



Toward a Two-Generation Strategy: Voices of American Families

**Findings from 10 focus groups conducted in September
and October of 2011**

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Letter From Ascend

Ascend, the family economic security program at the Aspen Institute, is a hub for breakthrough ideas and proven strategies that move parents, especially women, and their children beyond poverty toward educational success and economic security. Launched in 2010, Ascend takes a "two-generation" approach in its strategy, with a lens on parents and their children together. The program focuses on three key areas - education, economics and social capital – to change the conversation around families with low-incomes; engage across diverse sectors to develop a network of leaders and political will; and convene forums and create platforms to elevate effective two-generation policies and community solutions.

A critical aspect of Ascend's work is listening to, learning from, and lifting up the voices of the most vulnerable families in the United States today. Ascend commissioned this bipartisan series of focus groups to examine the experiences, perspectives, and needs of low-income families. By listening to the perspectives of families across demographics - race, gender, and family structure - Ascend aims to elevate their voices and use these findings to inform programmatic and policy work, in particular two-generation strategies to improve educational and economic outcomes for both parents and children.

Anne Mosle, Executive Director
Ascend

Methodology

Lake Research Partners and American Viewpoint conducted 10 focus groups as follows:

- September 14th – Detroit, MI
 - One group among low income African American single mothers
 - One group among African American/Latino married fathers
- September 15th – New York, NY
 - One group among low income Asian American single mothers
 - One group among African American/Latino single fathers
- September 20th – Albuquerque, NM
 - One group among low income Native American single mothers
 - One group among white single fathers
- September 21st – Los Angeles, CA
 - One group among low income Latina single mothers
 - One group among African American/Latina married mothers
- October 5th – Denver, CO
 - One group among low income white single mothers
 - One group among white married mothers

Participants were recruited to reflect a mix of age, educational background, and political partisanship. The following findings use the term “participants” in reference to the participants of the 10 groups.

Qualitative Research Statement of Limitations

In opinion research, the focus group seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.

The reader may find that some of the information seems inconsistent in character upon first reading this report. These inconsistencies should be considered as valid data from the participant's point of view. That is, the participant may be misinformed or simply wrong in his or her knowledge or judgment, and we should interpret this as useful information about their level of understanding.

This study cannot be considered reliable or valid in the statistical sense. This type of research is intended to provide knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and opinions about issues and concerns.

This report cannot accurately detail the wealth of information in the non-verbal area; e.g., "body language" (posture, sleepiness, wiggling in the chair, etc.) or the amount of time lapsed between questions from the moderator and actual responses from the group. It also cannot report on the subtle area of "peer pressure"—the willingness to avoid making a particular response because of fear of what others might think or to change a response when others in the group appear to oppose his or her original position.

The following biases are inherent in qualitative research and are stated here to remind the reader that the qualitative data presented here cannot be projected to any universe of individuals.

- Bias 1. Participants who respond to the invitation of a stranger to participate in this research show themselves to be risk takers and may be somewhat more assertive than non-participants.
- Bias 2. Some participants speak more often and more forcefully in focus group sessions than other participants, so their opinions tend to carry more weight in the findings.
- Bias 3. Participants "self-select" themselves, i.e., they are those people who are available on the night a particular group was scheduled.
- Bias 4. Participants were not selected randomly so that each person in the pool of possible participants did not have an equal chance to be selected.
- Bias 5. People in groups may respond differently to a question than if asked that same question individually. They may follow the lead of a strong speaker or someone they perceive as "expert."

Key Findings

Context

Parents across groups express strong feelings of frustration and disappointment with how things are going for people like them today. They believe politicians are just fighting and completely out of touch. They are burdened financially – living paycheck to paycheck – as well as by the demands on their time from work and family. They are also attempting to attain the elusive goal of a sliver of leisure for themselves and a little extra for their families. They believe the economy is bad with no recovery in sight and it is making things worse for them in terms of wages, benefits and cost of living.

Family and friends help, and are their primary support network in providing financial assistance, care for their children, and an emotional foundation. For some, church provides invaluable support both spiritually and by providing a network of people and services which can help in various ways from time to time.

For mothers, their dreams and aspirations are mostly to provide a better future for their children. Low income single mothers unlike other people believe their children will likely have a better life than their own – and they play an active and conscious role in trying to ensure that they do have a better life and do not repeat the mistakes they have made. Fathers too express their dreams and aspirations for their children as their own, but are also looking for a better financial position for themselves as their principal goals.

The key watch words of this economy are economic security and stability. In this economy security means having enough money to buy necessities without having to worry, a steady good job, and a little savings. Economic stability is the short term goal. Instability marks today's economy where decisions of others can completely turn the economy upside down. People feel they have little control. Low income single mothers are even more at risk from instability – where they begin to make progress and a sick child, a new bill, or a late arrival at work can turn their lives upside down. Economic security is the long term goal that comes from greater stability. They view opportunity as a better position through education and a better job. For some – especially single mothers – opportunity is the most important because it serves as a foundation to provide security and stability. They are the one group who believes in opportunity. For others, stability and security are tied to more immediate needs and are more important.

People view education as essential for their children's success. They find this more and more difficult to provide as children age. Education is a key value and not just a commodity. They recognize that in today's competitive economy a bachelor's degree and job skills training are necessary, though in a struggling economy even people with master's degrees can't find employment. They value pre-school but assume it is available. They worry about achieving and affording higher education and skills training for themselves and their children. Participants say that a structured positive environment is also a key ingredient for their children to succeed – and to avoid some of the mistakes they have made such as teen pregnancy, and staying on the right track for higher education. They try to produce this structured and positive environment

at home, but also appreciate school from the perspective of providing a safe and structured surrounding for their children.

Low income single mothers, not surprisingly, are particularly hard pressed and at the margins economically with no cushion, in low-paying often unstable employment situations trying to improve their situation, but finding themselves short of time and money to do so. They believe good education will be key for their children and that better education is key for themselves. They worry about the quality of their children's schools and the ability to get their children higher education. They are extremely motivated in their lives to provide a better future for their children and to help them prevent making the mistakes they made. Their goals for themselves are almost totally intertwined with their goals for their children.

View of Single Parents

Participants acknowledge the challenges facing a single parent in raising a child without a partner, as well as the specific challenges of raising a child of the opposite gender; they agree on differences between men and women, the strengths and weaknesses particular to each as a parent. Single mothers report tremendous challenges in their day-to-day lives from having to be solely responsible for their children. However they feel these challenges have made them strong and independent.

Most people believe that society has at least a somewhat negative perception of single mothers, but most distance themselves from this view saying that they personally do not share it. They believe single mothers are often seen as partial failures, or on welfare. However single fathers in New York City themselves expressed some negative views towards single mothers.

Participants view the term "Women-Headed Families" positively, believing it connotes strength and responsibility. Some believe it is a more positive phrase than single mothers, but for many it does not necessarily imply single – it could easily refer to a married mother. Further, it does not connote being the financial head but rather the lead decision-maker.

Concepts

The examples of programs are well received, with the only downside being when they are presented as just for single mothers. Across groups, but especially among the men, participants prefer to expand the reach of programs to single parents. They do not see a reason to exclude men. Because they view the concept as being important and beneficial to children, they believe they should be open to all single parents. In general people want programs to be inclusive, not exclusionary.

Many take issue with an investment frame - it seems too abstract and lacks a human touch, and some of the men find the notion to be patronizing and negative toward single women. Some women resent the notion of referencing a values-oriented relationship in monetary terms.

Single mothers responded strongly to the specific programs. They liked the examples on education including pre-school and beyond. They like helping themselves and their children.

However, some women reacted negatively to living in a dorm which they felt was exclusionary and isolating. People also dislike the idea of being channeled into one occupation or training program.

Economic Context

Across groups, participants express strong frustrations with how things are going for people like them. They are strapped financially and express strong feelings of anxiety over the economy and disappointment with politicians. They believe there is little they can do personally to change this environment, and believe that elected officials and economic elites are not doing anything to improve the economy. Asian single mothers in New York seemed somewhat better off, or at least not as vocal in their frustrations, while both groups in New Mexico – Native American single mothers and white single fathers – expressed the most palpable frustrations.

“Disappointed” (African American/Latino Married Fathers, MI)

“Disappointed” (African American Single Mothers, MI)

“Disappointed” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)

“Disheartened” (White Married Mothers, CO)

“Discouraged” (Native American Single Mothers, NM)

“Challenging” (White Single Fathers, NM)

“Frustrated” (African American/Latino Married Fathers, MI)

“Frustrated” (African American Single Mothers, MI)

“Frustrated” (Asian Single Mothers, NY)

“Irritated” (African American/Latino Married Mothers, CA)

“Annoyed” (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)

“Concerned” (African American/Latino Married Fathers, MI)

“Concerned” (White Single Mothers, CO)

“Stressed” (Asian Single Mothers, NY)

“Stressed” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)

“Stressed” (White Single Mothers, CO)

“Uncertain” (Asian Single Mothers, NY)

“Very confused” (White Married Mothers, CO)

The key words people express about the economy are “economic security” and “economic stability” which are linked. They mean a lack of financial worry – that one has enough money to pay the bills and provide food and shelter. Participants across groups value both security and

stability, with some believing they have one or the other, though most indicate they continue to strive towards stability and security as a goal.

The value of stability stood out as particularly important given that most see stability as a short term situation while they view security as the long term equivalent. For some, economic stability had a dimension of the ability to withstand emergencies. Given participants' anxiety over the present economy, stability is their primary goal – to be able to handle what comes their way and survive until the economy improves.

Economic Security

*"Money in the bank; your bills are taken care of; you **don't have to worry about how you are going to pay a bill.** Just some financial security." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, MI)*

*"**Not have to struggle.**" (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"Well the bills are all paid and you're **not having to worry about the next week.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"Well for me, it's presently whether or not I could be stable in terms of **being able to pay rent or buy food**, you know put food on the table, and clothing and getting the right healthcare." (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*"I think economic security is just like **being able to maintain** in the society and **having the things that you need** like shelter, money, healthcare, just broadly you know. Things that you need for everyday survival." (African American Single Mothers, MI)*

*"You have money saved. You have a future. You know you **have money set aside for your kids.** That's what I feel that economic security would be." (White Single Mothers, CO)*

*"To go to the grocery store and get what you want and **not have anxiety.**" (White Married Mothers, CO)*

Economic Stability

*"There's always surprises in life and whatnot, but being able to count on, you know, having a normal steady income and you know **being able to face what comes your way.**" (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*"I want to be, or course, secure. That to me is like way out there. **Stability is probably more in my reach.**" (White Married Mothers, CO)*

*"Stability that you're **at that place where you want to be.**" (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"Financial stable. I would say financially stable. You **don't have to worry** about calling somebody to say I need to borrow this money to pay a bill; you are stable; you've got you know..." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"It means **I have money to send my kids to the school they want to go to** and extracurricular things, like piano lessons and stuff that they want to go to." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"You have a **secure job that** you get pretty much a raise every other year or some sort of step and then you see your investments growing...slowly, but surely." (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*“Well basically **not living paycheck to paycheck**. You know like if you live paycheck to paycheck and you have an emergency and now you are like scrambling to try to make ends meet.” (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

“There’s always surprises in life and whatnot, but being able to count on, you know, having a normal steady income and you know being able to face what comes your way.” (White Single Fathers, NM)

“Money in the bank.” (White Single Mothers, CO)

Short-term/Long-term

“I think they are different. Stability is probably more like you are talking about now. Security, I guess, is also paving the road for the future.” (Asian Single Mothers, NY)

“But stability I think is more short term; security I think is more long term.” (White Single Fathers, NM)

“Security feels more long term than stability. Stability feels like in the here and now. And opportunity again, to me is very different from security and stability.” (African American or Latino Married Mothers, CA)

“Stability is like short-term and security is kind of like long-term.” (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)

“I think you have to be stable before you can be secure.” (White Single Mothers, CO)

Participants say that “economic opportunity” refers to future-oriented conditions such as better jobs, better education and more money. It remains an important goal, mostly for single parents who strive to create opportunities for their children like a college education. Some participants believe that obtaining security and stability are prerequisites for providing opportunity. They believe that today one first needs both security and stability in order to even take advantage of existing opportunities. The state of the economy drives this sentiment, as many clamor for policy makers to provide a more stable and secure environment that can facilitate opportunity.

Economic Opportunity

“That you’re able to go out and try to get a job but like that doesn’t mean you’re gonna get one. Like you have the opportunity.” (Native American Single Mothers, NM)

*“I would think the opportunity **for people to get better jobs, more jobs**. More jobs for adults who are out working and love to work.” (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

“A chance to make more money.” (African American/Latino Married Fathers, MI)

“More jobs.” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)

“Better future.” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)

*“More **education**.” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*“Opportunity to **advance either in your career or with your assets**.” (Single White Fathers, NM)*

“It means you have a job and better pay.” (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)

"I have already focused [my son's] future, whatever he decides to do with himself, but I know college is going to be part of it and I have taken that step for him to give him economic opportunity." (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)

"Maybe just an opportunity to **get a better job or to advance**. You know get a job and then maybe be able to advance." (White Single Mothers, CO)

"The opportunity to...I mean **knowing that there is a chance to do more.**" (White Married Mothers, CO)

People have their networks of support. Across groups, parents name their friends and family as their primary support network. For many single mothers, their parents are vitally important in helping raise their children. From child care support and supervision, extra money, and helping with transportation, their parents are critical to providing support while they pursue their jobs or education. Many single and married parents alike say that their friends or other parents they know are also important, and often time take turns watching each others' kids. For single mothers having their mother or a family member near or not seems to be a critical factor.

"My **friends** help me out with **side jobs** you know." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)

"If I am **falling behind on a bill**, my **mother** understands that being a single parent...she has been there, **she will help me.**" (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)

"Like **neighbors** sometimes with **transportation** and things like that." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)

"Yeah. **Friends**. I get a lot of **support, positive enforcements**. Same thing from church, it's somewhere outside of everywhere that you go that you can go and really just, be **encouraged** you know..." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)

"Yes. I am so thankful for my **mom because she takes care of my son.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)

"**Family** is intimate. **Church** is religious and spiritual." (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)

"...I put **husband, mom, husband's family, friends, family**, neighbors, co-workers and clients." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)

"My **family, close friends that I trust**, my **wife**, my **kids** and my **grandkids.**" (Single White Fathers, NM)

"At the top I put **church, God**. Sometimes you're praying, God help me you know get to work or help me find a vehicle or something." (Native American Single Mothers, NM)

"I **have my mom and his mom**, and him just because of child support, and my aunts. I have never paid for daycare. If I find myself spending too much money or like in a bind, my mom gets me out of it, so if she wasn't there, I would fail all the time." (White Single Mothers, CO)

"**We have had financial help, the church prayers**, and you know support like that." (White Married Mothers, CO)

Several participants identify their church as a primary support network as well. Through their church they receive spiritual inspiration in addition to some financial support and a network of

people and programs that can help out with day-to-day needs ranging from child care, to the occasional meal, to job search help.

A few participants name non-profit and governmental entities as part of their support network. These organizations provide helpful services ranging from healthcare and food to financial education. Low income mothers know a number of programs but the support is spotty and people move in and out of programs and eligibility.

"I put family, non-profit, churches and neighbors." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)

"I wrote friends and family, but I put down community, church and government, but the two were my top. And the reason I wrote government as a support, is because there's programs that they've given us. They give us unemployment, they have given us Healthy Families for people who can't, Social Security, disability." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)

"Close friends and Medicaid for the kids." (Native American Single Mothers, NM)

"Most of my family is back east, I have some kind here, but as for support network, you know, I had mentioned a union. I believe in the established programs that we've set up to protect us in times of need or Social Security, Welfare or unemployment, and I really depend on these programs that we've always paid into and now that we need them, I really think that they should be there for us, along with you know church groups." (Single White Fathers, NM)

"Community Works Education Employment. CWEE." (White Single Mothers, CO)

"I have used some food banks." (White Married Mothers, CO)

For most women regardless of their marital status, their dreams are for their children – their children's dreams are their own dreams. Many brought up various dreams and goals they had for themselves when they were younger, but when their children were born most put their own goals aside. Some indicated that they pursued their goals later when their children were older – one woman shared the emotional story of her 34 year struggle to get her G.E.D., which she valued not only for herself, but for the positive influence it gave to her daughter who expressed pride in her mother and determination to graduate high school.

These parents are working hard to ensure that their children can strive for their dreams with fewer boundaries than they had growing up. They are trying to instill education as a value, and most want to make sure that their children do not make the same mistakes they themselves made. For example, single mothers say they want to avoid their daughters going through unplanned pregnancies. Others want their children to stay in school and get a good education – either a college degree or skill training in a trade.

For some of the men, their dreams revolve around getting to a better place financially that would benefit themselves and allow them to provide for their children.

Dreams Focused on Children

*"I say to live better. I mean as far as being able to maybe buy me a bigger home and **make sure that my kids are comfortable**, I have **money set aside for them to go to college** and just basic living." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"A secure life, like **for my children to have something that they can start with**, but I think a lot of times we don't have anything to start with." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"**Raise a productive citizen.**" (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"A degree so I can get a better job and **provide for my family.**" (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"Providing a **better path for my son.** It's his future; not mine. It's his future." (Asian Single Mothers, NY)*

*"For my daughter to be...I know it's not me, but **for my daughter to be as successful as she can be.**" (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*"Spending all my **weekends at home with my child.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"I would like to have my own home here in Albuquerque **so my son can have a good education.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"Have **my kids have all the opportunities to do the things I couldn't do.**" (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*"**Raise a healthy, well-rounded, smart son.**" (White Married Mothers, CO)*

Dreams Focused on Their Own Financial Security

*"Just have **millions of dollars** in the bank and just say bye." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"A **six-figure** career." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"**Own my own business.**" (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*"My dream I guess ultimately is so that I **don't have to work.**" (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*"**Financially free.** Stress Free." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"**Financially Independent** for myself." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

Children

Parents believe that children are doing well these days. Some express concerns over the economy's impact on children, particularly those that are in high school and closer to entering a tough job market. Single parents express more optimism than their married counterparts, and believe that children will have a better life than they did. Participants across groups are working hard to see that their children will be better off than they are, expressing a conscious effort to ensure a bright future for their children and to avoid the mistakes they made.

"I'm going to make sure that she is more ambitious than me. I'm going to make sure she hangs around the right kids and gets a network going in school and college..." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)

*"I would say **better because she's exposed to more than I was exposed to.** She can, you know she has a more opportunities as far as education wise and whatnot than I, you know than I did and just from what we expose her to." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

*"**Hope for better** but you can't guarantee it." (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"It's going to be a lot **more challenging, but I think it will be better.**" (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*"Not making stupid decisions. I mean I had a full scholarship; I went to C Boulder and I messed that scholarship up. And just for someone to have that opportunity is stupid, extremely stupid, and I mean I could have been living my real dream right now, but it changed; I had a kid; I messed up my school. So I don't want her to do that again. I mean **I want her to stay in school, having a family, a whole family, a complete family and not just like a single mom or a single dad** or something like that." (White Single Mothers, CO)*

All parents agree on the importance of education for a child's success. They believe that in order to compete in the job market their children will need a college education – it is as important today as a high school education used to be. Some believe that a college education is not enough to compete for the top jobs, and that a masters degree is necessary. Others cite anecdotal evidence that even people with masters degrees and law degrees are struggling to find jobs in this economy.

*"...you have a lot on your plate and I tell him **you need an education** cause I don't have a money tree outside." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

*"Well right now **they are on a straight path.** I mean I put my foot down basically. I mean **education is number one.** Like I tell them, **you need an education.** I mean the streets and the hanging out and all the other stuff can wait. There is a future in education. Do for yourself because I am not going to always be here to provide and take care of you, so **you need to be educated.**" (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"**Top priority** (education). You tell them that's their job..." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

*"**Education.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"I say education too. I agree with that. **Education.**" (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"A **good education.**" (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*"I mean there are few that fall between the cracks that just have an innate ability to create wealth or something, **but by far, most of them need that education, a strong education.**" (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*"Well you know I am fortunate enough to have child support from my ex and so I do send them to **prep classes that are specialized like high school right now.** I am sending my son to them to prep him for science and all that." (Asian Single Mothers, NY)*

"Yes. Education and support." (White Single Mothers, CO)

Education also provides a safe and structured environment for children, which parents believe is also crucial for a child's success in its own right. They value creating a safe family setting that provides both a loving support network and a structured environment to help their children learn decision making skills. Some of the single parents worry about the environment that their children are exposed to, particularly parents of older children who face the myriad distractions teenagers encounter. They want to shield their children from these distractions and "keep them on the right path."

Keys to a child's success:

*"I think the **environment is important.**" (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*"It means that the **kids need to be engaged; they have to have limits.** Because you know a kid doesn't know what they want; they don't know what they need. They think they know, but they don't know and so **they need to have structure** so they know that they need to be here or they need to say yes and they need to say thank you. Pick that up; don't touch that; don't steal that; buy this." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"Love and a structure as far as family structure because **if there is no family structure then the child has other things on their mind** than what they should be worried about." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"I think **they need to have goals**, especially if they are older. I have a son and he has goals; he wants to go to...and I see him working towards that and trying to graduate from high school early." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"I feel that everybody has an opportunity. It's **motivation that's gonna be a little bit harder...**" (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"**Boundaries.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

Single Parents

Single parents and married parents alike face a variety of challenges and parents across groups recognize that being a single parent makes challenges more difficult. They have to handle all of the responsibilities of being a parent without the support of an additional partner financially, in terms of time management and as a source of advice and consultation. Aside from the financial disadvantage of being limited by one income, single parents have the sole responsibility over household chores, making sure their kids get to school and extracurricular activities on time, and providing for their children.

Many of the single fathers in the groups who only had partial custody of their children acknowledged that their children's mothers faced many of these difficulties, but that they try to provide support when it directly affects the child, like getting him or her to school or activities. Some of the single mothers also acknowledged that their children's father played a similar role at times, though often times they reported being on their own with just the help from their support networks.

*"You **have to provide everything** that if you had somebody to share it with, then you can split half of the responsibility." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"**Gas in the car and food in the fridge.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"Just **making ends meet** from one paycheck to the next." (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"My time. Pretty much **the use of my time**. You know there is so much you can do in a day and you are by yourself." (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*"I **have to take care of everything** in the house." (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*"Trying to **raise my teenage daughter.**" (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*"Always things happening; it's never really a dull moment. **School and trying to make sure she do what she's got to do to accomplish what she needs to accomplish at school.** And boys and wanting to go out. There's a whole bunch of things. **We could be here all night.**" (AA and Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*"My daughter is seven years old and we separated when she was one. She lives out in Long Island and we have had lots of ups and downs and I see my daughter every other weekend for the past seven years. I haven't missed a weekend or maybe even a handful. And it's difficult you know because **you want to give them all your time and you can't.**" (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

"Time management." (White Single Mothers, CO)

Married parents report experiencing difficulties but are quick to appreciate the efforts of their partners, and imagine that life without them would be even more difficult. They understand how much easier it is to allocate responsibility between parents, and have a backup – for example when one parent can not drive their child to a practice, the other one can.

*"It has a lot of do with...I'm going to say the opportunity...I can tell my husband here watch, watch her while I go and do this so **they don't have that extra support.**" (African American or Latino Married Mothers, CA)*

*“...You have to provide everything that **if you had somebody to share it with, then you can split half of the responsibility.**” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*“**One parent, one salary, that’s rough.**” (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*“Even cooking dinner. It’s like just **all the stuff that I know that I need help from husband.** Just to take a baby away.” (White Married Mothers, CO)*

Aside from the difficulties posed by having a single income and being a single provider of logistical support for their children, parents across groups believe that raising a child – instilling values and providing guidance – is more challenging for a single parent. Married parents recognize the importance and value of having a sounding board for their thoughts and ideas on how to deal with new situations.

Single mothers and fathers recognize that there are challenges specific to raising a boy and to raising a girl as a single mother or single father. The fathers believe that there are certain qualities that they lack that their child’s mother possesses, and other qualities that they themselves possess that their child’s mother lacks. The mothers expressed a similar opinion, and were more likely to believe that there are challenges specific to raising a child of the opposite gender. For example, they said it would be difficult for a single father to help his daughter through puberty.

*“My dad was a single father. It was the not knowing, the unknown, the constant unknown; what do I do, is this the right decision, I, I, should I be checking with someone, should I...it’s the constant unknown, **they don’t know for sure if they’re doing things right,** they don’t know who to go to because they are men...” (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

*“Kids are raised by two parents traditionally. You need emotionally, physically, financially and it’s just **I can’t provide everything that his momma can.** No matter how good a dad I am, momma just does something for him and you know I can’t make that up. So like you said this divorce thing sucks, but it is what it is.” (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*“**Kids need their mom** man.” “Yeah, **and they need their dad** too” (exchange) (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*“**Being mom and dad.**” (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*“It is **hard for a woman to teach a boy how to be a man.**” (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*“If you are a **mother, you can’t teach a boy how to be a man.**” (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*“And showing that attention and that love, the hugging. Even with a boy, okay...**with a boy, you feel as a single mother, single mothers are going to always hug and you know nurture.** If they fall down and cry, we are going to nurture them and things like that; **a father, you know they say my son is supposed to be strong;** get up you know and shake it off. Okay, they need both. They need that get up and shake it off and they also need that mother there with that hug.” (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

“You also have the gender thing. Am I doing right? I am just a mom; I don’t have any input for my son. Or if you are a male, I don’t have any female input for my child.” (White Married Mothers, CO)

Single mothers say that they are strong and independent. They take pride in raising their children on their own, and believe that it has made them stronger and better prepared to handle difficult situations.

*"I think now that there's a majority of single parents I think **they see them as very strong** because not to point any you know or misuse the word of married woman, I think you have a bigger load when you're single..." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"**Strong.**" "**Powerful.**" (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"Being strong." "**Financially independent.**" (Asian Single Mothers, NY)*

"It seems sometimes that being a single parent, they're doing better than kids with both parents." (Native American Single Mothers, NM)

"Strong." (White Single Mothers, CO)

Despite their self confidence and pride derived from being a single parent, most assume that other people and society in general have a negative perception of single parents. Latina single mothers in Los Angeles said that some probably assumed there was something wrong with them for their husband or boyfriend to have left them. They also say some view them as "failures." A few participants noted that Christians might view single mothers unfavorably, and assume that they have poor values.

*"**Some people look at us negative.** They are like you are not married when you look at it from a Christian background and then you look at it where other people who are married look at you, like oh do you have a man or something like that." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"Well they don't know what happened with the other male part. They would probably think **what did she do wrong or why are they not together.**" (Asian Single Mothers, NY)*

*"When I was growing up there were some friends I was really close with and there was four sisters. And I always loved to come and stay at their house but they were never allowed to come and stay at my house. And basically what it was, the dad told one of my friends and the friend confided in me, **my parents won't let you stay because your mom is divorced, a single family and he feels that your values are bad and that they're gonna rub off on me.**" (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"They **assume you are going to struggle.**" (Native American Single Mothers, NM)*

*"Other people see my son in the neighborhood where I live most of them are like married couples and I **think my son had a disadvantage**; like some disadvantages. Like I notice that some people will like kind of you know single him out." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"I think in the Latino culture that still hasn't changed. **You're single and you're seen as a failure** or what did you do wrong..." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

"And I hate it when people say oh you are a single mom." (White Single Mothers, CO)

"Because I had somebody like tell me oh you are a single mom, so let me guess, you live off the government too right?" (White Single Mothers, CO)

Single fathers believe that there are more single parents now than there used to be. Still they assume that society holds a negative view of single mothers. Many married parents expressed similar views. Some of the African American married mothers said that society probably believes single mothers are on welfare.

*"Well society sees [single parents] as awful...**they look down on them.**" (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

"I think people look down on them and they think oh she couldn't keep her man." (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)

*"In this society **single mom has been made so negative.**" (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

*"[Society] assumes **they're on welfare...Taking from the government.**" (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

"They're on assistance." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)

*"Something like **50 percent of marriages now have failed** so I think it's very common." (Single White Fathers, NM)*

*"I think nowadays people kind of expect it, like I say **it's a lot more common.**" (Single White Fathers, NM)*

"It is harder than if you have a partner involved." (White Married Mother, CO)

Parents across groups viewed the term "Women-Headed Families" positively as a term of strength and responsibility. However they did not assume it was limited to referring only to single mothers. Rather, they thought it conveyed a woman as being in charge and making decisions in a household regardless of whether or not she had a partner. While some took it to imply a woman being financially in charge, for others the term did not imply financial leadership so much as meaning that women are the decision makers in the family.

*"**The women are in charge**; there are no men there. He is not there; the women take over raising them." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"...when you hear mom then you know that this is someone that is multitasking automatically because she is a single mom and so she has to be the provider and she is a mom and so she has to do all the things associated with mom. But **women-headed could be someone with no children.** Not to say that they are not multitasking, but it just adds more to hear, for me, the mom in there in the sentence." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

"If I were to hear it the first time, I would think that...if you use the family at the end, I would think that you still have the other half in the circle." (Asian Single Mothers, NY)

*"A **woman plays the biggest role.**" "Yeah, the woman is leading the family." (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

"Single parent household...single mother household." (Native American Single Mothers, NM)

*"They might run the finances, **make major decisions** even if they're a married couple or a single mom." (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*"The woman is **making more money**." (White Single Mothers, CO)*

*"**Strong women**." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*"She's earning all the money." "Stay at home dad." "She's **running the household**." (exchange) (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)*

Two-Generation Concept

When asked about programs that are effective and available in their communities, both married and single parents can name a variety of governmental and non-profit programs that are available for single parents. Some of the single parents report receiving assistance from several programs as well as some that help their children such as food programs in school. The programs they identify cover a range of areas including healthcare, financial literacy, food assistance, child care, and housing.

"WIC for mothers." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)

"Food assistance." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)

*"I am going to say **Department of Human Services**." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

"They have a program for children. They changed the name though; it's not WIC anymore and you don't get a book; it comes on an electronic card and you can go to the grocery store and get a certain amount of dairy..." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)

*"**Independent Community Grant**. At one point where I was really down and I was impoverished and I went to Social Services in Detroit and I asked for emergency food stamps, they told me I had to wait. When I got to Oakton County and I asked for them, no wait. I waited, but they had a food pantry in the office and they took me in there and they allowed me to take food home that same day." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"There's one in --- called **MEND** – Meet Each Need with Dignity." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

"Helps for housing, rental assistance." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)

*"**Free meals for kids at school**." (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

"Food stamps. Medicaid." (White Single Mothers, CO)

"WIC." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)

"Family, church." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)

"Free clinics." (African American/Latina Married Mothers, CA)

*"**Section 8**." (Single White Fathers, NM)*

"Whether it is WIC or Health Plus even. They charge low-income families a small percentage to get the insurance." (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)

*"They have **Head Start** Program for kids." (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*"They have a **Business Worker Program**." (Asian Single Mothers, NYC)*

*"You've got **PAL**." (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

"And in the summer, the schools give free breakfast and lunch." (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)

While many parents appreciate the various programs that are available, what they want above all else are programs that act as a resource hub and can serve in a mentoring capacity. They want programs that can let them know about educational and job opportunities, or can advise them on steps they can take to better their situation. They want someone available to answer their questions and help them figure out their own independent strategy for their future – an advisor with access to resources that serves as a de facto one-stop support network. They believe availability and eligibility for programs is often unstable. They also think programs are not networked together. Those are big holes that Ascend's examples help fill.

Some of the African American and Latino married men in Detroit want programs that do more than simply help them make ends meet which to them is the bare minimum, and even sounds like welfare.

*"I would say a **resource center** - giving them **information to lead them to opportunities** and phones and places that have things available for them." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"We need more volunteers, good volunteers, people who can understand...because **really these are mentoring situations**." (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*"...**a mentor and network**. Something where I can say; don't beat your head over this, you can go here or you need this..." (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*"Some kind of **help in the high school for kids to be able to know what they want to be** when they grow up..." (African American/Latino Married Mothers, CA)*

*"Education resource, jobs, **teaching them some kind of skills** so they can take care of themselves, and maybe **talk to them more about not becoming teenage parents** and things like that." (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*"To **get them ready for different work**. You know like we said, like little work programs, like nurse or anything, firefighter, policeman." (African American Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"I think there should be like **after school programs and make all the kids get involved**, like required so that they don't get into like bad things and keep them busy until they are out of school." (White Single Mothers, CO)*

*"Well either that or like a step down where once you start working, they **help train you** or whatever or work with you while you are doing that, and **then as you start making more money, it still helps to do that cushion** in-between so it's not all yes or no." (White Married Mothers, CO)*

*"Standardize the education for some a little more so where everybody gets the **same opportunity to progress as far as they want**, to get what education that fits them or suits them..." (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*"Because it sounds **like just making it**. Who wants to just make it? That's what I got it as - make ends meet." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*"I mean, helping families make ends meet; **that's like Welfare to me**." (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

Parents believe that skills training and education are fundamental toward getting a better job and establishing economic security. Skills-training is more important to some of these parents because it is more closely associated with particular jobs. They note that a college education is not always the best educational opportunity and is occasionally irrelevant. They believe that college might not be for everyone, and that skills training can provide those students who would not benefit from college with the abilities to compete for jobs.

*“There are a lot of jobs out there, but a lot of people don’t have the skills or training. And then **the education gives you the knowledge on how to go out and seek those jobs** and you get access to them.” (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*“Right, **that doesn’t just cover education; it’s other** than...if you want to **build**, if you are **good with your hands**, if you are **good with your mind**...” (African American/Latino Married Fathers, Detroit)*

*“If **you don’t have a skill, you cannot make money**.” “It’s just that simple. It could be anything from creating dolls to creating computers; you know whatever it is.” (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*“Well when you look at the fact you’re creating **long lasting economic stability** than me, I look at the future and I think that the investment that we need to make is number 9; **skills training and education, cause that’s the only thing that’s going to change the future**.” (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*“Education for my daughter, but my son’s 19 and **he’s not too much into school and for him it’s gonna be more skills and training**; more like a training college or something that’s gonna teach him a skill; as to my daughter going to college...” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

“Because often even if somebody is in the position where they are not able to get by and they are on poverty, they either lack training or lack additional or other training to be able to provide themselves an income to be able to get out of the situation.” (White Married Mothers, CO)

Whether it is attaining higher education or completing skills training, parents across groups repeatedly affirm the importance of education. They value educational opportunities beyond high school for children as a key to a better life. Jobs skills and higher education are the principle tools available to ensure long-lasting economic stability and security.

*“Well as we have said throughout the evening, it’s just common fact that **most of the jobs that are going to pay in the higher bracket are going to require that you have more than a high school diploma**.” (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*“I think because **we teach our kids to set goals that are high, they’re gonna do better**. Even if they don’t get at that point but they’re gonna end around there. But if we don’t set those goals for them than they’re just you know...” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

*“Because if you have the **long-lasting economic stability or a long-term plan, then you will not be dependent upon the other things**. Like once you have those networks that are that have been created, then they are solid and you can...you are self-sustaining and you won’t need those...you won’t need the other assistance. You won’t have to continue to be at that same place going for help or getting help over and over.” (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*“Well because you’re going to, it’s going, it’s more about...for my kids than anything because I **want them to be stable in life in their future so that’s what I’m more focused on.**” (African American/Latina Married Mothers, LA)*

Many participants took objection to programs that are described as being just for single mothers, preferring instead that they be made available to single parents – both mothers and fathers. They were read a statement rationalizing the need for programs for single parents, and agreed in principle that helping single parents benefits their children, but some were turned off by singling out the need to help single mothers in particular.

*“The wording should be changed there too I think because it’s not just when you invest in the women; it’s when **you invest in whoever is the provider for the children.**” (African American Single Mothers, Detroit)*

*“Well we pretty much figured “mothers”...you know we are all here and are male and have kids. I don’t know any of these people and they don’t know me, but I assume they are good fathers. So **when it just says mothers, everything is geared towards mothers.** Everything. Every freaking thing.” (African American/Latino Single Fathers, NY)*

*“And also, I don’t want to say it’s only the mothers. I mean there are single dads out there too, but **they are just sort of pushing it towards the women’s side.**” (Asian Single Mothers, NY)*

*“I **don’t think it should be focused on anything, on male or female.** I mean if there’s somebody (over talking) that needs assistance you know if it’s a single father or a single mother that’s low income both of them should have that same opportunity.” (White Single Fathers, NM)*

*“I kind of disagree with just in particular to mothers. **Why should it be just to mothers?** It also should be to a single low income parent...” (Latina Single Mothers, CA)*

The programs that were provided to focus group participants are composites; components from real programs were pulled to create composite programs for comparison and discussion. They were named the Tulsa program and the Boston program. Across groups most participants viewed the program in Tulsa favorably. They particularly liked the training it provides along with education for kids. These components resonate with their views on the importance of education and skills training. Parents find reassurance in knowing that their children would be cared for while they are receiving training. They appreciate that the program recognizes that while many people want skills training to help them find a better job, a major hurdle to that opportunity is the cost of caring for their children. They believe there is a synergy in educating children and parents together.

Most parents like that the program is deliberate about training parents in fields that are hiring but feel they personally may not be suited to that particular field. Some do not like the focus on a specific job/field – nursing and health information technology – and do not want to be channeled into one occupation or education program.

Tulsa Program - Here is a description of a program in Tulsa Oklahoma. This program uses a two-generation approach by providing workforce training and education for parents of children who are enrolled in an early childhood education program. Parents are offered training in a high growth field like nursing and health information technology, allowing them to get credentials that lead to a better job, while their younger children receive high quality early childhood education and their older children attend after-school programs.

PROS

*"Its excellent because it will **solve both the problems at the same time for the mother and the child.**" (Asian Single Mother, NY)*

*"You are really **helping the mother to help the next generation.**" (Asian Single Mother, NY)*

*"I **like the training** in nursing and healthcare information technology programs because I mean with healthcare and the rising cost of healthcare, it's good I believe." (African American/Latino Married Father, Detroit)*

*"Number one, parents can get the **workforce training and education that they need.** They are more likely or more inclined to go out and be able to find something to do as far as jobs, even if they just want to further their education. If they've got the information, they can do it. In the meanwhile, they don't have to worry while they are doing that; **they know their kids are in a safe environment; they are learning the things they learn.** It would seem to make the parent more comfortable." (African American Single Mother, Detroit)*

"If you want long term stability, healthcare and technology, those are both going to provide the stability people need." (White Single Father, NM)

*"I like that parents are **offered training in a high growth field.** And the credentials are definitely gonna help to lead to the better job. And I also like the fact that their children are able to receive the early education program..." (Latina Single Mother, CA)*

*"Providing **workforce training which is specific,** people know what they want to do and they just want the training in that area." (African American/Latina Married Mother, CA)*

*"So it's not a four-year degree; it's let's get these people help when they need it, but **let's get them into a higher paying job as quickly as we can while their kids are being taken care of.** So you can serve more people." (White Married Mothers, CO)*

CONS

*"When it said parents are offered training in high growth fields like **nursing...I mean what if it gets too congested in that area, what are you going to do?** But it said "like" and so okay you have many different growth areas..." (African American/Latino Single Father, NY)*

*"It's also emphasizing a better-paying job and I'm going back to well **it shouldn't be just the job; it should be a career,** something that you want to go into; not just 'cause it's better-paying." (Native American Single Mother, NM)*

Participants across groups view the Boston program favorably for the same reasons, and also like covering transportation and housing costs, and the opportunity for a four year degree. As with the Tulsa program, participants appreciate that the Boston program recognizes that there are logistical challenges to parents' pursuit of skills training and education, and immediately cite the help with transportation and housing costs as cues that the programs understand these issues. This network of support is unique to these women and very valued as a new and realistic approach likely to be more successful than many programs now.

There were mixed reactions among the white mothers – both single and married – over the description of the housing. Some felt that by placing all of the single parents into a "special dorm" would isolate and stigmatize the single parents. Others thought that it could be a good

experience for these parents to get to know each other and provide each other support and encouragement.

Boston Program - *There is also a program in Boston at a four-year college. Student parents work toward their bachelor's degree in over 20 different subjects, while their children attend a high quality early childhood school nearby. Housing costs are covered through vouchers and the school, and the parents and their children live on campus in a special dorm. Transportation costs are also covered. The students can complete a four year degree while their children also receive a quality education.*

PROS

*"It's making that the **parent and child are working toward the same goals** together" (Native American Single Mother, NM)*

*"I know when we hire at our company it's **more favorable to have a four-year degree** to have training in another program." (Native American Single Mother, NM)*

*"The second program I personally feel would be more effective and helpful because **not only is it about offering them training, but they still have the home stuff** to worry about you know and; on the second program it **offers housing cost, it offers transportation costs**... everything is within the same vicinity so I think the second one is definitely more efficient than the first." (White Single Father, NM)*

"They're geared towards both so it's a win-win situation where since it's just one. I believe when you reach out to the parents you're enabling them and empowering them to help their children as well." (Latina Single Mother, CA)

*"The **transportation; the child care**; all of that is I think what sometimes makes it difficult to be able for a parent to go out to a training. So if you have a program that is based there, where you're getting all of that support and that to me I think is a lot easier. If I didn't have my mom, that's the way I see it. **I would be less likely to go out there and do something like this if I didn't have someone where I could leave my child** and I'm also there and so I think that's probably why I like the Boston one more." (Latina Single Mother, CA)*

CONS

*"The second program might be a **little limiting for some**, like certain populations of parents and maybe they have a place to live and they necessarily, you know **wouldn't want to live in a campus dorm**; I think that's great, but you know certain people it may not appeal to that kind of a program." (Native American Single Mother, NM)*

*"I don't know if it empowers the person or if it just enables them to just do that and then at the end of it it's like **okay, well now what**..." (Latina Single Mother, CA)*

"Who's funding this? (African American/Latina Married Mother, CA)

*"I disagreed on putting them in a special dorm. **When you isolate people in like ways like that...just like single moms, people look down on that and you don't want people to**... I don't know; I just didn't like that part of it." (White Single Mothers, CO)*

This report was commissioned by Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

About Ascend

Ascend, the Family Economic Security Program at the Aspen Institute, is a hub for breakthrough ideas and proven strategies that move children and parents, especially women, beyond poverty toward educational success and economic security. The program focuses on three key areas - education, economics and social capital - to change the conversation around low-income families; engage across diverse sectors to develop a network of leaders and political will; and convene forums and create platforms to elevate effective two-generation policies and community solutions. Ascend takes a "two-generation" approach in its strategy, focusing on both parents and their children.

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