



**BACKGROUND ~**

Thirty-five focus groups on family well-being were conducted as part of the Family Support America’s *Evidence Along the Way – National Family Support Evaluation Project* sponsored by **The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**. These focus groups, known as **FamilyWise Focus Groups**, were organized by The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children and took place between February 28, 2002 and June 30, 2002.

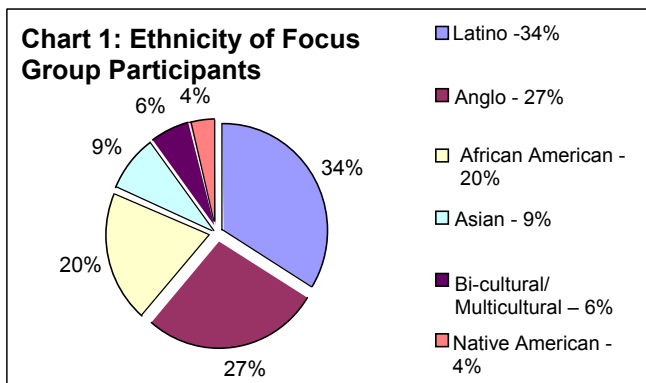
**OVERVIEW ~**

While much data is available about how individuals are doing, little is known about the state of families today. This study was prompted by the lack of information on how the family, as a whole, is doing. Most current family research focuses on specific family members or populations, such as children, youth, single parents, and low-income parents receiving public assistance. This study is quite possibly the first of its kind to ask a diverse group of family members to define family well-being and identify what their families need to succeed. The information in this report promises to be of value to family-focused programs, funders, and policy makers.

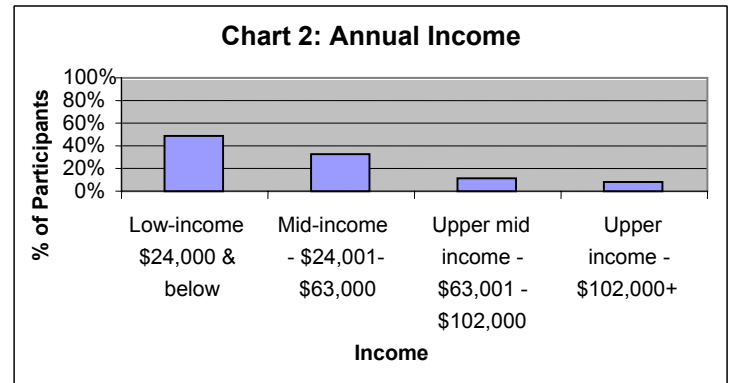
**FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS ~**

- ❑ Thirty-five focus groups attended by 279 family members (youth, adults, and seniors) were conducted.
- ❑ Focus group participants were recruited through family resource centers, faith-based and community-based organizations, family support conferences and meetings, and targeted community outreach.

Participants came from a cross section of geographic locations (urban, suburban, and rural) and represented diverse ethnic, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds as illustrated in Chart 1 and Chart 2.



Source: FamilyWise Focus Group data, 2002



## THE QUESTIONS ~

Participants in the 35 focus groups answered these simple questions about their family.

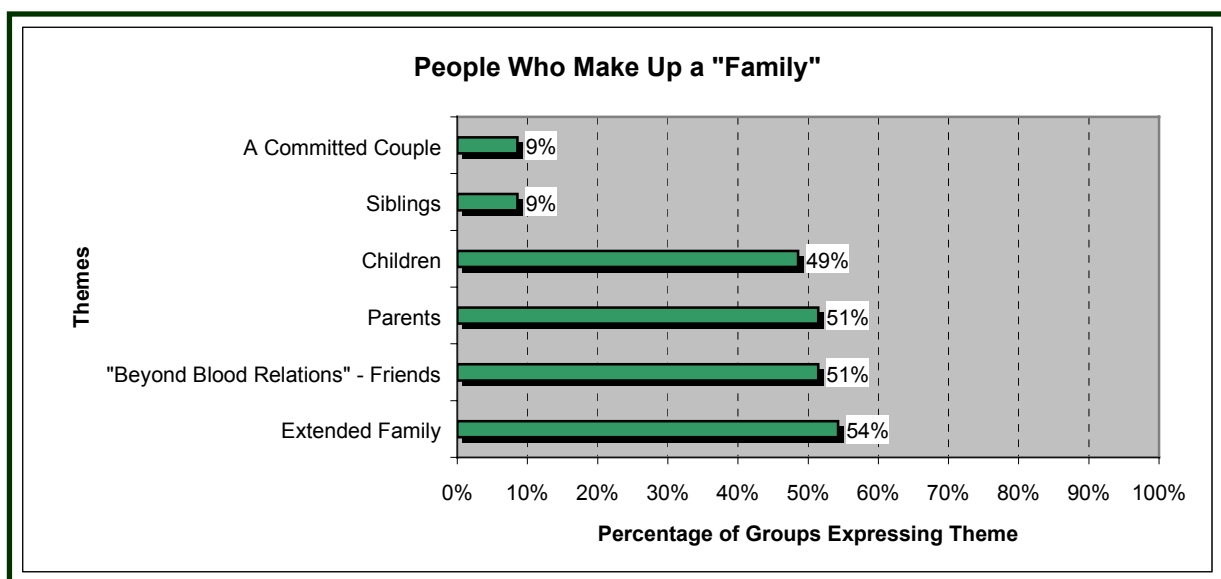
- ❑ How do you define family?
- ❑ What is well-being for your family?
- ❑ How are families supported in your community?
- ❑ What are the threats to families in your community?
- ❑ What should be done to help families succeed?

## FAMILIES DEFINE THEMSELVES ~

When asked to define family, focus group participants spoke of who they considered to be their “family” and why, the role they felt families played in nurturing and raising children, and the importance of family today in their lives and in society as a whole.

### **“Family is a group of people you choose to share your life with”**

Relationships were the central theme in participants’ definitions of *family*. Participants identified relationships with parents, children, and extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. Most families in the focus groups also described an expansive definition of *family*, reaching beyond the boundaries of biology and “blood”. Participants spoke of the love, respect, caring, and nurturing they experienced in those relationships. One participant said simply that family “feels like home”. Members spoke of supportive relationships and a sense of belonging, a place where “every member has a role and feels valued” and of “pulling together for a common goal”. Participants also described a sense of “shared history” and experiences such as holiday celebrations, vacations, playing games together, and just spending time together. The two criteria most people cited for determining who they considered “family” were unconditional love and commitment, or a degree of permanency. The relationships associated with *people who make up a family* are listed in the following chart.



## FAMILIES DEFINE THEMSELVES, CONTINUED

### **“Family teaches the next generation what is expected from society”**

The definitions of family, while expansive and diverse, still centered around children and the role the family plays in raising and nurturing them. One member went so far as to state that family exists for “the education and formation of children”. Participants spoke both of the way their parents raised them and the values they learned growing up as well as acknowledging the “powerful role that we play in children’s lives” today. Another participant said families “teach children how to treat others with respect”. Youth participants agreed with this, saying “family tells me right from wrong and gives me advice” and affirming that they wanted their parents to be “role models”. This mirrors the desire expressed by many parents who saw one of their primary roles as “setting an example for the children”. In general, people described their families as the place where they learned their values, where culture is transmitted, and where children learn relationship skills.

### **“The ‘sense of family’ is still strong despite what we read in the press”**

One theme that emerged strongly throughout the focus groups is the continued relevance of the family despite divorce statistics and dire predictions that in today’s society the family is in danger of becoming obsolete. Members differed in their assessment of whether families were better off today or in the past. While most acknowledged that it is “easier today in terms of modern conveniences”, they also noted that “families today are not as close”, primarily due to busyness and mobility. One participant relayed that when she was growing up she saw her aunts and uncles on a weekly basis, while as an adult she only sees her siblings at holidays. A consensus emerged among participants that families serve as both a foundation for their personal success as individuals and a building block of society. Family members described their family as playing a central role in their lives and as being the “center or core of a person’s well-being”. Participants also identified families as playing a crucial role in society, as one participant put it, “families make communities what they are”. Another participant adds, “family is the building block of society – society reflects the love we are or are not receiving at home”.

## FAMILIES DISCUSS WELL-BEING FOR THEIR FAMILIES ~

Participants described family well-being in terms of an individual member’s well-being, the dynamics of family relationships, and the influence of outside factors such as economic and community conditions.

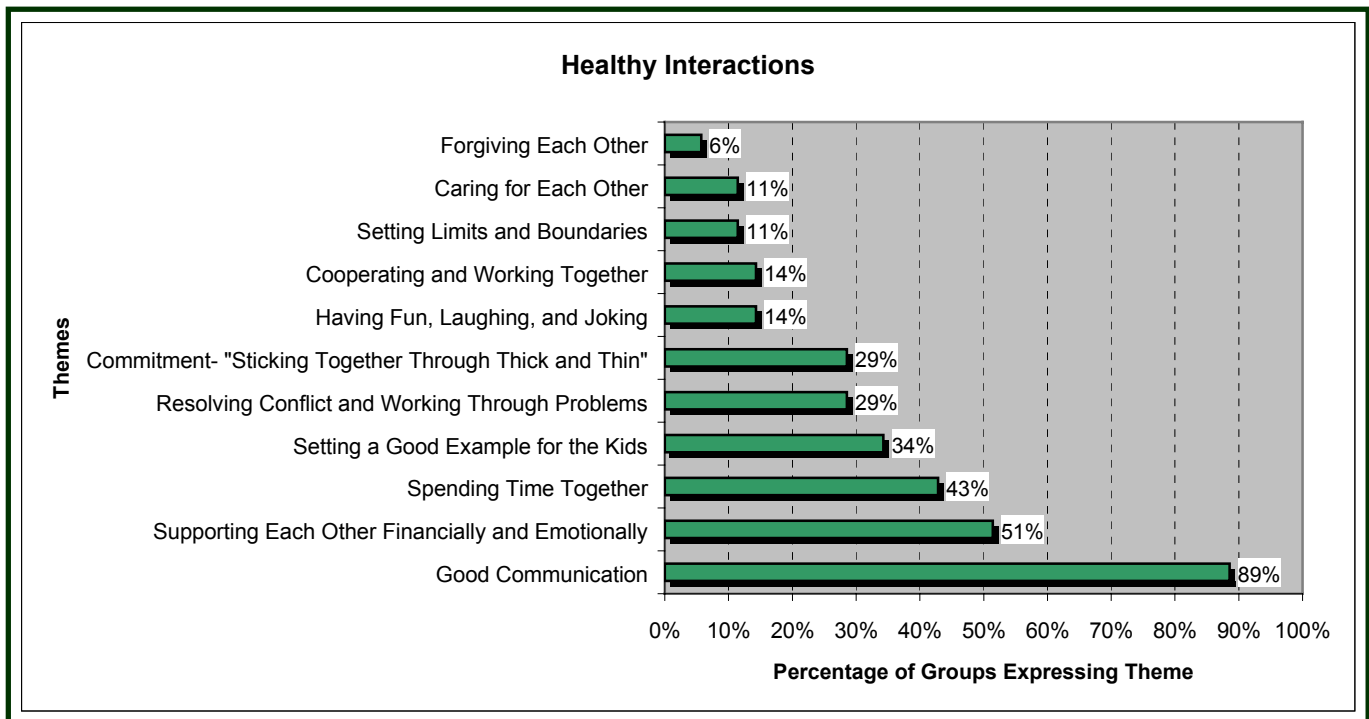
### **“In happy families there is good communication, honesty, and trust”**

“Good communication” was by far the most frequent response from participants, when asked what contributes to family well-being. Descriptions of good communication included: “listening and not jumping to conclusions”, “honesty”, “openness to different opinions”, “being able to express all emotions”, and “giving good advice”. Another form of communication “being able to work through problems together” or healthy conflict resolution was frequently brought up as being key to ensuring family well-being and a “harmonious” family environment.

Participants described their family dynamics, including the qualities of their relationships and their relationship interactions, as central to well-being. The *relationship qualities* that contributed

## FAMILIES DISCUSS WELL-BEING FOR THEIR FAMILIES, CONTINUED

to well-being in families were: love, respect, trust, acceptance of differences, openness and honesty, and harmony. The *relationship interactions* most often cited as the backbone of family well-being are shown in the chart below.



### "Economic pressures impact our family health"

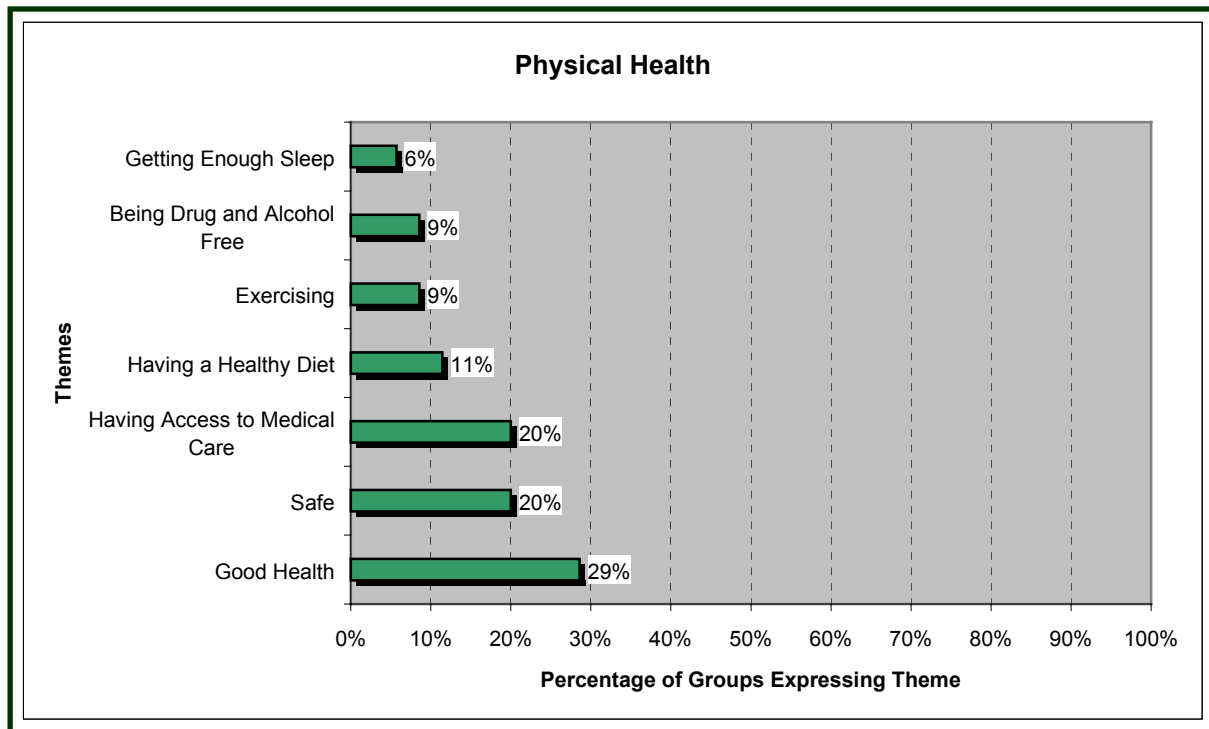
Participants were open in discussing the effects of economic factors on their family well-being. One participant put it bluntly stating, "money contributes to well-being". Overwhelmingly, participants said that the key factor that contributed to their sense of well-being was having "the basic needs met". When asked to describe basic needs, families most frequently cited food and housing, with others adding transportation and medical care. Parents and youth alike talked about the importance of having a "good job", which they defined as having a "living wage" and "insurance". Participants also clearly linked having an education with having financial stability and the ability to get a "good job".

Perhaps more importantly, participants talked about the effects that economic conditions had on their family functioning and roles. Many members talked about shifting roles for men and women, due in part to economic pressures, "nowadays it takes both parents to provide food and housing". Others alluded to the effects of these economic pressures on parent's self-esteem and how they view themselves. Many described positive self-esteem as "being able to provide for my family" and having "all the bills paid with a little left over".

## FAMILIES DISCUSS WELL-BEING FOR THEIR FAMILIES, CONTINUED

### “The whole family can’t be well unless each member is well”

Participants spoke of the importance of the family in supporting the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of each member. Members stressed the importance of maintaining good health for all members through regular exercise, good diet, being drug and alcohol free, and obtaining regular medical care when needed. The focus groups described *physical health* using the themes listed in the chart below.



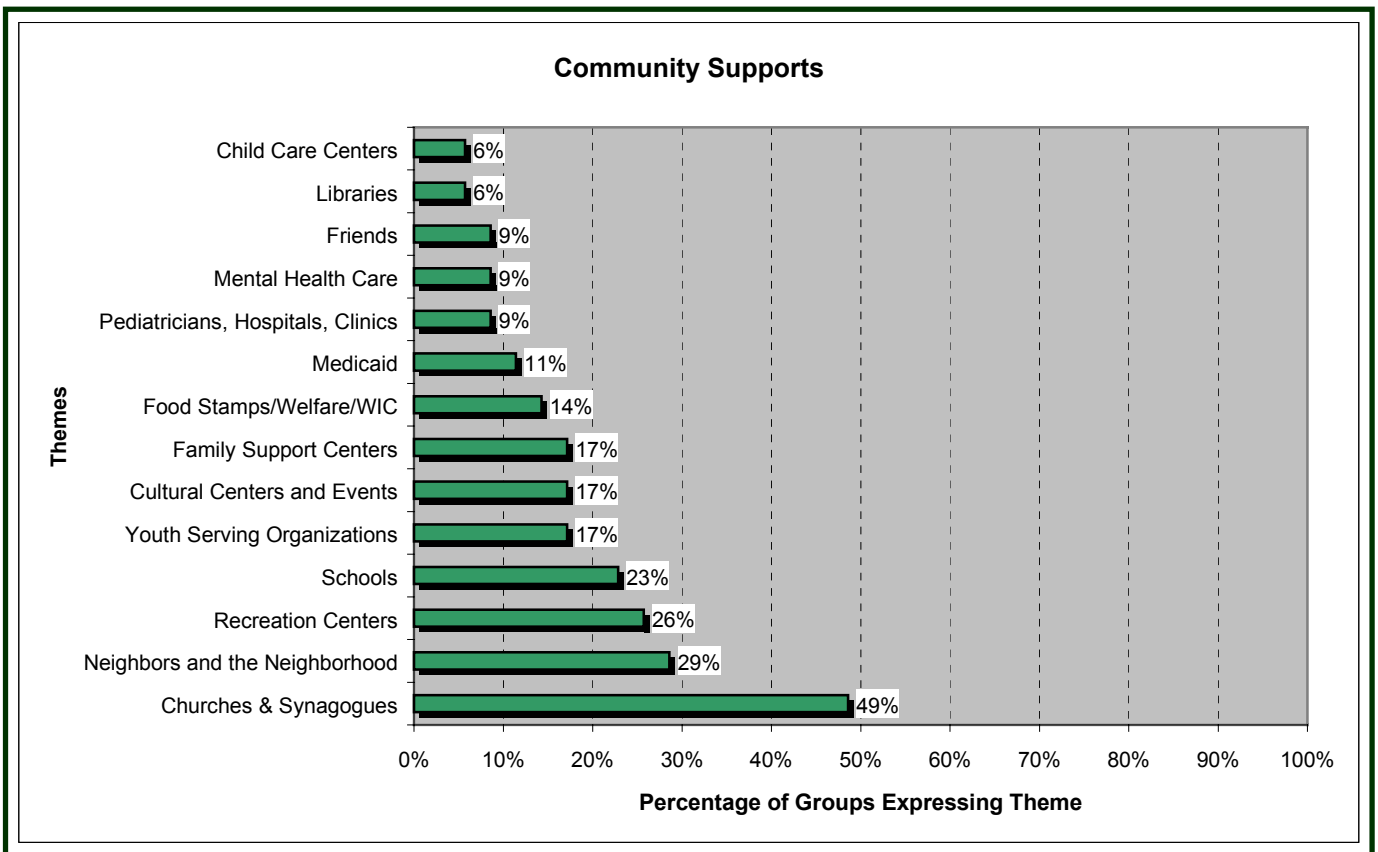
Some participants associated well-being with good mental health. Comments indicated that it is important for individual family members to have a “positive outlook”, “good self-esteem” and “be happy”. Member’s spiritual well-being was cited as contributing to the overall well-being of the family. Participants spoke of having “faith in God”, “praying”, and “following God’s ways”. The education of individual family members was also seen as crucial to both individual and family success. Consistently participants spoke of the importance of “educating children and parents”, of “children staying in school”, and of every member “continually learning”.

Participants also noted that broader connections to community impacted their sense of well-being. They especially cited connections to “my culture”, “my heritage”, and “my community.” These connections contributed to participants feeling supported rather than isolated. The greater their connection the greater sense of overall well-being.

**FAMILIES ASSESS THEIR COMMUNITY’S SUPPORTS AND THREATS ~**

**“Family success supports community success and community success supports family success”**

Families found themselves in agreement in many of their perceptions of community supports and areas of concern, despite differences in culture and socioeconomic status. Families most often cited churches when asked about community supports. They described churches as helping with “food pantries and clothes”, hosting youth groups that “kept them off the streets” by providing them with activities, and cultural and social connections to the community. Families also saw their neighbors as a crucial source of support in the community. Some members talked of sharing resources such as childcare, carpooling, and vacations with their neighbors. Others mentioned the importance of having neighbors that are “trustworthy” and having good communication with their neighbors. The role that neighbors play in “watching over the children” of the neighborhood was mentioned as being especially important to ensuring the safety of children. *Community supports* frequently expressed during the focus group are listed below.

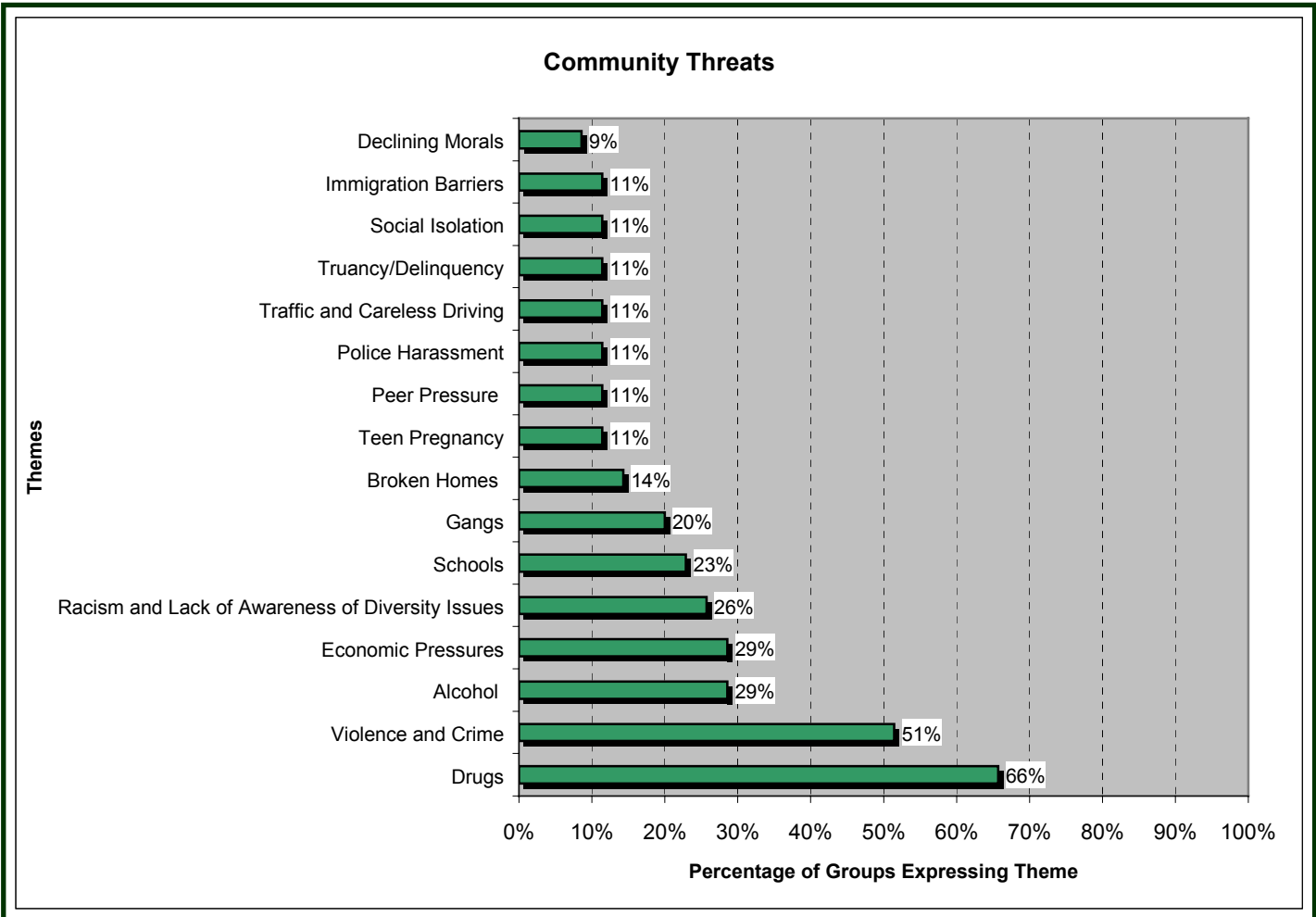


Families greatest concerns or perceived threats in their neighborhoods included drug and alcohol use and violence. Most participants cited drugs as the primary concern for their neighborhood, followed by violence. Specific types of violence that participants worried about included: sexual assault, gangs, guns, violence against gay and lesbian families, and drive-by shootings. It is

**FAMILIES ASSESS THEIR COMMUNITY’S SUPPORTS AND THREATS, CONTINUED**

difficult to determine how many of these families are experiencing these problems directly in their neighborhoods and how much of the threat is a perception that these are problems in society at large.

In examining these perceptions further, it would be helpful to compare participants’ perceptions of safety in their neighborhoods to crime and drug statistics from those same neighborhoods. Other threats identified included: racism, schools, teen pregnancy, and peer pressure. See the following chart for a list of commonly expressed *community threats*.



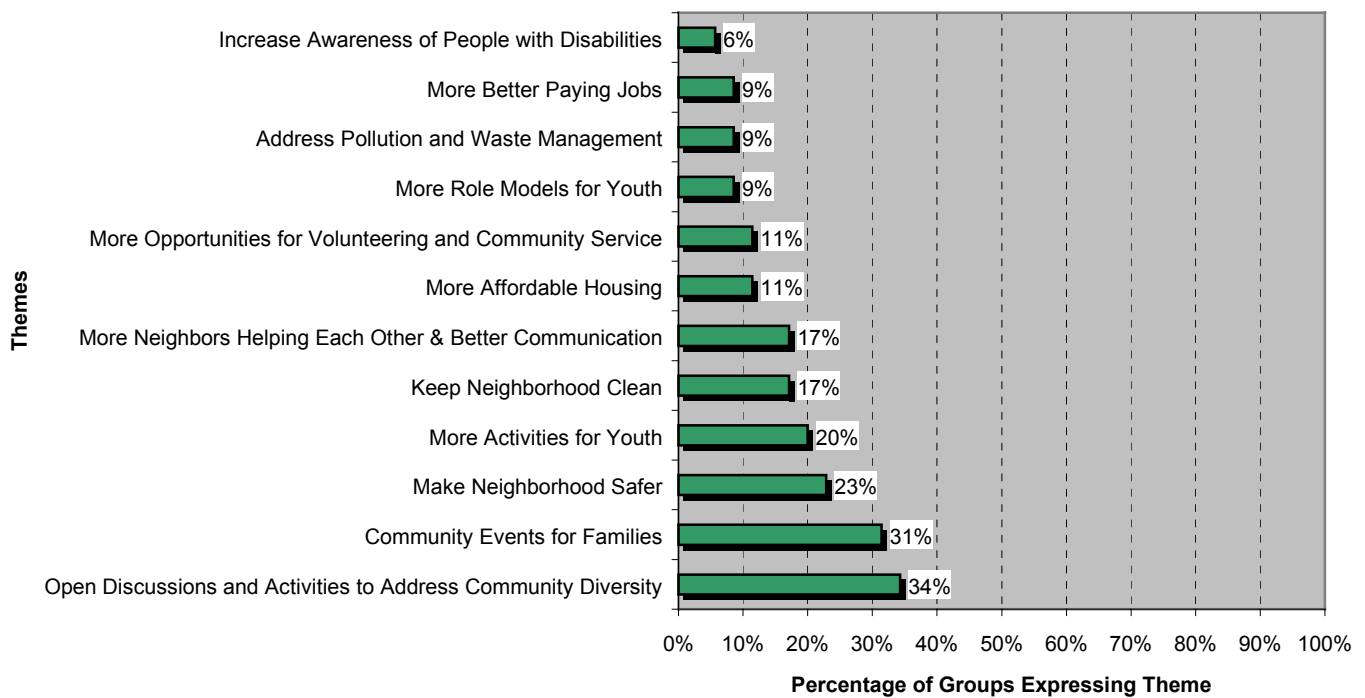
Families also expressed concerns that a lack of support in key areas constituted a “threat” to their well-being. The most common areas identified by families in which they were lacking support included: affordable housing, law enforcement, and activities for youth.

## FAMILIES ANSWER A CALL TO ACTION ~

### **“The community needs to pull together to address issues”**

Participants discussed their hopes for the future and what they would change in their neighborhoods, in the services they receive, and in the policies impacting their families. Family members also had ideas for how they would like to be involved in the process. Participants mostly focused on ideas for improving their neighborhoods and their relationships with their neighbors. Participants wanted “open discussions on racism and diversity”, “organized activities to help different cultures to come together”, and other opportunities to “learn about other cultures”. They also wanted “community events” such as “BBQ’s” and “get-togethers with other families”, to “share resources”, and “address issues” such as building a new playground. They wanted more activities for youth, including more role models and positive mentors for youth. They wanted cleaner neighborhoods and cleaner parks. Most importantly they want to be involved, with both youth and adults requesting more opportunities to volunteer, do community service, and to have input into the policies that affected them on both a local level and legislative level. The issue of most concern to them was education. Parents wanted to be “empowered to influence the school system” and opportunities for “more family participation in schools”. See chart below for a comprehensive list of ideas for neighborhood and community improvements cited during the focus groups.

**Ideas for Improving Neighborhoods and Communities**



## UNEXPECTED FINDINGS ~

### **Culture: “Diversity is seen as a threat, but it could be a strength”**

Perhaps the most unexpected finding in these focus groups was the emergence of culture and diversity as an area both of concern and desired growth for families from all ethnicities, age groups, geographic regions, and socioeconomic status. Participants focused on addressing racism, improving relationships between cultures, integrating schools, and issues that were specific to being an immigrant or a minority in the community.

Most participants wanted these issues to be addressed on a community and neighborhood level. One participant suggested “healthy, open discussions on racism, multiculturalism, gay, lesbian, bisexual issues and individual experiences”. A group of immigrant, Spanish-speaking families suggested, “organized activities to help cultures come together”. Others wanted more “interfaith and multicultural activities” and opportunities to “learn about other cultures”. Some parents expressed concerns that schools are slowly becoming re-segregated by socioeconomic classes and ethnicity.

### **Schools: “Schools are both a threat and a support to our family”**

While many families cited their children’s schools as being a source of support for their family, others saw the schools as being neutral at best and a threat at worst. The most common concern that families expressed about their neighborhood schools was that the teachers “didn’t care” or “played favorites”. Other concerns frequently cited included “class size”, “guns in schools”, and “kids being passed on (into the next grade) without learning”. Youth wanted to address policies and practices within their schools that were preventing them from taking upper level and college preparatory classes. For example at some schools students must purchase course books in order to take advanced classes. If you cannot afford these books, you cannot take the class regardless of your scholastic aptitude. Both concern with and support of schools crossed ethnic and socioeconomic lines, with parents and youth across very different neighborhoods expressing common concerns. Everyone agreed that they would like to improve the quality and affordability of education.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS ~

- ❑ *Family policy should have as its primary focus the **support of families in raising healthy children.***
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that policies should take into account the parental resources, both relationship and family self-sufficiency skills, that are needed to raise healthy children.
    - o Pro-family policies should support programs that assist families in developing relationships such as communication, conflict resolution, and healthy parenting.
    - o Pro-family policies and programs should focus on developing family members’ self-sufficiency such as job skills and money management skills that support parents’ efforts to provide for their families.
    - o Pro-family policies should support access to quality education for both children and parents through programs such as community schools.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS, CONTINUED

- ❑ *Family policy cannot be developed in isolation, but should take into account the **effects of broader community policy issues.***
  - ✓ Participants recommended policies focusing on developing more jobs, better jobs (livable wage and benefits), and affordable housing for families.
- ❑ *Family policy should seek to **engage non-governmental partners** such as faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations, and family support centers.*
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that policies should focus on “local control” and implementation at a local or neighborhood level.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that policies should encourage the engagement of faith-based and community-based organizations in efforts to support families.
- ❑ *Family policy should take into account the **changing structures of families.***
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that policies should support any adult caregiver who is primarily responsible for the care of a child in having access to needed financial assistance, medical care, or housing assistance regardless of the legally recognized status of their family.
- ❑ *Family policy should take into account issues of **culture, race, and socioeconomic differences.***
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that health care policy should continue tracking health issues, including access to care and health outcomes by ethnicity.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that justice department and law enforcement policies should continue to track police contacts and arrest rates by ethnicity to prevent racial profiling.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that education policies should continue to emphasize and promote racial integration in schools wherever possible.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that education policies should continue to track and compare data on student outcomes (graduation rates, truancy, achievement) by ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.
- ❑ *Family policy efforts should support education policy to **improve the quality of education.***
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest educational policies need to promote smaller class sizes.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest educational accountability policies should focus on school climate, teacher quality, and multiple measures of student progress in addition to annual test scores to track improvements.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest education policies should encourage parents to participate in their children’s schools and in the governance of those schools.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest more funding should be provided to community schools that offer a continuum of support to the community through promoting family literacy and lifelong learning.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY SUPPORT PRACTITIONERS ~

- *Family Support should have as its primary focus the **support of families in raising healthy children.***
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that Family Support programs should take into account the parental resources, both relationship and family self-sufficiency skills, that are needed to raise healthy children.
    - Family Support Center programs should assist families in developing relationships such as communication, conflict resolution, and healthy parenting.
    - Family Support Center programs should focus on developing family self-sufficiency such as job skills and money management skills that support parents' efforts to provide for their families.
    - Family Support Center programs should support access to quality education for both children and parents.
- *Family Support services should take into account **cultural factors** and be conducted in a culturally competent manner.*
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that it is important for Family Support Center staff to be knowledgeable about the culture and languages of the families with whom they are working.
  - ✓ Participant comments also suggest that families are very interested in community forums and activities that bring together families of different cultures to discuss community issues of racism and diversity. Family Support Centers could play a critical role in organizing and supporting these efforts.
- *Family Support services should seek to **build on existing formal and informal supports** that exist in the community.*
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that Family Support Centers should seek to engage these faith-based and community-based organizations in coordinating services for strengthening families and addressing broader community issues.
  - ✓ Participant comments suggest that Family Support Centers should seek to engage these “natural support networks” in developing and implementing any “support plans” that are utilized with families.
  - ✓ Participant comments also suggest that families are very interested in community activities that bring together families to network, share resources, and discuss community issues. Family Support Centers could play a critical role in organizing and supporting these efforts.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ~

- ❑ *Provide forums for families to meet and discuss issues of importance to them.*
  - ❑ *Conduct a statewide poll on family well-being to further explore and validate these findings.*
  - ❑ *Develop a family well-being index to monitor the well-being of families in our state annually.*
  - ❑ *Develop comprehensive state databases to track data on the well-being of our most vulnerable families by combining data on the well-being of youth in the educational, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice system with data on the well-being of their adult caregivers from the welfare, jobs training, child support, mental health, and correctional systems.*
  - ❑ *Increase opportunities for family recreation.*
  - ❑ *Provide community events for families.*
  - ❑ *Improve the quality of education.*
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### **The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children**

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children was founded in 1991 as a private non-profit partner to state government. The role and mission of CFFC is to improve the effectiveness of organizations and individuals who serve children, youth and their families in educational, health or human service settings.

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A copy of this *Executive Summary* and *Final Report on FamilyWise Focus Groups* is available online at [www.coloradofoundation.org](http://www.coloradofoundation.org).

Presentations on FamilyWise Focus Group findings are currently being conducted. For more information, please contact Judith Martinez - 303/837-8466 ext. 105, email: [judy@what-works.org](mailto:judy@what-works.org).