



Who Needs Parental Controls? Assessing the Relevant Market for Parental Control Technologies

by Adam Thierer

A common refrain heard in debates about media, video game, or Internet content regulation is that government intervention may be necessary because parental control technologies are not widely utilized in most homes. But does every household really need parental control technologies? This paper argues that the relevant universe of potential parental control users is actually quite limited.

The term “parental controls” is defined broadly in this report. It includes the various ratings systems—both industry-sponsored and independently crafted—that parents might use to screen media content. It also includes technologies such as the V-Chip, cable or satellite TV blocking controls, video game console controls, Internet filters and monitoring tools, and the wide variety of other tools currently available to parents that allow them to restrict or tailor the media content that their children consume, or the interactive communications in which they engage.

The number of families that might need or want these tools is smaller than most think. The percentage of homes that might need parental control technologies is certainly no greater than the 32% of U.S. households with children in them. Moreover, the relevant universe of potential parental control users is likely much less than that because households with very young children or older teens often have little need for parental control technologies. Finally, some households do not utilize parental control technologies because they rely on alternative methods of controlling media content and access in the home, such as household media rules. Consequently, policymakers should not premise regulatory proposals upon the limited overall “take-up” rate for parental control tools since only a small percentage of homes might actually need or want them.

To better understand why this is the case, consider an analogy. Imagine a survey or study that gauged the efficacy of protective child cabinet locks by asking whether *all* U.S. households employed such safety measures on kitchen and bathroom cabinets. Such a survey would yield truly absurd results. The vast majority of Americans have no

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need for baby locks because they either: (a) have no children present in the home, (b) their children are of an age where such locks are not needed, or (c) they take other steps to protect their children from harmful products that might be in the home. Thus, any survey or study that evaluated the success of child safety cabinet locks by using *all* households as the relevant universe of analysis would produce highly skewed, inaccurate results. Such a survey or study would conclude that few households use such controls and, therefore, those controls are a failure, even though that is an illogical conclusion based on a faulty statistical method.

Regrettably, a similar statistical fallacy plagues discussions about parental control technologies today. Only a small percentage of households need parental controls, yet many surveys or critiques of parental control technologies suffer from similar statistical flaws by over-estimating the relevant universe of households.¹

A more accurate methodological approach to studying this issue is described below.

Estimating the Relevant Universe of Parental Control Users

U.S. Census Bureau data can be used to determine which households have children and might need to employ parental control technologies. According to the Census Bureau's *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, as of 2007, over 68 percent of American homes did *not* have any children under 18 years of age in residence.² (Stated differently, only 32% of U.S. households have children in them). This percentage is calculated as follows:

¹ Adam Thierer, "Distorting Numbers in the Debate over Parental Controls," Progress & Freedom Foundation, *PFF Blog*, March 26, 2007, http://blog.pff.org/archives/2007/03/distorting_nummb.html

² U.S. Census Bureau, *2008 Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Table No. 58, available at www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/09s0058.pdf

**Exhibit 1:
Formula for Calculating the Percentage of Household without Children**

Nonfamily Households + Family Households without own Children³ \div Total Households $=$ % of Households without Children

Thus, using recent Census Bureau data, the percentage of homes without children for 2007, the most recent year for which data is available, can be computed as follows:

Exhibit 2: Calculation for 2007

37,587 + 41,668 \div 116,011 $=$ 68.3%

Incidentally, the number of homes without children in them has been steadily rising for many years. Exhibits 3 and 4 present a breakdown of the Census Bureau data for select years from 1960 to the present.

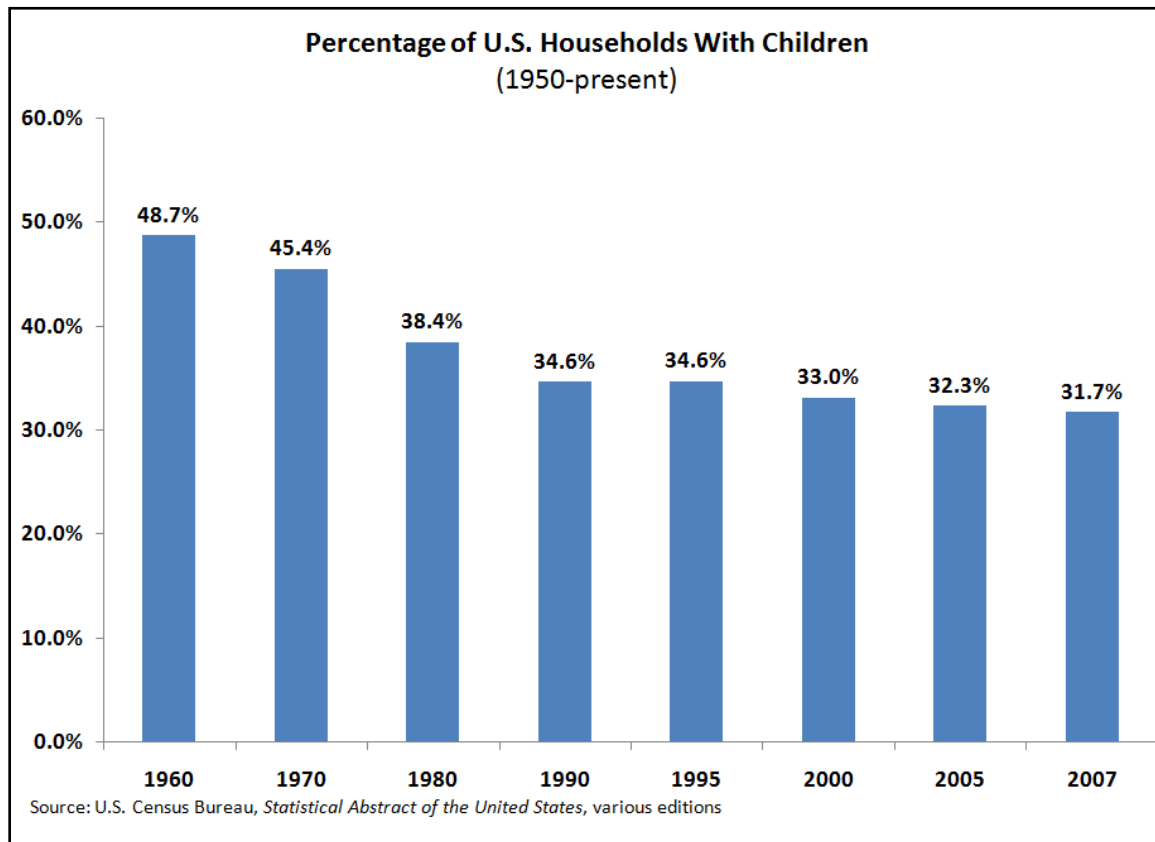
**Exhibit 3:
Breakdown of U.S. Households With and Without Children**

	1960	1970	1980	1990	1995	2000	2005	2007
Total Households (in thousands)	52,799	63,401	80,776	93,347	98,990	104,705	113,146	116,011
Nonfamily Households	7,895	11,945	21,226	27,257	29,686	32,680	36,136	37,587
Family Households With Own Children	25,690	28,812	31,022	32,289	34,296	34,605	36,520	36,757
Family Households Without Own Children	19,215	22,774	28,528	33,801	35,009	37,420	40,491	41,668
Total Households Without Children	27,110	34,719	49,754	61,058	64,695	70,100	76,627	79,255
% of Households Without Children	51.3%	54.8%	61.6%	65.4%	65.4%	67.0%	67.7%	68.3%
% of Households With Children	48.7%	45.4%	38.4%	34.6%	34.6%	33.0%	32.3%	31.7%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various years

³ According the Census Bureau, a *nonfamily household* “can be either a person living alone or a householder who shares the housing unit only with his or her nonrelatives—for example, boarders or roommates.” A *family household* “has at least two members related by birth, marriage, or adoption, one of whom is the householder. Family households are maintained by married couples or by a man or woman living with other relatives—children may or may not be present.” Obviously, the relevant subset of those family households for this analysis would be those without any children present. See: U.S. Census Bureau, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003,” November 2004, p. 2, www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-553.pdf

Exhibit 4: Steady Decline of Homes With Children Present



This makes it clear why it is illogical to survey *all* homes about parental control usage. It is highly unlikely adult-only homes would be using parental controls or blocking services when they have the ability to block objectionable content and communications in other ways.⁴ Thus, the relevant universe of homes that should be considered when evaluating parental control technologies usage would only be those 32% of U.S. households with children present.

Actually, the Relevant Universe is Even Smaller...

The actual relevant universe of homes, however, is likely much smaller than the 32% of homes in which children are present. Even in those homes with children in residence, most of those families will not need to use parental control technologies for children

⁴ Of course, some adult-only households with heightened sensitivities about certain types of programming might use some blocking or filtering tools to keep unwanted content or communications out of the home. It seems more likely, however, that those households would simply avoid such material by choosing not to subscribe to certain services or just changing channels and only visiting certain trusted websites.

under a certain age (say 5 or 6 years) or older than a certain age (perhaps 15 to 16). Consider both groupings in turn:

From Toddler to Pre-School

Many parents tightly control their children's media consumption habits before they reach a certain age. Before the age of six, for example, parents can (and do) employ a wide variety of household rules and methods to control media and communications in the home. In my Progress & Freedom Foundation special report *Parental Controls and Online Child Protection: A Survey of Tools and Methods*, I document a 4-part taxonomy of household media rules that often serve as a substitute for parental control technologies.⁵ These household media rules include:

- (1) "where" rules (assigning a place for media consumption);
- (2) "when and how much" rules (creating a media allowance);
- (3) "under what conditions" rules (carrot-and-stick incentives); and,
- (4) "what" rules (specifying what kids can and cannot consume).

Older Teens

After children reach a certain age—especially as they get closer to leaving home—the training wheels come off, so to speak, and parents begin to trust their children to make more media decisions on their own. Or, better yet, parents talk to their kids about objectionable content and communications, but likely without rigid parental control technologies in place. Many parents of teenage children also use various household media rules, especially "carrot-and-stick" incentives, to encourage them to use media and online connections in a wise (or limited) fashion.

Some policymakers have acknowledged these realities. For example, in August 2007, Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), former chairman of the House Telecommunications & Internet Subcommittee, was asked by *Broadcasting & Cable* if existing TV ratings and the V-Chip were effective or needed tweaking. In response, Markey noted:

The evidence is that parents who have small children and know about the V-chip use it at relatively high levels and like it. Obviously, most families aren't in that situation, meaning that they don't have small children. So it's not something that every person is going to be talking about because it would never occur to them to use a V-chip in 85% or 90% of all homes. *So it's in that subset of homes that,*

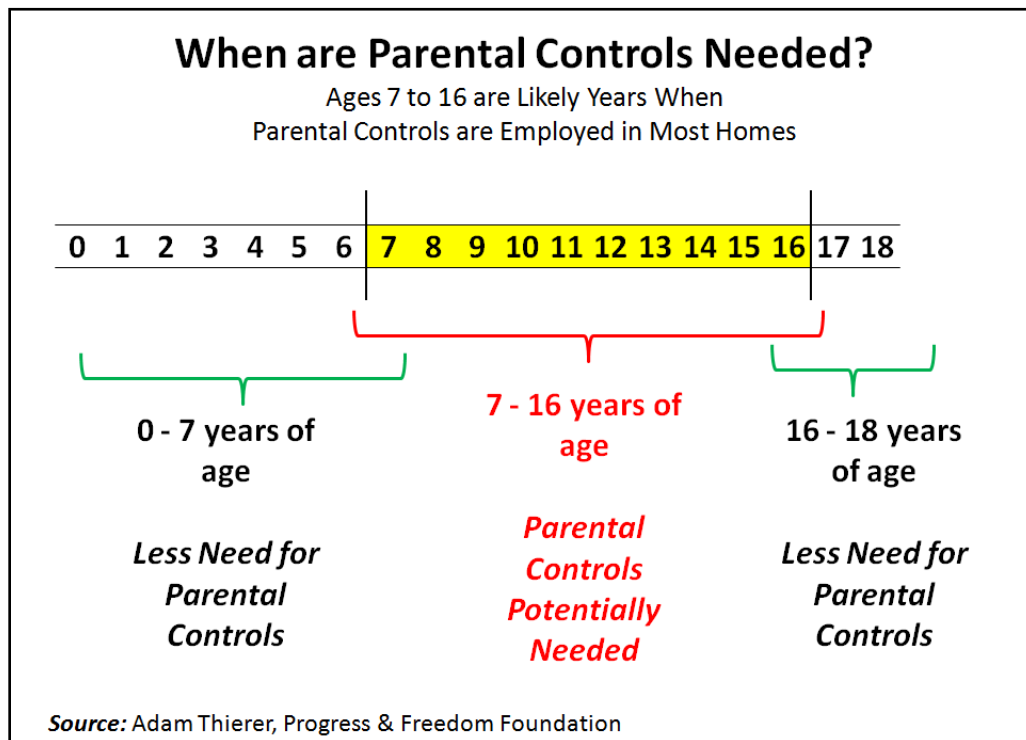
⁵ Adam Thierer, *Parental Controls and Online Child Protection: A Survey of Tools and Methods* (Washington, DC: The Progress & Freedom Foundation, Version 3.1, 2008), pp. 21-37, www.pff.org/parentalcontrols

among the parents who know about it, there is a very high degree of satisfaction.⁶

Markey is correct that those homes with much older children would likely not need to utilize the V-Chip, but it's also just as true for those households with very young children, for the reasons stated above.

Putting these two pieces of information together, Exhibit 5 depicts when it is most likely that parental control technologies will be used in the home (for those homes in which children are present). If anything, this estimate (at least for teens) may be a bit conservative since the window when parental controls may be relevant could be even narrower for many families.

Exhibit 5: Ages When Parental Controls Most Likely Needed



⁶ Quoted in John Eggerton, *Broadcasting & Cable*, "Ed Markey on TV Violence, Media Ownership and the Digital Transition," August 20, 2007, [emphasis added]
www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA6470038.html?display=Breaking+News&referral=SUPP&nid=22
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... and Smaller Still

Another important consideration is that, for whatever reason, some parents rarely, or never, employ parental control technologies in the home, even when their kids are in the age band where those technologies would be most helpful. A significant, but unknown, number of parents reject parental control technologies for a combination of the following reasons:

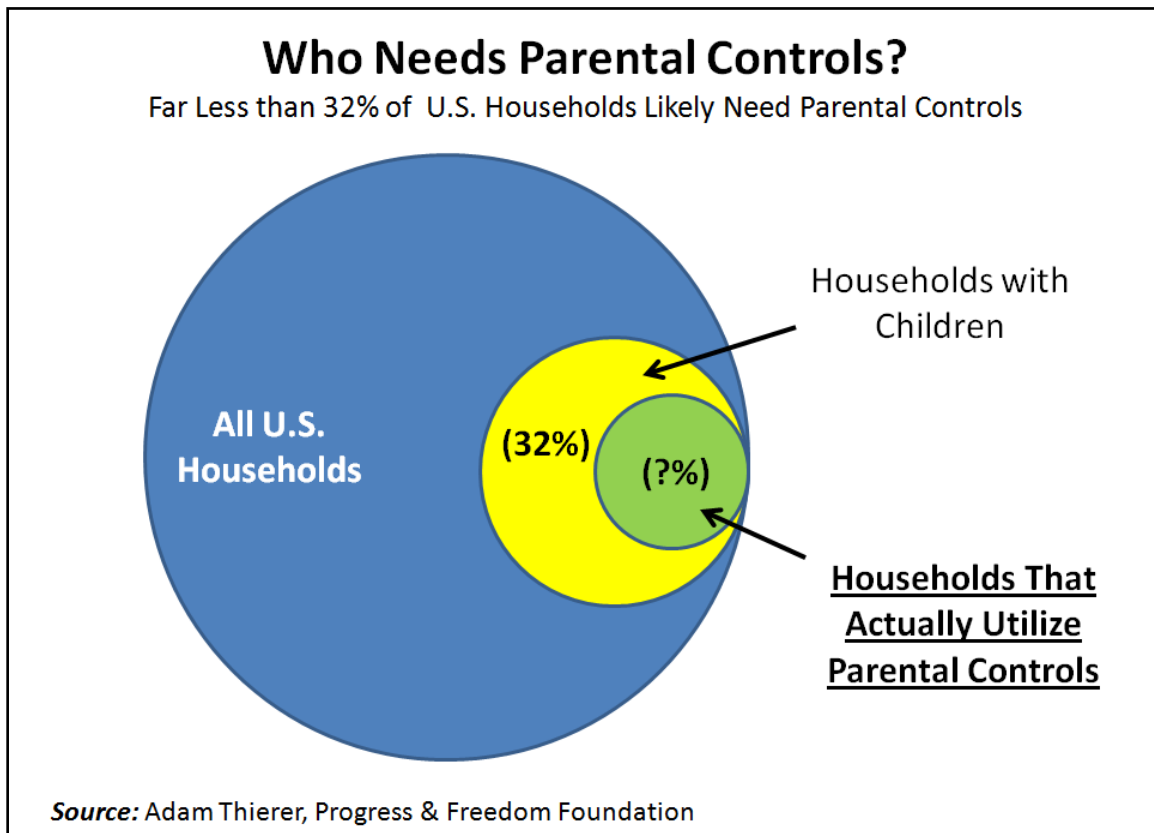
- they have an aversion to parental control technologies, perhaps fearing it creates distrust between them and their kids;
- they don't think parental control technologies work;
- they believe their own household media rules and restrictions constitute a more sensible approach;
- they feel comfortable making their own judgments after consulting ratings, program guides, and other information provided by media providers or third party media watchdog or rating organizations;
- they just don't allow many media or communications devices in the home;
- or perhaps some of them are just lazy!

The fact is, every family is different, with unique values and preferences regarding media consumption and interactive communications. But simply because some households choose not to use parental control technologies, it does not necessarily mean they are not taking other steps to control media, monitor communications, or mentor their children.

The Big Picture: Only a Small Percentage of Households Need Parental Controls

Recognizing that every family is different and will bring different needs, values, and approaches to the task of raising children, Exhibit 6 depicts just how narrow of a slice of the overall universe of U.S. households actually needs parental control technologies. In essence, only a small subset of the subset of homes with children present will ever need parental control technologies.

Exhibit 6: The Big Picture



While we know with certainty the percentage of that first subset—32%—there is no way to accurately measure the second “subset of the subset” of homes. But I believe it is reasonable to assume that of those 32% of homes with children present, at least half of them have little need for parental control technologies. The many other factors identified above mean that many of those 32% of homes with children will forgo, or have no need for, parental control technologies.

Policy Implications

Parental control technologies are now ubiquitously available, increasingly easy to use, and also increasingly free-of-charge. Indeed, there has never been a time in our nation’s history when parents have had more tools and methods at their disposal to help them decide what constitutes acceptable media content in their homes and in the lives of their children.

However, merely because parents have been empowered, it does not mean they are all taking advantage of those tools. It is impossible to determine definitively why that may be the case.

The policy ramifications of this finding are three-fold:

- (1) **Not all homes have children or need tools.** Regulation cannot be premised upon a lack of parental control uptake among *all* U.S. households. Policymakers and the courts should be skeptical of calls for regulation premised upon faulty statistical analysis and an over-estimation of the relevant universe of parental control users.
- (2) **Education and ease of use is important.** For those households in which children are present but which are *not* using parental control technologies, parents may need to be better informed about the existence of these tools and how to use them. Education and awareness-building efforts—by industry, non-profits, and governments—might help increase uptake of some of these parental control tools. And although industry generally does a good job explaining parental control tools and making them easier to use, more improvements in this regard would be helpful.
- (3) **Engaged parenting is the main solution for many parents.** But, even with such efforts to promote more wide-spread usage of parental control tools, we should not be surprised if we don't "move the needle" much. Many parents—including this author—continue to believe that education and parenting represent the first and best approach to dealing with concerns about objectionable content or troubling communications. Parental controls can be helpful in a "training wheels" and "speed bumps" sense, but they are no substitute for parental oversight and mentoring.

Indeed, at some point in these ongoing debates, parental responsibility has to come into the picture. Public officials should not act *in loco parentis* when parents have the power to make content and communications decisions on their own. And if parents are not exercising that responsibility, then they should be strongly encouraged to do so. Raising children, and determining what they watch, play, read, listen to, or download, is a quintessential parental responsibility. Parental control technologies can play an important supplementary role in that process, but we should not over-estimate the number of families who need those tools in the first place.

Related PFF Publications

- [Parental Controls and Online Child Protection: A Survey of Tools and Methods](#), by Adam Thierer, Progress & Freedom Foundation *Special Report*, Version 3.1, Fall, 2008.
- [“Joint Amicus Brief of The Center for Democracy & Technology and The Progress & Freedom Foundation, U.S. Supreme Court in the matter of *FCC v. Fox Television Stations*,”](#) by Adam Thierer, John B. Morris, Jr., and Sophia Cope, August 8, 2008.
- [“The Perils of Mandatory Parental Controls and Restrictive Defaults,”](#) by Adam Thierer, *Progress on Point* 15.4, April 11, 2008.
- [“Congress, Content Regulation, and Child Protection: The Expanding Legislative Agenda,”](#) by Adam Thierer, *Progress Snapshot* 4.4, February 6, 2008.
- [“Parental Control Perfection? The Impact of the DVR and VOD Boom on the Debate over TV Content Regulation”](#) by Adam Thierer, *PFF Progress on Point* 14.20, October 2007.
- [“Freedom of Speech and Press in the 21st Century: New Technology Meets Old Constitutionalism,”](#) by Laurence H. Tribe, *PFF Progress on Point* 14.19, September 2007.
- [“Convergence-Era Content Regulation? S. 602, ‘The Child Safe Viewing Act of 2007,’”](#) by Adam Thierer, *PFF Progress on Point* 14.17, August 1, 2007.
- [“Why Regulate Broadcasting: Toward a Consistent First Amendment Standard for the Information Age,”](#) by Adam Thierer, Catholic University Law School *CommLaw Conspectus*, Vol. 15, pp. 431-482, July 10, 2007.
- [“Images Kids See on the Screen,”](#) Testimony by Adam Thierer, before the Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, June 22, 2007.
- [“Social Networking and Age Verification: Many Hard Questions; No Easy Solutions,”](#) by Adam Thierer, *PFF Progress on Point* 14.5, March 21, 2007.
- [“Fact and Fiction in the Debate Over Video Game Regulation,”](#) by Adam Thierer, *PFF Progress on Point* 13.7, March 2006.
- [“New Worlds to Censor,”](#) by Adam Thierer, *Washington Post* editorial, June 7, 2005.
- [“Can Broadcast Indecency Regulations Be Extended to Cable Television and Satellite Radio?”](#) by Robert Corn-Revere, *PFF Progress on Point* 12.8, May 2005.
- [“Thinking Seriously about Cable & Satellite Censorship: An Informal Analysis of S-616, The Rockefeller-Hutchison Bill,”](#) by Adam Thierer, *PFF Progress on Point* 12.6, April 2005.

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