

Results from the RWJF Perspectives on Families in America Survey: Beliefs about Families in Need and their Deservingness

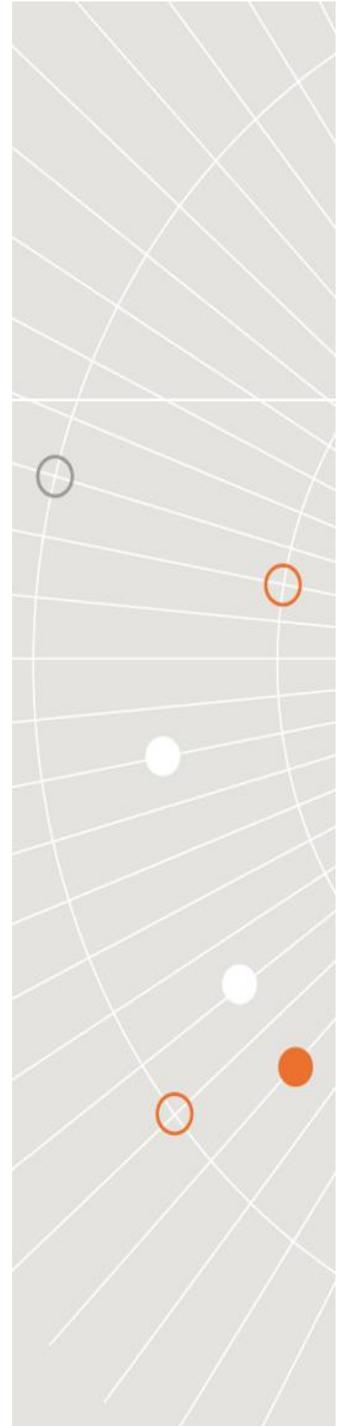
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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and its Healthy Children and Families theme area have the goal that all families, no matter their background, have access to the resources they need to raise thriving children. The strategy for achieving the goal is two-fold: first, to shift mindsets so that all families and children are seen as deserving of good health and well-being and, second, to shift policy so that families and children are at the forefront of state and national policy agendas.

In 2019, RWJF commissioned NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) to survey U.S. adults and develop a typology to better understand mindsets related to these issues. The resulting Perspectives on Families in America (PFA) Survey was fielded in early 2021 with 6,207 adults living in the U.S. The objectives of the PFA Survey were threefold:

- Learn more about prevailing views on the well-being of children and families in the U.S.
- Explore differences in those perspectives through the development of a typology
- Generate insights for stakeholders engaged in efforts to ensure that all families have the resources they need to foster the health and development of young children

The survey largely focuses on capturing views about access to three important resources that families with young children need: adequate income; healthy, affordable food; and child care as well as preschool programs. Many families lack access to these resources. Hence, we explored views about the causes of these access problems, the most effective solutions to address them and who should have the responsibility for implementing the solutions. For the income problem, we also explored the deservingness of low-income families with young children in the context of their need for government assistance. In this brief report, we focus on the views of U.S. adults about how deserving these families are of help from the government. Views about deservingness have been found across multiple studies to have a significant impact on opinions about pro-social policies and hence were an important focus of this research.² We wanted to assess whether this is true with regard to our particular group of interest—U.S. families with young children without adequate financial resources.



Why Deservingness?

Since people do not typically feel knowledgeable enough to evaluate policies and assess how well they fit with their underlying values, they tend to rely on a heuristic, a cognitive shortcut. The heuristic provides rules to inform a quick decision based on limited information.^{1, 2} Researchers have found that deservingness beliefs are such a shortcut and that they are strong drivers of public opinion toward policies about welfare and access to social services. If beneficiaries of a proposed policy are viewed as deserving, people are more likely to support that policy. If a group of beneficiaries is viewed as undeserving, people are less likely to support that policy. In essence, deservingness drives views about who should get what in society, and why.³

The PFA study was built upon work by other researchers who have explored how deservingness beliefs impact evaluations of social policies in the U.S. and abroad. Several items related to deservingness were included in the survey to shed light on possible reasons for support or opposition to government policies designed to address the lack of income that many U.S. families with young children experience. Understanding whether and how deservingness beliefs affect attitudes in this area can be helpful to policymakers and others as they seek to develop and promote policies and programs.

Measures Used to Assess Beliefs about Deservingness

The measures described below were used to gather views on the deservingness of families without enough income for their young children to thrive. These measures were adapted from the CARIN deservingness principles scale developed by Meuleman et al.³ The CARIN scale assesses five dimensions: Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity and Need. Mueleman et al. were among the first researchers to more directly measure these five dimensions which collectively relate to the ideas of both individual responsibility and social commitment. The specific items from the survey are below.

Families without enough income for their young children to thrive...

- Should not receive special help if their problems stem from their own poor choices. (Control)
- Should feel grateful for the help they get from the government. (Attitude)
- Should receive help from the government since they make a contribution to our society in the U.S. (Reciprocity)
- Should only receive help if the parents are American citizens. (Identity)
- Should only receive government help if they are in very great need. (Need)

The control dimension is strongly rooted in the individual responsibility point of view: the idea that individuals have control over their situations and should not receive help due to their inability to make better choices. The need dimension is similarly grounded in individual responsibility: individuals should only use government benefits in a case of great need. The attitude dimension relates to expectations of social membership, the idea that those receiving assistance from others should feel appreciation. The reciprocity dimension relates to the social commitment of reciprocity, the notion that receipt of things of value should be reciprocated. Identity relates to the idea that help should be extended to people one feels socially connected to. In our study, we decided to operationalize this social closeness in terms of American citizenship.

Overall Survey Findings on Deservingness

Table 1 presents survey findings for each of the CARIN deservingness measures among the total sample of U.S. adults.

Table 1. Beliefs about Deservingness of Families without Enough Income

Measure	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %
Should not get help if problems stem from poor choices (<i>Control</i>)	40	23	37
Should feel grateful for help from government (<i>Attitude</i>)	65	25	10
Should get help from government for contribution to society (<i>Reciprocity</i>)	64	23	13
Should only get help from government if parents American citizens (<i>Identity</i>)	43	20	36
Should only get help from government if in great need (<i>Need</i>)	52	21	26

Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding, missing or blank responses.

Overall, the data suggest that significant numbers of U.S. adults believe the CARIN conditions are important for deciding whether the families should get government help. While a large majority agrees that the families are deserving of assistance because of the contribution they make to society (64%), majorities also expect the families to feel grateful for the assistance they receive (65%) and to receive it only if they are in great need (52%). In addition, pluralities agree that assistance should be denied if problems stem from poor choices (40%) and that only American citizens should receive help (43%), conditions that put children at a disadvantage if families make the occasional poor decision or risk a venture to immigrate to the U.S. in search of a better life. Importantly, on the latter two issues, more than a third (36-37%) disagree, indicating considerable division among U.S. adults on issues thought to be central to the deservingness calculus. On most of the issues it is also striking that about one-quarter of U.S. adults seem to be conflicted in their views, undecided, or, for some other reason, report neither agreement nor disagreement with the statements.

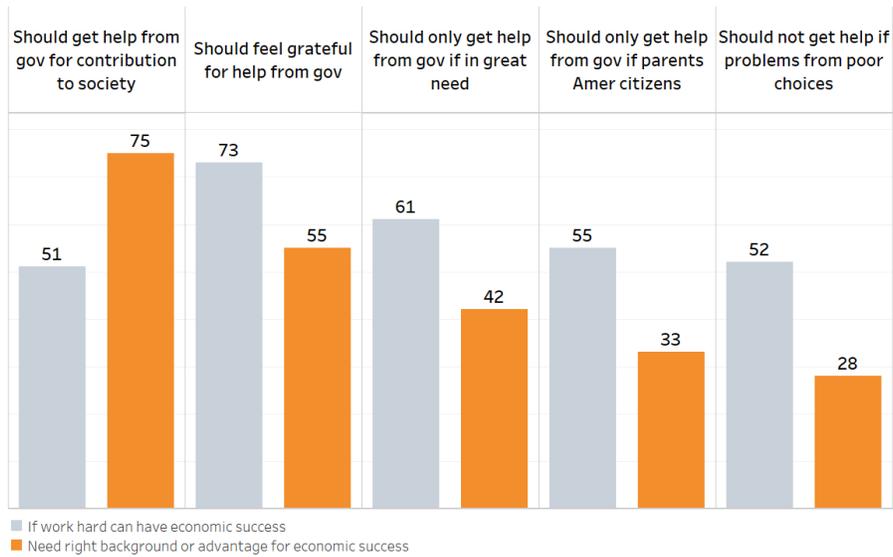
Targeted Analysis: Deservingness and Other Beliefs

In a targeted analysis, we explored the relationship between deservingness beliefs and views about the justice of the economic system and government responsibility to help families in need.

DESERVINGNESS AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

We compare responses to the CARIN deservingness items and views on whether hard work alone can yield economic success in the U.S. Findings are presented in Exhibit 1 below.

Exhibit 1. Level of Agreement with Deservingness Beliefs Among U.S. Adults with Opposing Views about Justice of the Economic System

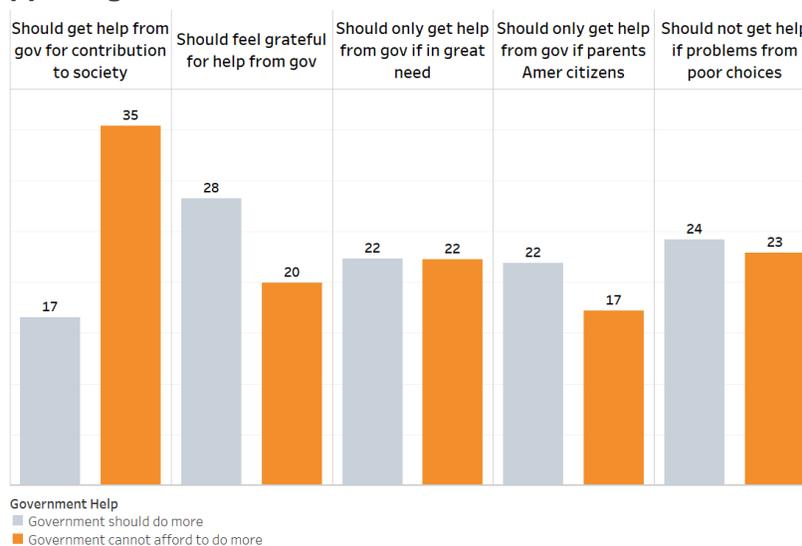


About one half of all the U.S. adults in the survey said that hard work can yield economic success in the U.S. with the other half saying that the right background or some other advantage is necessary to be successful. Sizeable numbers of both groups qualify their support for government help based on the CARIN deservingness criteria although those who embrace the hard work point of view are more likely to than those who do not. Those who believe that hard work is enough are less likely to believe that the families deserve help because of their contribution to society and more likely to have concerns about citizenship, greatness of need, poor choices, and gratefulness. The data suggest that efforts to communicate about economic inequities in the nation will be important to reach the many U.S. adults who believe that hard work is enough.

DESERVINGNESS AND SUPPORT OF GOVERNMENT ROLE

Those who support a government role in helping families without enough income also have different views on the deservingness of families in need compared to those who believe that the government cannot afford to do more to help. Findings are presented in Exhibit 2 below.

Exhibit 2. Level of Agreement with Deservingness Beliefs Among U.S. Adults With Opposing Views about Whether Government Should Do More



Overall, the survey showed that six in ten U.S. adults believe that government should do more to address the income problem that the families in this group face; about one-third took the opposing view that government cannot afford to do more. Significant numbers of both groups have deservingness concerns. However, those who oppose government action are far more likely to have concerns over deservingness. They are less likely to believe that families deserve help because of the contribution they make to society and that help should be contingent on feelings of gratefulness, American citizenship, great need and good decision-making. These findings validate the idea that deservingness is an important driver of views about government help for families with young children in need of social resources.

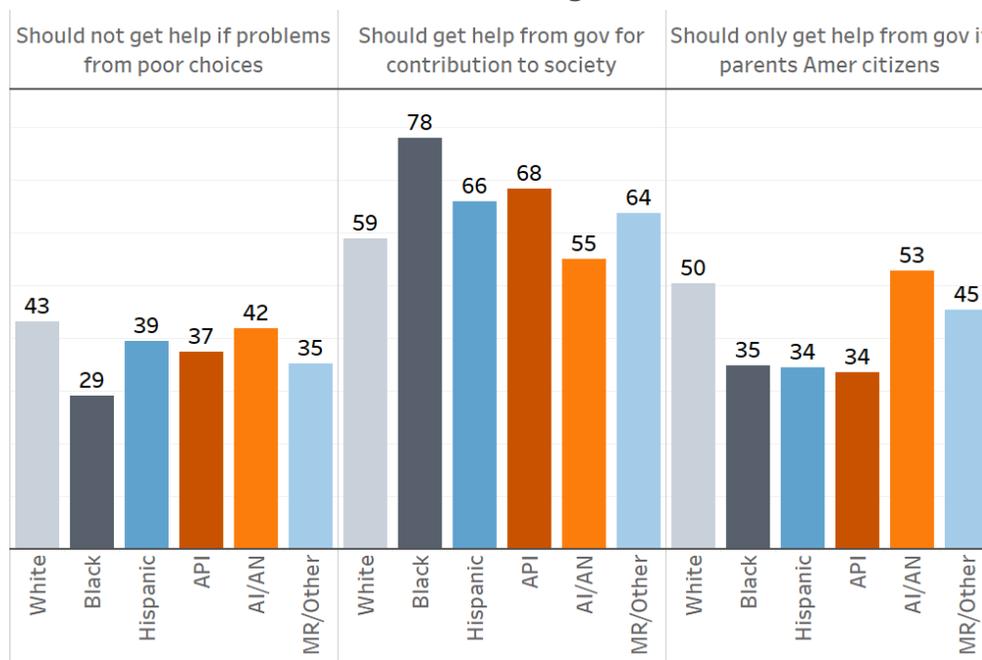
Targeted Analysis: Demographic and Political Differences

We examined the relationship between race/ethnicity, political party affiliation and the measures related to deservingness.

DESERVINGNESS AND RACE-ETHNICITY

Findings from the analysis of the CARIN deservingness measures and race/ethnicity are provided in Exhibit 3 below.

Exhibit 3. Level of Agreement with Deservingness Beliefs Among U.S. Adults of Differing Race/Ethnic Backgrounds



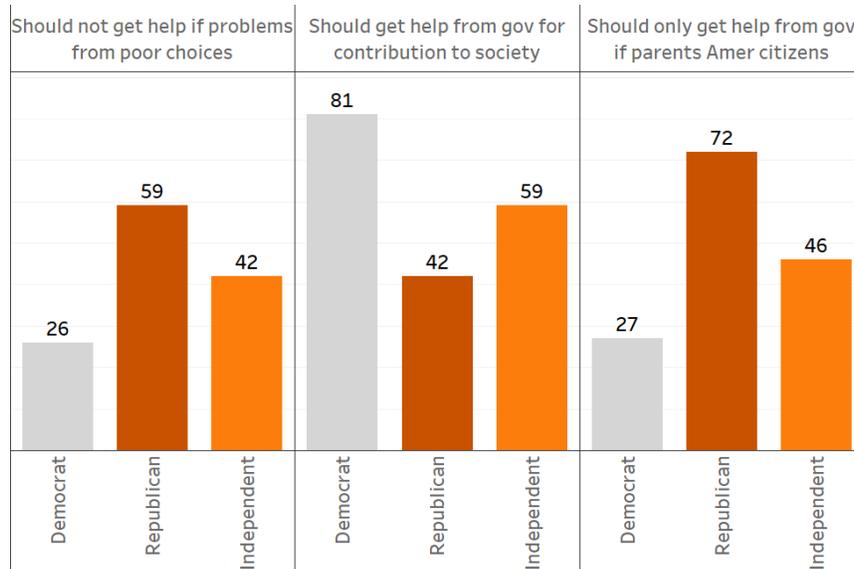
Although deservingness concerns are present in each of the race/ethnic groups, smaller numbers of Black people seem to share in them. Black people are the group most likely to feel that the families deserve help because of the contribution they make to society and among the least likely to question the deservingness of the families based on beliefs about identity and control. American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) and Whites are most likely to display beliefs about deservingness. These two groups are least likely to believe that the families deserve help because of the contribution they make to society and among the most likely to question their deservingness because of beliefs about identity and control. The AI/AN differences are somewhat surprising. Fewer differences are present among race/ethnic groups on the measures not displayed related to feelings of gratefulness (attitude) and the

level of need for these families. Generally, the patterns are similar, but the differences are not as large, and in most cases, there remains about a quarter to a third who are conflicted or undecided on where they stand. Future research should examine the question of race/ethnic differences in deservingness beliefs in more detail.

DESERVINGNESS AND POLITICAL PARTY

Differences in the CARIN deservingness items were also explored by political party. Findings are presented in Exhibit 4 below.

Exhibit 4. Agreement with Deservingness Beliefs Among U.S. Adults with Differing Political Party Affiliations



Some proportion of all partisans display deservingness considerations although there are large and rather predictable party differences across the deservingness belief measures. Differences on three of the five measures are displayed above. The overwhelming majority of Democrats and sizeable majority of Independents believe that the families should get help because of the contribution they make to society compared to only a minority of Republicans who hold this view. The reverse is true on the two other measures: majorities of Republicans have concerns about citizenship and family choices when they think about whether the group should get help compared to only minorities of Independents and Democrats. This same pattern of party differences applies on the two measures not displayed—those related to need and attitude.

Implications

The study validates the importance of deservingness beliefs as drivers of support for government help for families of young children without adequate incomes and that use of this heuristic constrains support for government action promoting the health and wellbeing of young children in their formative years. The CARIN control, attitude, identity and need considerations are important for sizeable numbers of U.S. adults. This is especially true of those with more conservative political views. However, almost two-thirds of adults reject the reciprocity consideration, believing instead that the families deserve help because of the contribution they make to U.S. society. U.S. adults are also divided on the control and identity considerations. Further, there are large numbers whose views seem not to be fully formed about the five deservingness considerations as evidenced in the number who seem to be conflicted or undecided. As a result of the diversity of views, and the fact that many have not yet formed an opinion,

there is an opening for advocates of child and family health to educate stakeholders and communicators about the deservingness of families with young children in need and to mobilize millions of Americans to support efforts to help them. In these efforts, it will be important to reinforce the idea that these families can and do make a significant contribution to U.S. society, that their need is great, and that systemic causes are significantly responsible for the problems they face.

The study suggests that one useful focus for future research would be to gain a deeper understanding of the group that appears to be undecided or conflicted in their views. It should explore the reasons for the ambiguous responses of “neither agree nor disagree” when presented with statements about deservingness. Also, as noted above, more attention to race/ethnic differences would be valuable. Finally, there is a need for more research generally on the deservingness heuristic, its elements, how to measure it and the ways in which it conditions the evaluation of social policies by the public. This work should be focused on the U.S. currently and more thoroughly examine specific policies under consideration to address the needs of low-income families with young children. One measurement issue that needs attention is the validation and testing of measures related to the deservingness heuristic.

Methodology

The Perspectives on Families in America (PFA) survey was conducted with adults living in the U.S. using the AmeriSpeak⁴ probability-based panel sample. The PFA Survey conceptual constructs were derived from a broad body of literature and tested for validity through individual interviews with the survey population. The actual survey measures were developed from existing instruments whenever possible with input provided by a technical expert panel. Cognitive testing and a quantitative pretest also informed the finalization of question wording. The questionnaire included measures that assess the values and beliefs concerning the health and well-being of children and families—definition of a thriving child, problems that prevent children from thriving, causes of these problems, and solutions to the problems; as well as beliefs about who is responsible for the causes and solutions—parents and/or society; beliefs about deservingness; and moral foundations. Three main issues affecting children and families were selected as a means of capturing these values and beliefs: lack of income and economic opportunities for families; lack of reliable access to healthy food; and lack of access to child care and early childhood education.

The data collection period was from January through March 2021. Data were collected using a multi-mode web and phone survey design from a general population sample of U.S. adults aged 18 and older with over samples of parents of children age 0-5 years old, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and American Indian/Alaska Natives from the NORC probability-based panel, AmeriSpeak.³ In total, NORC collected 6,207 responses, 5,831 by web mode and 376 by phone mode. The data were weighted to account for non-response and respondent characteristics (age, sex, race, education, and region).

Notes and Additional Resources

The findings presented in this report combine response categories of somewhat agree and strongly agree, and somewhat disagree and strongly disagree. In some cases, categories have been revised to show only one response category. Full tables are provided in an addendum and to view more detailed disaggregated results, please refer to topline tables or the final report covering findings from the survey which can be found on the [Every Family Forward](#) website.

TOPLINE TABLES

The topline data tables provide percentages for each response option and cover all survey questions. Information about statistical significance is provided.

TPOLOGY BRIEF

This brief provides an overview of the typology and the groups within it, as well as key differences.

COMPREHENSIVE REPORT

The final report is a comprehensive formal report with an executive summary, overview of study objectives and methodology, detailed presentation of results and a discussion of study conclusions. The report includes the following:

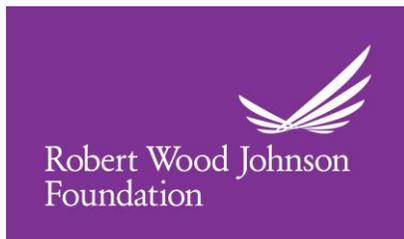
- Overview of the typology and the groups within it, important differences between the groups
- Detailed profiles of the six groups that emerged from the survey data
- Graphic data displays presenting percentages for each response option and for each typology group for all questions in the survey
- Findings about how the groups differ in their demographic, health and political characteristics
- Detailed media use, trusted source and organizational affiliation characteristics of the groups

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ABOUT NORC

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research organization headquartered in downtown Chicago with additional offices on the University of Chicago’s campus, the DC Metro area, Atlanta, Boston, and San Francisco. NORC also supports a nationwide field staff as well as international research operations. NORC’s decades of leadership and experience in data collection, analysis, and dissemination—coupled with deep subject matter expertise—provide the foundation for effective solutions.