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we struggle,  
we have difficulties.  
None of us are Superman."**

*– Father of 4 Children, Mississippi*

**36%**

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at least once

**80%**

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caregiving needs

# AMERICA'S FATHERS 2026

A Brief on What American  
Parents Are Experiencing –  
and What They Need

# Introduction: The Systems Trap for Parents in America

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American parents are at a breaking point. Across 16 countries surveyed for the [State of the World's Fathers 2026](#) report (SOWF), the United States stands out for some of the most troubling findings: among the highest parental distress levels, the most expensive childcare, and the weakest paid leave provisions of any peer nation. At the same time, fathers and mothers across the political spectrum are telling us the same thing — they want policies that let them care for their families without constant financial strain.

This brief draws on the US sample of the State of the World's Fathers 2026 global survey and qualitative interviews with 32 American fathers. It presents a clear-eyed and distressing portrait of what American fathers and mothers are experiencing. The data make clear that caregiving in America is not just a family matter. It is a public health issue, an economic issue, and increasingly a political one.

**“ My main job as a parent is to provide or create the environment within which learning and growth and maturing will happen. The government’s role to its society is to provide the environment within which we are also all learning and growing. And so, chaos there creates chaos down here.**

– 51 YEAR-OLD FATHER, KANSAS CITY

# Methodology

This brief draws on the US sample from the State of the World's Fathers 2026 (SOWF 2026), a global study of approximately 8,000 parents and caregivers across 16 countries coordinated by Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice.

**US Survey Sample:** A comparative random sample of 500 US parents (372 fathers, 121 mothers, and 6 non-binary/trans parents) aged 18 to 65, drawn from the State of American Fathers study conducted in May 2025. Data were collected via established online panels administered by RepData.

**Qualitative Component:** In-depth interviews and focus groups with 32 US fathers conducted across six cities (Kansas City, Oakland, Atlanta, Raleigh, Chicago, and Dallas), representing diversity in ethnicity, age, political leaning, caregiving responsibilities, and marital status. Fathers also participated in a photovoice activity documenting their caregiving experiences through images and reflection.

The online panel methodology means data are illustrative of cross-national patterns and associations rather than fully nationally representative estimates. Where noted, additional data from Equimundo's [State of American Men 2025](#) study (N=2,454 including 1,080 fathers) provide supplementary US context.

# “All On You”: Economic Precarity and the Impossible Math of American Parenthood

American parents are running the numbers every day — and they don't add up. Childcare costs more than rent. A single emergency can wipe out months of savings. Between mortgages, lack of decent wages, and a tax system that does not provide carers strong benefits, parents in the US face anguish-inducing economic precarity. This is an economic concern but as the global report suggests, its also about 'empty hearts'. When a father is mentally replaying his bills while his kid is asking him to play, when a mother quits a career she loves because daycare costs more than her paycheck, the economy is failing wallets and hearts.

Economic anxiety is the defining feature of American parenthood in 2026. The survey used a 12-item economic precarity index across all 16 countries. The result for the United States was stark: economic precarity affects all ages and genders similarly, with no significant differences between fathers and mothers or across age groups. Financial insecurity among American parents is essentially universal – which stands out given the US is the world's richest nation.

The average US household with children spends 9% of its income on childcare, but low-income families spend over 20%. After subsidies, net childcare

costs still consume 23% of household income for couples and 37% for single parents — placing the US among the OECD countries with the most expensive child care.

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**79%**

**of US fathers agree that it is much harder for their generation to feel financial secure than their father's generation. 77% of mothers agreed.**

**86%**

**of US men (fathers and non-fathers) chose “providing for my family” as the top trait of manhood. 77% of women (mothers and non-mothers) agreed — making economic insecurity existential for American men's identity.**

**51%**

**of US parents say home ownership is out of their reach.**

**“ I got laid off after [...] 13 years, and now, I can't always provide. [Your children] value that time with you [...] and sometimes, it's hard [to be present and support them] even though you're physically there.**

— FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN, DALLAS

**“ I've been out of graduate school for over 20 years and I'm still paying back my loans. My kids' peers are \$50,000, \$75,000, \$175,000 in debt and still working at Starbucks. There's this sense of: 'I'll never be able to afford to buy a house. I can't afford to get married. I can't afford to have kids.'**

— 51 YEAR-OLD FATHER WHO LIVES ALONE AND HAS ADULT CHILDREN, PORTLAND

**“ For almost 10 years, my wife worked as a server at a restaurant [...] I would come home, give her a high five, and she would go to work. You can't typically get an office job starting at 4 p.m. Once the kids were in school, she was able to start having a career, but it was hard for her to go back [because employers ask] 'what have you been doing for 10 years?'**

— 51 YEAR-OLD FATHER WHO LIVES ALONE AND HAS ADULT CHILDREN, PORTLAND

# “The Sacrifice ‘Scorecard’ Where No One Wins

There is a question that millions of American parents ask themselves in some form every single week, and it has no good answer: What do I give up today? The job promotion that requires travel, or the bedtime routine your four-year-old still needs? The salary bump that keeps you afloat, or the school play you promised you'd attend? Flexibility at work, knowing your manager will remember it at review time? For fathers, actively parenting comes with a "flexibility stigma" i.e., the more you try to be present, the less committed you appear. For mothers, the penalty is even more direct: having a child costs women roughly 23% of their earnings over a decade.

Men get a "fatherhood bonus" for simply being fathers - including higher pay, better promotion prospects, or being viewed as more responsible and committed employees - but the moment they act on it, the bonus disappears. Women face the motherhood penalty for trying to "have it all." And somewhere between those two impossible expectations, American families are simply trying to survive in a system that neither rewards nor supports parents and caregivers.

The study measured 16 types of caregiving-related sacrifices spanning employment and personal life.

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**5.4**

average sacrifices reported by US fathers.

**5.8**

average sacrifices reported by US mothers.

**80%**

of US parents have made work- or finance-related changes to meet caregiving needs.

US mothers are 14 percentage points more likely than fathers to stop working to meet caregiving responsibilities. Meanwhile, 61% of US fathers cite struggling to balance job and care responsibilities as the key reason they lack time for caregiving.

“ **Decrease in finances decreases the opportunity to give to your kids. Maybe we don't play in 700 different sports leagues, maybe we don't eat out. You want to provide your children with experiences, and without the dollars, it's hard to do that.**

– 48 YEAR-OLD FATHER OF THREE CHILDREN,  
KANSAS CITY

“ **I was the wallet dad. The only thing I did for my children growing up was [pay] for everything. I was never there. Career over family. It caught up with me.**

– 51 YEAR-OLD FATHER OF THREE CHILDREN,  
CHICAGO



	Fathers	Mothers
Reduced work hours	47%	49%
Worked overtime	62%	57%
Changed job to have more flexible work hours	43%	46%
Left my job/stopped work	30%	45%
Turned down a promotion or professional opportunity	29%	28%
Delayed major life purchases	51%	60%
Tapped into emergency savings funds	48%	57%
Tapped into a retirement savings account	38%	36%
Refinanced or sold your home	33%	23%
Reduced spending on non-essential activities like shopping, taking vacations	53%	64%

# "None of Us Are Superman": The Hidden Mental Health Crisis of American Parents

Your kids think you can fix anything. The leaky faucet, the broken bike, or even a nightmare at 2 a.m. What they don't see is the father lying awake at 3 a.m., doing the math on next month's rent, replaying every decision he made that day, wondering if he is enough. "None of us are Superman," one dad told us — but the expectation to be Superman never lets up. Our data reveal that **American parents report the worst mental health outcomes of all 16 countries in this study.** American parents reported higher rates of suicidal thoughts and chronic worry, than parents in almost every other nation.

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**36%**

**of US fathers have thought of suicide at least once in 2 weeks prior to taking the survey. 28% of US mothers have thought the same.**

**16.3x**

**Men (fathers and non fathers) in the US facing financial instability are 16.3 times as likely to have had suicidal thoughts in the past two weeks.**

**5.2x**

**Fathers with more rigid ideas of fatherhood are 5.2 times as likely to report suicidality.**

At the same time, fatherhood itself is a protective factor for mental health problems: US fathers are 1.3 times as likely to report a sense of purpose compared to men without children. The challenge is that systems are undermining that source of resilience.

“ Kids look at you like you're Superman. We're like anyone else; we struggle, we have difficulties. None of us are Superman.

— FATHER OF FOUR CHILDREN, MISSISSIPPI

“ [...] our culture really expects men to be providers [...] But men don't really support each other in those challenges. We don't have each other the way our wives do with their friends. As men, we're alone a lot trying to navigate being a father [and] being a husband.

— 24 YEAR-OLD FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN,  
LOUISVILLE

“ [When experiencing hardship] A lot of us in rural areas [commonly hear] — 'You're just weak!' 'Suck it up!' 'Tough it out!' Instead of somebody being supportive like: 'Hey man, I understand. I go through that myself sometimes.'

— FATHER OF FOUR CHILDREN, MISSISSIPPI

“ The worst part is [as a father,] you have to maintain that façade. If dad's struggling, then we're really in trouble. [...] [There are] times where there's a squeeze or uncertainty and you just have to muddle through it on your own.

— 24 YEAR-OLD FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN,  
LOUISVILLE

“ There are men that want to be parents. But I keep this all hidden because I don't want to look like I don't know what I'm doing. When somebody says, 'hey, you need help with anything?' I say no. Because I don't want to feel like I can't do this. Especially because I wasn't raised by a male.

— FATHER OF ONE 18 MONTH-OLD CHILD, LOS  
ANGELES

# Day One, You're on Your Own: America's Parental Leave Failure

In most higher income countries having a baby comes with a guarantee: paid time. Time to heal, time to bond, time to figure out how to keep a tiny human alive without also losing your income. In America, that guarantee doesn't exist as a national law. The day your child is born, the clock starts ticking on how fast you can get back to your desk. This lack of support from day one is counterintuitive to a world that places its bets on our children as the future, as those who will shepherd the species into innovation, into pushing our current boundaries. Babies need parents and parents need time with their babies.

The United States has one of the smallest paid parental leave provisions among the 16 countries studied. Although there is no national leave in the US, a growing number of states are responding to the demand. While New York City records zero gender gap in paid parental leave (84 days for both parents), the total duration remains far shorter than peer nations — Spain offers 133 days each, Croatia 120 days. The US is not among the six countries offering incentives for fathers to take leave, nor among the four perceived by legal experts to fully enforce existing leave legislation.

The US does not have a culture that promotes leave, makes it normal, or encourages fathers to take it. Economically precarious families do not take leave — they cannot afford the income loss or feel too insecure in their employment. This finding of economic insecurity overshadows all other findings. America needs paid leave — but it also needs economic security of all kinds for families.

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**14%**

of US workers have access to paid family leave.

**Only 9 states and DC**

provide paid family leave within that 14%.

**About 32%**

of workplaces offer paid family leave.

“Daycare is where I think policy could make a huge difference. Families shouldn't be deciding between [their] career [...] and allowing their kids to be in a safe place during the day.

— FATHER OF THREE CHILDREN, WISCONSIN

“There were many years when I wanted to quit and felt like I didn't have an option. I had to keep my job because otherwise, how's my family gonna eat? It's all on you.

— 51 YEAR-OLD FATHER WHO LIVES ALONE AND HAS ADULT CHILDREN, PORTLAND

# "They Don't Care About People Like Me": Trust, Distrust, and the Parent Vote

American parents have not stopped wanting help. They have stopped believing it is coming. Across our interviews, fathers — conservative and progressive alike — described a deep, bipartisan exhaustion with a political system they see as performative, self-serving, and disconnected from the daily reality of keeping a family afloat. And yet, when asked directly, **overwhelming majorities said they would vote for the very policies no one is offering them.**

Trust in US institutions has collapsed. Only 22% of Americans said they trust the federal government to do the right thing in 2024 — near the lowest level in more than six decades of Pew polling.

**81%**

of US fathers say most elected officials don't care about people like them. 78% of mothers agree.

**27%**

of US fathers say they trust Congress. 38% of mothers trust Congress.

**31%**

of the US fathers say they trust their Political Parties. 46% of US mothers trust their Political Parties.

Despite deep distrust, American parents overwhelmingly support care policies:



**87% of fathers and 91% of mothers agree employees would be happier and more productive with subsidized childcare.**



**82% of fathers and 87% of mothers support a four-day work week for better work-life balance.**



**90% of fathers and 83% of mothers agree all parents should have paid time from work to spend with their children.**



**60% of fathers and 64% mothers would vote for candidates who care about paid parental leave (paternity and maternity).**



**65% of fathers and 69% mothers would vote for candidates who care about child tax credits.**



**64% of fathers and 64% mothers would vote for candidates who care about subsidized elder or child care.**

**“ I personally don't think that a group coming from the government is gonna carry the same credibility with me. [...] I like the natural community. It's more like: 'I want to do this [because] these are my people.' Coming from the government, it's just gonna feel inauthentic.**

– FATHER OF ONE CHILD, BALTIMORE

**“ We don't trust the government. I do not trust the government to have any input on my family or my kids. My village can handle it.**

– 44 YEAR-OLD FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN,  
CHICAGO

**“ I think part of the reason the election was the way it was – it was just this profound dissatisfaction and distrust of everything. These are a lot of the kids now of voting age. They didn't get to have a high school experience because they had to watch classes online. And it's a sense of: 'you guys are in charge, what's going on here?'**

– 51 YEAR-OLD FATHER WHO LIVES ALONE AND HAS  
ADULT CHILDREN, PORTLAND

**“ We all kind of fall in the middle. I want equality for everyone. I want everybody [to have opportunities]. I just want to know that my children have a chance.**

– 52 YEAR-OLD FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN, CHICAGO

**“ Additional tax credits for families – this year was the first year I didn't get the child tax credit for my 17-year-old son. Didn't even know that was a thing. That was kind of a hit on us. If anything, it would be more on the financial side.**

– FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN, RURAL TEXAS

**“ Taking the financial burden off of people – it does free them up to be able to do other things. To be a full-time dad and a full-time husband.**

– 24 YEAR-OLD FATHER OF TWO CHILDREN,  
LOUISVILLE



# Where Do We Go From Here?

American parents are not failing — the systems around them are. Across political and economic divides, fathers and mothers are asking for the same basic supports: affordable childcare, paid parental leave, economic security, flexible work, and better mental health support. Care cannot continue to be treated as a private burden families solve alone. It is essential social and economic infrastructure.

The current conservative political panic about fertility decline is empty rhetoric. We know what families who already have children need and want and we know what families of any ethnic group and income bracket need to feel secure enough to want children: the guarantee that they can be supported as caregivers. Our data confirm what is mostly widely known: parents will vote for the care services they desperately need. This is not a question of desire nor political will by parents. It is a matter of specific economic interests and political subterfuge that is keeping Congress from passing the laws that would support the care policies that an overwhelming percentage of families, conservative, progressive and in between all want.

As the upcoming midterm elections approach, campaigns like Equipundo's Vote Like a Dad campaign are encouraging fathers and caregivers to take action by researching candidates' positions on paid leave, accessible childcare, living wages, and family economic security; asking elected officials where they stand on care policies; sharing their own caregiving stories in their communities and online; and showing up to vote with the needs of families at the center of the conversation. The campaign emphasizes that dads should step into the ballot box with both their hearts and wallets in mind, recognizing that strong care policies strengthen not only families, but also workplaces, communities, and the broader economy.

The findings in this brief show that American parents overwhelmingly support care policies and want institutions that value caregiving as much as paid work. The question is no longer whether families need support. It is whether the United States is willing to build a society where caregiving is recognized, protected, and shared.

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