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A Pro-Family Handbook for Florida

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the state of Florida has emerged as a leader in advancing conservative policies, and experienced the kind of economic growth and population increase that is the envy of many other states across the union.

But a state is only as strong as its families. The cultural and economic pressures that make it harder for families to have children and raise them in the manner they deem best affect families in Florida, despite the impressive steps the state has already made towards making the Sunshine State the best state in America to raise a family. In Florida, the fertility rate has dropped 18% over the past decade-and-a-half; marriage rates have fallen by 20% over that same time. A meaningfully pro-family agenda must seek to make it easier to have and raise kids.

The next step to build off Florida's economic success and leadership is to create a slate of policies aimed at making family life easier and more affordable. In a new YouGov survey commissioned by the Institute for Family Studies (IFS) and the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC), parents make clear that they are looking for policies that will make raising kids a little more achievable—and will empower parents against the cultural forces that challenge family life. And our sample of Florida residents suggests that many of these policies are popular across the political spectrum.

Particularly in the wake of Florida's recently passed Heartbeat Protection Act, which would give legal protection to unborn children after six weeks' gestation, pursuing policies that strengthen strong families as the cornerstone of a healthy

society should take preeminence. Policies that expand choices for parents, giving them more options and ability to raise their children in the way they deem best, are authentically pro-family. So, too, are policies that seek to shore up the institution of marriage and increase the share of children raised by two parents. Policies that treat family structure as incidental, or that seek to outsource the responsibility of caring and raising children to the institutions of the market or state to the greatest extent possible, do not merit that definition.

With that in mind, this report offers five policies for Florida lawmakers to consider. Each of these areas don't just poll well, as our survey data show, but—if constructed the right way—can meaningfully advance the goal of making it easier to start and raise a family. The five pro-family policy priorities highlighted in this report are:

- (1) Reorient school curricula to focus on long-term well-being**
- (2) Empower parents to better protect their kids online**
- (3) Expand early childhood options and support for all parents**
- (4) Provide greater support to pregnant and new mothers and their families**
- (5) Create a state commission on the well-being of men and boys**

Reorient school curricula to focus on long-term well-being

72% of Florida respondents favor teaching the ‘Success Sequence’ in public schools

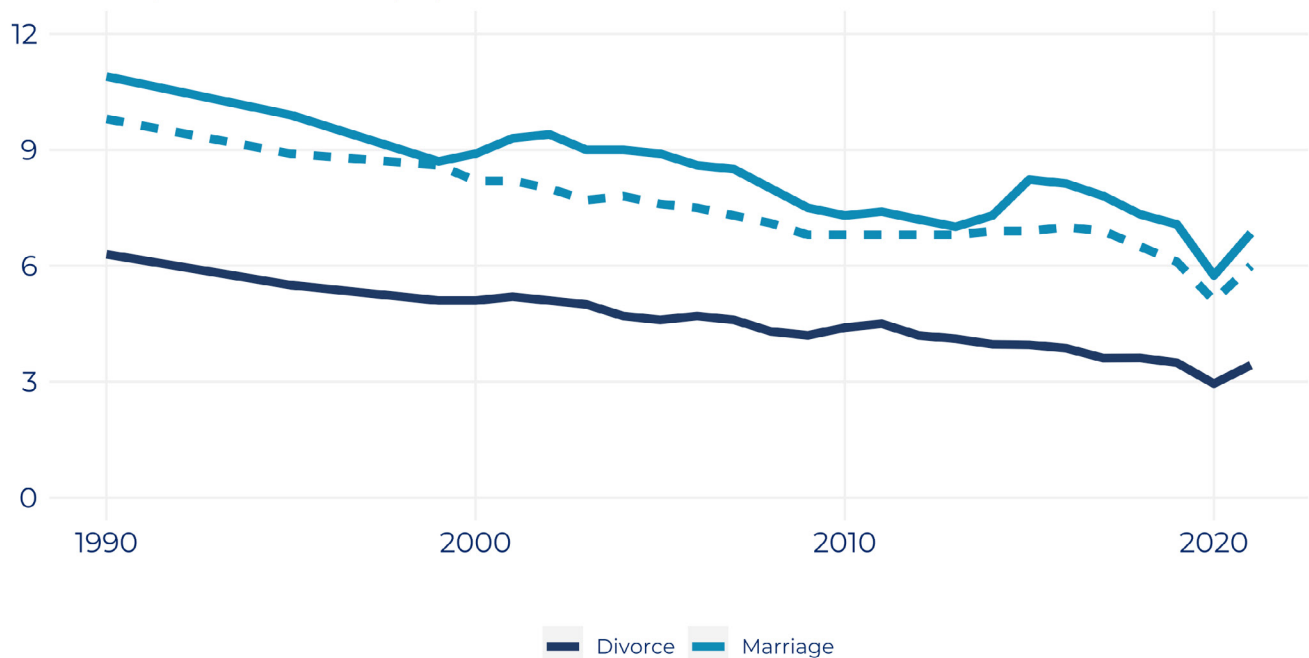
As young people increasingly delay, defer, and opt out of marriage, studies find commensurably lower levels of happiness and higher rates of loneliness, depression, and suicide. Marriage rates in Florida have been declining, as they have throughout the United States. As recently as 2004, there were 9 marriages per 1,000 Florida residents. In 2021, that number had dropped to 6.8, benefiting from a small post-Covid bump.

As social scientists have pointed out, certain habits and decisions are associated with long-term

flourishing. Specifically, young adults are found to be 60% less likely to be poor when they put marriage before the baby carriage. Likewise, “97% of young adults who get at least a high school degree, work full time, and marry before having children avoid poverty in their late 20s and early 30s.”¹ To help its citizens flourish, the state of Florida should embrace its responsibility to inform young people about these statistics and encourage them to think about the long-term trajectory of their lives in ways that go beyond just career readiness.

Marriage and Divorce in Florida, 1990-2021

Rates per 1,000 total population



Dashed line is marriage rate for entire U.S.
Source: CDC National Vital Statistics System

¹ “The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids, and the ‘Success Sequence’ among Young Adults,” Brad Wilcox and Wendy Wang, June 2017, American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/IFS-MillennialSuccessSequence-Final.pdf>

Preparing young Florida residents for the economy of the twenty-first century is important—but it is even more important to equip them to think about building strong families and healthy futures in an environment which is increasingly hostile to family life.

This approach is broadly popular. We asked Florida residents in our survey their opinion of a “proposed requirement that all public schools teach the ‘Success Sequence,’ the idea that young people who graduate from high school, work full-time, and marry before having children are more likely to avoid poverty and be financially successful later in life.” 72% either somewhat or strongly supported it, including 88% of self-identified Republicans, 62% of Democrats, 76% of Hispanics, and 67% of parents.

To accomplish this fuller vision of education—as about more than just test scores, but equipping students to live a rich and meaningful life—the Florida Department of Education and State Board of Education could require that state schools incorporate a family life standard into curriculum standards that would teach that:

- A high school graduation, full-time work, and having children after marriage are linked to less poverty and greater prosperity for adults.
- Sequencing marriage before parenthood is associated with greater family (and thus financial) stability.
- A stable, married family is linked to better educational, social, and emotional outcomes for parents and children, many of which are associated with more positive financial outcomes.

It could also include basic facts about fertility, work-life balance, home economics, happiness, and human flourishing. These would help students to think about their long-term goals, including preparing to form families as well as seek

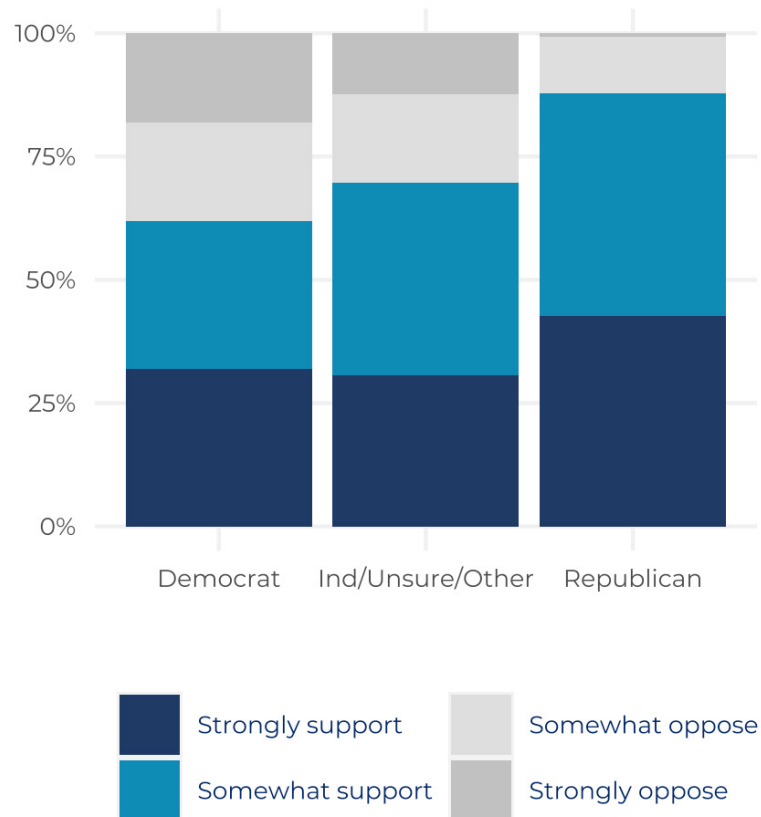
out meaningful work. And informing students in high school about fetal development, such as when a heartbeat is detectable or when a fetus’ fingerprints form, could help provide richer and better-informed debates around abortion in the state.

These topics could be incorporated into its recently introduced half-credit high school graduation requirement in personal financial literacy, or used to supplement the required units of career-focused electives.

School districts could also be directed to collect student academic data by family structure, in addition to race and other demographic characteristics, to give researchers better insights into the value of a stable home environment on student achievement.

Teach ‘Success Sequence’ in public schools

% of Floridians supporting, by party ID



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=376 Florida residents

Empower parents to better protect their kids online

Three-quarters (74%) of Florida respondents support age verification to access porn

Parents of all political stripes agree: It's far too easy for children to come across pornography online, and that could have long-term negative consequences. In a national poll conducted by YouGov for IFS/EPPC last year, 86% of parents agreed it is "too easy" for kids to find explicit content online.

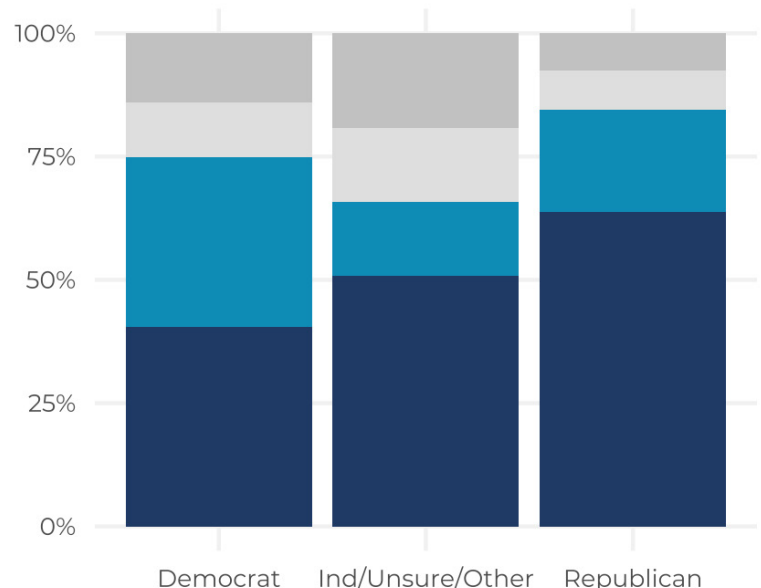
Across five Sun Belt states, 88% of Republican parents and 83% of Democratic ones agreed with a proposal to require users to verify their age before accessing websites that host sexually explicit content. In Florida, three-quarters of all adults somewhat or strongly supported the idea, including 78% of adults with a college degree, 74% of parents, and 71% of adults who reported they seldom or never attend any religious services.

To accomplish this goal, Florida could require third-party verification that an individual is 18 years of age or older before being permitted to access a web site that is predominantly used to host prurient or explicit content; a step that could assuage concerns about privacy online could be introducing a "zero-knowledge proof" approach, which relies on a

cryptographic method that reveals no information about the user.² This idea has been pioneered by states like Louisiana, Arkansas, Virginia, and Utah, which have passed age-verification laws.³ These policies are currently pending various legal challenges, and some observers believe they are likely to ultimately be upheld. Plus, they have already led to

Require age verification to access pornography online

% of Floridians supporting, by party ID



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=376 Florida residents

² "Age Verification: Policy Ideas for States," John Ehrett and Clare Morell, Ethics and Public Policy Center and the Institute for Family Studies, Aug. 2023, <https://eppc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Age-Verification-Policy-Brief-web.pdf>

³ Louisiana State Legislature, House Bill No. 142 (2022 Regular Session), <https://legis.la.gov/legis/ViewDocument.aspx?d=1289498>

direct action even without fully taking effect: Pornhub, the twelfth-most-visited website in the world in June, voluntarily blocked access to users in certain states in protest of the new law.⁴

Apart from the topic of pornography online, parents continue to wrestle with how to ensure their kids are engaging with social media and the Internet in healthy, not destructive, ways. Prior work has shown that many parents feel overwhelmed by concerns over cyberbullying, mental health threats, and the broader negative effects of a childhood intermediated by screens. Championing legislation to strengthen parents' ability to protect their children online should be a top priority. Florida's recent moves to prohibit students from using cell phones during class time and curtail the use of TikTok on public school grounds are advancing the national conversation.

The backlash against Big Tech has led many policymakers to re-evaluate what principles should be governing their approach to legislation. But beyond the ongoing philosophical realignment about tech's place in society, prioritizing strong legislation that gives parents more power is a winning political issue that cuts across partisan lines.

Asking individual parents to be experts on the plethora of user settings, filters, and options for keeping age-inappropriate content away from their kids places an undue burden on families. A recent policy brief gives policymakers more options to reset the status quo around kids and tech.⁵ Lawmakers could require that all social media platforms and other websites that allow minors to open profiles first obtain the explicit and verified consent of a parent or legal guardian. They could also require that all social media platforms give parents administrator-level access to view what content their children are

watching, and who they are communicating with. Other options could include examining steps to introduce more control at the device level.⁶

In our survey, parents were largely split between prioritizing measures that would require a parent's permission before children could open a social media account or requiring tech companies to give parents more tools to filter or limit access to certain content. But of the parents we polled across the five states, only 17%—and 12% of Republican-leaning parents—said the problem of helping navigate kids' tech use was “not a problem government should try to solve.”

⁴ “Inside Pornhub’s Finances,” Bradley Saacks, *Semafor*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.semafor.com/article/07/27/2023/inside-pornhubs-finances>

⁵ “Protecting Teens from Big Tech: Five Policy Ideas for States,” Clare Morell, Adam Candeub, Jean Twenge, Brad Wilcox, August 2022, Institute for Family Studies and the Ethics and Public Policy Center, <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/final-ifs-eppc-protectingteensfrombigtech-aug2022.pdf>

⁶ “Making Smartphones and App Stores Safe for Kids,” Clare Morell and Michael Toscano, November 2023, Institute for Family Studies and the Ethics and Public Policy Center, <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/briefs/ifs-eppc-smartphonesapp-storesbrief-nov23.pdf>

Expand early childhood options and support for all parents

79% of Floridians support action on child care affordability

Florida's landmark education freedom bill signed in March 2023 remade the landscape of K–12 education in the Sunshine State and made Florida a national leader in giving parents of elementary and high school students more options in finding the education option that best suits their family. Now, Florida has the opportunity to build on that success by expanding options and support for early childhood.

Some states have adopted a straightforward way of improving family affordability for parents with young children via a state Child Tax Credit (CTC). Idaho, Oklahoma, and Utah offer non-refundable CTCs (i.e., the amount of the credit cannot exceed a household's tax liability), and 11 states have made the credit fully refundable, with various eligibility thresholds and credit amounts. For example, the state of Vermont offers taxpayers with incomes below \$125,000 a \$1,000 per child CTC under the age of 5. An approach similar to Vermont's, that targeted meaningful assistance to working-class families with young children, would likely cost the state of Florida a little under \$1 billion per year.

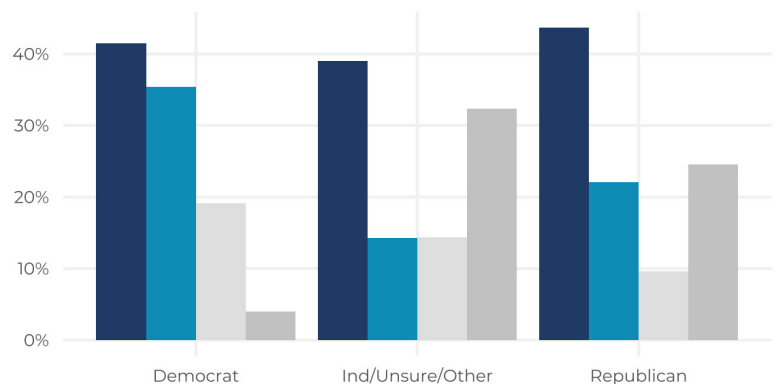
A policy that restricted CTCs to the poorest households, as in the model adopted by Oregon and New Jersey, would be less popular than if middle-class families were eligible as well. In our survey, 22% of Florida respondents strongly opposed a state Child Tax Credit

that only benefited households with incomes up to \$50,000. When eligibility was increased to incomes below \$100,000, the level of strong opposition fell by about half, to 13%.

A universal, or near-universal, state child tax credit could support new parents to a broad degree. Multiple polls have found a plurality of new moms say that their "ideal" situation would be to work have one parent part-time or stay home, especially when their children are young.⁷ Paid leave programs tied to work leave out those moms, just as expanded child care subsidies leave out those families who prefer to have a relative or neighbor watch their child. Because Florida has no state income tax, state lawmakers would have to think creatively about building out a system of direct financial support

How should politicians address child care?

% of Floridians, by party ID



- a) New program to expand child care availability and raise workers' pay
- b) Direct payments to help parents offset cost of preferred arrangement
- c) Pursue both approaches, and raise taxes to pay for it
- d) Do nothing; child care affordability isn't a major problem

Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=376 Florida residents

⁷ "Five Pro-Family Priorities for the 118th Congress and Beyond: Policies and Public Opinion on Putting Families First," Patrick T. Brown, Institute for Family Studies and the Ethics and Public Policy Center, February 2023, <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/reports/ifs-congress-family-priorities-final.pdf>

for families with young children. But a state CTC, or child benefit, would give parents more money in their pocket to determine the work-life balance that is best for them.

There are, however, other policy problems that weigh on the minds of parents with young children. In our survey, 79% of Floridians say the state should act to improve child care affordability, including two-thirds of political independents, three-quarters of Republicans, and nearly all Democrats. In our survey, both Democrats and Republicans were more likely to favor a child care program over direct payments to parents, though the group least support of direct cash were the politically unaffiliated. But how the state takes action is just as important as whether it decides to do so.

In early childhood, for example, parents' preferences vary widely; some prefer to have a parent at home full-time, others prefer to have a relative or neighbor watch their children while parents work full- or part-time, still others prefer a faith-based or for-profit child care center. To the greatest extent possible, policymakers should try to expand parents' options in early childhood, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.

According to a national poll conducted in late 2020 by the Bipartisan Policy Center, 31% of working-parent households used center-based care, and of those 53% used one that was affiliated with a faith organization. One-third of parents participating in center-based care said the religious orientation of the facility was "somewhat" or "very" important in their decision, according to a government survey.⁸ Therefore, any discussion of child care in Florida should include a focus on ensuring faith-based providers an essential part of the delivery system.

An early childhood and primary education capital expansion grant would grant non-profit and community organizations a three-year, forgivable

(or partially-forgivable) grant aimed at retrofitting or expanding existing physical spaces (not new construction), covering teacher training or certification, acquiring technology or other approved capital expenses. They would not be intended to cover normal operating expenses, but to provide religious and non-profit providers access to capital to help launch their new or expanded early childhood, elementary, middle, or high school educational offerings.

Similarly, churches or community groups interested in expanding K-12 education could benefit from a start-up grant or technical assistance for ensuring that true choice is available to more families. Additional grants to non-profit and religious organizations get a child care program off the ground or technical assistance to ensure compliance with regulations and requirements could help them build out enough capacity to break even.⁹ Building child care capacity in this way would help ensure a pluralistic landscape for Florida without committing large amounts of state money towards a broad-based child care approach that puts a thumb on the scale for parents finding the work-life situation that best suits their needs.

⁸ "Child Care Pluralism: Supporting Working Families in Their Full Diversity," Patrick T. Brown, June 2021, Niskanen Center, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Child-Care-Pluralism.pdf>

⁹ Utah, Texas, New York, and Rhode Island have all offered variants of similar approaches to help new child care facilities with start-up and licensing costs. See: "Increasing America's Child Care Supply," Hailey Gibbs, August 2022, Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/increasing-americas-child-care-supply/>

Provide greater support to pregnant and new mothers and their families

Three-quarters of Florida respondents want more action to support pregnant and new moms

Fertility rates in the U.S. have been on the decline, particularly since the Great Recession, and Florida has seen rates drop as well. In 2007, there were 67 births per 1,000 women age 15–44 in Florida. In 2021, that number was down to 55 per 1,000 women of childbearing age.

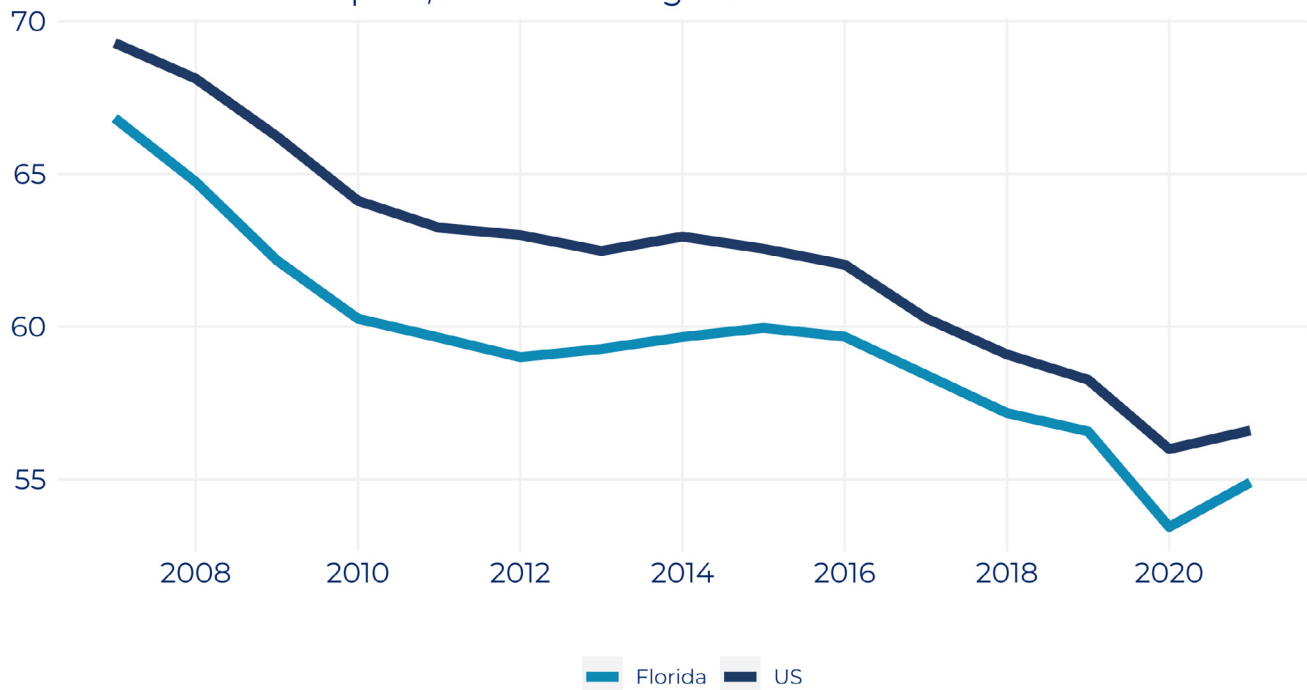
Over that time, the share of Florida babies born to married parents hovered around 53%, a few percentage points below the national average. The raw number of births dropped by 10% for both married mothers and unmarried ones alike. To put that number in context, as the state's overall population grew by 18% over the past 15 years, the total number of annual births fell by over 9%.

Lower fertility is tied to lower marriage rates; and children who are raised by unmarried parents are much more likely to grow up in poverty. Restoring a culture of marriage, particularly for working-class Floridians, would be the most important way to welcome more children and ensure they are supported with the resources they need to thrive.

But accompanying those efforts, public policy can support low-income women facing unexpected pregnancies, particularly in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in the Dobbs case and Florida's recently passed Heartbeat Protection Act. In addition to the direct support discussed above,

Fertility Rates, 2007-2021

Number of births per 1,000 women age 15-44 in the U.S. and Florida



Source: CDC WONDER-Nativity

targeted support for low-income parents received high marks across the political aisle.

For instance, three-quarters of Republican and politically unaffiliated respondents, and a near unanimity of Democratic ones, supported expanding child care vouchers for low-income parents. In Florida, families making less than 72% of the state median income are eligible for child care vouchers. Because the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant is not fully funded, only 15% of children in households that would be eligible for federal child care benefits receive assistance.¹⁰ Ever since the 1996 welfare reform that tied most benefits to work, there has generally been a bipartisan consensus that low-income parents should participate in the labor force to benefit their family over the long-term, and that child care vouchers can provide a valuable service in connecting

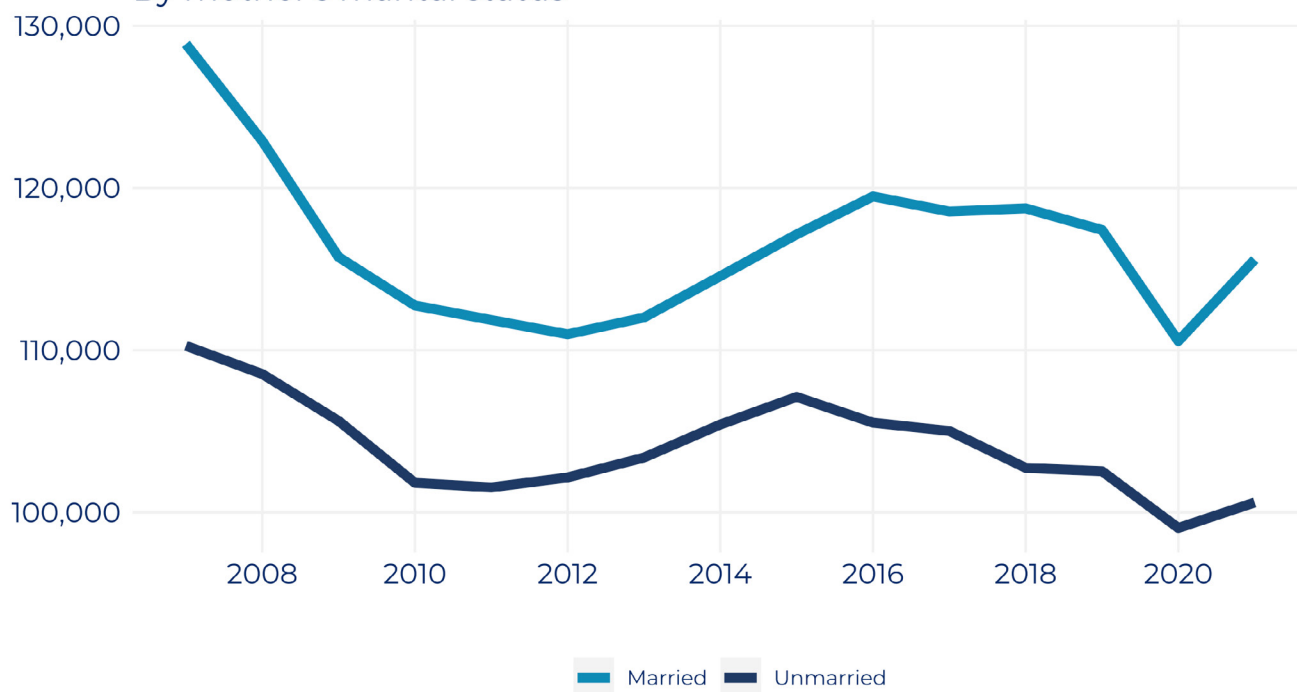
low-income parents to work. We see evidence that this is still a dominant narrative.

We also surveyed whether Medicaid coverage should be expanded to cover a larger share of pregnant women. Currently, pregnant women in households up to 196% of the federal poverty line are eligible to have their pregnant, childbirth and postpartum costs covered by Medicaid; thanks to recent action by Florida's legislature, new moms are now eligible to remain on Medicaid up to a year after birth. When we asked whether eligibility should be expanded, we again found near unanimity among Democratic respondents; such expansion was also supported by 70% of the politically unaffiliated and two-thirds of Republicans.

These numbers may be impacted by the recent state action to eliminate sales taxes on diapers and other baby-related items, as well as the broader

Total births in Florida, 2007-2021

By mother's marital status

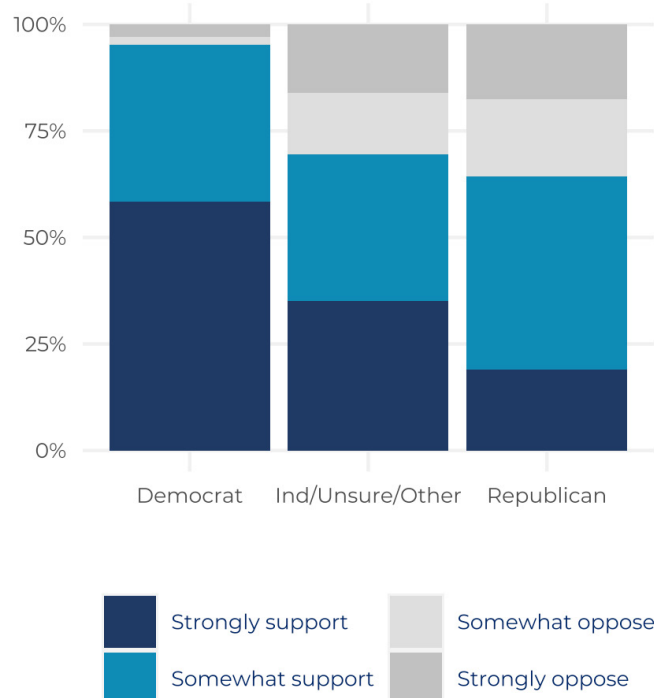


Source: CDC WONDER-Natality

¹⁰ "Child Care & Development Block Grant in Florida," First Five Years Fund, May 2023, https://www.ffyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023_CCDBG-Fact-Sheet_FL.pdf

Expand Medicaid coverage for pregnant and new mothers

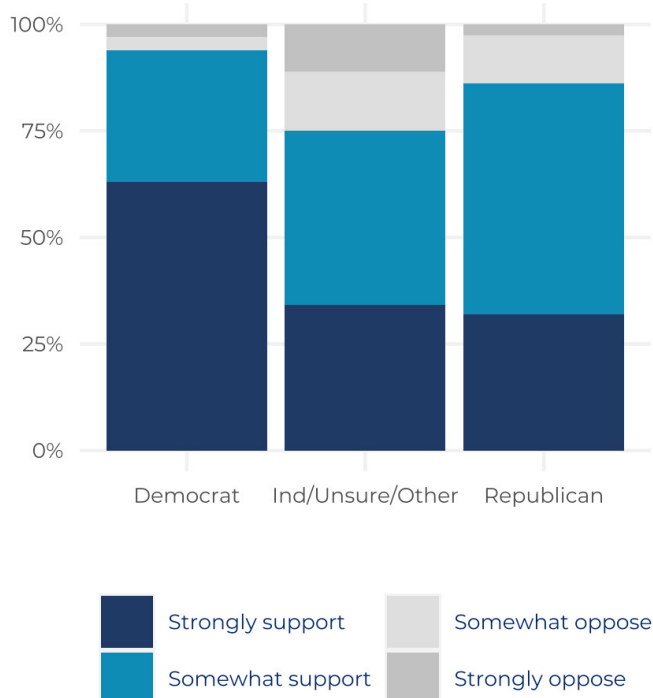
% of Floridians supporting, by party ID



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=376 Florida residents

Increase child-care vouchers for low-income parents

% of Floridians supporting, by party ID



Source: IFS/EPPC/YouGov poll
n=376 Florida residents

context about low-income women and pregnancies in a post-*Dobbs* environment. But regardless of the political environment, three-quarters of Florida respondents said they wanted to see additional action taken to support pregnant moms. When asked how, or if, politicians should support pregnant women in the aftermath of the *Dobbs* decision, half of Republican respondents (and 80% of Democrats) preferred additional social spending over either focusing on tax cuts or doing nothing at all.

Legislative action around supporting low-income pregnant and new moms seems salient. But part of the slate of legislative actions around greater support for low-income households should include efforts to smooth or eliminate marriage penalties in means-tested safety-net programs. Any reform or expansion of child care benefits, Medicaid coverage, or other supports for pregnant and new mothers should be accomplished with an eye towards making sure they do not lose those benefits upon

marrying. Options to accomplish this include extending the length of time a low-income couple can maintain eligibility after tying the knot (a so-called “honeymoon period”) or making sure that income thresholds are higher for married couples than for single parent households.

Create a state commission on the well-being of men and boys

73% of Florida respondents support a state panel on the crisis facing men

Young men are now less likely to graduate from high school or college than women.¹¹ Men, especially single or divorced men, are more likely to die from suicide or opioid-related causes.¹² And these social dynamics contribute to delayed marriage, deferred parenthood, lower labor force participation,¹³ and a rising share of young men¹⁴ who are categorized as neither working, nor in education or training.

The cultural and economic factors driving these trends can't be solved overnight. But a state Commission on Men and Boys would offer a focused, serious effort to rejuvenate policy and cultural efforts aimed at helping at-risk young men mature into their place in society.

In general, there was broad support for this kind of concerted action. Roughly three-quarters of Florida adults somewhat or strongly supported the proposal of a new "state commission that would study the well-being of boys and men, and promote policies that encourage healthy masculinity and responsible fatherhood." 81% of both Democratic and Republican respondents somewhat or strongly supported the idea, while only 60% of the politically unaffiliated or independent did the same. One outlier was college-educated males, who were roughly evenly divided on whether the idea of a commission on men and boys was worthwhile, though the size

of this subgroup was below conventional statistical reliability; support for the idea was highest among women with a college degree.

The Commission would look across the lifespan but focus on boys and young men who are struggling the most today. It would focus on bridging the gender gap in Florida schools to ensure that boys are better prepared for adulthood, from both a labor force and family-focused perspective. This would include identifying opportunities to realign and re-envision career and technical education, often referred to as vocational ed, to ensure that all high school students, even those who don't attend college or university, are given the tools they need to build a pathway to the middle class. It could also look at scaling up educational strategies like single-sex schools and more male teachers to help boys flourish in schools across the state.

The commission could also build off of the work of Florida's recently-established initiative on engaged fatherhood, seeking to bolster outreach efforts by religious and non-profit organizations to ensure more dads have a meaningful relationship with their children and restoring relationships with their children's mother. Recognizing the declining state of marriage in Florida, and its impact on young boys who grow up without a male role model in the

¹¹ "The Male College Crisis is Not Just in Enrollment, but Completion," Richard V. Reeves and Ember Smith, Oct. 8, 2021, The Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/10/08/the-male-college-crisis-is-not-just-in-enrollment-but-completion/>

¹² "Opioids and the Unattached Male", Patrick T. Brown, *City Journal*, Jan. 14, 2022, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/opioids-and-the-unattached-male>

¹³ Male Labor Force Participation: Patterns and Trends, Laura Dawson Ullrich, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, 2021, https://www.richmondfed.org/media/RichmondFedOrg/publications/research/econ_focus/2021/q1/district_digest.pdf

¹⁴ "Inactive, Disconnected, and Ailing: A Portrait of Prime-Age Men Out of the Labor Force," Social Capital Project, Joint Economic Committee, Sept. 2018, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/4a929c09-9936-47eb-89e3-a77fd3fd139/3-18-jec-report-inactive-disconnected.pdf

home, also engenders a focus promoting a model of masculinity that encompasses fatherhood and marriage to its teenage and young adult men. While policymakers may have a limited ability to change culture directly, pointing out the need for creative efforts on this front, especially given the negative or distorted messages about masculinity often being conveyed online, is important.

As part of its work to strengthen marriage, part of the commission could also be tasked with evaluating the extent to which marriage penalties in state safety-net programs are discouraging young men from marrying. Fully solving marriage penalties is expensive, and perhaps best pursued at the federal level. But the state could explore taking steps towards reducing the impact of marriage penalties on low-income households by, as discussed, easing the sharp cliffs that make getting married a financial loser for too many parents. Offering a honeymoon period, where newly-married couples are able to maintain safety-net program eligibility for a year or two after marriage, could also help families adjust without abruptly cutting them off of benefits.

About the Authors

Patrick T. Brown is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in the Life and Family Initiative, where his work focuses on developing a robust pro-family economic agenda and supporting families as the cornerstone of a healthy and flourishing society. His writing has been published in the *New York Times*, *National Review*, *Politico*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, and he has previously published reports on paid leave and family policy with the Institute for Family Studies. Prior to joining EPPC, he served as a senior policy advisor to Congress' Joint Economic Committee. He and his wife Jessica have four young children and live in Columbia, S.C.

Brad Wilcox is Professor of Sociology and Director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, the Future of Freedom Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, and a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. The author of *Get Married: Why Americans Should Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families and Save Civilization* (Harper Collins, 2024), Wilcox has written for scientific journals such as *The American Sociological Review* and *The Journal of Marriage and Family*, and the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *National Review*.