant points of contact between the state and the family, and that contact should be ordered by a clear principle: parents are the primary educators of their children, and public schools are partners in that work, not substitutes for it. This has concrete implications. It implies robust parental transparency regarding curriculum, instruction, and student services. It implies a serious role for parental choice — including educational options that respect families' convictions and match children's particular needs. And it implies that schools should respect the moral authority of parents on questions of formation that lie beyond academic instruction. This is not because parents are always correct. It is because a regime in which the state routinely displaces parental authority is a regime in which the family itself has been displaced.

Family Formation and Paid Leave

The United States is an outlier among developed nations in its approach to parental leave. A serious family policy would address this — not by imposing a single national model on a diverse economy, but by ensuring that ordinary Americans do not have to choose between keeping a job and being present with a newborn child, or between sustaining a household and caring for a dying parent. Well-designed paid leave policies, whether public, private, or hybrid, represent support rather than substitution. They make room for the family to do its most irreplaceable work.

Marriage, Parenthood, and the Cultural-Legal Environment

Law is a teacher, and cultural institutions follow its lead. A legal environment that treats marriage as a serious covenant, that orients adoption and foster-care systems toward the flourishing of children, and that respects the religious and conscience rights of the institutions that have long served American families contributes to a culture in which the family can thrive. None of this requires the legal imposition of any particular religious doctrine. It requires only that the law refrain from actively undermining the institutions on which the family depends — and that it name, clearly, the goods it is charged with protecting.

Civil Society and Community Infrastructure

Families do not live in the abstract. They live in neighborhoods, in congregations, in schools, in voluntary associations — in the thick institutional fabric that Tocqueville identified as America's distinctive strength. Policies that support this civil society are, properly understood, family policies. They include the protection of religious liberty, the preservation of the public role of faith-based service

organizations, the support of community-based care and formation work, and a serious commitment to the places — the small towns, working-class neighborhoods, and mid-sized cities — where the hollowing out of civil society has been most severe. Family policy cannot be separated from the policies that either sustain or erode the communities in which families actually live.

The Formation of Children in a Digital Age

Finally, any family policy worthy of the name must reckon honestly with the new landscape in which American children are being formed. Children today face exposure to technologies, content, and commercial pressures that no previous generation has been asked to navigate, and the evidence of harm — to attention, to mental health, to the capacity for friendship and patience and wonder — is mounting. The moral seriousness of this moment requires a policy response equal to it: one that does not surrender the formation of children to market logic alone, that holds digital platforms accountable for their effects on minors, and that supports parents in the increasingly demanding work of raising children in an environment not designed for their flourishing.

VI. A Call to Seriousness

The American family is not beyond hope. The same capacities that have made this country resilient in every prior crisis — the commitment of ordinary citizens to the well-being of their neighbors, the moral seriousness of our civic traditions, the enduring strength of American faith and American civil society — remain available to us. What has been weakened can, in significant measure, be renewed. But it will not be renewed by accident, and it will not be renewed by any political faction alone. It will be renewed by Americans willing to think clearly, act courageously, and subordinate their tribal loyalties to the demands of a common good they share.

This is, in the end, a matter of moral seriousness. The family is the first institution because it forms the human person, and the human person is the first concern of any politics that deserves the name. A nation that does not take its families seriously does not, in the end, take its citizens seriously. The work of renewal begins there.

The American Council, and the Center for Public Responsibility in particular, is committed to advancing this conversation with the rigor, clarity, and hopefulness the moment demands. We welcome the collaboration of all — in churches and in boardrooms, in state capitols and in Washington, across lines of party and

tradition — who share the conviction that the American family is worthy of our best thinking and our best work.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

The Center for Public Responsibility is the independent intellectual and ethical center of The American Council. It produces original research, public commentary, educational resources, and policy briefs that bring principled moral reasoning to bear on the most consequential questions of American public life. The Center is nonpartisan in posture and independent in voice, and its work is grounded in a conviction that every person, institution, and community carries a responsibility toward the common good.

This paper reflects the position of the Center for Public Responsibility. It is offered as a contribution to serious policy conversation and as a framework for Americans — in churches, in civic organizations, in government, and in the public square — who seek to think and lead well on behalf of the American family.