



In A Hearing Before Committee on the Budget U.S. Senate

Reform the Safety Net to Counter the Economic Challenges Facing Women Considering Abortion

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Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Grassley, and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Leslie Ford and I am an Adjunct Fellow in the Center for Opportunity and Social Mobility at the American Enterprise Institute. My research focuses on vulnerable families in our safety net and pathways out of poverty to opportunity.

I want to make three points about vulnerable mothers experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. First, when we asked these women about the challenges they face, they tell us that their concerns are relational and financial. They fear raising their child alone, without the father of their child or extended community to support them as they care for their child. Those challenges are real and we should treat them seriously. Second, many of these women do face economic uncertainty. Many will enter a new, complex world of government support. We can better support these mothers. There is a robust federal and state safety net in place for low-income mothers, and states can and are using their authority within these programs to ensure new mothers can access programs. Still, reforms are needed at the federal level to reduce marriage penalties and help these women find a path back to work and self-sufficiency. Third, as Congress contemplates the options available to vulnerable mothers, it's vital to incorporate non-governmental supports, including both the biological father and vital community supports which surround scared and lonely women with the friendship, guidance, and resources necessary to brave motherhood.

First, it's important to acknowledge that many women considering abortion face significant challenges. But research suggesting that abortion results in better outcomes for women is highly misleading. Studies such as the Turnaway Study collect data on women and analyze differences in outcomes by abortion status. It is scientifically impossible to isolate the effects of an abortion on outcomes for these women. The methods these studies use can only point to correlations, which could be caused by any number of things unrelated to abortion.

Nonetheless, these studies can be informative by describing the circumstances that women may face. Nearly nine in ten women who choose abortion are unmarried.¹ Over half of women who choose abortion are in their twenties and another eight percent are in their teens.² The Turnaway Study also reported that the most common reason women seek abortion is the daunting prospect of economic hardship.³ Another national survey of post-abortive women revealed that the majority of women experienced pressure to abort from other people in their lives.⁴ The challenges that mothers experiencing unplanned pregnancies face are very real. That doesn't mean that ending the life of her unborn child through abortion is the right answer, and a mother should never be pressured to believe that abortion is her only choice.

Second, the U.S. safety net robustly supports vulnerable low-income mothers. They have access to food assistance, supplemental food assistance for babies, cash assistance, health insurance, and for some, housing assistance and childcare. Historically, the U.S. has focused on single-parent families because economic insecurity hits families with single parents more severely than two-parent families. Unfortunately, there are now more families in this situation than ever. When the War on Poverty

1 Kortsmitt K, Nguyen AT, Mandel MG, et al. Abortion Surveillance — United States, 2020. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2022;71(No. SS-10):1–27. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7110a1>

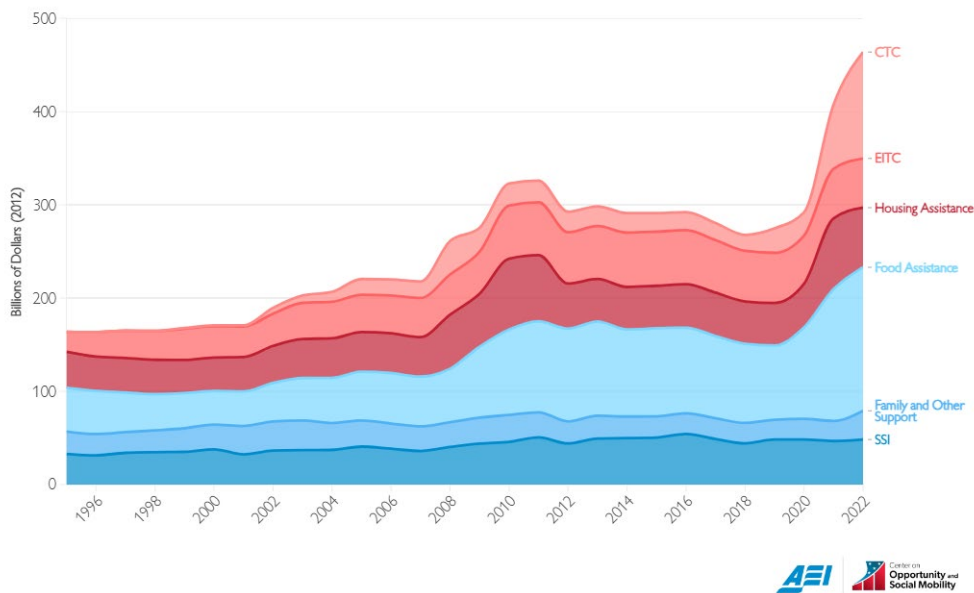
2 Kortsmitt K, Nguyen AT, Mandel MG, et al. Abortion Surveillance — United States, 2020. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2022;71(No. SS-10):1–27. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7110a1>

3 Biggs, M.A., Gould, H. & Foster, D.G. Understanding why women seek abortions in the US. *BMC Women's Health* 13, 29 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6874-13-29>.

4 Reardon D C, Longbons T (January 31, 2023) Effects of Pressure to Abort on Women's Emotional Responses and Mental Health. *Cureus* 15(1): e34456. doi:10.7759/cureus.34456

started in 1964, only seven percent of children were born to single mothers; it is now 42 percent.⁵ More U.S. children under the age of 18 live with one parent and no other adults than in any other country in the world. Now, the U.S. rate—23 percent—is more than three times the average share of children around the world (seven percent).⁶ The number of children living with an unmarried parent is now 32 percent (this includes another parent in the home).⁷

Real Federal Outlays on Major Means-Tested Safety-Net Programs, 1995–2022⁸



Policymakers should respond to the real challenges that these mothers face by reforming the U.S. safety net. Unfortunately, while safety net spending has doubled in real dollars since 1996, it remains a disjointed selection of sometimes difficult to navigate programs that require beneficiaries to interact with multiple agencies on a state and federal level.⁹ The safety net also continues to disincentivize work. Key safety net programs, such as public housing, food assistance programs, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), also have benefit cutoffs or phase-outs that disadvantages married couples relative to unmarried couples.

Reforming the safety net for self-sufficiency should consider the desire of mothers to care for their

⁵ “U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “FastStats: Unmarried Childbearing,” 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/unmarried-childbearing.htm> (accessed December 15, 2022).

⁶ Stephanie Kramer, “U.S. has world’s highest rate of children living in single-parent households, Pew Research Center,” December 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent/> (accessed October 2, 2023).

⁷ Gretchen Livingston, “About one-third of U.S. children are living with an unmarried parent,” Pew Research Center, April 27, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/04/27/about-one-third-of-u-s-children-are-living-with-an-unmarried-parent/> (accessed October 2, 2023).

⁸ Note: Dollar amounts are adjusted to 2020 dollars and exclude funds spent on health care. Outlays include only the refundable portions of the EITC and CTC, not the portions that offset taxes paid. Source: Authors’ calculations using data from Federal Office of Management and Budget, Historical Data Tables, Outlays (billions of dollars) in Constant (FY 2012) Dollars from Matt Weidinger and Angela Rachidi, “CTC Expansion Rooted in Desire to Roll Back Work-Based Welfare,” American Enterprise Institute, February 08, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/articles/ctc-expansion-rooted-in-desire-to-roll-back-work-based-welfare/>.

⁹ Rachidi, Angela, Matt Weidinger, and Scott Winship. 2022. “A Safety Net for the Future: Overcoming the Root Causes of Poverty.” In *American Renewal: A Conservative Plan to Strengthen the Social Contract and Save the Country’s Finances*, ed. Paul Ryan and Angela Rachidi. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.americanrenewalbook.com/a-safety-net-for-the-future-overcoming-the-root-causes-of-poverty>.

young children. The early years are essential for children’s formation and require stable and caring relationships with adults.¹⁰ While 60 percent of low-income mothers return to work within three months,¹¹ surveys of parents with children under age 2 show a preference for a parent to remain at home with the child.¹² For the population of low-income, single mothers, whether or not they seek abortion, the data show that many women reduce their work hours when their children are young. My colleague Angela Rachidi recently examined data from Harvard and Columbia University’s Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Survey, which followed nearly 5,000 families, focusing on parents with nonmarital births, over 15 years and found that “only a small share of unmarried mothers worked full-time in the early survey years after the birth, but fulltime employment increased in later survey years.”¹³

Our safety net can be designed to meet these vulnerable, low-income mothers in their time of need while supporting transitions back into the labor market and not disincentivizing marriage. Within the current safety net, for families with small children (under 6-years-old), the safety should be designed to assist the household. But for parents of school-aged children, the safety net should be directed towards self-sufficiency. Because employment is a key to economic stability and ending individual poverty, the best way for moms to support their children is to find stable work. While the safety net is effective at relieving material deprivation—food, health care, cash—the long-term goal should be for all parents and their children to break out of the cycle of poverty through self-support. Policymakers looking to alleviate poverty should promote policies that lead to more employment and the acquisition of job-related skills to relieve long-term dependency and promote upward mobility.

Specifically, the safety net should not discourage safety net beneficiaries from pursuing what social scientists call the “success sequence,” which is the completion of at least a high school education, full time employment, and marriage. Even when an unplanned pregnancy may interrupt the completion of the success sequence, there is still immense benefit to completing the steps after a child is welcomed. When following up with mothers who completed the success sequence milestones after a nonmarital birth, the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Survey data also showed substantially lower poverty rates on average (9 percent) than did those who did not (78 percent).¹⁴

An example of how to redesign a safety net for self-sufficiency is the 1996 welfare reform, which transformed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program into the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. As a result of these pro-work reforms, the employment-to-population ratio for never-married mothers rose from 46.4 percent in the five years to 62.6 percent. As of 2019, it

10 Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, “The Science of Early Childhood Development (InBrief),” 2007, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-eed/> (accessed October 11, 2023).

11 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Table 6. Employment Status of Mothers with Own Children Under 3 Years Old by Single Year of Age of Youngest Child and Marital Status, 2015–2016 Annual Averages,” April 20, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.t06.htm> (accessed October 11, 2023).; and Lynda Laughlin, “Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns: 2006–2008,” US Census Bureau, 2011, 70–128 <https://www.cen-l.sus.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-128.pdf> (accessed October 11, 2023).

12 Steve Farkas, Ann Duffett, and Jean Johnson, “Necessary Compromises: How Parents, Employers and Children’s Advocates View Child Care Today,” Public Agenda, 2000, <https://researchconnections.org/childcare/resources/6416> (accessed October 11, 2023).

13 Angela Rachidi, “Dynamics of Families After a Nonmarital Birth, American Enterprise Institute, January 08, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/dynamics-of-families-after-a-nonmarital-birth/>.

14 Angela Rachidi, “Dynamics of Families After a Nonmarital Birth, American Enterprise Institute, January 08, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/dynamics-of-families-after-a-nonmarital-birth/>.

reached 73 percent.¹⁵ Most importantly, child poverty, which had been stagnant for decades, fell by more than 60 percent.¹⁶ There is also significant evidence that when mothers who were formerly dependent on the safety net found employment, they experienced increased physical, emotional, and psychological health, as well as better health and behavioral outcomes for children.¹⁷ In addition, while the nonmarital birthrate had been steadily increasing for decades before the safety net reforms of the 1990s, after welfare reform the trend line stabilized.¹⁸ If the non-marital birth rate trend line had continued, an additional 9 million children would now reside in single-parent homes.¹⁹

Finally, there is a real and substantial role for non-governmental support for mothers experiencing unplanned pregnancies. This should include the child's biological father whenever safe. Sometimes engaging non-custodial fathers will take place through the Child Support Services, which offer an opportunity for non-custodial parents to contribute to their child's needs. The evidence is clear that child support payments improve the well-being, health, and stability of children.²⁰ In 2021, child support offices served 13.2 million children—one in five children in the United States.²¹ Child support payments made by non-custodial parents lift 750,000 individuals out of poverty a year²²—unfortunately down from 1 million in 2015.²³

Mothers also need a community that supports them as they learn to be mothers for the first time, or integrate a new baby into their existing families. I'd like to highlight the thousands of pregnancy resources centers throughout the country. While there were 1,603 U.S. abortion providers,²⁴ only 808 clinics performed 96% of all abortions. I'd like to contrast that with the 2,700 pregnancy resource centers that provide wraparound services for women who chose to welcome their child into the world.

To conclude, unplanned pregnancies do present real challenges for mothers. The U.S. safety net is generous and does substantially assist vulnerable mothers as they provide for their and their child's needs. There is work to better design these programs to support low-income families encountering hardship while also empowering them to rise beyond dependence and truly thrive. Low-income

15 Rachidi, Angela, Matt Weidinger, and Scott Winship. 2022. "A Safety Net for the Future: Overcoming the Root Causes of Poverty." In *American Renewal: A Conservative Plan to Strengthen the Social Contract and Save the Country's Finances*, ed. Paul Ryan and Angela Rachidi. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

<https://www.americanrenewalbook.com/a-safety-net-for-the-futureovercoming-the-root-causes-of-poverty>.

16 Scott Winship, "Poverty After Welfare Reform," Manhattan Institute, August 22, 2016, <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/poverty-after-welfare-reform.html>

16 <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Expanding-Work-Requirements-in-Non-Cash-Welfare-Programs.pdf>

17 Slack, Kristen Shook et al. "How Are Children and Families Faring a Decade After Welfare Reform? Evidence from Five Non-Experimental Panel Studies." *Children and youth services review* vol. 29,6 (2007): 693-697, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4260333/>

18 Stephanie J. Ventura, Christine A. Bachrach, "New Report Tracks Trends and Patterns in Nonmarital Births: 50-year rise in births to unmarried women levels off during the 1990s," October 18, 2000, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Health Statistics,

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/00facts/nonmarit.htm#:~:text=After%20rising%20dramatically%20during%20the,stable%20at%20about%2033%20percent>.

19 Robert Rector, Jamie Hall, and Leslie Ford, *A Road Map for Conservative, Pro-Family Welfare Reform*, The Heritage Foundation, December 9, 2022,

<https://www.heritage.org/welfare/report/road-map-conservative-pro-family-welfare-reform>

20 ACF, *The Child Support Program Is a Good Investment: The Story Behind the Numbers*, December 2016, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/report/child-support-program-good-investment>

21 ACF, *FY 2018 Preliminary Data Report*, June 2019, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/policy-guidance/fy-2018-preliminary-data-report>

22 ACF, *The Child Support Program Is a Good Investment: The Story Behind the Numbers*, December 2016, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/report/child-support-program-good-investment>

23 ACF, *The Child Support Program Is a Good Investment: The Story Behind the Numbers*, December 2016, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/report/child-support-program-good-investment>

24 Rachel K. Jones, Marielle Kirstein, Jesse Philbin, "Abortion incidence and service availability in the United States, 2020," 20 November 2022, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Volume 54, Issue 4, <https://doi.org/10.1363/psrh.12215>

mothers, like all Americans, desire and deserve real opportunity for themselves and their children. Finally, the role of supporting these mothers doesn't solely rest with the government. All mothers, but particularly single mothers, deserve a consistent and supportive community to walk alongside them.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.