



CONCLUSION



Rhode Islanders want to keep the Ocean State as our home, to see our relocated loved ones return, and to attract other American families to settle and work here. We want meaningful work and financial security now, with ample hope for a bright future. We would much rather welcome and see the headlights of those on the highways pouring *into* our state, as opposed to waving good-bye and seeing the taillights of those we are driving away.

Yet, Rhode Island ranks 48th in the nation on the 2016 Family Prosperity Index because of its poor economic and cultural environments. This poor performance reduces opportunity for family prosperity and is exemplified by the fact that the Ocean State ranks in the bottom 10 states in the country on five of the six major indexes that comprise the Family Prosperity Index: economics (43rd), demographics (46th), family structure (46th), family sufficiency (42nd), and family health (50th). Rhode Island's best ranking is on the family culture major index, but even there, the state comes in at a merely average rank of 25th.

Both lawmakers and community leaders are encouraged to re-align their priorities to place a focus on the family as a holistic unit — taking into consideration more than just material needs, but also people’s social, cultural, and familial needs. Translated, this means that being able to set a self-sufficient example for our children and save for our futures via good-paying jobs and intact marriages — and the pride and dignity associated with it — is the best path to upward mobility and a better quality of life.



Based on this FPI analysis of publicly available data from government and private sources, Rhode Island can begin to improve its ranking - and the well-being of its residents — by reversing the crowd-out of the private sector and of civil society by an over-intrusive government, by enlisting civic and religious leaders to advocate for improved social and cultural self-standards, by empowering families with additional educational options for their children, by improving opportunity for a higher quality of life in our state in order to stem the state’s out-migration problem, and by passing aggressive drug and criminal justice reforms that will help curb its illicit drug use epidemic.

This means that higher self-sufficiency and productivity and lower reliance on government assistance is the true path to happiness and success.

Ronald Reagan once said about too much government intervention:

[It] robbed us of our tiller and set us adrift. Helping to restore these values (faith, family, neighborhood, work and freedom) will bring new strength, direction and dignity to our lives and to the life of our nation. It’s on these values that we’ll best build our future.⁴⁶

To that end, and throughout history, major Democrat and Republican icons — and people from across the philosophical spectrum — agree on the vital need for work and strong families.

Rhode Island’s politicians would do well to focus on minimizing government encroachment on its citizens by reducing its onerous tax burden, which, in turn, would spark new entrepreneurship and jobs, and on taking up pro-family measures that encourage healthy familial activity. Rhode Island’s community and religious leaders would also do well to inspire their constituents to aspire to a higher level of self-sufficiency as part of stronger marriages or otherwise healthier lifestyles.

Religious institutions and other elements of civil society can help mitigate Demographic Winter in the Ocean State by addressing issues associated with family fertility, out-of-wedlock births, incarceration and drug abuse, and overall religious participation.

⁴⁶ Reagan, Ronald, “Radio Address to the Nation on Administration Policies,” August 25, 1984. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40297>

In dollar terms, lowering Rhode Island’s state and local tax burden to the national average would require a \$450 million tax cut out of the \$5.4 billion in taxes raised in FY13. To match Florida, where a plurality of Rhode Island out-migrants choose to settle, would require a tax reduction of \$1.5 billion. Keep in mind, of course, that these are static estimates and that any move to reduce tax burdens at this level would be a strong boost to the private sector — thus significantly reducing the needed size of the tax cut in dollar terms because of naturally increased tax revenue.

Ironically, a debate in Rhode Island years ago about repealing its state sales tax might have been just what the doctor ordered. But political leaders were not ready for such bold action then. A thorough economic modeling of the tax plan by economists at the Beacon Hill Institute found that by eliminating this regressive tax — which disproportionately harms average and low-income families — Rhode Island can create up to 25,000 new jobs. This kind of reform can improve the quality of life for Rhode Islanders today and snowball to create even more good jobs that will attract Americans — especially young people — from other states to move into our state in the future, rather than forcing out our family members and neighbors.⁴⁷

Sales tax reform may just be what the doctor ordered!



As the Family Prosperity Index demonstrates, the job security and individual economic opportunity resulting from a reform of the sales tax or similar measures would likely have the added benefit of improved social and cultural circumstances for Rhode Island families. Clearly, lowering the state and local tax burden on Rhode Island’s families and businesses should be a major policy priority. This can only happen effectively if overall government spending is reduced.

Rhode Island must set itself on a path to grow its family and business population, thus increasing its productivity and tax base and improving the quality of life for its resident families. Our Ocean State can ill afford to continue to lose even more of its workforce or business and community leaders to other states.

At the same time, Rhode Island must maximize the productivity and availability of its existing labor force in the short term since importing new talent is a longer-run endeavor. As virtually all political and community leaders agree, workforce development begins with educational proficiency. Rhode Island must embrace education reforms that are transforming lives in other states in America and reverse its current trend of backtracking on such reforms under pressure from special interest groups.

⁴⁷ The Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity plan involving the elimination of the state sales tax called Prosperity’s “Zero.Zero” plan involving the elimination of the state sales tax can be found here: <http://rifreedom.org/0-0-sales-tax/>

Also, increasing the productivity of Rhode Islanders means reducing the growing use of illicit drugs that has long been a concern of the business and civic communities. The data shows that the burden of illicit drug use in Rhode Island is not only significant, but also growing faster than in the rest of the nation. Lowering Rhode Island’s illicit drug use rate to the national average must be a priority. In human terms, that would mean 46,000 fewer Rhode Islanders suffering from illicit drug use. The boost to Rhode Island’s labor force productivity would be profound. Further, increased productivity should also entail reforms to the criminal justice system to prioritize drug treatment over incarceration in order to break the cycle of recidivism, which imposes a destructive, negative force on family prosperity.

In order to achieve all of these ambitious goals of improving family prosperity and reducing the corrosive influence of over-reliance on government programs, the committed engagement of political, business, civic, and religious leaders in Rhode Island is essential. Such an endeavor is not without its challenges, but critical nonetheless. First, we must agree on the nature of the problem and the general path toward greater family prosperity.

If we want to turn the tide of friends and family members moving out of Rhode Island — and the lonely dinner tables left in their wake — we must embark on a new path toward renewed well-being. The Family Prosperity Index shows us the way.

