

The State of Kids and Families in America 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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ECHELON INSIGHTS

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Introduction

The 2024 election is already proving to be one of the most consequential for American kids and families. Every issue taking the stage—including mental health and the economy—is a high-stakes one for families across the country. As we move toward November, we need to center kids and families in the narrative about this election to ensure we find solutions that work. But we're also entering this election cycle with an electorate that is more deeply divided than ever before.

A new set of surveys from Lake Research Partners and Echelon Insights on behalf of Common Sense Media shows that despite the division, everyone—Democrat and Republican, parent and nonparent—has concerns for the future of America's children. And more importantly, there are similarly bipartisan desires for the government to ***take action*** to better support kids and families.

For all voters, kids and families are intrinsically connected with concerns about the economy. There is broad support for education, and mental health is squarely on their agenda. Contrary to conventional wisdom, voters across party lines favor investment in kids and families, see a role for government, and think that politicians are failing to deliver. And teens don't disagree—they want more from their schools and their leaders, and worry that the lives their parents lead today may not be accessible to them in the future.

The surveys—one of likely voters, and another of kids and teenagers age 12 to 17, conducted in English and Spanish in November and December 2023—illuminate the state of kids and families in the U.S. by exploring current concerns among voters, kids, and teens, their hopes for the future, and the solutions that they believe can make real change. No matter the outcome of the elections this year, it's time for our leaders to put kids and families first and build policies that leverage the power of the federal government to support kids and families.

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Key Findings

1. Kids and families are fundamentally linked in voters' minds to concerns about the economy and rising prices.

An overwhelming majority of parents surveyed agree that being a parent today is financially harder than ever before. About 9 in 10 (89%) parents of children age 0 to 18 agree (57% strongly agree), and 84% of parents of young adults age 19 to 24 agree (52% strongly agree), that being a parent today is financially harder than ever before.

That could be because economic precarity is very real for today's parents. Even as economic data may suggest a sunny financial forecast, that's not the experience of the majority of American parents. Over two-thirds of parents of children age 0 to 24 say it is difficult to afford the things they need to buy for their children. Among parents of children age 0 to 18, 68% say this is difficult, and 25% say it is very difficult; among parents of young adults age 19 to 24, 73% say this is difficult, and 30% say it is very difficult.

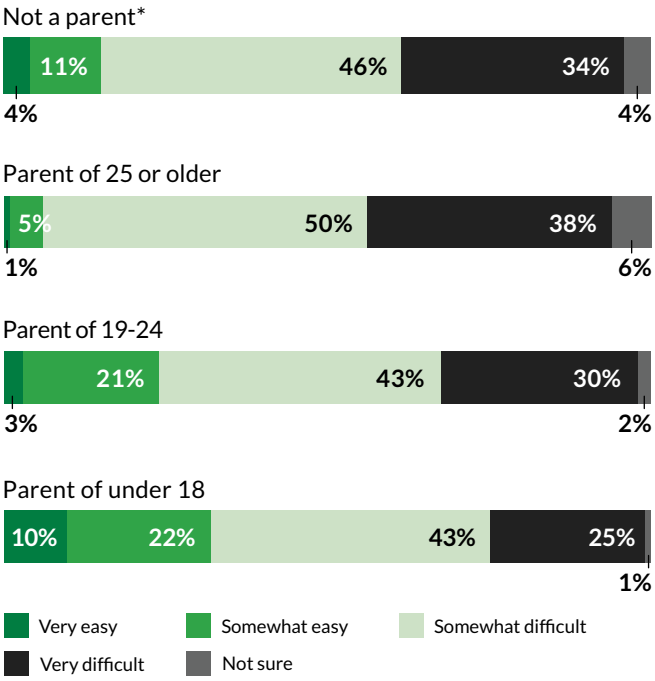
There's a long tail to these concerns. Voters also worry that the financial challenges of today will catch up with children as they grow. Four in five voters (81%) are concerned about children's future economic opportunities, with nearly half (46%) reporting that they are very concerned. Likely U.S. voters say that the most significant barriers to children today being able to achieve economic security when they grow up are that their income will not keep up with expenses and bills (34%) and the cost of housing (30%).

Surprisingly, nonparents are the most pessimistic about the economic future of children in the U.S. Nearly half of nonparent voters (48%) believe children today will be worse off in adulthood than they are—more negative than the 25% of parents of children age 0 to 24 who expressed concerns that their children would be worse off in adulthood than they are.

(Voters who are not parents include a mix of voters who plan on having children in the future [28%], voters who do not plan on having children [59%], and voters who are not sure if they plan on having children [13%].)

These days, how easy or difficult is it to afford the things you need to buy for your children?

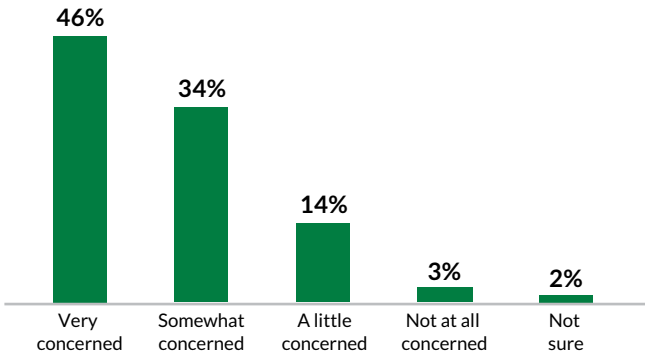
% of likely voters



Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters
* Nonparents were asked how easy or difficult they think it is for parents to afford things for their children.

How concerned are you about children's future economic opportunities?

% of likely voters



Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters

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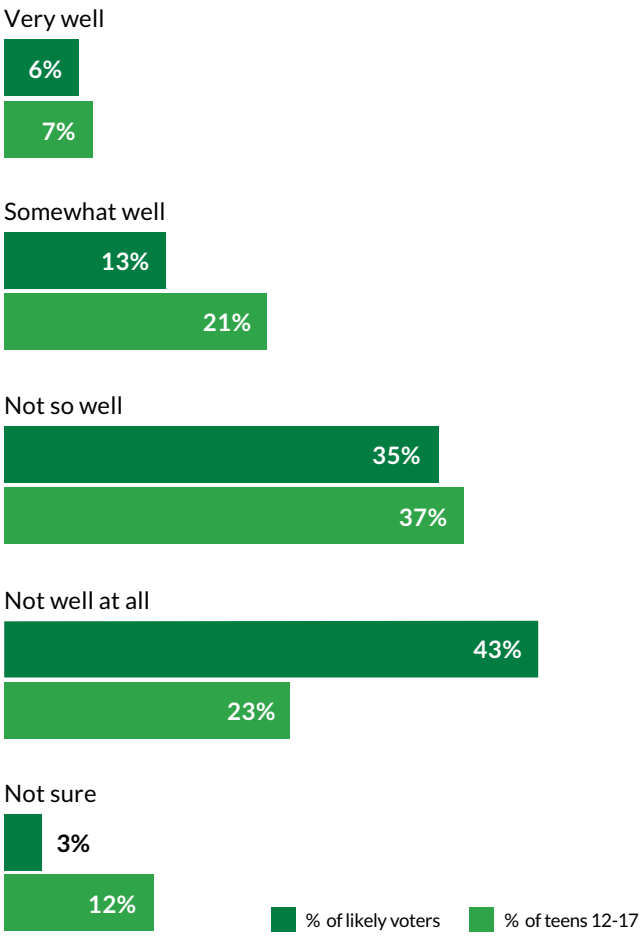
2. Voters and teens agree that our elected leaders are failing young people.

Faith in our elected leaders is running low among both voters and young people when it comes to how they serve kids and teens. Over three-quarters (78%) of voters and 60% of young people think that politicians and elected officials are not doing well in reflecting the needs, desires, and experiences of younger people in this country. And belief in that failure is almost universal: Every demographic subgroup thinks politicians and elected officials have more work to do when it comes to understanding and delivering on the needs, desires, and experiences of young people.

How well do you think politicians and elected officials reflect the needs, desires, and experiences of younger people in this country?



Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters
Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=844 teens age 12–17

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3. There is clear bipartisan support for more government investment to support children and families.

Despite their pessimism about elected officials, Americans across the political spectrum support government investments and programs that help kids and families. When considering broad investments in children and youth, like expanding paid family, parental, and medical leave, reducing child care costs, or specific investments like the Child Tax Credit, solid majorities of voters on both sides of the aisle are in favor. And voters see a clear role for government in those investments.

Whether thinking about programs or investments that benefit children and youth, voters believe the federal government spends too little—62% say the federal government spends too little on programs, and 67% say the federal government spends too little on investments that benefit children and youth.

Traditionally, Republican voters are skeptical about federal government investments and programs, but when it comes to investments and programs that benefit children and youth, Republicans think the federal government spends too little:

- 62% of Republican voters think the government spends too little on **investments** that benefit children and youth, 9% think it spends too much, 19% think it spends about the right amount, and 10% are not sure.
- 52% of Republican voters think the government spends too little on **programs** that benefit children and youth, 17% think it spends too much, 20% think it spends about the right amount, and 11% are not sure.

That's compared to about three-quarters of Democrats who think the federal government spends too little on children and youth. Fully 73% of Democratic voters say the federal government spends too little on programs, and 75% say the federal government spends too little on investments.

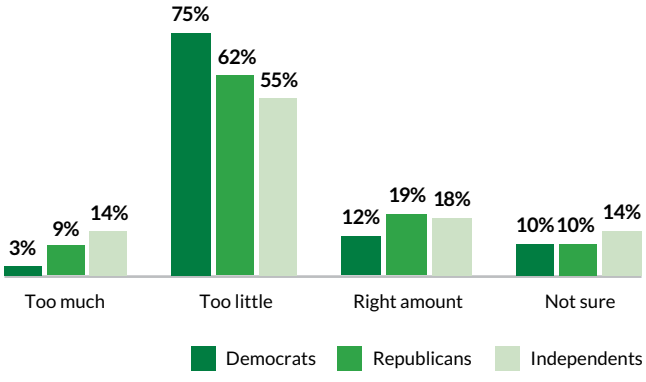
In addition to thinking that we are not investing enough in children and youth broadly, voters believe it would help a lot to focus on specific solutions to address child poverty. At the top of the list of investments they believe would help child poverty "a lot" are:

- Increased access to programs that help children facing hunger (56%)
- Increased pay and benefits (54%)
- Increased access to affordable housing for families with children (53%)
- Reduced drug and alcohol misuse and addiction (53%)

Voters also strongly support the Child Tax Credit, which enjoys solid bipartisan support. The vast majority (84%) of voters favor the Child Tax Credit, which we described as "an expanded and improved tax credit that refunds middle-class families and families with lower incomes more money for each child under age 18, creates a new tax credit for families with children under age 6, and makes the credit fully refundable for all families with lower incomes." Nearly half (47%) strongly favor the Child Tax Credit. Support for the Child Tax Credit is bipartisan, with 79% of Republicans favoring it and 92% of Democrats.

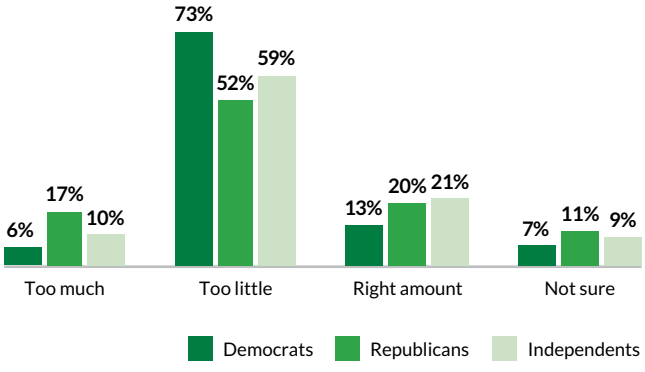
Do you think the federal government spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on investments that benefit children and youth?

% of likely voters, by party identification



Do you think the federal government spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on programs that benefit children and youth?

% of likely voters, by party identification



Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters

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Republican and Democratic voters also overwhelmingly favor solutions to the child care crisis. Seven in 10 (70%) Republicans and 93% of Democrats favor the U.S. government expanding access to child care assistance so more families with middle and lower incomes qualify. When voters were asked to think about their state government expanding access to child care assistance so more families with middle and lower incomes would qualify, there was even slightly more support for state rather than federal assistance among Republican voters (76% favor), and Democratic voters were just as favorable (90% favor) to state as to federal intervention.

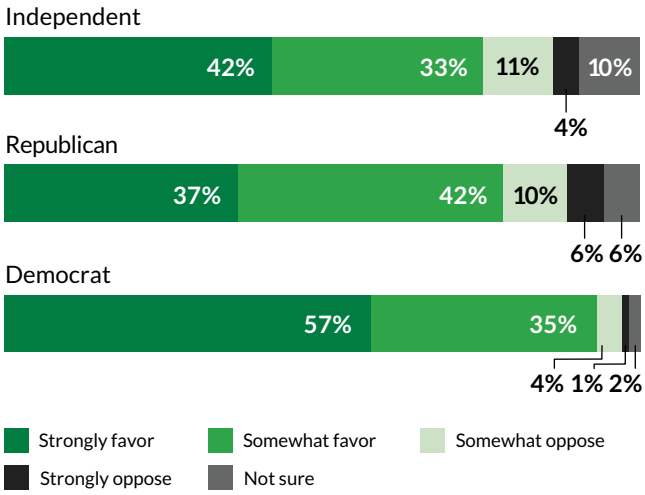
But this support goes beyond just improving access to child care. Voters also care deeply about the quality of care and the fairness of pay for child care workers. About three-quarters of Republican voters and 9 in 10 Democratic voters favor the U.S. government improving the pay, benefits, and training for people who work in child care to increase the quality of care (73% among Republicans and 92% among Democrats) and their state government doing the same (75% among Republicans and 92% among Democrats).

Finally, half (51%) of voters strongly agree that "too many parents and caregivers are struggling to meet both their family caregiving responsibilities and work obligations." So it is no surprise that three-quarters (75%) of voters favor 12 weeks of paid family, parental, and medical leave for all workers, no matter their job, employer, or state, through a national fund. Again, this policy enjoys broad, solid majority bipartisan support, with 64% of Republicans favoring paid family, parental, and medical leave, and 87% of Democrats favoring it.

Enthusiasm for child- and family-supportive policies isn't just coming from parents themselves; nonparents also want these changes. More than four in five (83%) of nonparents favor the federal government expanding child care assistance to middle and lower income families, and 84% of nonparents support the federal government improving the pay, benefits, and training for child care providers. And 75% of nonparents favor a national fund for 12 weeks of paid family, parental, and medical leave for all workers.

Do you favor or oppose the Child Tax Credit?

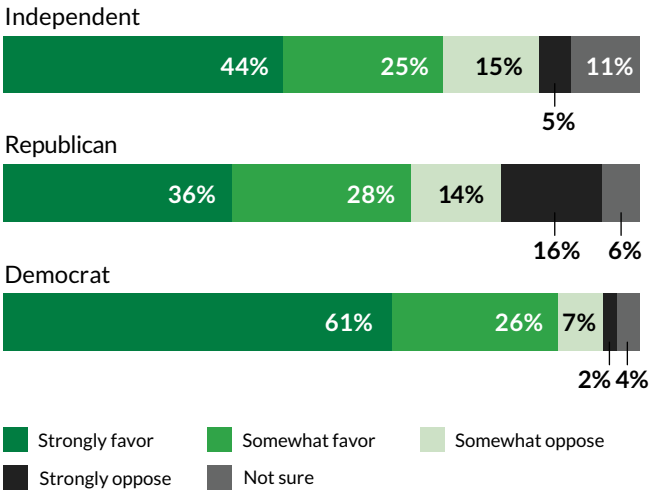
% of likely voters, by party identification



Q: "Here are some more details on a program that some say would reduce the rate of child poverty. The Child Tax Credit is an expanded and improved tax credit that refunds middle-class families and families with lower incomes more money for each child under age 18, creates a new tax credit for families with children under age six, and makes the credit fully refundable for all families with lower incomes. Based on this, do you favor or oppose the Child Tax Credit?" Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters

Do you favor or oppose 12 weeks of paid family, parental, and medical leave for all workers, no matter their job, employer, or state, through a national fund?

% of likely voters, by party identification



Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters

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4. Voters believe mental health for young people is in acute crisis, and teens see mental health as their top challenge.

To voters, children struggling with mental health is seen as one of the most important issues when it comes to the health and well-being of children (16% see it as one of the most important, along with gun violence at 20%, social media negatively impacting children's well-being at 18%, and child poverty at 18%). Voters lean toward rating the mental health of children in their community as just fair/poor (48%), rather than excellent/good (42%). Mental health concerns are especially intense for parents of 19- to 24-year-olds, with 28% of parents saying that this is one of the most important concerns when it comes to the health and well-being of children. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents of 19- to 24-year-olds rate the mental health of children in their community as just fair or poor.

When we provided kids and teens with a list of problems they face today, their top answer was mental health challenges (30%). Girls (35%) are more likely than boys (24%) to select youth mental health challenges as their most important concern. Fully 65% of teens rate the mental health of kids and teenagers in their community as just fair or poor, with nearly 7 in 10 girls (69%) saying this, compared with 59% of boys. Teens point to the negative impact of social media (20%) and bullying and discrimination (18%) as the main causes of today's youth mental health crisis.

Voters believe we can do more to improve mental health outcomes. The top solutions in the minds of voters focus on addressing insurance and access, while half of voters think addressing telehealth care and increasing providers would also have a big impact:

- Requiring health insurance companies to cover mental health care in the same way that they cover other types of health care (61% say it would have a big impact on improving mental health outcomes)
- Improving access to mental health providers (57%)
- Expanding the availability of mental health services in schools (54%)
- Making it easier for people to access telehealth care for mental health services (51%)
- Increasing the number of mental health providers (50%)

Black and Latino voters are more likely than White or Asian American and Pacific Islander voters to believe that expanding access to mental health care in multiple ways would make a big impact on mental health outcomes. Almost 7 in 10 Black (69%) and Latino (68%) voters want health insurance companies to be required to cover mental health as they do other health conditions, compared with 59% of White voters and 62% of Asian American/Pacific Islander voters. Latino and Black voters are also more likely than White voters to say they want expanded access to mental health services in schools (59% and 64% vs. 52%) and via telehealth (61% and 59% vs. 47%).

Americans think that schools play an important role in providing youth mental health support. About two-thirds (68%) of voters believe that access to mental health care is a service that schools should provide. There's broad bipartisan appeal for schools providing these services: Three-quarters (75%) of Democrats and 61% of Republicans believe schools should provide access to mental health care. Nonparents (69%) are just as likely as parents of kids age 0 to 18 (68%) to believe schools should provide access to mental health care.

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5. Both teens and voters think our schools are not currently up to the task of preparing kids for the future or economic stability.

Education is the issue that voters think most needs to be addressed and is most likely to set children up for a successful adulthood. Over half of voters (58%) and teens (57%) think that K–12 public schools are doing a "poor" (24% of voters and 19% of teens) or "just fair" (35% of voters and 38% of teens) job of educating our children. And in part to address these failings, voters and teens put improving or reforming the education system (34% of voters and 19% of teens suggest this) at the top of their lists of most important recommendations that would improve the lives of children in the U.S.

The desire to improve and reform education is solidly bipartisan. This is by far the top recommendation to improve the lives of U.S. children among Republicans (34%) and among Democrats (36%).

Education is also the most important thing for voters when they're asked to think about what we could do to improve this generation's ability to have a successful future when they are adults. One in five (20%) voters volunteered that we should improve and/or fix the education system, and 14% volunteered that students should stay in school and/or get an education. It is clear that education is seen as the key to successful adulthood.

When the media and elected officials talk about what is wrong in schools, they often gravitate toward discussions about math and reading skills. But students, parents, and voters think of education more broadly than just academic challenges. Voters believe that a wide array of problems create challenges in public schools in their communities. Voters perceive that the most significant problems within schools are:

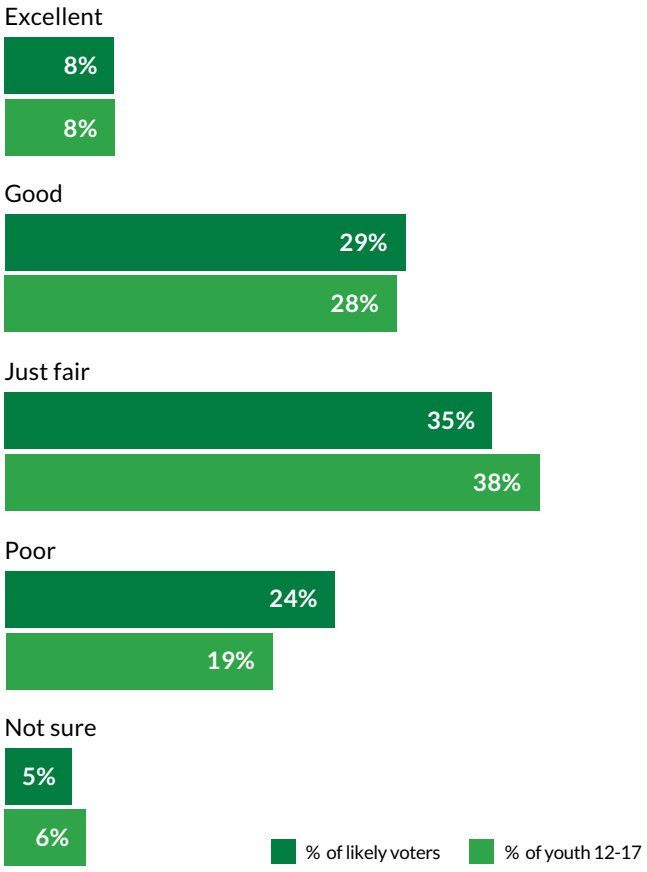
- Students not reading at grade level (50% say this is a major problem)
- The teacher shortage due to teachers leaving the profession because they are burned out and tired (50%)
- Bullying, including cyberbullying (49%)
- The teacher shortage due to pay and salaries that are too low (48%)
- Mental health struggles among students (47%)

Teens point to mental health as a critical education challenge. For kids and teens, the top perceived problem in public schools is mental health struggles among students (53% say this is a major problem). This is followed by bullying, including cyberbullying (42% say this is a major problem). Girls are more likely than boys—57% to 47%—to say mental health struggles among students are a major problem in public schools in their community.

Because voters say the problems within education are broad, there isn't a simple answer for how to best fix schools. These potential solutions were all noted as having a big impact on addressing student needs:

- Individualized learning plans based on each student's needs (49% say this would have a big impact)
- Increasing teacher pay (49%)
- Additional counseling or social, emotional, and mental health support (49%)
- Smaller class sizes (49%)
- Improving teacher preparation (47%)

How would you rate the job that K-12 schools are doing educating our children?



Q. "Thinking about public education, how would you rate the job that K–12 schools are doing educating our children?" Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters
Q. "Now for something different. When it comes to American education, how would you rate the job that K–12 public schools are doing? (K–12 schools are schools that cover any grades kindergarten through 12th grade.)" Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=844 teens age 12–17

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6. Kids, teens, and voters think we are in a crisis now, and less than a majority believe things will get better in the future.

Adults—parents and nonparents—as well as teens are solidly pessimistic about the current state of their lives. A solid majority (58%) of voters say that things are going just fair (39%) or poorly (19%) for families like theirs today. A majority (55%) of parents of kids age 0 to 18 think things are going just fair (41%) or poorly (15%). Parents of young adults age 19 to 24 are especially pessimistic, with 70% who think things are going just fair (47%) or poorly (23%).

A majority (53%) of nonparents think things are going just fair (35%) or poorly (19%) for families like theirs.

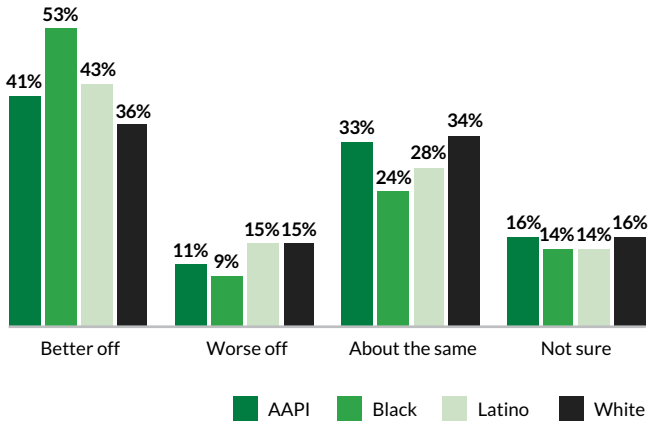
Kids and teens are even more negative. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of kids and teens say that things are going just fair (36%) or poorly (28%) for kids and teenagers in the U.S. today.

And yet, families still remain weakly optimistic about the future for their children. Some parents, kids, teens, and young adults are optimistic about this generation's prospects in adulthood, but nonparents are more pessimistic:

- Parents of children age 0 to 24 think their kids will be better off in adulthood (44%), though 25% say they will be worse off, and 25% say their kids will be about the same as they are.
- Parents of adult children 25 and older are split between saying their children are currently better off (39%) and about the same (35%) as they are, though 24% say their adult children are worse off.

When you grow up, do you think that you will be better off, worse off, or about the same as your parents?

% of youth 12-17, by race/ethnicity



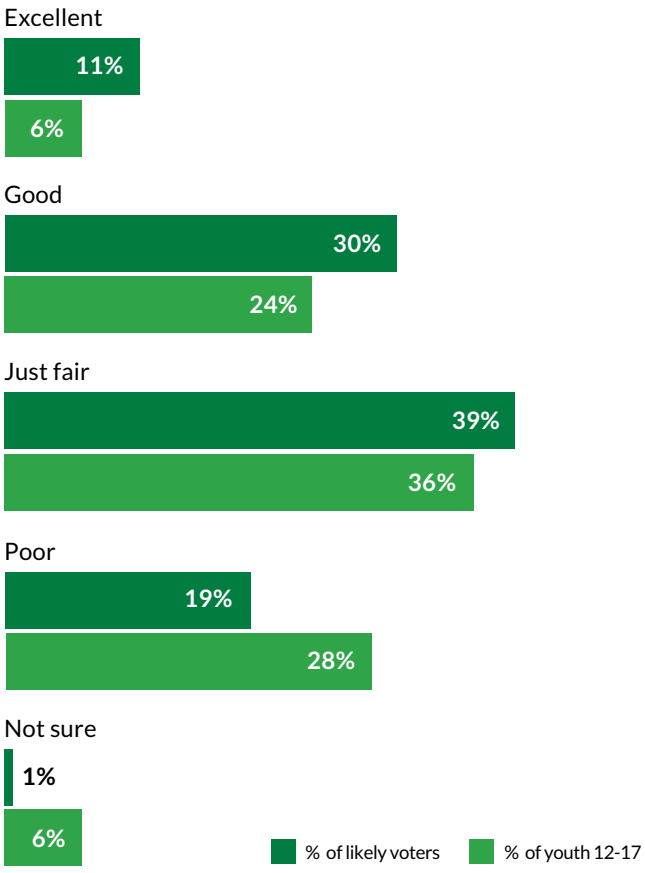
Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=844 teens age 12–17

A bit less than half (48%) of nonparents think children today will be worse off than they are, though 22% say they will be better off, and 22% say they will be about the same as they are.

Young people are slightly less optimistic than parents, and just lean toward believing that they will be better off than their parents in adulthood. Among young adults age 19 to 24, 41% think that when they are older, they will be better off than their parents, though 33% think they will be worse off, and 20% think they will be about the same. Teens agree—40% think they will be better off than their parents when they grow up. Three in 10 (30%) say they will be about the same as their parents, 14% say they will be worse off, and 16% are not sure.

Black teens are more likely than teens of other races or ethnicities to think they will be better off than their parents (53% believe they will be better off than their parents). White teens are less likely to think they will be better off than their parents (36%).

How do you think things are going for families like yours/kids and teenagers in America today?



Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=1000 likely voters
Common Sense State of Kids Survey, November 2023, n=844 teens age 12–17

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Methodology

Likely Voter Survey
Lake Research Partners and Echelon Insights designed and administered this online survey, which was conducted from November 15 to December 3, 2023. The survey reached a total of 2,000 likely 2024 voters nationwide, which includes a base sample of 1,000 likely 2024 voters, with oversamples of 200 parents of children age 18 and under, 100 parents with children age 19–24, 100 Black voters, 100 Latino voters, 100 Asian American and Pacific Islander voters, 100 voters age 18–24, 100 Black voters age 18–24, 100 Latino voters age 18–24, and 100 Asian American and Pacific Islander voters age 18–24. The oversamples were weighed down into the base sample to their proper proportion of the universe for a total sample size of 1,000.

Survey respondents were drawn from an online panel and screened to be likely 2024 voters. The data is statistically weighted to ensure that the sample's demographic and political composition reflect that of all likely 2024 voters nationally.

Kid and Teen Survey
Lake Research Partners and Echelon Insights designed and administered this online survey, which was conducted from November 15 to 29, 2023. The survey reached a total of 1,227 children and teenagers age 12–17 nationwide, which includes a base sample of 884 children and teenagers, with oversamples of 114 Black children and teenagers, 114 Latino children and teenagers, and 115 Asian American and Pacific Islander children and teenagers. The oversamples were weighed down into the base sample to their proper proportion of the universe for a total sample size of 884.

Survey respondents were drawn from an online panel and screened to be children and teenagers age 12–17. The data is statistically weighted to ensure that the sample's demographic and political composition reflect that of all children and teenagers age 12–17 nationally.

In both surveys, numbers sometimes do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Sampling Error in the Surveys
Because the samples are based on those who initially self-selected for participation in the panel, rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to multiple sources of error, including, but not limited to, sampling error, coverage error, and measurement error.

If the kid and teen survey were conducted among a probability sample, then the margin of error would be +/- 2.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence interval; if the voter survey were conducted among a probability sample, then the margin of error would be +/- 2.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence interval.

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Credits

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About Lake Research Partners

Lake Research Partners is a nationally recognized qualitative and quantitative research firm with over 25 years of experience in all phases of public opinion research for public entities and private enterprises. LRP's principals are leading strategists with experience serving as tacticians and senior advisors to a wide range of government agencies, advocacy groups, universities, labor unions, nonprofits, and foundations across the United States. LRP is a Woman-Owned Small-Business (WOSB) and is certified through the U.S. Women's Chamber of Commerce.

About Echelon Insights

Echelon Insights is an opinion research and analytical intelligence firm based in Alexandria, Virginia, known for providing strategic guidance to brands, political organizations, advocacy groups, and nonprofits. Founded in 2014, Echelon Insights has stayed on the cutting edge of polling and data analysis, and in 2022 was ranked as one of the most accurate pollsters in the 2022 election cycle by FiveThirtyEight's analysis.

About Common Sense

Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of all kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century. Our independent research is designed to provide parents, educators, health organizations, and policymakers with reliable, independent data on children's use of media and technology and the impact it has on their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. For more information, visit commonsense.org/research.

For the full report, please visit www.commonsense.org/kids-and-families-in-america.

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