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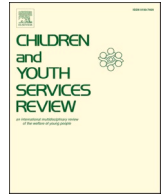
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# Public perceptions of child protection, children's rights, and personal values: An assessment of two states

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## ABSTRACT

Although there is an expansive literature on public attitudes towards the welfare state, we know comparatively little about public attitudes toward child protection. Gauging public opinion about the state's role in protecting children is complicated by the contested ideas that underlie the field. Child protection lies at the nexus between competing values about state obligations to allow unfettered parental freedom or to permit constraints on some parental behaviors. At issue is also the notion of balancing the individual rights of the parties involved: parents and children. Similar to the larger welfare state literature, public attitudes about child protection may be shaped by core human values. This study includes representative samples of the public in Norway and California ( $n = 2148$ ), countries that are commonly viewed as representative of social democratic and liberal welfare state regimes. Respondents reviewed a vignette portraying a child at risk of harm and were asked a series of questions to gauge whether and/or how the state might constrain the parent's behavior, questions pertaining to the rights of children, and their views about core human values. Findings indicate that residents of Norway were more likely to favor the values of security and equal rights, and Californians more likely to favor the value of self-direction. Contrary to the larger body of welfare state literature which suggests that human values help explain public attitudes about welfare provisions, in general, this study did not find that human values generally explained differences in country attitudes toward constrained parenting or toward children's rights. Findings offer an exploratory first step in expanding notions about child protection as nested in welfare states.

## 1. Introduction

There is an expansive literature on public attitudes towards the welfare state, much of it focused on Europe and the U.S. We have a great deal of evidence to suggest that public opinion varies by region (e.g., Kulin & Meuleman, 2015), by welfare regime (e.g., Svallfors, 1997), by the demographic characteristics of respondents (e.g., Senik, Stichnoth, & Van der Straeten, 2009), and by the underlying human values to which respondents are personally attached (e.g., Kulin & Svallfors, 2013). We know comparatively little, however, about public attitudes toward child protection (Skivenes & Thoburn 2017; Berrick et al., 2022). Just as views about welfare states may be conceptualized as a duality between the competing ideas of support for those who are deserving versus undeserving (Van Oorschot, 2000), child protection is also characterized by its underlying conceptual and normative tensions. On the one hand, for example, child protection balances notions of parental freedom – the idea that parents should enjoy unrestricted freedom

associated with their role, including freedom from state intervention in that role. And on the other hand, child protection must weigh the concerns of child safety, where the state may be obliged to interfere with parental freedom in order to protect a child from harm or danger. The state, therefore, plays a mediating role between the interests of parents and the interests of children, when those interests are at odds. States make choices about the circumstances that might require mediation, and these choices reflect historical, political, cultural, and other factors unique to each nation (Berrick et al., 2023). Some countries, including the U.S., have long adhered to a parental rights doctrine wherein parents are regarded as having foundational rights to direct the rearing of their child. The U.S. Supreme Court, for example, has resolutely defended the rights of parents in various cases that have come before that body. As Guggenheim (2005) recounts, “the interests of parents in the care, custody, and control of their children” is “perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests recognized by this Court” and as “rights far more precious... than property rights” (p. 18). But children, too, have

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rights expressed differently in different country contexts. Since the late 1980s, almost all countries have ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ushering in contemporary sentiments about children and their autonomous role as rights-holders that must be balanced against the rights of other parties (Archard, 2004). Some countries have incorporated elements of the UN Convention into their national constitutions or made the CRC national law, and by this additionally strengthened children's legal rights. Whether the public leans toward a children's rights or a parents' rights frame is likely to have implications for the design of and support for child protection policy. Child protection, therefore, lies at the intersection of these competing ideas.

This study explores public opinion about child protection. We examine if the public's values and their rights orientations are associated with their willingness to intervene into the family and to restrict parental freedom. We also examine the country conditions under which these differences may be expressed. Specifically, we examine if and how the public's views on basic value preferences (e.g., universalism, security, self-direction, benevolence, and equal rights) are related to (a) willingness to accept government constraints on parenting, and (b) orientation toward children's rights, and (c) whether these views are expressed differently in different country contexts. The data consist of representative samples from California (USA)<sup>1</sup> and Norway (total n = 2148), two nations that differ notably in the characteristics of their welfare state and child protection systems (Berrick et al, 2023; Berrick et al, 2022).

The paper is structured in seven sections, starting with some background on these issues, thereafter a review of existing research on public attitudes on child protection. The methods section and findings are then presented, followed by a discussion and a review of the study limitations. The paper concludes with a review of the implications of this work for public policy in the area of child protection.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Public attitudes about welfare provision

The welfare state is generally designed to protect citizens from a range of adverse circumstances that can arise in daily life. Depending on the country context, the welfare state might offer support against a volatile labor market, or against the risks associated with ill health. A large body of international comparative research has examined citizens' attitudes toward the welfare state.<sup>2</sup> These public opinions are important to assess synergies between the policy approaches of governance and the governed. As Svallfors argues: "Attitudes toward the welfare state and other public institutions should be seen as central components of social order, governance, and legitimacy of modern societies" (2012, p.2). In general, cross-national comparisons suggest wide variations in public attitudes toward welfare provision, though, in general, public views roughly align with the welfare regime typologies originally developed by Esping-Andersen (1990) and the policy inducements associated with these regime approaches (Arts & Gelissen, 2001; Svallfors, 1997). The

<sup>1</sup> The study sample in the U.S. is limited to only one state – California. Child protection policy varies considerably across the 50 US states and territories; the selection of one US state is therefore warranted. California, as the most populous state in the US with the largest number of children and families involved with the child protection system offers an important window into some public opinion in the US on this topic.

<sup>2</sup> Studies of public attitudes toward the welfare state have included both within-country examinations (e.g., Gilens, 1999), and international comparisons (see, for example, studies based on the European Social Survey (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>), the International Social Survey Program (<https://www.issp.org>), and the World Values Survey (<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>)).

literature on the welfare state, welfare state typologies, and public attitudes provides a general background for the approach pursued in this study.

### 2.2. Public attitudes about child protection

Child protection is one component of a functioning welfare state, designed to protect children from the risks associated with inappropriate or dangerous parental care. In spite of the significant role child protection plays within the welfare state, it is not typically included in studies otherwise addressing welfare state issues. The few cross-national studies of child protection include social worker (Berrick et al, 2020; Kriz & Skivenes, 2014,2015; Oltedal et al, 2020; Oltedal & Nygren 2019; Ellingsen et al., 2019; Witte et al., 2020) or judicial respondents (Berrick et al, 2019; Skivenes and Tonheim, 2016); some include document reviews (Krutzinna & Skivenes, 2021; Luhamaa & Strömpl, 2021). Studies that assess public attitudes of child protection are sparse. The degree to which the public is knowledgeable about child protection policy and practice is largely unknown, though some research suggests that public opinion does not generally hold child protection in high regard. In one study, about two-fifths of public respondents across three Western European countries and the U.S. expressed "high confidence" in child protection agencies. Fewer than one-fifth, however, held similar views about child protection staff and judicial decision makers. Norwegian respondents were most likely to indicate their positive regard and U.S. respondents the least likely (Juhász & Skivenes, 2017). In a recent study of confidence in child welfare, including eight European countries and CA (USA), similar differences between CA and Norway are evident (Skivenes & Benbenishty, 2022).

Some studies have examined a focal area of child protection practice. In one, community respondents were asked to weigh the relative benefits of adoption versus long-term foster care for a young child (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2017). These distinctions are important as they suggest differences in attitudes about the degree of government intrusion into family life. That study also found differences of opinion associated with national context. The majority of respondents across countries offered generally favorable views toward adoption, and positive views of adoption were more likely among U.S. and English respondents compared to Norwegian and Finnish respondents. And a study including social workers, judges, and respondents from the general population across four countries examined perspectives on a hypothetical case of possible child neglect. The majority of respondents agreed that such a child in need would merit services, but there were widely divergent views about whether the child's circumstances warranted the label "child neglect," and whether foster care might serve as an appropriate remedy. Germane to this study, public respondents from Norway were more likely than public respondents from the U.S. to label a child's less-than-optimal parental care as "neglect," though they were about equally likely to recommend an out-of-home placement for the child (Berrick et al., 2017). Elsewhere, Skivenes (2021) examined public opinion in England, Norway, Poland and Romania, about government's responsibility for children and their views of paternalism finding that a large majority favored restrictions on parental freedom to secure a child's welfare, and a majority supported intrusive interventions into the family. There are also some cross-country studies examining public views about corporal punishment (Helland & Skivenes, 2019; Burns et al., 2021), and views about where children should live if they cannot remain with parents (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2017; Skivenes & Benbenishty, 2022).

Our focus on Norway and CA (USA) is intentional given their distinctive institutional contexts of family policy and child protection (Gilbert et al., 2011). These child protection systems are embedded in welfare states that are typically portrayed as quite different from one another (cf. Healy & Oltedal, 2010). Norway is regularly described as a social democratic welfare state – according to Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology (1990) – and the US is considered a liberal welfare

state. Norway offers a welfare safety net that strongly buffers adults from the uncertainty of the market. The US (and California) has a relatively thin social safety net with few services and where the individual is largely responsible for assuming risks associated with modern capitalism (Hacker, 2019). Each of these welfare systems are ideologically distinctive in their approach to social responsibility, social problems and social inequality overall, and the degree to which the state is involved in families' lives. We view this work as exploratory examining two different country contexts. Future studies might examine a wider array of countries and values.

### 2.3. Human values and welfare state support

Findings from welfare state and child protection studies are not uniform. Some authors suggest mixed support for the welfare regime hypothesis (Jaeger, 2006), and others have offered contradictory findings (Gelissen, 2000; Svallfors 2012). Drawing on the notion of welfare provision as part of a larger "moral economy" (Mau, 2003), some of the scholarship on public attitudes frames these views as shaped by underlying human values such as "reciprocity, justice, obligation, and responsibility" (Svallfors, 2012, p. 10). Institutional context such as welfare regime, therefore, may shape public attitudes towards low-income or other vulnerable groups (or vice versa), and these underlying values may drive public opinion about state provisions of support (see for example, Larsen, 2008; Linos & West, 2003; Skivenes & Benbenishty, 2022, 2023; Loen & Skivenes, 2023). In fact, Kulin and Svallfors (2013) argue that welfare policies that are "visible and salient" to the public may help to confirm the public's cognitive association between their values – usually considered abstract principles – and concrete manifestations of their beliefs. This line of reasoning leads us to direct our focus on core values or basic human values to understand child protection systems and practice in societies.

A number of researchers have examined the association between basic human values and welfare attitudes. Arikian and Ben-Nun Bloom (2015), for example, found that human values relating to embeddedness were more pronounced in Eastern European countries and were associated with public support for welfare policies, whereas values associated with egalitarianism were more prominent in Western European countries. Regardless of national context, therefore, those whose values aligned with either embeddedness or egalitarianism were typically supportive of the welfare state. Similarly, Kulin & Meuleman (2015) determined that values of self-transcendence are associated with positive regard for the welfare state in Western European nations, whereas values associated with conservation contribute to positive regard for the welfare state in Eastern European nations. These bodies of work draw upon a notion from social psychologist Schwartz (1999) that "social" or "human" values "represent a society's shared ideas about what is good, right, and desirable" (see Arikian & Ben-Nun Bloom, 2015, p. 432) and that these social values frame how citizens view political institutions, economic development, public policy, and welfare attitudes.

### 2.4. Studying human values and child protection

To our knowledge, previous authors have not examined the relationship between the public's attitudes about human values and their views of child protection. Schwartz distinguished between ten basic social values: benevolence; universalism; self-direction; stimulation; hedonism; achievement; power; security; conformity; and tradition.<sup>3</sup> Various authors have examined the association between human values and respondents' political orientation (Puurko, Schwartz, & Davidov,

2011); views about gender equality (Stefani & Prati, 2021); and attitudes toward immigration (Davidov and Meuleman, 2012). Our approach is exploratory and for our study on child protection we examine whether basic values explain or increase our understanding of people's choices. We have selected four of Schwartz's basic values (security, self-direction, benevolence, and universalism), and in addition we explore the impact of equal rights values.

"Security" is included because values relating to being protective of oneself and others (family, health, job, order in a society, national security, etc) may influence how respondents consider the role of the child protection system. Security is measured on both the individual and societal level. "Self-direction" is about independence, freedom and individual autonomy, and is included because this value may be relevant to views on state responsibilities for children. "Benevolence" is included because it represents kindness or generosity toward others, and this may influence views on child protection. "Universalism" is included as it speaks to ideas of tolerance, justice, and respect for others, which may be relevant to regard for child protection issues. Finally, we developed a value that we label "equal rights" in which we aim to capture a typical dilemma in child protection, namely balancing children's rights versus parents' rights. We anticipate that basic human values will be related to citizens' views about government restrictions on parental behavior, and on views about children's rights. We also expect differences in respondents' views that are country specific.

First, we examine whether there is an association between each of the values and respondents' views about government restrictions on parents under conditions of possible risk to a child. We then examine the association between values and respondents' views about children's rights. Finally, we examine whether there are differences in these associations by country. Given the paucity of data on public attitudes about child protection, and the importance of human values in shaping public attitudes, the study reported here offers an initial step to understand the relationship between basic values and child protection interventions, including an assessment of citizens' rights orientation.

## 3. Methods

This study uses an experimental survey to examine public perceptions of child protection interventions that restrict parental behaviors, and of children's rights in light of five human values. The sample of 2148 respondents includes adults from Norway (n = 1031) and California, U. S. (n = 1117). Public opinion research firms in Norway (ResponsAnalyze-RA) and in California (YouGov) were engaged to collect the data in 2019. RA maintains a representative sample of Norwegian adult residents as potential web-based survey respondents as does YouGov in California. The RA panel is regularly employed to answer questions relating to a variety of topics including brand measurements, attitudes, and behaviors. Respondents in both countries are broadly representative of their respective populations through a weighting procedure developed by the data collection vendors. In both countries, weights are used to develop samples based upon known distributions in each country on three dimensions: gender, age, and geography. IRB approvals were granted from the authors' university institutions. Data are available at: <https://discretion.uib.no/supplementary-documentation/#1552296903964-af7d19a0-9d4c>.

### 3.1. Measures

Corresponding to other studies in the field of child protection (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2010), a survey vignette was used (Wilks, 2004) to assess laypersons' views about child protection restrictions on parental behaviour, and children's rights. The circumstances of child protection cases vary significantly across families and different country contexts. Selecting a single vignette to characterize this range would be impossible. Instead, the authors developed a vignette familiar to child protection professionals in both countries.

<sup>3</sup> Schwartz' scholarship has been incorporated into the European Social Survey, a biannual assessment of public opinion relating to the welfare state. Schwartz' condensed measure, the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) (Schwartz, 2005), includes 21 items that assess the ten basic values.

Vignettes have been used successfully elsewhere as a strategy to compare and understand underlying attitudes across different country contexts (e.g., see: Benbenishty, Osmo & Gold, 2003; Soydan, 1996; Skivenes & Tefre, 2012). This vignette and accompanying survey and demographic questions were developed by the authors in American English then translated and back-translated into Norwegian. The instrument was assessed for face validity by researchers and child welfare practitioners in California and in Norway. The vignette reads as follows:

A social worker visits Julie in the hospital when Julie gives birth to a baby boy. Julie is addicted to drugs and the newborn is suffering from drug withdrawal symptoms. The social worker is very concerned about the baby's safety, assesses Julie's ability to take care of the baby, and recommends drug treatment for Julie. Julie says she did not hurt her baby, she does not think she has a problem, and she refuses to enroll in treatment.

One sentence in the vignette, underscored, is manipulated to characterize severity of risk, with distinctions between low, medium, and high-risk circumstances (conceptualized as parental cooperation, insight, and responsibility). High risk (as it reads in the vignette above) represents low levels of parental cooperation, little insight into the problem, and low levels of responsibility. Medium risk is represented by medium levels of parental cooperation, medium insight into the problem, and medium levels of responsibility: "Julie says she is not sure she may have hurt her baby, she thinks she may have a small problem, and she doesn't need treatment." The low risk context – "Julie says she is sorry she may have hurt her baby, she realizes she may have a serious problem, and she is willing to enroll in treatment" – represents high levels of cooperation, high insight, and high levels of responsibility. Respondents were randomly assigned a vignette with either low-risk (n = 701), medium-risk (n = 700), or high-risk (n = 747).<sup>4</sup> For purposes of this study, we collapsed responses from the medium and the high-risk categories, and excluded all data on the low-risk scenario as we would expect responses to be notably different in a low-risk context and would not be sufficiently relevant to our questions regarding government intervention in the family and children's rights under conditions of risk. Elsewhere we report our findings pertaining to public attitudes about restrictions on parental behavior under varying conditions of risk (Berrick et al., 2022).

**Dependent Variables.** Respondents were presented with three statements: (A) "Julie should be free to bring her baby home regardless of the social worker's assessment." (B) "The baby should stay with Julie in a supervised setting." And (C) "The baby should be placed in foster care." For each of these statements, respondents could choose between four responses: Strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). A dichotomous variable was developed combining strongly disagree and disagree categories (equal to zero (0)) and agree and strongly agree (equal to one (1)). Because both alternatives B and C place some government limitations on parents we combined responses to these two items to examine respondents' views about "constrained" parenting in relation to their stated basic human values.

Respondents were also oriented to the concept of rights with the following introductory, global statement: "Rights' are things every person should have or be able to have. Some people have more rights than others. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about Julie and her baby." Respondents' attitudes about the balance between children's rights and parents' rights were assessed as follows: **Parents' rights:** "As the parent, Julie should have more rights than the baby." **Equal rights:** "The baby should have the same rights as Julie." **Children's rights:** "The baby should have more rights than Julie because of his vulnerability." Respondents were offered a 4-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree for each

statement. Strongly disagree and disagree were combined to equal zero (0) and agree and strongly agree were combined to equal one (1). For purposes of this analysis, we only examined respondents' views about **children's rights** in the context of their stated values. We have elsewhere addressed respondents' views about the contrast in views between children's and parents' rights (Berrick et al., 2021).

**Independent variable:** Respondents were asked to state their personal opinion on a 6-point scale from 1 = not at all, to 6 = very much on six basic values: Universalism, Security, Self-Direction, Benevolence and Equality. Each value was measured with a single question, except the value of "security" that was measured with two questions (see Table 1). In the analysis the mean value of the two security statements were merged.<sup>5</sup>

Respondents from CA were coded as 0 and respondents from Norway were coded as 1. A series of analyses were conducted (see below) to assess the conditions under which we might see differences in responses by country.

### 3.2. Analysis

The statistical program Stata SE Version 15 (StataCorp, 2017) was used for data analysis. Two-sample t-tests are used to test for significant differences between mean values for each country sample. We report significant differences at  $p < 0.01$  (\*\*) and  $p < 0.001$  (\*\*\*).

Next, logistic regression models are constructed to test the association between variables. In model 1 the dichotomous **constrained parenting** variable is regressed on the ordinal human value variables (*security*, *self-direction*, and *benevolence*, respectively). Results are shown as Model 1 in Table 3 below. The dichotomous **children's rights** variable is then regressed on the ordinal human value variables (*security*, *self-direction*, *benevolence*, *universalism*, and *equal rights*, respectively), shown in Model 1 in Table 5 below.

An interaction is added between the human values variables and country variables (U.S. = 0; Norway = 1) to test the conditions under which an effect exists. These results are shown in Model 2, also in Table 3 (for **constrained parenting**) and Table 5 (for **children's rights**).

## 4. Results

On a scale from 1 (low) to 6 (high), respondents' values generally

**Table 1**  
Statements measuring basic values.

Security	1. It is important to live in secure surroundings. I avoid anything that might endanger my safety. 2. The government should ensure my safety against all threats. I want the state to be strong so it can defend its citizens.
Self-Direction	3. It is important to make my own decisions about what I do. I like to be free and not depend on others.
Benevolence	4. It is important to help the people around me. I want to care for their well-being.
Universalism	5. Every person in the world should be treated equally. Everyone should have equal opportunities in life.
Equal Rights	6. The government should secure the rights of adults and children equally. All people should have equal rights regardless of their age or their relationship to others.

<sup>5</sup> We assessed respondents' views about human values drawing upon five of the questions in Schwartz' 21-item Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) (2001), previously assessed in the European Social Survey (ESS-2018). The wording in the ESS is slightly different as respondents are asked to consider a third party (e.g., "Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you." <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about/>).

<sup>4</sup> The three samples of respondents are overall similar on core demographic variables as displayed in Table A1 in the online supplementary appendix.

**Table 2**  
Mean scores on human values (1 = not at all, to 6 = very much).

Human Values	Total (N = 1447)		CA (N = 755)		Norway (N = 692)		t Statistic
	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	
Security	4.54	1.08	4.44	1.21	4.65	0.90	-3.73***
Self-Direction	4.98	1.07	5.07	1.13	4.88	1.00	3.38***
Benevolence	4.73	1.15	4.72	1.22	4.73	1.07	-0.2
Universalism	4.97	1.30	4.90	1.42	5.05	1.16	-2.27
Equal rights	4.81	1.37	4.58	1.55	5.05	1.11	-6.54***

Note: \*\*\* indicates a significant mean difference between CA and Norway at  $p < 0.001$ .

n = 1447.

**Table 3**  
Attitudes toward **Constrained Parenting**, as predicted by values and country of origin.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
<b>Security</b>				
Security	1.62***	(1.32, 1.99)	1.50***	(1.21, 1.86)
Norway	-	-	5.06	(0.31, 81.26)
Security * Norway	-	-	0.92	(0.49, 1.72)
Intercept	2.64	(1.11, 6.25)	2.37	(0.98, 5.74)
<b>Self-Direction</b>				
Self-Direction	1.34**	(1.09, 1.64)	1.53***	(1.25, 1.87)
Norway	-	-	823.50***	(16.82, 40316.87)
Self-Direction * Norway	-	-	0.35**	(0.17, 0.71)
Intercept	5.07***	(1.93, 13.34)	1.67	(0.65, 4.32)
<b>Benevolence</b>				
Benevolence	1.55***	(1.28, 1.87)	1.57***	(1.28, 1.92)
Norway	-	-	10.37	(0.96, 111.76)
Benevolence * Norway	-	-	0.80	(0.47, 1.34)
Intercept	2.97**	(1.31, 6.72)	1.78	(0.75, 4.27)

Notes. n = 1447.

\*\* p < 0.01.

\*\*\* p < 0.001.

**Table 4**  
Mean scores on children's rights (0 = strongly disagree to disagree; 1 = agree to strongly agree).

	Children's Rights Mean	SD
Overall	0.66	0.47
CA	0.59	0.49
Norway	0.75***	0.43

trended positive. Table 2 shows the total mean score for each of the human values assessed in this study, and mean values by country. In terms of country differences, Californians and Norwegians differ significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) on *security*, *self-direction* and *equal rights*, with Norwegians more likely to favor *security* and *equal rights*, and Californians more likely to favor *self-direction*.

4.1. Findings regarding constrained parenting and values

Respondents generally favored constrained parenting under conditions of risk to the child. In general, Norwegian respondents held more favorable views than Californians toward constrained parenting. A test of proportions indicates that a significantly greater proportion of

**Table 5**  
Attitudes toward **Children's Rights**, as predicted by values and country of origin.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
<b>Security</b>				
Security	1.47***	(1.32, 1.63)	1.47***	(1.29, 1.66)
Norway	-	-	2.96	(1.03, 8.48)
Security * Norway	-	-	0.92	(0.73, 1.15)
Intercept	0.35***	(0.22, 0.57)	0.26***	(0.15, 0.46)
<b>Benevolence</b>				
Benevolence	1.18***	(1.07, 1.29)	1.22***	(1.09, 1.38)
Norway	-	-	3.44	(1.32, 8.98)
Benevolence * Norway	-	-	0.90	(0.74, 1.10)
Intercept	0.92	(0.59, 1.45)	0.55	(0.31, 0.98)
<b>Universalism</b>				
Universalism	1.18***	(1.08, 1.28)	1.23***	(1.11, 1.36)
Norway	-	-	4.60***	(1.84, 11.52)
Universalism * Norway	-	-	0.85	(0.71, 1.02)
Intercept	0.89	(0.58, 1.34)	0.53	(0.31, 0.89)
<b>Equal Rights</b>				
Equal Rights	1.19***	(1.10, 1.28)	1.22***	(1.11, 1.34)
Norway	-	-	7.13***	(2.78, 18.32)
Equal Rights * Norway	-	-	0.77**	(0.64, 0.93)
Intercept	0.88	(0.60, 1.30)	0.57	(0.36, 0.89)

Notes. n = 1447.

\*\* p < 0.01.

\*\*\* p < 0.001.

Norwegians (0.95) endorse constrained parenting than do Californians (0.93,  $p \leq 0.0001$ ).

**Security:** Results from Model 1 suggest a positive association between respondents' values toward *security* and **constrained parenting** ( $OR = 1.62, p < 0.001$ ). Results from Model 2 suggest that among respondents who did not value *security*, there is no significant difference by country in the odds of endorsing **constrained parenting** ( $OR = 5.06, p = 0.25$ ). The non-significant interaction parameter ( $OR = 0.92, p = 0.80$ ) suggests that the association between respondents' values toward *security* and **constrained parenting** is essentially the same in both countries (see Table 3).

**Self-Direction:** Results from Model 1 suggest a positive association between respondents' values toward *self-direction* and **constrained parenting** ( $OR = 1.34, p < 0.01$ ). Results from Model 2 suggest that among respondents who do not value *self-direction*, the odds of endorsing constrained parenting are significantly higher among Norwegians than among Californians ( $OR = 823.50, p \leq 0.001$ ). The significant interaction parameter ( $OR = 0.35, p < 0.01$ ) indicates that the positive association between respondents' values toward *self-direction* and **constrained parenting** is weaker in Norway than it is in CA. We note that a mere 12 respondents offered a very low assessment of the value of self-direction (i.e., a value of "1") and only 22 respondents offered a low assessment of the value of self-direction (i.e., a value of "2"), none of whom were Norwegian. No Norwegian endorsed constrained parenting if they indicated a view of self-direction lower than a "4." Due to sparsity and small cell size, the OR associated with Norway in Model 2 is inflated and should be viewed with caution. Overall, the more respondents value self-direction, the more they also endorse constrained parenting. While there appear to be country differences, due to small cell sizes (Model 2), these country-based results are unreliable and should be interpreted with caution.

**Benevolence:** Results from Model 1 suggest a positive association between respondents' values toward *benevolence* and **constrained parenting** ( $OR = 1.55, p < 0.001$ ). Results from Model 2 suggest that among respondents who do not value *benevolence*, the odds of endorsing

constrained parenting are not significantly different in Norway than in CA ( $OR = 10.37, p = 0.05$ ). The non-significant interaction parameter ( $OR = 0.80, p = 0.40$ ) suggests that the positive association between respondents' values toward *benevolence* and **constrained parenting** is essentially the same in both countries. In summary, the more strongly respondents value benevolence, the more they also endorse constrained parenting. This association does not depend on country.

#### 4.2. Findings regarding Children's rights and values

Respondents had mixed views toward children's rights under conditions of risk to the child. Norwegians held more favorable views than Californians in endorsing children's rights (see Table 4). A test of proportions indicates that a significantly greater proportion of Norwegians endorse children's rights than do Californians ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Security:** Results from Model 1 indicate a significant association between respondents' values toward *security* and **children's rights** ( $OR = 1.47, p \leq 0.001$ ). The more respondents hold strong *security* values, the greater the odds that they endorse **children's rights**. Results from Model 2 suggest that among respondents who do not value *security*, there is no significant difference by country in the odds of favoring **children's rights** ( $OR = 2.96, p = 0.04$ ). The non-significant interaction parameter ( $OR = 0.92, p = 0.45$ ) suggests that the positive association between respondents' values toward *security* and **children's rights** is essentially the same in both countries (see Table 5).

**Self-Direction:** The analysis of self-direction and children's rights produced no significant findings.

**Benevolence:** Results from Model 1 indicate a significant association between respondents' values toward *benevolence* and **children's rights** ( $OR = 1.22, p \leq 0.001$ ). The more respondents value benevolence, the more they also endorse children's rights. Results from Model 2 suggest that among respondents who do not value *benevolence*, there is no significant difference by country in the odds of endorsing **children's rights** ( $OR = 3.44, p = 0.012$ ). The non-significant interaction parameter ( $OR = 0.90, p = 0.31$ ) suggests that the positive association between respondents' values toward *benevolence* and **children's rights** is essentially the same in both countries.

**Universalism:** Results from Model 1 indicate a statistically significant association between *universalism* and **children's rights**. Respondents who endorse *universalism* exhibit increased odds of endorsing **children's rights** ( $OR = 1.23, p \leq 0.001$ ). Results from Model 2 suggest that among respondents who do not value *universalism*, the odds of endorsing children's rights are significantly higher among Norwegians than among Californians ( $OR = 4.60, p \leq 0.001$ ). The non-significant interaction parameter ( $OR = 0.85, p = 0.08$ ) suggests that the positive association between respondents' values toward *universalism* and **children's rights** is essentially the same in both countries.

**Equal rights:** Results from Model 1 indicate a statistically significant association between valuing *equal rights* and **children's rights**. Respondents who endorse *equal rights* exhibit increased odds of endorsing **children's rights** ( $OR = 1.22, p \leq 0.001$ ). Results from Model 2 suggest that among respondents who do not value *equal rights*, the odds of endorsing **children's rights** are significantly higher among Norwegians than among Californians ( $OR = 7.13, p \leq 0.001$ ). The significant interaction parameter ( $OR = 0.77, p \leq 0.01$ ) suggests that the positive association between respondents' values toward *equal rights* and **children's rights** is weaker in Norway than it is in CA.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis shows that a large majority of respondents were supportive of constraining parents in situations of risk for a child, and Norwegians were more likely than respondents from California to endorse constrained parenting. Norwegian respondents were also more likely than respondents from California to favor the values of *security* and *equal rights*, though California respondents were more likely to

endorse the value of *self-direction*. In general, results from this study suggest a positive association between the public's endorsement of human values, measured by *security*, *self-direction*, and *benevolence*, and their willingness to constrain parents under circumstances of risk to a child. The more strongly individuals support these values, the more likely they are to indicate the appropriateness of some government intervention designed to constrain parenting behaviors.

We do not see differences by country with regard to the values of *security* or *benevolence*; due to small sample sizes; we are unable to state with confidence whether there are important differences between Norwegian and California respondents' views as they pertain to *self-direction* and constraints on parenting.

A majority of respondents were in favor of children's rights, and respondents from Norway were significantly more likely to endorse children's rights than respondents from California. Results indicate a positive association between the public's endorsement of human values measured here as *security*, *benevolence*, *universalism*, and *equality*, and their favorable views towards children's rights.

There is some indication that the association between human values and children's rights may be country dependent. Residents of Norway were more likely than residents of California to hold firmly to their positive assessment of children's rights, even among those whose values did not align with universalism or equal rights. This aligns with findings from a previous study which suggested that Norwegian respondents are significantly more likely than CA respondents to endorse children's rights (Berrick et al., 2021). In this study, Norwegians are four times as likely as CA respondents to support children's rights, even among respondents who do not strongly value universalism. Similarly, Norwegians are seven times more likely than CA respondents to support children's rights, even among respondents who do not strongly value equal rights. Findings from these two studies combined suggest that the concept of children's rights appears to be more fully embraced by the public in Norway than in California, even among those whose values on other important topics may be notably different.

## 6. Limitations

This study builds on a large body of research that examines public attitudes regarding welfare provision, including the contributions of human values toward public attitudes. As a pilot for further work on the topic of child protection, this study used a portion of the widely used Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001), a 40-item instrument, that was modified for the European Social Survey to a 21-item instrument (see ESS section in questionnaire development (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>)). The ESS instrument captures ten human values (e.g., benevolence; universalism; self-direction; stimulation; hedonism; achievement; power; security; conformity; tradition). We did not include all ten human values in our study. Instead, our goal was to measure four of these values (e.g., *benevolence*, *universalism*, *self-direction*, and *security*) as those we anticipated might have a relationship to the concepts underlying child protection. We selected a single item from the ESS to capture each of the values of *benevolence*, *universalism* and *self-direction*. Both items used in the ESS to capture *security* were included in our measure. Although these choices result in an incomplete assessment of human values, they offer an important starting point for future studies.

In assessing respondents' views about children's rights, parents' rights, and equal rights, we first oriented participants to the general concept of rights with the following statement: Rights are things every person should have or be able to have. Some people have more rights than others." We recognize that respondents' understanding of rights could be variable, based on specific circumstances, the age of the child, or other variables. Nevertheless, as an abstract concept, we were concerned that respondents might require an anchor to consider their global orientation prior to considering the unique circumstances described in the vignette.

We recognize the limitations of selecting a single vignette to provide insight into public attitudes about child protection. As an initial study to test public attitudes with regard to child protection, rights orientation, and human values in different country contexts, we intended to be limited in scope. We also recognize that had the child described in the vignette been older, or if other risk factors had been present respondents' attitudes might have been different. Importantly, we did not offer information about the family's income, race/ethnicity, or other factors – features that could be implicated in public attitudes. Future studies that include different vignettes, specific case characteristics, or more vignettes might offer additional nuance to these initial findings. We are aware that findings from this study may inspire additional research, or offer important hints about international comparative child protection, but that conclusions from this work are of course tentative.

Child protection is extremely complex and the family circumstances with which child protection professionals must work are often complicated. Assessing risk and safety in these circumstances is difficult, and myriad factors contribute to social workers' ultimate decisions about how to respond. In this on-line survey, it was necessary to limit the number of variables available to respondents to consider the risk to the child; we thus determined that the parent's attitude could be presented as varying in the experimental design. The vignette is necessarily limited and does not represent the complexity of typical cases in child protection.

As a survey of public attitudes, we cannot determine respondents' motivations, nor can we elicit explanations for their attitudes. We believe that this initial approach is important as it follows a large body of research on public views toward the welfare state in international comparative context (see, for example, Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). As a first step in developing a new understanding about a topic that has not previously been studied, we hope to begin to uncover differences across notably different country contexts with this work.

Finally, the study was limited to one state within the U.S. (California). This approach was intentional, as state child welfare policy in the U.S. is notably varied. Nevertheless, respondents from California do not fully represent the U.S. population, as the state enjoys greater demographic heterogeneity than the rest of the nation (Johnson et al., 2021).

## 7. Conclusion

Following the legacy of the larger welfare state literature, suggesting that human values may be associated with public attitudes toward welfare provision, this study attempted to determine whether human values are related to child protection, and whether there are international differences across countries. Prior research suggests that public attitudes toward social provision vary by country context. As an overarching statement about these public attitude differences, Svallfors suggests that “support for equality, redistribution, and state intervention is strongest in the social democratic regime, weaker in the conservative regime, and weakest in the liberal regime” (2012, p. 8). In particular, the U.S. public consistently shows notably negative attitudes toward welfare state provisions compared to other European countries (Brooks, 2012). In areas as wide ranging as health care, employment, income sufficiency standards for the elderly and the unemployed, family leave, and child care, “the U.S. public appears unusually low in support for government responsibility for welfare” (Brooks, 2012, p. 212). Findings from our prior work may suggest that Svallfors' summary extends to child protection. In earlier work, we found that, in general, the public held favorable views about state restrictions on parental freedom under conditions of risk to a child, but that more California residents than Norwegians endorsed views about parental freedom from government intervention (what we referred to as unrestricted freedom), even under conditions of considerable risk (Berrick, et al., 2021).

Findings from this study appear to extend that work indicating that public attitudes that are favorable to common human values such as

security, universalism, and benevolence, are associated with state responses to children at risk that limit parental freedom and that recognize children as individual bearers of rights. Contrary to the larger literature on welfare provision, values, and country context, however, we did not see strong country differences in opinion with regard to human values or the association between values and attitudes about constraints on parenting behaviors, though there were some differences by country in public attitudes with regard to the values of universalism and equal rights and views about children's rights. We view these findings as tentative and subject to verification through future research.

Corollaries between the welfare state literature and child protection are inexact and this body of research is under-developed. Child protection is an extremely complex field involving nuanced decisions that take into account children's safety, the immediacy and severity of a threat, and the context of parenting opportunities, at a minimum. Each family's circumstances typically have layers of challenge and complexity that must be negotiated by well trained child protection professionals and judicial officers. These complexities are likely unknown by the large majority of public respondents. But the ideas underlying child protection – that vulnerable individuals should be afforded some protections from the state – may align with human values and values, of course, evolve over time. Whether these human values can be shaped by social forces outside of the individual, or whether society is ultimately shaped by the human values espoused by its citizenry is a complex dynamic that cannot be easily disentangled. But values are instrumental in influencing public policy (see Beland, 2010; Brooks & Manza, 2006), which ultimately shapes the nature and degree of state involvement in family life.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Jill Duerr Berrick:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Marit Skivenes:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Joseph N. Roscoe:** Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

### Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2023.106960>.

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