

Which of These 4 Family Policies Deserves Top Priority?

We asked 18 academics what they would choose if they could pick only one, as Senator Manchin has reportedly advised.



By Claire Cain Miller

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The safety net spending bill proposed by Democrats in Congress includes major benefits for families: paid leave, child care, pre-K and child allowances. But as they negotiate over the size of the bill, they may need to choose. Senator Joe Manchin, one of the two centrists whom Democrats must persuade to vote with them, has suggested that they pick just one, Axios reported. In a letter to colleagues Monday night, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wrote, “Overwhelmingly, the guidance I am receiving from members is to do fewer things well.”

We asked 18 academics who study family policy — scholars of sociology, economics, public policy, social work and law — what they would choose if they could have only one, based on evidence from research in the United States and other countries.

All said it was a choice they would not want to make — proponents of more generous family policies say they all work together. “People need resources for coordinating family and employment across the life span,” said Joanna Pepin, a sociologist at the University at Buffalo. “Picking just one policy is akin to putting a fire out in one room of a house engulfed in flames and stopping.”

Democrats are considering other ways to spend less but keep all four programs, like giving child benefits only to low earners, offering fewer than 12 weeks of paid leave, or making the policies expire after several years. But the exercise of choosing one forces a closer look beyond the politics and at the policies themselves — who would be helped by each program, and where there is greatest need.

Universal pre-K

Public preschool for children ages 3 and 4 was the winner in our panel, with half the experts choosing it.

They said it was most likely to achieve multiple goals of family policy. By making child care free for toddlers, it could help decrease poverty and ease family life. By enabling mothers to work, it could increase gender equality. By giving children from different backgrounds the same preparation for kindergarten, it could decrease long-term inequality.

“When my collaborators and I have explored different outcomes — employment, wages, poverty — across a range of wealthy countries, the policy that has had the most powerful effect has been universal early childhood education,” said Joya Misra, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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Some states and cities — including Georgia, Oklahoma, New York City and Washington, D.C. — already offer it, and a majority of preschool-age children attend.

Many other rich countries offer it, including France, Germany and Spain, where public school effectively begins at 3. In the United States, about one-third of children enter kindergarten without any preschool, and they are more likely to have single parents or to be from families who are Hispanic or have low incomes.

“Pre-K would enhance the educational achievement and the economic mobility potential of future generations,” said Mohamad Alkadry, who leads the public policy department at the University of Connecticut.

Others said states and cities have already been successful starting public pre-K without federal help. Some feared an unintended consequence: It costs child care centers more to take care of infants and toddlers, so if they lost their preschool-aged students to public programs, they might not earn enough from tuition to stay in business.

Reasons given for choosing pre-K

“Universal pre-K would net families the largest savings.” — *Daniel Carlson, assistant professor of family and consumer studies, University of Utah*

“This is more of an investment in the future, and we should make it immediately.” — *Mohamad Alkadry, professor of public policy, University of Connecticut*

“This policy promises to provide the most consequential benefits to the largest group of Americans.” — *Kathleen Gerson, professor of sociology, N.Y.U.*

“A combined approach is best, but if you have to choose one, pre-K is the most important.” — *Barbara Risman, professor of sociology, University of Illinois, Chicago*

“This has been extremely successful in red states as well as blue states, and I think it would be hard to dismantle once put into effect.” — *Joan Williams, professor of law, University of California, Hastings*

“Subsidies are a Band-Aid, and we need something more powerful.” — *Joya Misra, professor of sociology and public policy, University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

“Full parental employment is the quickest way to eliminate child poverty, and you really need a care infrastructure to do that.” — *Jennifer Glass, professor of sociology, University of Texas at Austin*

“You shouldn’t have to be single, or poor, to be compensated by society for raising children.” — *Philip Cohen, professor of sociology, University of Maryland*

“Universal pre-K erases the negative effect of expensive child care on mothers’ employment.” — *William “Buddy” Scarborough, assistant professor of sociology, University of North Texas*



Pascall Jean-Jacques, a pre-K teacher at the Sunnyside Community Program in Queens, and a student practicing counting. Of the family policies Democrats are considering, universal pre-K was most popular with experts. James Estrin/The New York Times

Child credit

Extending the child tax credit — the monthly checks for up to \$300 per child now being sent to almost all American families — was the second-most popular. The Biden administration expanded the child credit through the end of this year, and included all families except the richest. Before, parents who didn't work or had very low earnings were excluded.

In July, three million fewer children were living in poverty, according to the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia. Research from other nations demonstrates that cash transfers decrease child poverty, especially in places with a high degree of income inequality.

Monthly checks also give parents a choice in how to spend the money. It can go to rent, food, child care or to subsidize a stay-at-home parent, for example. And, several researchers said, it's the policy that states or employers are least likely to provide on their own.

"The child tax credit is elegant in that it does something for all low- and middle-income families," said H. Luke Shaefer, professor of social justice and social policy at the University of Michigan. "If we have to do only one, I believe the most good for the most people is the right principle to use in making that decision."

But others said they would rather the money go directly to child care or pre-K because it would help mothers work. "I'm always very sensitive to policies that even unintentionally discourage mothers' labor force participation," said Barbara Risman, a sociologist at the University of Illinois, Chicago. "In the long run, those families will have fewer resources if the mothers have lower earning potentials."

Reasons given for choosing the child credit

"It does the most to empower families to do what they think is best for their families." — *H. Luke Shaefer, professor of social justice and social policy, University of Michigan*

"We have pretty unambiguous evidence that more financial resources for families with young kids has important and lasting impacts." — *Maya Rossin-Slater, associate professor of health policy and economics, Stanford*

"The money can be spent on anything, not just child care, and it will cover children older than the usual age at which child care is used." — *Claudia Goldin, professor of economics, Harvard*

"It can reduce child poverty right now, is likely to improve mobility over the long term, and it is unlikely to decrease mothers' employment." — *Joanna Pepin, assistant professor of sociology, University at Buffalo*

"Families are getting it now, and what a shame it would be to take it away." — *Jane Waldfogel, professor of social work, Columbia*

Subsidized child care

Three of the experts chose this as the most important. The plan being considered would make child care free for the lowest earners. And it would cost no more than 7 percent of earnings for others, up to a certain income.

"It would likely pull more women in the work force, so the overall gains to the family would be more than just the reduced cost of child care," said Jill Yavorsky, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

It would help close racial gaps, too, since Black and Hispanic women have disproportionately become unemployed during the pandemic, said Fatima Suarez, a sociologist at Stanford. "Child care subsidies is not just a family issue, but an issue of race, class and gender equity," she said.

Others said subsidies alone would not do enough to address other issues with child care, like unavailability, low pay for providers and varying levels of quality. And some preferred a universal benefit rather than a means-tested one — it would make the program more popular and improve quality, they said, and child care is unaffordable for many middle-class families.

Reasons given for choosing subsidized child care

“It would offer the greatest benefit to mothers who do not make enough income to cover the costs of child care.” — *Jill Yavorsky, assistant professor of sociology, University of North Carolina, Charlotte*

“Essential workers are disproportionately women of color, and they do not earn nearly enough to be able to survive, let alone pay for child care.” — *Fatima Suarez, postdoctoral research fellow, Stanford*

“I’m weighing what would help the largest number of families for the longest time span with the maximum money in parents’ pockets.” — *Caitlyn Collins, assistant professor of sociology, Washington University in St. Louis*

Paid family leave

The United States is the only rich country without a federal mandate to offer paid leave for new parents or for medical emergencies. The Democrats’ plan would give American workers up to 12 weeks. Research has shown that this would particularly benefit the lowest earners and people in unstable jobs, who now risk falling into poverty if they have a caregiving need or illness.

“It provides a necessary safety net for lower-income families when they are going through major life events,” said Youngjoo Cha, a sociologist at Indiana University Bloomington. “It has a strong implication for gender equality at work and at home. It will generate a long-lasting effect of equalizing gender division of work at home as well.”

She was the only expert who picked it as most important. Others said they strongly supported it, but thought it could effectively be offered through payroll taxes, as several states do, or by employers. Also, they said, the other policies would help families for much longer periods.

Reason given for choosing paid family leave

“Equality can be achieved by changing gender norms both at work and at home, and paid family leave is a basic necessary step.” — *Youngjoo Cha, associate professor of sociology, Indiana University Bloomington*