This decade review centers on 2 disconnects between rhetoric and reality. First, public investments in families continue to grow, yet family policy is still not a term widely used by policymakers or the public. Second, social science studies increased in number and sophistication, with some family sensitive and others policy relevant. Few focus on both, which is what is most needed if research is to inform family policy. In exploring these disconnects, we summarize recent trends in family policies and the influence of research on family policymaking. We suggest a rationale for family policy and illustrate its value using the examples of early childhood, welfare reform, and parent education policies. We conclude with suggested next steps.

In the spirit of a decade review, we look forward by first looking back. In the past decade, we have observed that family policy remains undeveloped as a focus of intellectual inquiry despite the growing reach of public policy on families. On the basis of our assessment of the current state of the field, family policy has not merited sufficient attention from knowledge producers in universities, think tanks, or evaluation firms. Only a handful of family policy courses are taught in family studies and social work departments, and even fewer in public policy schools (Ooms, 2006). Arguably, family policy is still not a term that is widely used by knowledge consumers, such as policymakers, journalists, or the public. It has not yet achieved the status of economic or environmental policy, nor is it even recognized in its own right as a subfield of social policy.

David Demo, editor of the Journal of Marriage and Family (JMF), recently surveyed the titles and abstracts of articles published in JMF to assess the prevalence of various topics. Between 1999 and 2007, Demo found 15 articles that focused on family policy, placing it in a tie for 20th place. In stark contrast, JMF editorial board members identified family policy as the most important topic for the 2010 decade reviews. Is this dearth of family policy articles in JMF because the topic has been co-opted by other family or policy journals? During this same time period, Family Relations published 22 articles in which family policy figured prominently enough to warrant a mention in the title or abstract. Similarly, between 1998 and 2007, 13 family policy articles appeared in the Journal of Family and Economic Issues (Dew, 2008). This paltry record also extends to political science journals. From 1907 to 2002, the top 28 political science journals included the word family in article titles only 72 times (Strach, 2007); the mention of family was modest at best,
far fewer than once per year over the course of almost a century.

Granted, these numbers are not derived from a scientific survey—the time periods vary and definitions differ across journals. Nonetheless, we believe the evidence is suggestive. Several scholars who have considered the attention the academy has committed to research on family policy reach a similar conclusion: Family plays a pervasive role in policy, but it is “surprisingly absent from mainstream research in American politics” (Strach, 2007, p. 5).

A major conundrum of the decade, based on our review of the field, is the paucity of attention devoted to research on family policy relative to the preponderance of public policies concerning families. Public investments in families continue to grow. Expenditures on some 80 means-tested programs have increased in recent years to the point where per capita spending is now at the highest level in history (Moffitt, 2008). Viewed from a research perspective, however, it is as if this massive and continuing encroachment of the public sphere into how families are formed and function were not taking place. We argue here that an insufficient share of social science research touches upon family policy questions. Obviously, some research is family sensitive and other research is policy relevant, but too little encompasses what is really needed if science is to inform family policy: research that is both family sensitive and policy relevant.

Some progress is being made. As noted in the last decade review (Bogenschneider, 2000), family policy is a young field that is slowly and inexorably evolving. Some major questions facing an emerging field have been answered, specifically, the controversies of the 1970s regarding the definition of family policy, the dilemma of the 1980s regarding partisan ownership of family policy, and the issue of the 1990s regarding the legitimacy of government’s role in family functioning. We contend that accumulating evidence finally has begun to answer the defining question of this decade, one that has plagued the field since Steiner’s (1981) book: Why do we need family policy, anyway? What, if any, unique and value-added perspective can family policy bring to research, social policy, and the design and conduct of social interventions? To be taken seriously as a field of inquiry and a subfield of social policy, family policy requires its own identity, a common language, and a clearer articulation of its value for research and policy.

In this article, we review four developments in family policy over the past decade. First, we discuss basic definitional issues critical to any fledging field. Second, we examine whether family policies continue to grow in scope and generosity as they did in the 1990s and since the inception of the field in the 1970s (Bogenschneider, 2000). Third, we situate this analysis in a larger policy context by considering how family policies are shaped by overarching trends in U.S. policymaking. Fourth, given policymakers’ rising interest in evidence-based policymaking in general (Huston, 2008), we focus in particular on whether research has been used to inform family policymaking. Building on these developments, we turn to a cross-disciplinary review of the literature to examine what we contend is a fundamental question for this decade: What rationale exists to warrant the status of family policy as a field of inquiry and a subfield of social policy? We propose such a rationale and illustrate its value to research and policy using the examples of early childhood, welfare reform, and parent education policies. We conclude with suggested next steps to move discussion of family policy from analysis to action.

**DEFINITIONAL DEBATES ABOUT FAMILY POLICY AND FAMILIES DURING THE DECADE**

We begin by defining policy as a plan or course of action carried out through a law, rule, code, or other mechanism in the public or private sector. Family policy has been conceptualized not only as an end goal but also as a criterion for assessing policy impact and as a means for achieving other policy goals (e.g., workplace policies that promote employee productivity by providing care for sick children; Bogenschneider, 2000). This conceptual distinction between explicit and implicit policy, though not initially embraced by all, was subsequently more widely accepted, most recently by the United Nations (E. Olson, personal communication, March 5, 2009).

As initially defined by Ooms (1990), family policies encompass four explicit functions of families: (a) family creation (e.g., to marry or divorce, to bear or adopt children), (b) economic support (e.g., to provide for members’ basic needs), (c) childrearing (e.g., to socialize the next generation), and (d) caregiving (e.g., to
provide assistance for the disabled, frail, ill, and elderly).

The companion implicit term, a family perspective in policymaking, acknowledges the critical role family considerations play in a broad range of policies by analyzing (a) what the consequences are of any policy or program on family well-being and (b) when families are used as a means to accomplish other policy ends. Many issues prominent in the decade were not considered family policies per se because they affected individuals as well as families, yet still would have benefited from a family perspective in a couple ways. First, families can be used as a criterion for assessing the advertent and inadvertent impact of policies. For example, political discourse on prison policy focused primarily on the prisoner as an individual, with little analysis of the effect of incarceration on family earnings, family relationships, and parenting practices. Similarly, debate over Social Security was seldom approached from a family perspective, yet, when it was, substantial family effects became apparent. Concerns about the solvency of Social Security led to proposals to create privatized accounts that would maximize an individual’s opportunity to build up personal retirement savings, but would jeopardize existing protections for children and lower earning spouses (Reno, Graetz, Apfel, Lavery, & Hill, 2005).

Second, families are used as a means to achieve various policy ends. For example, families are used to determine who is eligible for benefits; currently, 80% of U.S. immigration policy is based on family connections. Families also act as administrators of public benefits to their members; for instance, parents’ economic status is used to determine eligibility for student financial aid, regardless of how much money parents plan to provide (Strach, 2007).

Focusing on families broadens political discourse because it embodies an essential quality found in few policy frameworks and one that is seldom advanced by special interest groups: commitment to others even when such actions exact a personal cost. This family focus can counter individualistic, narrow, or self-serving agendas forwarded by lobbyists or political action committees by moving away from concentrating on overly specific problems or single solutions and toward a more holistic, multidimensional way of thinking about policy challenges. A family-centered view enlarges our organizing frame by adopting a longitudinal life span perspective that considers families from the cradle to grave and acknowledges all forms of intrafamily sharing.

The terms family policy and a family perspective in policymaking move our attention beyond the individual to a relationship between two or more persons tied together by blood, legal bonds, or the joint performance of family functions—a conceptual distinction that is often overlooked in policy debate. For example, children’s or women’s policy is often incorrectly equated with family policy even though an individual is targeted, not a family relationship or family unit. Family is sometimes misused to represent some, but not all, relationships in families. For example, family can be a code word for mother and child, with no mention of the father (Cowan & Cowan, 2008) or grandparent. The term single-parent family often masks the role of cohabiting or nonresidential parents in the lives of their children (Bogenschneider, 2000, 2006a).

Even as a consensus emerged around the definition of family policy, research raised questions about the definition of family. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study of 5,000 children born to unwed parents in 20 large U.S. cities revealed a high rate of cohabitation and close partner relationships among what had previously been termed single-parent families (McLanahan, 2009). When their baby was born, half of unmarried mothers were living with the child’s father. The mothers reported that 90% of cohabiting fathers provided financial and other support during pregnancy, 100% of the men told mothers they wanted to help raise the child, and nearly 100% of mothers wanted the fathers to be involved. This study, and others, suggested that the term single parent was misplaced and that the term fragile families might be more fitting.

One definitional debate proved uncommonly controversial: whether same-sex couples were to be thought of as a family and should be allowed to raise children and marry. With regard to raising children, no jurisdiction legally recognized same-sex parents in 1991. By 2005, half of all states had some recognition of same-sex parents, established by legal mandate or court decree. All states now allow married couples and unmarried individuals to apply for adoption, and 11 states do not allow sexual orientation to be used as a criterion for preventing adoption. In contrast, three states specifically block same-sex couples from adopting, and two states prohibit
gay people from becoming foster parents (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007).

This growing recognition of same-sex parenting does not extend to same-sex marriage. Since 2003, six states have permitted same-sex marriage. By 2009, 36 states had enacted statutes to ban gay marriage, 30 states had amended their constitutions to ban gay marriage, and 42 states had passed laws defining marriage as a union between a man and woman, although three of these have since been overturned (Vestal, 2009). Marital status has social significance but also brings with it many legal rights as well (American Bar Association Section of Family Law, 2004).

Contention remains over gay rights and gay marriage, although the overall trend is toward increased acceptance. Two decades ago, solid majorities of Americans felt that gay marriage should be illegal, but in a survey after the 2004 election as many citizens rejected that proposition as accepted it. When asked about the importance of issues to their vote, gay marriage ranked 15th out of 16 issues. Gay marriage appears to constitute a major issue for some politically active Americans, but a minor issue for most others (Fiorina, 2006).

We anticipate further attention to the definition of family, given trends in family formation. As both nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation have increased, family formation has become less sequenced. Instead of couples marrying, divorcing, and then remarrying and having another child, fragile families today experience greater partnership instability and more multiple-partner fertility. In the Fragile Families Study of new parents, by the time of their child's third birthday, two thirds of unmarried mothers had experienced one partnership change, over one third had experienced at least two changes, and about one fifth three or more changes. Mothers find themselves ending relationships and searching for a permanent partner often at the peak of fertility (McLanahan, 2009); these multiple transitions have important consequences for the design of child support policies, fathering programs, marriage initiatives, and so forth.

THE ENACTMENT OF FAMILY POLICIES DURING THE DECADE

Recent public policies arguably have resulted in one of the most remarkable socioeconomic status (SES) changes for families in the nation’s history (Wertheimer, 2003). When the welfare reform law was passed in 1996, 32% of parents living in poverty were in the labor force; only 4 years later, that figure rose to 43%, a seismic shift in such a short time. The entry of low-income, single mothers into the labor force has stalled recently, yet the world of poor children is qualitatively different today from two decades ago. Now, only 38% of children in families living below 200% of poverty have a stay-at-home, nonemployed parent (Waldfogel, 2008). The welfare reform law was the first federal policy to explicitly address marriage and family formation (Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004), and its 2006 reauthorization provided $150 million for demonstration/evaluation projects to promote healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood. By 2005, 32 states had established at least one couples and marriage education program, and 36 states had eliminated requirements that limited welfare benefits to single parents (Nock, 2005).

Policy initiatives in education and health care have been no less dramatic. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, characterized as the most significant federal education policy initiative in a generation (Education Commission of the States, 2002), charged states with improving student performance and closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students or risk corrective sanctions. By 2008, almost every state had put into place a system for tracking the academic achievement of individual students, and 27 states instituted yearly testing in reading and mathematics in Grades 3 through 8 (Rand Corporation, 2007). Similarly, the 1997 State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and its 2009 reauthorization was the biggest policy change since the enactment of Medicaid for improving health access for the poor and near poor (Swartz, 2008). Every state expanded SCHIP coverage, though doing so was optional, with state and federal funding quadrupling from less than $2 billion in 1999 to $7 billion in real terms in 2005 (Zedlewski & Zimmerman, 2007), reaching an estimated 7.4 million children and over 334,000 parents at some point in 2008 (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2009). Finally, in response to a 2003 initiative of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 43 states opened resource centers for older adults and people with disabilities (see the Aging & Disabilities Resource Center Web site at www.adrc-tae.org/tiki-index.php?page_ref_id=745).
Across the decade, policymakers enacted a number of federal family policies addressing issues such as adoption, autism, bankruptcy, child abuse, child care, childhood disease, children’s health, child support, college costs, disabilities, domestic violence, education, family caregiving, family poverty, fatherhood, foster care, Head Start, infant mortality, kidnapped children, legal protections for military families, marriage, mentoring children of incarcerated parents, partial-birth abortion, premature birth, Native American language preservation, tax policy, underage drinking, welfare reform, visitation rights, and others (additional supporting information from Bogenschneider, Little, & Corbett, “Appendix: Selected Federal Family Policies Enacted in the U.S. Between 1998 and 2009” may be found in the online version of this article and also on the web site of the first author at http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/doc.asp?d=jmf2010 appendix.pdf). States also enacted a number of laws regarding children’s health, education, family poverty, paid family leave, partial-birth abortion, prisoner reentry, universal pre-K, waiving juveniles into adult court, etc.

THE EFFECT OF POLICYMAKING TRENDS ON THE RECIPIENTS, REACH, AND GENEROSITY OF FAMILY POLICIES

Over the past decade, we observed that family policies were shaped, in part, by four trends emblematic of the larger context of U.S. policymaking. First, family policies have been patched together over time by policymakers, sometimes without apparent rhyme or reason. For example, the federal government spends more funds on the elderly, primarily through universal programs such as Social Security, whereas state and local governments spend more on children, primarily through income-tested policies and programs. Education is locally financed, which has resulted in inequities because spending patterns are heavily influenced by the wealth of the local community (Folbre, 2008). This “means testing” of many family policies, when taken together with the American tradition of providing support through tax subsidies, results in a patchwork system of coverage and generosity. In some instances, certain demographic groups win whereas others lose. For example, when confronting health challenges, virtually all the elderly enjoy health care coverage, whereas some 11% of children have no insurance. In addition, coverage varies by race and ethnicity, with 23% of African American and 37% of Hispanic children experiencing periods without health insurance coverage during 2003 (Folbre).

Second, the budget process has favored some recipients over others because certain programs are mandatory and do not require annual appropriations, whereas others do. The major mandatory programs—Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare—largely serve the elderly and will continue to do so because of built-in annual benefit increases. Social Security has an annual cost-of-living provision, whereas the major federal health coverage programs are based on a sum sufficient budget where demand dictates how much is spent. Between 1996 and 2006, spending on Social Security grew by over $73 billion and Medicare spending exploded by $150 billion in constant 2007 dollars (Scholz, Moffitt, & Cowan, 2008). In contrast, other programs, such as those that invest in children’s health, education, and work supports for parents, seldom are structured to have automatic increases; as a result, these programs have grown in nominal terms, but at rates much slower than other domestic spending and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the future, if the large entitlement programs continue as is, their rising costs will squeeze out resources dedicated to discretionary initiatives benefiting children, education, work support, and so forth (Steuerle, Reynolds, & Carasso, 2007).

Third, with the passage of the 1996 welfare reform law, government spending shifted from the goal of income support through guaranteed cash assistance to one of helping families support themselves through work (Zedlewski & Zimmerman, 2007). Spending on four main work support programs for low-income families with children—Medicaid, SCHIP, food stamps, and child care subsidies—grew steeply between 1996 and 2005, with state and local government allocations growing from $2,088 to $3,235 per person in constant 2005 dollars.

Fourth, the devolution of federal authority for family policies to states and local municipalities continues unabated. This local latitude in enacting family policies affects the distribution and generosity of supports families receive. Spending on Medicaid, SCHIP, food stamps, and child care subsidies varies substantially; some states provide under $2,000 per person per
year and other states provide more than $4,000 per person per year (Zedlewski & Zimmerman, 2007). Using the example of the nation’s largest, work-conditioned cash assistance program for low-income families, 17 states supplement the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) with a state EITC, although benefits fluctuate from $13 to $200 per person.

THE INFLUENCE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE ON FAMILY POLICYMAKING

This decade has witnessed a welcome interest in evidence-based policymaking (Huston, 2008), yet there still is no simple, linear association between science and policy. In fact, this relation may be less linear for family policies because they touch on core, often conflicting values regarding equality, personal responsibility, sex, and so forth. Sometimes science is used, sometimes not; sometimes it is used correctly, other times it is misused and misconstrued for political purposes. Several prominent theories attempt to explain the underutilization of research in policymaking: the character of the policymaking process itself, the structure of democratic institutions, the limitations and complexities of scientific inquiry, and the institutional and professional environments in which knowledge producers and consumers operate (see Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010). In the end, the role of research in shaping policy debates and informing policy decisions seldom matches the level of investments by government and the philanthropic community. Granted, science could play a much bigger role than it does, but still some recent successes can be noted.

The Society for Research in Child Development (2008) recently identified examples where science informed policy in the last decade: higher-quality children’s educational television programming; improvements in child passenger safety; a law requiring federal reimbursement of foster care maintenance through age 21; legislation for early childhood programs at the state and federal levels; state standards for providing mental health care to children, adolescents, and families; and the U.S. Supreme Court decision to abolish the juvenile death penalty.

Knowledge intermediaries, those who translate and disseminate research to policymakers, reported some success in providing research that has informed policy decisions. For example, the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars developed a theory of change for evaluating efforts to disseminate high quality, objective research to policymakers. Preliminary impacts included policymaker reports of knowledge gained, attitudes changed about research and researchers, and relationships built with researchers and colleagues in the other party. Also, policymakers reported using Seminar information in their jobs in several ways, such as sharing it with colleagues and constituents, drawing on it to draft legislation, and using it to assess the family impact of legislation. Seminar organizers make no claim that the Seminars, in and of themselves, cause a policy change. Examples suggest, however, that they may have influenced such policy decisions as authorization of long-term care insurance, establishment of school safety specialists, a prescription drug law for the elderly, refundable child care tax credits, and a state Earned Income Tax Credit (Bogenschneider, Normandin, Onaga, Bowman, & MacDermid, 2010). Taken together, research appears to have had some impact on some policies some of the time.

THE RATIONALE FOR FAMILY POLICY AS A FIELD OF INQUIRY AND A SUBFIELD OF SOCIAL POLICY

Intuitively accepting the importance of healthy families to a strong and vital society is one thing; it is quite another to consciously and systematically place families at the center of research and policy. As a first step, families need to be viewed as a focal area of study deserving of support and encouragement. Family should be seen as a population to be assessed systemically, as an indicator of societal health, and as an explicit criterion for evaluating the impact of policies and programs. The potential of anchoring research and policy on families is illustrated by the story of contemporary poverty research that dates back to 1963. In that year, Robert Lampman wrote a seminal chapter in the Council of Economic Advisor’s Report of the President arguing that an improving economy would not lift all families out of want. Soon thereafter, a measure of poverty was developed by Mollie Orshansky at the Social Security Administration, and public policy was directed to a new societal challenge by President Johnson’s declaration of the War on Poverty. By the late 1960s, one litmus test for policy
proposals was, "What does it do for the poor?"

Granted, concern for the poor can be traced back to the emergence of civilization itself, and poverty research was being practiced as early as the late 19th century. Yet sophisticated policy attention did not pick up until a distinct field of inquiry developed. Today, our understanding of poverty is immeasurably more advanced and nuanced than it was 50 years ago.

To similarly elevate families in research and policy, the nature of discourse must shift to prioritizing families as worthy of study and political action. To make that happen, what is needed is a clear rationale for family policy, which we think may be a defining question of the last decade. The proposed rationale synthesizes studies from several disciplines and is intended to stimulate further dialogue about strengthening this rationale so family policy can achieve a more serious standing as both a field of intellectual inquiry and as a subfield of social policy.

We begin by proposing several reasons for establishing families as a critical focus of policymaking because of the many contributions they make to society. Families are a fundamental foundation for generating the productive workers a sound economy demands. Families also contribute to the rearing of the caring, committed citizens a strong democracy requires. Family policy is an efficient investment of public resources to achieve societal goals and an effective means of promoting positive child and youth development. Finally, because families reflect normative ideals held by U.S. policymakers and the public, they potentially proffer the middle ground from which compromise and consensus can emerge.

Families Are a Fundamental Foundation for Generating Productive Workers

Family policy could help policymakers perceive families, not as mere units of consumption but rather as the key contributor to the development of human capital (Longman, 2004). If policymakers better appreciated families as a powerful and unique engine of a vital economy, they would be more receptive to public policies rewarding families for their private contribution toward the public good of producing productive workers. In her analyses of the origins of U.S. family policies over the past century, Skocpol (1997) noted that policymakers have long been motivated to enact and sustain policies that reward public contributions such as childbearing and service in time of war. Today, investments in families are warranted as an essential workforce development strategy for driving economic growth.

In the midst of the decade’s global economic transformation, every nation’s competitiveness will depend more than ever on its human capital, in particular the education and social skills of its labor force. Human capital in the new knowledge-based economies, according to economists like Heckman (2006), requires cognitive and noncognitive skills, both of which are shaped to a large extent by socialization that occurs early in family life and in preschool programs. In knowledge-based economies, family contributions can be even more substantial because children can remain economically dependent on their parents, at least in part, for the 30 – 35 years it can take to develop the panoply of technical abilities, credentials, social competencies, and personal maturity technically advanced jobs require (Longman, 2004, p. 136):

 Doctors . . . must first be born. Doctors must also, for many years, be swaddled, fed, and comforted . . . . Prodigious human effort is further required to teach them to read their first sentence and to add their first sums. Indeed, teaching them to read almost always requires far more adult effort and pedagogical savvy than teaching them biochemistry, the latter of which is usually performed in large lecture halls by teaching assistants and junior faculty members. Moreover, because doctors must be trusted with highly technical life-and-death decisions, they had also better acquire a strong sense of morality, a balanced personality, sober habits of living, and discipline—all of which will most likely require vast commitments of time and money by parents and other nurturing adults.

Economic policy debates often are myopic because they fail to connect the dots among contributors to human capital development. As aptly put by Folbre (2008), "If parents don’t create and nurture children, schools can’t educate them, employers can’t hire them, and governments can’t tax them" (p. 179).

Evidence for the family foundation of the formation of human capital has emanated from many sources (Reynolds & Temple, 2005). For example, in a rigorous 30-year longitudinal
study, Sroufe and colleagues followed 180 low-income, primarily European American children in Minneapolis from the last trimester of pregnancy through adulthood. About 61% of the mothers were unmarried when the child was born and about half were teenagers. The study included over 30 assessments of the child and the child’s immediate setting (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Of particular policy relevance, the researchers examined the predictors of dropping out of school by age 18 and educational attainment by age 23.

The researchers were able to predict which children would drop out of school with 77% accuracy using only one predictor: quality of care up to age 42 months (assessed by a conglomerate of measures such as attachment quality at 12 and 18 months and relationship quality observed in laboratory videotapes of structured mother-child activities at 24 months). Thus, by age 3½, well before these children had started school, the probability of becoming a high school dropout was predictable. Subsequent parental neglect and lack of involvement sustained the child on this unfortunate path.

Similarly, educational attainment by age 23 depended on young adults’ early and cumulative history. By the time the child entered school, a combined measure of early care and the quality of the home environment correlated at .35 with educational attainment in young adulthood. The attachment relationship between mother and child during infancy was significantly related to a number of qualities at ages 15 and 16 that most societies would value in their citizens: involvement, leadership, self-confidence, and social competence in problem-solving situations (Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000). Also, the quality of caregiving at age 3.5 years predicted the quality of romantic relationships over two decades later at ages 23 and 26. Research has also revealed a remarkable continuity of parenting competence across generations, over and above IQ, education, and SES. Positive parenting at age 2 in the first generation predicted positive parenting at age 2 in the second generation (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Human development is a logical process premised substantially on how early relationships shape later development (Sroufe et al., 2005). Infant exploration is emboldened by the secure base their parents provide, preschoolers’ curiosity is enhanced when they are emotionally supported, and accomplishments at every age are encouraged when they are lauded by significant others. On the basis of their caregivers’ accessibility and responsiveness, children appear to internalize these early experiences through mental representations evident in family drawings, projective tests, and storytelling. Third graders with secure attachment histories drew well-proportioned family members who had positive dispositions, were appropriately placed, and were connected to each other. Those with avoidant attachment histories drew stiff people with rigid postures and distance between them. Those with resistant histories drew small selves that appeared vulnerable.

These mental representations serve like interpretive filters through which children (and adults) come to expect others to behave, either as people that one can trust or as people likely to be associations, but particularly by families—the first institution to teach what he termed “habits of the heart.” Culture and religion provide broad parameters for behavior, but it is in families that values like empathy, morality, self-reliance, and commitment to others are translated into action. Longitudinal studies from several theoretical perspectives provide converging evidence that families help a society develop a caring, committed citizenry. Children with secure attachment relationships with their mothers were more empathetic, more self-reliant, and less hostile with their peers (Sroufe, 1988). The attachment relationship between mother and child during infancy was significantly related to a number of qualities at ages 15 and 16 that most societies would value in their citizens: involvement, leadership, self-confidence, and social competence in problem-solving situations (Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000). Also, the quality of caregiving at age 3.5 years predicted the quality of romantic relationships over two decades later at ages 23 and 26. Research has also revealed a remarkable continuity of parenting competence across generations, over and above IQ, education, and SES. Positive parenting at age 2 in the first generation predicted positive parenting at age 2 in the second generation (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Families Contribute to the Rearing of Caring, Committed Citizens

One major threat to U.S. democracy, noted by Tocqueville in the 1830s, is individualism. In a country founded on the rights of the individual, he warned too little attention would be placed on one’s responsibilities to family, community, and country. Tocqueville (1945) believed that American individualism was tempered by participation in religious, political, and voluntary
Family Policy

791

unjust. They then develop corresponding decision rules for interacting with others (Thompson, 2008) that inaugurate adaptive or maladaptive processes, which have been likened to a "tuning of the central nervous system" (Sroufe et al., 2005, p. 230). These representations, considered the "carriers" of early experience, can be shaped by later experiences, so they are best thought of as probabilistic prognosticators, not definite determinants, of life outcomes.

Family Policy Is an Efficient Investment of Public Resources to Achieve Societal Goals

Families carry out a variety of functions critically important to society. Economists have estimated the value of these functions if families were unable to provide them. Recently, Folbre (2008) used a replacement cost approach to estimate the value of unpaid time parents devoted to the rearing of children under the age of 12. This careful analysis of the value of family work excluded children's sleep time, included only time in which at least one parent was engaged with the child, and assumed that more than one child could be supervised at once. Her lower bound estimate of the value of parental time (using the $7.43 average hourly wage for childcare workers in 2000) was $14,338 per year per child under age 12 in two-parent, middle-income families and $11,077 in single-parent, low-income families. Considering expenditures of both time and money, a parent's investment amounted to approximately $23,253 per year per child in two-parent, middle-income families and about $17,125 in single-parent, low-income families. Folbre (2008) also estimated the value of the cash support for childrearing that the federal government provided in 2000 to be $920 – $2,200 per year per child under age 18 (including tax subsidies or transfers, social insurance for death and disability, and means-tested benefits for low-income families, but excluding tax subsidies for child care and college). Taken together, government cash subsidies represented a small portion of childrearing costs—from 10% to 25% of a middle-income parent’s annual cash expenditures on a child under age 18 and only 4%–10% when both a parent’s cash and time expenditures were included. To gauge the value of parents’ investments another way, taxpayers received a return of $10.50 – $25 in private parental contributions for every public dollar allocated to a child in a two-parent, middle-income family and $8.00 – $18.50 per dollar allocated to a child in a single-parent, low-income family.

Similar returns are found when we look later in the life span. The vast majority of long-term care is provided by informal caregivers, primarily family members. The economic value of informal caregiving, provided by those aged 18 or older to adults with limitations in daily activities, was an estimated $375 billion in 2008. This contribution, which does not show up in government budget ledgers, was more than the $311 billion that state legislatures and Congress spent in 2007 for medical and long-term care under Medicaid (Houser & Gibson, 2008).

In sum, government cannot afford to fully replace the functions families perform for the benefit of their members and for society. As aptly put by Bronfenbrenner (1986) in testimony before the U.S. Congress: “The family is the most powerful, the most humane, and, by far, the most economical system known for building competence and character” (p. 4). Still, families do better in a supportive policy environment, one in which, for example, schools actively seek parental engagement, employers recognize that workers are also family members, agencies and organizations are family centered in their philosophy and operation, and laws support family members’ roles as caregivers, parents, partners, and workers. A vital role remains for government to supplement and complement the private investments families make.

Family Policy Is an Effective Means of Promoting Positive Child and Youth Development

Recently, great progress has been made in family-centered prevention science (Spoth, Kavanagh, & Dishion, 2002). During the decade, the effectiveness of family approaches has emerged from three disparate lines of research examining prevention and intervention among children at different developmental stages. The studies employ diverse methods, including experimental studies of welfare reform programs for low-income families with children, comparisons of the effect sizes of youth- versus family-focused programs for preventing youth substance use, and a meta-analysis of evidence-based programs for preventing youth crime and reducing recidivism.
Children benefit when parental work is supported. In family-sensitive studies of innovations in welfare reform policy, parental work investments, particularly among fragile families, improved their children’s school performance and (sometimes) their social development (Berlin, 2007). This finding emerged from three large-scale, well-designed, and well-implemented studies involving 12,000 children in three “Make Work Pay” experiments in the city of Milwaukee, the state of Minnesota, and two provinces in Canada. All three programs supplemented the earnings of low-wage workers by providing monthly cash payments calibrated on work effort and on earnings. These reforms also assured that working parents would receive coverage for child care and health insurance. Compared to the control group, the mostly single mothers worked more, earned more, received higher incomes, and were less likely to live in poverty. At their peak, the earnings gains were large, increasing employment rates by 12%–14%, quarterly earnings by $200–$300, and quarterly income by $300–$500. The largest, most enduring effects were for African American participants and for those most disadvantaged, high school dropouts without recent work histories and with the longest spells on welfare.

Not only did these interventions help raise families out of poverty but, compared to the control group, they also improved children’s school performance on a range of measures, including standardized tests, teacher ratings, and parent reports. Effect sizes were modest but, nonetheless, important with gains occurring in preschooler’s behavior and noncognitive skills in the Minnesota and Wisconsin programs. Preschoolers did better because their parents had higher incomes but also because they were more likely to attend center-based child care. Results for adolescents were less encouraging and resulted in some unfavorable school outcomes, though these adverse impacts did not persist (Berlin, 2007).

Family-focused prevention of substance use works better than youth-only approaches. In a comparison of the effect sizes of programs for preventing youth substance use, programs that change family dynamics proved more effective than approaches that focus only on the individual youth. Many tested programs designed to prevent substance use focus on the individual, and most of these had small effects (Kumpfer, Alvarado, & Whiteside, 2003). For example, average effect sizes for universal, child-only approaches ranged from −0.05 for school-based affective education to +0.05 for knowledge plus affective education to +0.28 for life or social skills training, yielding an average effect size of +0.10. In contrast, average effect sizes for family-focused interventions ranged from +0.31 for parenting skills training to +0.82 for family skills training to +1.62 for in-home family support, yielding an average effect size of +0.96. Thus, family-focused approaches were, on average, over nine times more effective than youth-only approaches.

Family-focused corrections programs are more cost effective than youth approaches. In a meta-analysis of 571 rigorously evaluated criminal justice prevention and intervention programs, those most effective in reducing future crime and in producing benefits that substantially outweighed program costs were the ones targeted at juveniles. Of these, the five most cost-effective rehabilitation programs and the single most cost-effective prevention program employed a family approach. In addition, a net benefit was calculated for each program by subtracting the program’s costs from imputed benefits to taxpayers and crime victims, who were spared monetary costs and reduced quality of life (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006). Of the 73 program types, the largest decrease in crime was found in Old’s Nurse Family Partnership, a prevention program where nurses visit low-income mothers in their home prenatally and during the first 2 years of their child’s life. The researchers prorated the crime-prevention aspects of the program with estimated net participant benefits of $14,283 for the mother and $12,822 for the child.

The five most cost-effective rehabilitative programs included Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, a 6- to 9-month program in which youth with histories of serious, chronic delinquency are placed with carefully selected, trained, and supported foster parents. The $6,945 per participant cost was offset by benefits to taxpayers and crime victims of $84,743, yielding a net participant benefit of $77,798. The Adolescent Diversion Program, an alternative to typical court processing for lower risk offenders, focuses on the youths’ family, school, and workplace; the net benefit reached $40,623.
per participant. Family Integrated Services, an intensive family- and community-based program in which teams of four therapists work with four to six families and provide 24-hour support, yielded a per-person net benefit of $40,545. Functional Family Therapy (on probation) and Multisystemic Therapy produced net benefits valued at $31,821 and $18,213 per person, respectively (Anderson & Bogenschneider, 2007; Aos et al., 2006).

Research affirms the critical importance of family factors in creating juvenile delinquents. Thus, the cost-effectiveness of family approaches that encourage or support the powerful socialization forces of functional family life should come as no surprise. The Washington state legislature placed a fiscal bet on these results by shifting funding away from unsuccessful policies and toward these evidence-based program alternatives (Aos et al., 2006).

**Family Policy Reflects a Normative Ideal Held by U.S. Policymakers and the Public**

Family policy has the potential to foster political consensus and build common ground because it embraces a normative ideal. An analysis of five longitudinal data sets on U.S. public attitudes confirmed a strong commitment to marriage, children, and family. This commitment did not erode between the 1960s and 1990s and may well have increased in recent decades. Americans expressed a greater acceptance of divorce, yet they also believe that children should have two parents and that marriage should be ended only under extreme circumstances. In 1998, half of all respondents supported covenant marriage (involving premarital counseling and making divorce more difficult) for those who want it, and two fifths would consider this option for themselves. Some traditional attitudes are changing. For example, a substantial majority of Americans in the 1990s reported egalitarian attitudes on most men’s and women’s roles, and three fifths of high school seniors endorsed cohabiting before marriage (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

The normative valuing of marriage and family—specifically Smith’s (1993) conceptualization of the Standard North American Family (SNAF) as a two-parent, heterosexual, married unit often with children—was supported in findings from three distinct streams of research. Among White, single mothers in rural Vermont, the “‘traditional’ family remained a powerful ideal for these women, even after personally experiencing the fracturing of just such a family form (Nelson, 2006). Many single mothers used the two-parent, married, heterosexual family as the yardstick for measuring their own families: “Even when the ideal is rare in reality, it is the stuff of legend that is at the heart of the master narrative” (Hertz, 2006, p. 798).

Second, in ethnographic interviews in three U.S. cities, most African American and White single mothers were willing, even eager, to marry to become “respectable,” which they believed was enhanced by marriage to a partner employed above the minimum wage (Edin, 2000). Finally, in a study of Wisconsin’s constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, the SNAF narrative—the two-parent, married (but not heterosexual) family—permeated political discourse and shaped arguments used by stakeholders with vastly different political views: focus groups of citizens both for and against the amendment, the legislators who authored the amendment, and the leaders of the advocacy campaigns in support of and opposed to the amendment (Ittig, 2008). Thus, marriage and family hold different public meanings but enough shared meaning to form a nucleus for attaining and maintaining political consensus.

**Family** is also a normative ideal embraced by policymakers. Of the 271,430 entries in the Congressional Record between January and October 2002, 87,016 used family-oriented words. In an average week, family words and images were invoked 218 times, making their way into one third of all speeches, statements, tributes, and so forth; importantly, the mention of family did not vary by gender or political party. In a 10-year period, with only two exceptions, family-oriented words appeared every single week Congress was in session, leading Strach (2007, p. 25) to conclude the “‘business of Congress is conducted in the language of family.’” The language and symbol of family appeal to common values that hold the potential to rise above politics.

**Applying the Family Perspective to Three High-Profile Family Policy Issues of the Decade**

Next, we illustrate the value of the family perspective using three substantive examples.
We apply this approach to early childhood, welfare reform, and parent education policies.

The undervaluing of families in early childhood programs. Interest in early childhood policies has never been higher than in the last decade (Reynolds & Temple, 2005). Head Start spending was $6.8 billion in 2007 (see the Administration for Children & Families Web site at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/fy2008.html), and child-care spending through the Child Care and Development Block Grant and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program was $12 billion in 2006 (Spar, 2006). States’ spending on pre-K in the 2004–2005 school year was nearly $3 billion, which funded more 4-year-olds than Head Start (Gormley, 2007). These spending levels comport with the prevailing views of the American public. In a 2007 Gallup poll, two thirds of adults (N = 1,005) reported that they would pay more in taxes to fund preschool programs for children from low-income or poverty-level households (Lake, 2008).

This growing investment in young children reflects a major change in the lives of young children. In the last 25 years, the proportion receiving regularly occurring child care prior to school entry skyrocketed from under 25% to over 80% (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006). Growing evidence signals the economic payback of investing in early childhood programs. Heckman (2006) compared a number of diverse policy regimes and concluded that investing in disadvantaged young children is a “rare” public initiative that “promotes productivity in the economy and society at large” (p. 1902), and does so more effectively than such alternatives as reduced class size, job training, and prisoner rehabilitation. Taking a long-term economic view, Bartik (2006) estimated that universal preschool participation will add over 3 million jobs to the U.S. economy, almost $300 billion to annual earnings, over $200 billion to annual government tax revenues, and almost $1 trillion to the nation’s GDP over the next seven decades. Furthermore, cost-benefit studies of four exemplary early childhood programs—the Carolina Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, the Elmira Nurse-Family Partnership Program, and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program—documented that for every dollar invested, $4 – $10 were returned to society in increased earnings in adulthood as well as cost savings in the education and criminal justice systems (Reynolds & Temple, 2005).

Beyond benefiting from these exemplary programs, children also appeared to gain in consequential ways from Head Start and universal pre-K programs, though the results were conditional (Gormley, 2007; Karoly & Bigelow, 2005; Ludwig & Phillips, 2007). We touch on one condition here: family engagement. In an evaluation of 17 Early Head Start Programs for low-income pregnant women and families with infants and preschoolers, impacts were greater for children and parents when home visiting was combined with center-based services. In such programs, children scored higher on language and social-emotional outcomes than in programs that offered services in only one setting; parents also read to their child more often, reported fewer instances of spanking, and exhibited more support and less detachment in semistructured play (Love et al., 2005). Although most effect sizes were small, programs that offered services in centers and homes and implemented them early in the evaluation period had effect sizes as large as .46. Despite evidence of a family premium in early childhood programs, fewer than 10% of federally funded programs provide comprehensive services that include family social services, parental support, and medical services and referrals (Reynolds & Temple, 2005).

For policymakers, such findings raise an important question. To ensure effective use of tax dollars, should public early childhood programs be required to partner with families? Preliminary evidence emerged from a recent paper that asked each principal investigator (PI) of three exemplary early childhood programs to describe key components of their program and to speculate about the most important contributors to their program’s positive effects (Galinsky, 2006). Here, we review only their comments on parental participation and support. PI Larry Schweinhart describes the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in this way:

The continuing message all the time [to the families] was, “You are an important educator of your child. Pay attention to your child. Observe your child closely. Pick up on the development of your child and carry it forward.” (cited in Galinsky, p. 9)
He further speculated that consistent messages like these taught parents to observe and extend their child’s learning. This was “more important than the specific lessons” and “lasted not only through the preschool years, but [also] afterwards” (cited in Galinsky, p. 9).

The Chicago Child-Parent Center, a public program serving low-income children aged 3 to 9 in a stable school environment, specifically assigned a teacher to staff a parent resource center. This intervention hired paraprofessionals, typically parents of former students, to serve as liaisons between the center and the families, to conduct home visits, and to help families access community resources. As explained by PI Arthur Reynolds (cited in Galinsky, 2006, p. 16):

It’s a family-school partnership model of parent involvement. Parents were expected to volunteer in the classroom, to go on field trips with the kids and to participate in parenting skills workshops at the center. Although there were some home visits, the parents primarily went to the center instead of the staff going to visit the parents at home.

Reynolds (cited in Galinsky) said they observed higher parental involvement throughout the elementary school years, “leading us to see a link to [lower levels of parental] abuse and neglect, juvenile crime and juvenile delinquency,” which he explained as follows:

One of the biggest causes of maltreatment in inner-city areas is social isolation from the social institutions that support the family—whether it’s health care or the schools. And the whole point of this program was to make those relationships stronger. (p. 18)

In fact, by age 17, court petitions for maltreatment were 33% lower for those who participated in the center for 4 to 6 years compared to alternative treatments (Reynolds & Robertson, 2003).

In the Abecedarian Project, no evidence of a parent premium emerged. The purpose of the evaluation, according to PI Craig Ramey, was to test the contribution only of early childhood programs, so intensive family support was provided to the treatment and control groups. All the above observations, along with their family policy implications, warrant further empirical study.

The incorporation of a family perspective into welfare reform. The welfare reform story is a minor drama in the overall socioeconomic landscape. Federal spending on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the successor to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the primary cash assistance policy for poor families, amounted to $14 billion in 2004; although it is a substantial amount, it is much less than the $31 billion spent on Food Stamps, the $34 billion on EITC, or the $300 billion on Medicaid (Spar, 2006). It is major, however, in that the passions aroused by AFDC and TANF always exceeded their monetary significance (Corbett, 1993) because they tapped into those core issues that define civic and personal responsibility—children, family, poverty, and work—as few other policy regimes can.

The welfare debate is necessarily interwoven with evolving economic and social realities over the past six decades or so. Simply put, we have two disparate stories. For almost three decades after World War II, the United States enjoyed strong economic growth, real wages that almost doubled, and diminishing income inequality. As earnings rose for those in the bottom income quintile, poverty fell—by almost half between 1959 and 1972. Between the mid-1970s and today, the story is different. Male wages and labor force participation have fallen, income inequality has grown, and median household income has stagnated (Berlin, 2008). After rising by 60% between 1947 and 1973, average real earnings of all nonsupervisory workers have fallen by some 20%. By 2008, income inequality had reached levels not seen since the late 1920s (Greenstein, 2008); the gains associated with an expanding GDP, which tripled in value over this time, largely accrued to the very top of the income distribution. In effect, progress against poverty stalled.

At the same time, associated demographic shifts were raising questions about the fundamental health of society as well as the wisdom of prevailing welfare strategies. Women poured into the labor market in greater numbers with three fourths of all prime-aged women employed outside the home by April of 2000 (Berlin, 2008). In addition, family savings rates dropped—to negative rates in some recent years—and debt levels rose. Such social stresses arguably spilled over onto families. In 1960, 5% of births to younger women occurred out of wedlock, a rate that grew to about a third by 2000 (McLanahan, 2009). The divorce rate peaked in 1980
and has moderated only modestly since. Though many factors contributed to this demographic earthquake, it proved politically easy to assign disproportionate blame to the welfare system. In truth, the structure of AFDC did contain several invidious incentives—to work less, to avoid marriage, and to bear children out of wedlock.

AFDC was abolished in 1996 and replaced by TANF despite dire predictions of dramatic increases in child poverty and social unrest in poor, urban communities. TANF ended welfare as an entitlement, established a time limit for receiving benefits, and increased expectations for work. Caseloads dropped dramatically, by two thirds between 1994 and 2006, a dramatic result (Bane, 2008). Viewed another way, the take-up rate for welfare—the proportion eligible who use the program—fell from 86% in 1992 to 48% in 2002 (Parrott & Sherman, 2006). At the same time, child poverty in single-parent households fell by 10 percentage points between 1994 and 2006 (Bane). Among female-headed families, pretransfer poverty before any government help fell by over 20% in the years following reform, reflecting increases in work and earnings by these mothers (Haskins & Sawhill, 2007). Researchers searched hard for adverse effects of welfare reform on child outcomes. Few were found and fewer were particularly robust; some positive outcomes even emerged (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003).

The important shifts in postwelfare thinking about policy involved the way “problems” were conceptualized and, consequently, the way helping strategies were organized. Let us focus on just two of these. First, there was a concerted effort to move from problem remediation to problem prevention. Second, there was a shift toward thinking about families holistically as opposed to focusing on the individual or specific problems. Solow (2008, p. 5) recently observed that “my personal conviction is that the behaviors we perceive as social (and economic) problems are messily intertwined with each other and with normal behaviors.” This genre of thinking was not new. When he approached welfare reform in the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy noted (cited in Woolley & Peters, 1999 – 2009, Section V, para. 5):

> The goals of our public welfare programs must be positive . . . . [Welfare] must stress the integrity and preservation of the family unit. It must contribute to the attack on dependency, juvenile delinquency, family breakdown, illegitimacy, ill health, and disability. It must reduce the incidence of these problems, prevent their occurrence, and strengthen and protect the vulnerable in a highly competitive world.

Over time, however, the reform impulse purportedly retreated to more efficient income-support strategies and to narrowly defined, categorical services. Holistic, prevention-oriented strategies took a back seat to incentivizing desired behaviors or remediating individual flaws.

Recently, local officials across the country have been returning to the reform impulses that guided Kennedy 4 1/2 decades ago. Bane (2008) reflected on this shift by citing a study of TANF spending patterns by the Welfare Peer Assistance Network (WELPAN), a group of senior state welfare officials from seven Midwestern states. Between 1996 and 2003, the proportion of TANF dollars in these states spent as cash assistance to poor families fell from 72% to 30%, as the proportion directed to child care rose by about one third. The percentage directed to more holistic, family-centered services exploded from 2.4% to 23%, almost a 10-fold jump. Deborah Bingaman, a former WELPAN member and welfare administrator in Iowa and Washington state, commented on the shift in thinking (cited in Corbett & Swartz, 2002, p. 4):

> Five years ago we talked solely about benefits . . . . about timeliness and accuracy, period. It was solely financial. Today, we’re talking about early childhood, we’re talking about prevention, we’re talking about serving families holistically.

Reflecting on this new focus, we also see a groundswell of interest in how helping systems are organized. Across the country, there has been a renewed interest in integrated service models and one-stop centers (Ragan, 2003). The motivating premise is that a preventative, family-focused, policy perspective cannot be realized if services are structured around specific helping technologies delivered through narrow, categorical delivery mechanisms. Allard (2008) affirmed the sweeping changes in the character of social assistance, arguing that for every $1 spent on traditional cash assistance, some $20 is now expended on service programs targeted at the working poor and particularly their families: adult education, child care, counseling, health
care, job training, mental health, substance abuse, and other related services.

Couple-focused versus parent-focused methods of parent education. The complexity of designing family policies can be illustrated by two different approaches taken in two countries, both with the goal of promoting children’s well-being. The United Kingdom recently devoted £10 million per year to promote effective parenting. In contrast, the United States allocated $150 million per year over 5 years to encourage marriage, strengthen couple relationships, and promote father involvement. Cowan and Cowan (2008) conducted three experiments to compare the potential effects on child well-being of the United Kingdom’s parent-focused approach and the United States’ couple-focused approach.

In one longitudinal study, parents and children were assessed before the children entered school, at kindergarten, and in the first, fourth, and ninth grades. The randomized clinical trial included a brief consultation (the control) and two variations of a 16-week couples’ group led by trained professionals (one that focused more on parent-child issues and one that focused more on couple issues). Compared to the control group, couples in the parent-focused group were more effective in their interactions with their children 1 year later; however, no changes were observed in the quality of the couple relationship. Notably, for the parents in the couple-focused group, both the parent-child and couple relationship improved. The children showed higher academic achievement and lower aggression in first grade and continued to show better school performance and fewer problem behaviors 10 years later when they transitioned into high school. Parents in the couple-focused group experienced a decline in depression, marital conflict, and parenting stress; also, their marital satisfaction did not decline over time as it did in the other conditions.

The researchers cautioned that more studies are needed with low-income populations. The results have been replicated over an 18-month period with a low-income, Mexican American sample, and a study of African American families is underway. Further study is warranted to disentangle whether focusing on the whole family system is more effective for enhancing children’s development than focusing only on the parent-child subsystem.

Summary. These examples illustrate how public policies can benefit when approached from a family perspective and how research can be strengthened when conceptualized using family-relevant questions, measures, and analyses. There exist numerous policy-relevant studies on issues such as early childhood programs and welfare reform, to name just a few, that fail to examine underlying issues through a family lens. Conversely, there are many family-sensitive studies investigating topics such as fatherhood and parenting that fail to consider outcomes that are policy relevant, such as the children’s academic success or the extent to which families use public benefits. Family policy decisions would benefit from studies with policy-relevant questions and outcomes that consciously include family considerations in fundamental ways.

Next Steps
In this review, we addressed a defining question of the decade: What is the rationale for establishing family policy as a field of intellectual inquiry and a subfield of social policy? We reviewed a small slice of the accumulating research evidence for a family policy perspective. We provided a number of compelling examples of the effectiveness of family-centered policies in high-risk and normative settings, for young and old, for purposes of prevention and intervention.

We are taken with the expansion of family policy activity over the past decade even at times when government activism was frowned upon by some (Bane, 2008). We have been encouraged by the advances in evaluation methodology (Boschen, 2010; Cook, Shadish, & Wong, 2008; Nathan, 2008); teaching family policy (Boschen, 2006b); and theory, specifically community dissonance theory (Boschen, 2006b); the dynamic systems perspective (Yoshikawa & Hsueh, 2001); and a theory of how policies adapt to changing family values and practices (Strach, 2007). We have been intrigued by the attention given to the definition of family and informed by how recent patterns in U.S. policy choices affect the recipients, reach, and generosity of family policies. We have been encouraged by how quickly the lexicon of evidence-based policy has caught on with policymakers and the public alike.

Despite progress over the past decade, we are neither naïve nor sanguine. We recognize families are only part of a large, complex, and
comprehensive political landscape. We do not assert that family factors affect every issue or that family approaches will always be the most effective. Our enthusiasm for a family-centered approach for conducting research and for doing public policy is tempered by our appreciation for the sentiment attached to an opposing position:

I am impatient with the entrepreneurs of family policy, finding it a concept without a clear content; suspicious of politicians, bureaucrats, or scholars who participate in the movement without pinpointing its objectives; and doubtful whether family policy, no matter if described as comprehensive or partial, implicit or explicit, is a useful or practical theme. (Steiner, 1981, p. 194)

This skepticism expressed almost three decades ago remains instructive for us today. Family policy should not be embraced without acknowledging appropriate cautions. Family policy can be myopic if it fails to keep pace with the forms, functions, and diversity of contemporary families. As in most policy regimes, a good thing can be overdone. Conceivably, focusing too exclusively on families could be used as a rationale for interfering with hard-fought individual freedoms, such as women’s career opportunities, equal wages, and reproductive rights. Even when judiciously applied with a clear sense of the plurality of U.S. families, adopting a family perspective does not automatically tell us what ends to pursue or which strategies to employ. Two well-meaning professionals can start with what each considers a family-focused perspective and yet arrive at quite different conclusions about the most desirable ends and the most appropriate means to achieve those ends. In short, we must still do all the hard theoretical and normative work that any difficult policy area entails. The fact that it is hard, however, does not mean it is not worth doing.

Steps to Move Family Policy From Analysis to Action

Those who work in the nexus between the worlds of research and policy know that translating good ideas into good policies takes more than good intentions. As described next, it will require family-sensitive and politically relevant research agendas, politically difficult family policy and program decisions, and politically astute knowledge intermediaries who can package research evidence for the policy consumer.

Next steps for researchers. Researchers, particularly those in academia, must work to span the cultural divide that too often separates them from the policy world if they wish to contribute to the development of family policy (see Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010). Besharov (2009) claimed that there is a dearth of good research ideas, in part, because of the phenomenon of rear-view mirror research, where questions are limited by disciplinary blinders, close conformity to previous studies, and outdated perspectives of the issue being studied. In our work with policymakers, we encounter much research that is relevant to policy, often conducted by knowledge producers who take the step of immersing themselves in the daily phenomenon they are studying. Yet we also come across research agendas that devolve into minutia, examining variables that are too microscopic and immutable to be of interest to action-oriented policymakers. If researchers propose a different intervention for every outcome, every developmental period, and every family structure, policymakers will throw up their hands in despair as they become aware of the array of interventions this complexity would suggest. Such research may well serve other purposes, but its usefulness for policy decisions is limited.

For us to identify family-sensitive and policy-relevant research questions for every social science issue is impossible. Instead, we offer this general advice. For research to become policy relevant, we suggest more communication with knowledge brokers, specifically professionals in research firms (e.g., Child Trends), foundations (e.g., the Annie E. Casey Family Strengthening Policy Center), government organizations (e.g., the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, the Family Economic Success Project at the National Conference of State Legislatures), and universities (e.g., the Family Impact Seminars now operating in 29 states, the Harvard Family Research Project), and all who have expertise in family policy and existing relationships with policymakers. For research to become family sensitive, we suggest researchers ask these family impact questions when designing studies: In what ways, if any, do families contribute to the issue? How are families, not just individuals, affected by the issue? Would incorporating
family considerations into the design of studies result in a more complete understanding? Given the extant changes in family formation and experience, we encourage the development of a general theory of family change (Moynihan & Smeeding, 2004). The field also needs better measurement of family variables and processes (see Westmoreland, Bouffard, O’Carroll, & Rosenberg, 2009) and analytic methods that acknowledge the whole family system.

Shonkoff (2004) contended that program evaluations too often are conducted for advocacy purposes. For studies carried out in high-stakes environments where funding may be at risk, we need politically courageous program evaluators, and we need program designers who are willing to put their programs to the test without knowing in advance what the outcomes will be. We need to expedite program design, test multiple ideas simultaneously, and pay more attention to outliers such as program sites that defy convention and are unusually effective (Besharov, 2009). Family-centered practices and procedures need to be systematically identified, verified, and incorporated into programs.

In addition, the utilization of research needs to be viewed as a science unto itself (Shonkoff, 2004). Because studies examining the use of evidence in policy and practice are few and dated (Huston, 2008), we are encouraged by the W. T. Grant Foundation’s leadership in funding studies on the vital topic of generating evidence on the use of evidence in policymaking.

Next steps for policymakers and program administrators. Arguably, it would be a step forward if government explicitly assumed family policy to be part of its responsibility and created a greater capacity to advance a proactive family agenda. In his seminal book, Family and Nation, former senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1986) observed that the 1946 Full Employment Act said virtually nothing about how to achieve full employment. What it did do was assert that government ought to be concerned about employment and should strengthen its capacity to pursue that objective, largely through the creation of the Council of Economic Advisors. The very lack of specificity, for Moynihan, was a virtue rather than a deficit.

Drawing a parallel to family policy, the president still has a Council of Economic Advisors, along with a National Security Council and a Domestic Policy Council, that covers a host of policy concerns. But no formal, dedicated entity exists to promote family-focused policy agendas, assess existing family-focused efforts, or coordinate such policy across the labyrinthian corridors of executive and legislative power. At the very center of the U.S. power grid, no one is in charge of promoting the well-being of U.S. families in all their manifestations. A political locus is needed to advance policies and programs with family impacts in mind. The president, in concert with governors and decision makers on down through the political food chain, also shares some responsibility for advancing the health and well-being of families.

On the basis of recent estimates, only 10% of prevention programs currently being implemented are evidence based (Kumpfer et al., 2003). We need policymakers willing to make the (always) tough political decisions to “mandate” that public funds be used primarily for evidence-based programs when they are available, even when special interests object. We need program administrators with the courage to eliminate current programs that are not effective and redirect efforts to those that are. When evidence-based initiatives are enacted, some funds should be set aside for quality control, as was done in Washington state, because even evidence-based programs are not effective unless implemented with fidelity (Aos et al., 2006).

Next steps for knowledge intermediaries. For those in the business of translating research for public consumption, we could build on communications research and cognitive theory to configure and communicate scientific findings in ways that are consistent with dominant frames of thinking (FrameWorks Institute, 2002). Dodge (2008) has done this successfully in the framing of youth violence as has Shonkoff and his associates in the framing of early childhood policy (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). In the case of family policy, research can be framed in ways that help policymakers and the public see family issues not as the private problems of particular families but as priorities for public policy. We have attempted to apply these framing principles to the rationale for family policy outlined in this review. In keeping with the methodology used in “framing” research, these ideas need vetting by family policy professionals and testing with focus groups of policymakers and the public. Granted,
the ideas that we propose in the following paragraph will undoubtedly require reflection and refinement. Yet we hope they provide an impetus for this kind of “messaging,” and a starting point for articulating the need for and value of family policy and a family perspective in policymaking.

Investments in family policies can create the conditions for families to do their best in rearing the next generation, in economically supporting their members, and in caring for those who cannot always care for themselves: the elderly, frail, ill, and disabled. Yet families can be damaged by stressful conditions: the inability to earn a living, afford health insurance, find quality child care, or send their kids to good schools. Policies that support families are politically popular and typically are much more effective than policies aimed only at individuals. When the family foundation is strong today, children are more likely to develop the solid foundation they need for tomorrow to become competent workers in a sound economy and caring, committed citizens in a strong democracy. “For there to be ‘no child left behind,’ we will have to do a better job in leaving no family behind” (Sroufe et al., 2005, p. 288).

Moynihan wrote once that “no government . . . can avoid policies that profoundly influence family relationships. This is not to be avoided. The only option is whether these will be purposeful, intended policies or whether they will be . . . concealed ones” (Moynihan & Smeeding, 2004, pp. xxii–xxiii). This decade review makes an evidence-based case that purposeful and intentional family policy complements the private contributions that families make to the public good. We challenge family professionals to move this evidence from analysis to action so family policy becomes a field of inquiry and a subfield of social policy in the decade to come.

NOTE

We extend our appreciation to Jennifer Seubert and Deborah Johnson for their editing of the manuscript and preparation of the references, which they completed with their characteristic competence and cheerfulness. We also appreciate the assistance of Stephanie Eddy, who helped conduct an extensive review of books, academic journals that span a range of disciplines, and reports from evaluation firms, foundations, government agencies, public interest groups, and think tanks.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:


This material is available as part of the online article from: http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1742-4658.2006.05233.x

(This link will take you to the article abstract).

Please note: Wiley-Blackwell is not responsible for the content or functionality of any supporting materials supplied by the authors. Any queries (other than missing material) should be directed to the corresponding author for the article.

REFERENCES


