Why do babies always get the short end of the stick?

“Do they?” you might be thinking.

**Exhibit A:** Remember the baby formula crisis of 2022? It's still going on. Roughly 1.4 million people were still having trouble getting infant formula late last year, Washington Post columnist Alyssa Rosenberg recently pointed out.

The perennial formula shortage is just the most current example of the way lawmakers consistently shortchange babies. The country’s 11.4 million babies and toddlers make up 3.4% of the U.S. population but receive just 1.5% of all federal spending, according to First Focus on Children’s report Babies in the Budget, published with Zero to Three.

**Other current examples of sticking it to babies:**

1. **Babies are more likely to be hungry:** The Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is facing a $1 billion shortfall, which could result in cutting an estimated 2 million infants, toddlers, and pregnant women from nutrition services this year. Congress has until March 1 to decide on WIC funding.
2. **Babies are more likely to die:** Infant mortality, already significantly higher in the United States than in other similarly developed countries, rose in 2022 for the first time in 20 years.
3. **Babies are more likely to enter foster care:** Infants and toddlers are twice as likely as older children to enter foster care. Nationally, nearly 105,000 children from birth to age 3 entered foster care in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017. The rate of babies entering foster care that year was more than double the rate for older children, with 6.6 per 1,000 children ages 3 and younger entering foster care, compared to 2.8 for ages 4 to 17.
4. **Babies are more likely to be evicted:** Children under 5 make up the largest group by age of those whose households have had an eviction filed against them. Black babies face disproportionately higher rates.
5. **Babies are more likely to live in poverty:** Roughly 40% of babies and toddlers live in low-income families or families experiencing poverty. The figures are higher for children
of color: Two-thirds of Black and Indigenous infants and toddlers and more than half of Hispanic infants and toddlers live in low-income families or those experiencing poverty.

**The question is WHY? Among the answers:**

**Babies lack advocates:** Babies are babies for just a short period of time, and during that time, their parents and caregivers — who would have the greatest interest in advocating for them — are usually overwhelmed by simply keeping the babies fed and dry. The Post’s Rosenberg aptly calls this a “mismatch between the metabolism of families and politics” noting that kids grow fast and politics moves slowly. “The people who make up the baby-parent constituency of 2024 are different from the class of 2022,” she writes, “and with that kind of turnover, it’s all too easy for momentum and moral urgency to dissipate.”

**Critics demonize babies and their parents:** Babies often get stink eye from lawmakers when their parents have trouble meeting their needs. But the facts are: 1) Babies are expensive. 2) The people having babies are, by biological necessity, often young and therefore not at their peak earning potential, 3) **These expensive babies born to families at the beginning of their financial lives are automatically at a disadvantage**. Despite this natural gap, critics cast attempts to help these systemically disadvantaged babies as handouts. See, for example, current arguments about how to structure an improved Child Tax Credit.

**Babies don’t vote:** And, as time goes on, the country’s crop of babies look less and less like the people representing them in government. Studies on this **racial generation gap** have shown that lawmakers are less likely to invest in children who don’t look like they do.

**And finally, how we can help our babies now:**

**Refocus:** Lawmakers, media and critics must focus on how policies affect children — especially when those policies are specifically about children. Witness: myriad news stories that discuss the **impact of the Child Tax Credit on parents**. Implementing **child impact statements** and creating an independent **Children’s Commissioner** would offer good first steps toward centering children and babies in the national conversation.

**Repeat what works:** The improved Child Tax Credit helped lift more than 3 million children out of poverty in 2021 primarily by increasing the amount of aid to children and making more of them eligible. “There’s a strong case that Congress should be spending way more money on kids,” Annie Lowry recently wrote in The Atlantic. “There’s a really, really strong case that it should be handing out cash to babies.” Rx Kids, launched this month by Flint, MI’s Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha and University of Michigan poverty expert Luke Shafer, will put this proven strategy to another test by giving pregnant moms a prenatal allowance and babies financial support during the first 12 months of their life. Find their **conversation with First Focus on Children here**.

**Prioritize kids in politics:** Pediatrician and former candidate for Congress Dr. Annie Andrews and political strategist Renee Harvey have created **Their Future, Our Vote**, a political action committee designed to offer financial support to candidates and causes that promote urgently needed kid-first policies, such as improving the Child Tax Credit, Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and child care, and fighting harmful policies such as book bans. Find their **conversation with First Focus on Children here**.

**Save money by following the science:** Infants and toddlers form 1 million neural connections *per second*. A child’s brain doubles in size in the first year of life. And by age 3, the human brain has reached 80% of its adult volume. Investing in healthy development at the beginning of a child’s life eliminates downstream costs of poverty, poor health, homelessness and other issues. Investing in babies helps produce adults who draw higher incomes, pay more taxes, use fewer public services, and have more civic engagement. Research shows that investing in high-quality birth-to-five programs for young children can deliver a **13% return on investment each year**.
Just a few facts to help lawmakers and others get on board with helping babies.

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