Association of public explanations of why children struggle and support for policy solutions using a national sample

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Abstract

Purpose: Despite evidence showing the importance of structural determinants for child well-being and the existence of policies that can promote child well-being, many communities are not adopting these policies. Limited awareness of structural determinants may explain this gap. This study establishes the public's recognition of structural determinants and their associations with support for policies that promote child well-being.

Methods: Secondary analyses of survey data collected in 2019 from a random sample of 2496 adults in the United States. This survey asked why some children "struggle" (e.g., do poorly in school, use drugs, or get involved in crime). Respondents could select individual (e.g., lack of effort) and structural (e.g., low wages) explanations. Respondents were also asked about their support for policies that are supportive of children and families.

Results: Stronger beliefs of structural explanations were associated with greater support for policies that strengthen family economics, family-friendly work, and afford access to high-quality early childcare and education. Beliefs in individual explanations were inversely associated with support for these policies.

Conclusions: These findings suggest increasing recognition of the structural determinants that hinder child development may help increase support for policies that are effective in improving children's outcomes.

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By almost any indicator, children in the United States are not doing as well as children in other rich nations. Compared to 41 other rich countries, children in the US rank 38th for physical health, 32nd for mental health, 28th in reading and math skills, and 32nd in social skills (UNICEF, 2020). Worse still are the inequities observed by race/ethnicity in the United States. For example, 20% of all US children live in poverty, but Latino and Black children are 2.4 and 2.8 times more likely, respectively, to live in poverty compared to White children (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Why is the United States not doing as well as other nations when we know of several effective policies to promote child well-being?

Public understanding of who or what is responsible for a problem can lead to how to solve it. Attribution theory provides a conceptual framework for research on the role of personal versus societal responsibility for solving social problems. Attribution theory predicts that people who believe a problem is largely within a person's own control (as opposed to being caused by broader societal forces) are more likely to hold individuals responsible for their own solutions (Weiner, 1993, 2018). For example, individual explanations of poverty might point to lack of effort, motivation, or ability of those who are poor (Beeghley, 1988) leading to solutions such as work requirements for public assistance and training programs. Alternatively, structural explanations of poverty might identify factors such as poor-quality schools, limited employment opportunities, and institutionalized gender and racial/ethnic discrimination that point to collective solutions (Beeghley, 1988). While this theory is somewhat reductionist, it can help us better understand the gap between what we know is effective for child well-being and what communities choose to do about it.

Research connecting attributions to policies in the United States in the last 20 years has addressed poverty (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Hannah & Cafferty, 2006; Shirazi & Biel, 2005), racial inequality (Hunt, 2007; Krysan, 2000), crime (Johnson, 2008; Metcalfe et al., 2015; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002), police violence (Hadden et al., 2016), gun ownership (Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2017), mental illness (Watson et al., 2005), gay rights (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004), immigration (Verkuyten et al., 2018), terrorism (Sadler et al., 2005), obesity (Barry et al., 2009; Pearl & Lebowitz, 2014; Thibodeau et al., 2015; Thibodeau et al., 2017; Young et al., 2016), addiction (Nielsen et al., 2010; Rasinski et al., 2000), and climate change (Jang, 2013). In general, this research shows attributions vary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income, and ideology (Sahar, 2014) and that adults' increased beliefs in the importance of structural determinants is associated with increased support for policies that support or help individuals or impacted groups.

Much less research has connected adults' attributions of childhood issues and support for policies benefiting children. Existing research includes childhood obesity (Barry et al., 2013; Dumitrescu et al., 2016; Jeong et al., 2018), children's vaccinations (Carpiano & Fitz, 2017), preschool programming (Forde & Heckler, 2017), juvenile justice (Trzcinski & Allen, 2012), and children's cellphone use (Jeong et al., 2018). This research also shows that believing in structural determinants for children's issues (e.g., the food industry) is associated with reduced blame of children or parents and increased support for policies that promote child well-being or that regulate the responsible industries (Young et al., 2016). The current study focuses on "children struggling," defined here as children not playing well with other

children, doing poorly in school, not graduating from high school, becoming teen parents, using drugs, or becoming involved in crime.

Childhood experiences are critically important for determining whether a child "struggles" or thrives. The cumulative effects of childhood adversities such as poverty or child maltreatment, particularly in the absence of supportive relationships and conditions, can lead to children experiencing excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems ("toxic stress"), which has consequences for learning, behavior, and health as well as adult educational attainment, employment, and income (Hamby et al., 2021; Metzler et al., 2017; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) has been linked to family, community, and societal factors (Merrick & Latzman, 2014). While prevention efforts have largely focused on addressing parental factors (e.g., parenting programs), childhood adversity can also be prevented by addressing societal factors through policies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019; Fortson et al., 2016).

People can have both individualistic and structural causal attributions for a problem. Individualistic explanations of why children are not doing well might include parents or children not working hard enough, making poor choices, or poor parenting skills. Structural explanations might include low-wage work, lack of access to quality childcare and neighborhood/community services, and resources for families. However, having only individualistic attributions for children struggling may limit action because it blames individuals (i.e., children and/or their parents) for their problems and, if any effort is made to prevent or solve subsequent problems, it is limited to solutions that try to "fix" children or their parents. Although individual responsibility is one important aspect in determining success, research shows that the conditions and opportunities that children have are also critically important (Lee, Sadana & Commission on Social Determinants of Health Knowledge Networks, 2011). Research also shows that differential access to the opportunities and conditions needed for health are key drivers of persistent health inequities among groups that experience systemic historical and ongoing social and economic disadvantages (Mersky et al., 2021).

Based on the best available evidence to date, the CDC has identified three types of policies, among others, that can prevent childhood adversity: strengthening household economics, family-friendly work policies, and access to high-quality early childcare and education (Centers for Disease Prevention & Control, 2019; Fortson et al., 2016). Although some states have adopted policies supportive of children and families, many others lag behind (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2019; National Partnership for Women & Families, 2018). One possible reason for this disconnect between the existing evidence and lack of adoption of effective policies may be minimal public understanding of the importance of structural determinants in healthy child development.

This study examines the public's causal attributions for children struggling and the relationship between such attributions and support for policies identified in CDC's publications of the best available evidence for preventing child abuse and neglect and other childhood adversity (Centers for Disease Prevention & Control, 2019; Fortson et al., 2016). The broader concept of "children struggling" captures educational outcomes and teen health

risk behaviors that have been associated with having experienced childhood adversity (Dube et al., 2003; Fox et al., 2015; Metzler et al., 2017). Based on prior research on differential effects of structural and individual attributions of childhood problems, we hypothesize that those with stronger beliefs of structural explanations for why children struggle (e.g., low wages) will be more supportive of public policies to promote child well-being. We also hypothesize that persons with stronger beliefs in individual explanations (e.g., parenting skills) will be less supportive of these policies.

METHODS

We conducted secondary data analyses of survey data collected by YouGov (an international Internet-based market research and data analytics firm; https://today.yougov.com/about/about/) through their proprietary opt-in Internet panel. The YouGov opt-in panel comprises approximately 1.2 million US residents who have agreed to participate in YouGov's web surveys. Panel members are recruited by web campaigns using internet banners, pop-ups, e-mails, permission-based e-mail campaigns, partner-sponsored solicitations, telephone-to-web recruitment such as random-digit-dial-based sampling, and mail-to-web recruitment using voter registration-based sampling to help ensure diversity in the panel population and engage hard-to-reach populations. Participants receive points for each survey taken, which are then redeemable for cash.

To maintain a panel that is nationally representative, YouGov uses demographic information to select panelists based on the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (see https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs); voter registration data; and computer, internet, and Smartphone usage data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey (see https://www.bls.gov/cps/). YouGov recruits random samples from their panel for specific surveys and weights respondents to maintain representativeness. Research has shown that these methods generate nationally representative estimates (Kellner, 2004; Rivers & Bailey, 2009). A more detailed description of YouGov's US panel and sampling strategy is available elsewhere (Rivers & Bailey, 2009).

Of the 5709 randomly sampled panelists, 3566 responded (62.5%), and 3043 (53.3%) of those invited completed the survey from July 2019 to August 2019. Respondents completing the survey were matched down to a sample of 2500 to better represent the US population as described above. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents compared to the US Census Bureau's. Less than 1% ($n = 15$) of the participants did not answer any questions related to why children struggle or policy support and were excluded from our analyses. Deidentified data were procured for program evaluation purposes and as such, determined exempt from Institutional Review Board review and approval.

Measures

For the "Why Children Struggle" survey, YouGov asked their panelists to indicate, on a scale from 1 (*extremely important)* to 5 (*not at all important*), how important they believed different reasons were on a list of 26 reasons that people give to explain why some children struggle (i.e., not playing well with other children, being held back in kindergarten, doing poorly in school, not graduating from high school, becoming teen parents, using drugs or

getting involved in crime) in the United States (see Table 2 for a complete list of the 15 structural and 11 individual explanations). YouGov also asked their panelists to indicate how strongly they would support or oppose, on a scale from 1 (*strongly support*) to 5 (*strongly oppose*), a list of "things communities could do that could increase the opportunity for all children to succeed." In this study, we focus only on policies with evidence of effectiveness at preventing childhood adversity as outlined in CDC's publications (Centers for Disease Prevention & Control, 2019; Fortson et al., 2016; see Table 3 for the list of select items in each policy bucket). Response options were reverse coded for analyses.

Analyses

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus version 8 to evaluate how well the survey items fit into the constructs of structural- and individual-level reasons for why children struggle. The estimator for this type of analysis is a robust weighted least squares estimator (Muthén, 1984; Muthén et al., 1997). Model fit was evaluated using standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) estimates. We also assessed Cronbach's alpha for each subscale. Mean scores were generated for each factor as well as for statements in support of policies that strengthen household economics, family-friendly work policies, and policies that afford access to high-quality early care and education by summing participants' responses.

Using the mean of participants' responses for each factor, we used Stata's (StataCorp, 2015) *svy* command to conduct weighted linear regression models to examine the importance of structural versus individual explanations to predict support for policies that strengthen household economics, family-friendly work, and access to high-quality early care and education, adjusting for sex, race/ethnicity, age, education, income, geographic region, employment, and marital status. Age and income were treated as ordinal variables. Race/ethnicity, education, region, employment, and marital status were coded as dummy variables, with the first category of each of these demographic control variables as the reference group.

We also conducted exploratory regression models to examine differences by race and income in support of policy solutions, and endorsement of structural and individual reasons for why children struggle. Moderation analyses were conducted to examine if the relationship between structural reasons and support for policy solutions differed by race or income.

RESULTS

Over half the sample were female (51.4%), 40% had a high school degree or less education, 55.1% were married, and 48.9% were employed (see Table 1). Sixty-four percent of the sample reported being non-Hispanic White, 12% Black, and 15.7% Hispanic. There were some statistically significant differences between the YouGov sample and the US population. Specifically, the YouGov sample has more Black respondents and fewer White, Asian, Native American, and those categorized as "other race or ethnicity." It also has more respondents with a high school degree or less, fewer with very low incomes and more with

incomes of \$40,000 or more, fewer single and more married individuals, more unemployed or not in the labor force, and more respondents from the Midwest and fewer from the South.

Confirmatory factor analysis, as documented in Table 2, indicated acceptable fit for the 15 structural and 11 individual explanation indicators. Cronbach's alpha was .93 and .86 for the structural and individual explanation subscales, respectively. Cronbach's alpha for the policy support subscale was .96. The correlation between the structural and individual subscales was .63.

Table 3 shows the weighted percent of respondents who believe each reason is extremely or somewhat important for explaining why some children struggle and support for policy solutions. The five most frequent explanations include: (1) children living in families with challenges like substance abuse, partner violence and mental illness (individual explanation; 92.4%); (2) children with learning challenges not getting the support they need (structural explanation; 88.9%); (3) families living in low-resourced neighborhoods (structural explanation; 88.3%); (4) parents not supporting their child's learning through educational activities like reading to them and playing with them (individual explanation; 88.1%); and (5) children growing up living in poverty (structural explanation; 87.7%). Individual explanations such as "Parents not working hard enough" (65.1%), "Parents using harsh discipline" (64.6%), and "Child born with bad personality traits passed on from one generation to next" (55.1%) were the least endorsed reasons. However, more than half of respondents see these reasons as extremely or somewhat important for explaining why some children struggle.

Also as reported in Table 3, a majority of participants supported policy solutions documented to increase childhood well-being, including *strengthening household economics* (i.e., 84.7% supported being able to buy enough nutritious food; 85.8% supported being able to live in safe, stable housing; 79.9% supported having a full-time job that provides sufficient income to cover basic needs for the employee and his/her child; 79.9% supported being able to live in a neighborhood where few or no families have a hard time making ends meet; 76.4% supported having paid parental leave to care for a new child; and 66.4% supported receiving income support to cover basic needs if a breadwinner loses job); *family friendly work* (i.e., 71.7% supported having a job that provides flexible schedules, on-site childcare or subsidies for childcare, paid days to care for sick family members, or paid leave to attend school events); and *high-quality early care and education* (i.e., 81.0% supported being able to leave their children in childcare that is good for the child's development and 68.7% supported being able to send their children to high-quality preschool).

In the multivariable analyses predicting overall support for policy solutions after controlling for demographics (Table 4), the resulting *b* coefficients show a statistically significant positive association for the structural explanation scale ($b = 0.83$, $p < .001$) and a negative association, also statistically significant but less so, for the individual explanation scale ($b = -0.05$, $p < .01$). As respondents' belief in structural factors influencing childhood outcomes increases, so does their support for policy actions; respondents' belief in individual factors influencing childhood outcomes slightly decreases their support for policy actions. The

model explains 66% of the variance in support for policy actions related to strengthening household economics, family-friendly work, and high-quality early childcare and education.

Tables 4 and 5 show the association between demographics and policy support, structural and individual factors. The exploratory regression analysis found that White participants are more likely to endorse structural explanations (Table 5) or policy solutions (Table 4) than Black participants. Income is associated with support for policies in a positive direction (i.e., as income increases, support for policy actions increases) but this association is not particularly strong (see Table 4). In the moderation analysis, the interaction terms for either income or race were not significant. This means that while one group might be more or less likely to endorse structural explanations or support policy solutions, the relationship between beliefs about why children struggle and support for policy solutions is consistent across income and racial groups (results not reported).

DISCUSSION

Secondary analyses of YouGov data show that believing more strongly in structural explanations for why some children struggle was strongly associated with support for policies that strengthen family economics, family-friendly work, or access to high-quality early care and education; the stronger these beliefs, the more support for these policies. Strong beliefs in individual explanations had a weak negative association with support for these policies. These findings are consistent with our hypotheses and cited research (e.g., Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Forde & Heckler, 2017) on causal attributions and policy support.

Three troublesome findings emerged from this study. While respondents recognized several structural determinants as explanations for children struggling (e.g., poverty), more than half of respondents believe genetics (e.g., "children born with bad personality traits") is an extremely or somewhat important reason for why some children struggle. This contrasts with decades of behavioral genetics, brain science, and epigenetics research (Champagne, 2010; Collins et al., 2000; Shonkoff et al., 2012) and meta-analyses of twin studies showing that environmental factors interact with biological factors in predicting developmental outcomes (Polderman et al., 2015). As such, while some children are born with traits that may impede their ability to succeed (e.g., congenital cognitive impairments), most children are born into environments that interact with their biological traits in ways that either support healthy development or not. The public narrative that attributes children struggling to internal, individual causes, such as bad personality traits, limits understanding of the problem and the pathways to care and solutions as discussed below. Such a narrative can also further marginalize and stigmatize those groups of children who have experienced a disproportionate amount of the burden of childhood adversity and the adverse conditions (like systemic racism) that exacerbate the risks conferred by childhood adversity.

Second, around two-thirds of YouGov respondents believe children not thinking carefully enough and making poor choices are important explanations for why children struggle. Although some of the examples used for "children struggling" in the survey (i.e., do poorly in school, don't graduate from high school, become teen parents, get into drugs, or involved in crime) may have evoked images of teenagers, the adolescent brain is far from mature

(Steinberg, 2008). Therefore, even if respondents were thinking of adolescents, believing children's poor choices or lack of hard work are important reasons for their problems is contrary to robust scientific understanding of brain development. The brain's ability to plan ahead, weigh risks and rewards, and control impulses is not fully mature until the mid to late twenties (Steinberg, 2008). Based on our current understanding of brain development, efforts to prevent or minimize adolescents not doing well in school, not graduating, becoming teen parents, getting into drugs, or involved in crime would focus on changing environments for teens (e.g., providing adult-supervised and structured activities, equitable educational opportunities) rather than trying to change what adolescents know and the ways they think, as current practice does (Steinberg, 2008). Further, the finding that 58% of respondents believe children not working hard enough in school is an important or extremely important reason for their struggling also suggests a lack of understanding of the impact of ACEs on school performance. Societal factors, such as poverty, increase the likelihood of children's exposure to toxic stress, which impedes their ability to pay attention, stay on task, and avoid risky behaviors (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

Lastly, almost 20% of respondents did not think children treated unfairly because of their color was an important explanation for why some children struggle despite evidence that discriminatory practices contribute to children's poor outcomes. For example, research has shown that White children who act out in school are more likely to get diagnosed with and treated for Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder while Black children are more likely to get suspended and expelled for the same behaviors (Ramey, 2015). Suspending or expelling children puts them at greater risk for poor school performance, high school noncompletion, and increased risk for involvement with the criminal justice system (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013; Novak, 2019). Training staff and enacting school policies to eliminate discriminatory discipline and implementing school-wide positive behavioral interventions can help create equitable, safe, supportive, and nurturing school environments (McIntosh et al., 2014).

These findings have important implications for the development of public awareness efforts. Respondents' recognition of some structural determinants as explanations for children struggling (e.g., poverty, not getting enough support, living in underresourced communities), provides an important foundation to build upon. Communication efforts could improve the public's understanding of healthy child development and the structural policies and processes that lead to living conditions (e.g., poverty, housing instability) that create toxic stress for children, and how these conditions affect children's brain architecture and function. Describing the structural determinants that contribute to adversity can also promote greater support for children who experience adversity and greater recognition of external factors that influence well-being. This could lead to reductions in pathologizing behavioral patterns caused by structural determinants and greater understanding and support for diagnosing and addressing structural determinants of health. Indeed, experimental studies show that communication of societal factors can change the public's understanding of a problem and increase support for policies (Barry et al., 2013; Bostrom, 2004; Niederdeppe et al., 2014; Young et al., 2016). Our results also suggest that baseline endorsement of structural reasons for children's outcomes may vary by community and should be considered when planning community-based prevention programs, policies, and practices.

Future research may examine why those differences exist, explore the sources of public narratives around why children struggle, identify characteristics of audiences that could benefit from information regarding structural conditions on child development, and test messages to establish their impact and effectiveness.

Findings also suggest it may be useful to increase awareness about children's toxic stress among childcare providers, early education and elementary school teachers and others who interact with children daily so that their responses to children "misbehaving" is trauma-informed and trauma-responsive. For example, modifying school policies and systems to reduce implicit bias, increasing the availability of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and implementing fair disciplinary policies may reduce the disproportionate burden of school discipline that leads to some children struggling (McIntosh et al., 2014). These efforts could also help change perceptions that children are to be blamed for behaviors that result from exposures over which they have no control.

A better understanding of the effects of structural determinants on child development may help build support for policies designed to improve living conditions for all children and their families (Gassman-Pines & Hill, 2013). Increased awareness may reduce the gap between our knowledge about what children and families need and our actions to support those needs. While parenting practices are important contributors to why some children struggle, it is also important to recognize and understand the context in which some parents are raising their children (Hall et al., 2016; Metzler et al., 2017; Richardson, 2016). Conditions such as economic insecurity; unstable, unaffordable, and poor quality housing; food insecurity; lack of affordable and reliable transportation; segregation and discrimination; underresourced neighborhoods; and lack of health care, affordable and good-quality childcare, and paid parental and sick leave not only fail to support healthy child development but also contribute to health inequities during childhood and across the life course (Desmond, 2016; Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Newman & Chen, 2018). It is important to note, however, that public support is not the only factor in policy change; for example, there is wide support for a number of firearm prevention policies that have not led to policy change.

There are several limitations to this study. First, these findings may be limited by nonresponse bias. Just over half of those invited to participate responded and completed the survey. In addition, the YouGov sample differed from the US population in several ways (e.g., more Black, higher income, married, unemployed, and Midwest respondents). Second, while we found that the two subscales derived from the Why Children Struggle survey have high reliability, they have not been validated against any "gold standard." However, the findings support the factorial and predictive validity of these scales in that they predicted support for public health policies examined in the hypothesized directions. Third, survey responses are subject to social desirability bias, which was not measured in this survey. Fourth, the question asking about solutions was framed as "things communities could do" (not policy solutions). As such, it is possible some respondents supported these solutions thinking communities could deliver them through charitable actions and future research could explore this explanation. Finally, the data are cross sectional and the causal direction

may be in reverse; that is, people in communities that adopt structural solutions may be more aware of them and their value precisely because they are more likely to see their effects.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest increased recognition of structural factors that hinder positive parenting and healthy child development may help build support for policies that are potentially effective in improving equitable health and life opportunity outcomes for all children, and the adults they will become (Klevens & Alexander, 2019). Public health and other sectors concerned with the well-being of children could help connect the dots between structural determinants, families' lived experiences, and children's outcomes (e.g., Office of the California Surgeon General, 2020). Such actions will support efforts to achieve health equity for all people and all groups. Findings can also inform public awareness efforts to support the healthy development of all children through policy solutions, as well as contribute to growing efforts to eliminate health inequities so all children and their families experience safe, stable, nurturing relationships, and environments.

FUNDING

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TABLE 1

Weighted percentages of sample demographic variables ($N = 2496$), YouGov Survey 2019 compared to the US population[a]

		YouGov	US
Sex	Female	51.4	51.3
Age	18–34	30.1	29.8
	35–54	31.6	32.4
	55+	38.3	37.8
Race/ethnicity	White	64.3[**]	61.1
	Black	12.0[**]	10.3
	Hispanic	15.7	16.6
	Asian	3.0[***]	4.9
	Native American	0.7[**]	1.3
	Multiracial	2.4	2.0
	Other	1.9[***]	3.8
Education	High school	40.0[***]	36.3
	Some college but no degree	21.3	22.0
	2- or 4-year college degree	28.1	29.9
	Grad school or more	10.6	11.8
Income			
	<$20,000	17.5[***]	37.6
	$20,000–39,999	24.7	23.8
	$40,000–59,999	17.5[***]	14.9
	$60,000–79,999	14.8[***]	8.7
	$80,000–99,999	8.1[***]	5.0
	$100,000+	17.5[***]	10.0
Marital status	Married	55.1[***]	47.6
	Divorced or separated	12.6	12.7
	Widowed	5.2	5.7
	Single	27.1[***]	33.9
Employment	Employed	48.9[***]	60.7
	Unemployed	7.8[***]	2.9
	Not in labor force	43.4[***]	36.4
Region	Northeast	18.7	17.4
	South	21.0[***]	38.1
	Midwest	37.4[***]	20.8
	West	22.9	23.8

[a] Census Bureau statistics for 2019 population.

**
$p < .01$;

***
$p < .001$.

TABLE 2

Standardized confirmatory factor analysis results (*N* = 2496 adults), YouGov Survey 2019

	Estimate	SE	Est/SE	Two-tailed *p*-value
Structural explanations (15 items)				
Children with learning challenges not getting the support they need	0.78	0.01	71.13	.00
Children growing up living in poverty	0.67	0.01	47.53	.00
Children not having high-quality childcare	0.77	0.01	74.21	.00
Families living in neighborhoods with few resources and services like community centers, libraries, or transportation	0.81	0.01	94.97	.00
People not willing to support solutions that benefit all children, not just their own	0.71	0.01	58.51	.00
Lack of public investment (e.g., in early care and education, schools, job opportunities) in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color	0.81	0.01	93.87	.00
Children treated unfairly because of their color (e.g., in schools, by police, or the justice system)	0.81	0.01	87.80	.00
Employers not paying parents enough to support a family	0.80	0.01	85.42	.00
Employers not adopting family-friendly practices (e.g., paying family and sick leave, flexible schedules to accommodate children's needs)	0.79	0.01	86.77	.00
Parents stressed about money	0.77	0.01	75.58	.00
Children not going to high-quality schools	0.72	0.01	58.58	.00
Limited political support for helping poor families get out of poverty	0.82	0.01	98.25	.00
Families living in neighborhoods with a lot of other families that can't make ends meet (i.e., living in concentrated poverty)	0.63	0.01	46.80	.00
Families living in unsafe neighborhoods	0.77	0.01	68.49	.00
Living in communities with easy access to harmful drugs	0.77	0.01	68.87	.00
Individual explanations (11 items)				
Children living in families with challenges like substance abuse, partner violence, and mental illness	0.86	0.01	60.28	.00
Parents not knowing how to parent correctly	0.77	0.01	67.25	.00
Parents not supporting their child's learning through educational activities like reading to them and playing with them	0.79	0.01	69.19	.00
Parents not having enough time for their children	0.81	0.01	75.97	.00
Children not thinking carefully enough and making poor choices	0.66	0.01	48.45	.00
Parents not thinking about the future of their children	0.69	0.01	49.42	.00
Parents not thinking carefully enough and making poor choices	0.78	0.01	71.46	.00
Children not working hard enough in school	0.58	0.02	38.41	.00
Parents not working hard enough	0.47	0.02	26.30	.00
Child born with bad personality traits passed on from one generation to next	0.53	0.02	29.23	.00
Parents using harsh discipline	0.75	0.01	51.66	.00
Interfactor correlation	0.63	0.01	46.52	.00
Indicators of model fit				
RMSEA	0.11			
CFI	0.84			
TLI	0.83			
SRMR	0.09			

TABLE 3

Weighted percent of sample (*N* = 2496) that believe each reason is extremely or somewhat important in why children struggle and support for policy solutions, YouGov Survey 2019

	Wgt %	[95% CI]
Structural explanations (15 items)		
Children with learning challenges not getting the support they need	88.90	[87.4, 90.4]
Children growing up living in poverty	87.70	[86.1, 89.2]
Living in communities with easy access to harmful drugs	84.60	[82.9, 86.3]
Children not going to high-quality schools	84.50	[82.7, 86.2]
Families living in unsafe neighborhoods	88.30	[86.8, 89.8]
Children not having high-quality childcare	82.10	[80.3, 83.9]
Families living in neighborhoods with few resources and services like community centers, libraries, or transportation	78.50	[76.5, 80.4]
Parents stressed about money	77.20	[75.2, 79.3]
Lack of public investment (e.g., in early care and education, schools, job opportunities) in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color	76.20	[74.3, 78.2]
People not willing to support solutions that benefit all children, not just their own	75.60	[73.5, 77.6]
Employers not paying parents enough to support a family	73.80	[71.7, 75.9]
Families living in neighborhoods with a lot of other families that can't make ends meet (i.e., living in concentrated poverty)	71.80	[69.6, 73.9]
Children treated unfairly because of their color (e.g., in schools, by police, or the justice system)	71.50	[69.4, 73.7]
Employers not adopting family-friendly practices (e.g., paying family and sick leave, flexible schedules to accommodate children's needs)	70.30	[68.1, 72.5]
Limited political support for helping poor families get out of poverty	70.20	[68.0, 72.4]
Individual explanations (11 items)		
Children living in families with challenges like substance abuse, partner violence, and mental illness	92.40	[91.1, 93.7]
Parents not supporting their child's learning through educational activities like reading to them and playing with them	88.10	[86.6, 89.7]
Parents not having enough time for their children	87.20	[85.6, 88.8]
Parents not knowing how to parent correctly	86.10	[84.4, 87.7]
Parents not thinking carefully enough and making poor choices	84.60	[82.8, 86.4]
Parents not thinking about the future of their children	82.90	[81.1, 84.7]
Children not thinking carefully enough and making poor choices	76.50	[74.5, 78.5]
Children not working hard enough in school	74.80	[72.7, 76.9]
Parents not working hard enough	65.10	[62.8, 67.3]
Parents using harsh discipline	64.60	[62.3, 66.8]
Child born with bad personality traits passed on from one generation to next	55.10	[52.7, 57.4]
Policy		
Strengthen household economics		
Be able to live in safe, stable housing	85.8	[84.3, 87.4]
Be able to buy enough nutritious food	84.7	[83.1, 86.3]
Be able to live in a neighborhood where few or no families have a hard time making ends meet	79.9	[78.2, 81.7]
Have a full-time job that provides sufficient income to cover basic needs for the employee and his/her children	79.9	[78.1, 81.6]
Receive income support to cover basic needs if a breadwinner loses job	66.4	[64.3, 68.5]
Family-friendly work		
Have paid parental leave to care for a new child	76.4	[74.5, 78.3]

Have a job that is "family-friendly" (provides flexible schedules, has on-site childcare or provides subsidies for childcare, provides paid days to care for new baby or sick family members)	71.7	[69.7, 73.6]
High-quality early care and education		
Be able to leave their children in childcare that is good for the child's development	81.0	[79.3, 82.8]
Are able to send their children to high-quality preschool	68.7	[66.7, 70.7]

TABLE 4

Linear regression[a] of support for policy solutions[b] when explanations for children struggling are structural or individual, YouGov survey 2019 ($n = 2496$)

	b	Standard error	t
Structural explanation scale	0.83***	0.02	53.3
Individual explanation scale	−0.05**	0.02	−2.75
Age	0.00***	0.00	6.94
Sex	0.02	0.02	0.92
Family income	0.00**	0.00	3.02
Education			
Some college	0.02	0.02	0.62
2 or 4 years	0.03	0.02	1.17
Postgrad	−0.04	0.03	−1.61
Race/ethnicity			
Black	−0.06*	0.03	−1.98
Hispanic	0.02	0.03	0.73
Asian	−0.04	0.05	−0.76
Native American	0.02	0.11	0.2
Multiracial	0.06	0.05	1.28
Other	−0.03	0.11	−0.32
Employment			
Unemployed	0.01	0.04	0.30
Not in the workforce	−0.04*	0.02	−2.23
Marital status			
Divorced/separated	−0.04	0.03	−1.49
Widowed	−0.01	0.05	−0.15
Single	0.02	0.02	0.82
Region			
Midwest	0.01	0.03	0.35
South	0.01	0.02	0.30
West	0.02	0.03	0.84
Adjusted R^2	0.66		
F	159.28***		
Constant	0.22***	0.05	4.14

[a] Analysis weighted and adjusted for demographics; reference group for sex = female, for race/ethnicity = white, for employment status = employed, for marital status = married, for region = northeast.

[b] Policy solutions include actions to strengthen household economics, family-friendly work, and high-quality early childcare and education.

*
$p < .05$;

**
$p < .01$;

***
$p < .001$.

TABLE 5

Linear regression[a] of endorsement of structural explanations for children struggling, YouGov survey 2019 ($n =$ 2496)

	b	**Standard error**	*t*
Individual explanation scale	0.60***	0.02	26.32
Age	0.00*	0.00	2.34
Sex	0.16***	0.02	6.47
Family income	0.00*	0.00	2.10
Education			
Some college	0.05	0.03	1.55
2 or 4 years	−0.04	0.03	−1.38
Postgrad	−0.15**	0.04	−3.38
Race/ethnicity			
Black	−0.15***	0.03	−5.36
Hispanic	−0.02	0.04	−0.45
Asian	0.04	0.06	0.68
Native American	0.20	0.16	1.28
Mixed	−0.03	0.09	−0.40
Other	0.25*	0.10	2.57
Employment status			
Unemployed	−0.05	0.04	−1.35
Not in the workforce	−0.02	0.03	−0.71
Marital status			
Divorced/separated	−0.08*	0.04	−2.11
Widowed	0.03	0.05	0.71
Single	−0.10***	0.03	−3.51
Region			
Midwest	0.07	0.04	1.93
South	0.05	0.03	1.59
West	0.06	0.04	1.57
Adjusted R^2	0.32		
F	44.63***		
Constant	0.59***	0.07	8.77

[a]Analysis weighted and adjusted for demographics; reference group for sex = female, for race/ethnicity = white, for employment status = employed, for marital status = married, for region = northeast.

*
$p < .05$;

**
$p < .01$;

***
$p < .001$.