



TRENDS IN THE WELL-BEING OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH: 1995

INTRODUCTION

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This is the first edition of what is intended to be an annual, comprehensive report on trends in the well-being of America's children and youth. It is intended to provide the policy community with a comprehensive guide to data on the well-being of children and youth. We plan to update the report annually, updating existing measures, adding new measures as new data sources become available, and providing new narratives on key issues affecting children.

The report has two sections. Section one is a quick-reference guide describing national trends for seventy-four indicators of child and youth well-being based on data collected by the Federal government. The information provided for each indicator includes one or more tables documenting recent historical trends and important population sub-group differences, graphics to highlight key trends and group contrasts, and accompanying text that briefly describes the importance of each indicator and highlights the most salient features of the data. The tables often contain substantially more information than is reflected in the accompanying graphs and textual descriptions. Interested users are encouraged to use the text and graphics as a starting point for a self-guided exploration of the more detailed data contained in the tables. The indicators have been organized into five substantive areas:

- population, family, and neighborhood;
- economic security;
- health conditions and health care;
- social development, behavioral health, and teen fertility; and
- education and achievement.

The second section of the report offers a narrative treatment of a particular topic affecting the well-being of children and youth. In this first edition we offer a review of trends in—and detailed historical tables on—the socio-demographic characteristics of children, youth and their families titled “Population Change and the Family Environment of Children,” by Donald J. Hernandez, Ph.D., of the United States Bureau of the Census. This section draws heavily on data from the Decennial Censuses and the Current Population Surveys. It emphasizes long historical trends, in some cases reaching as far back as 1790, the time of the first U.S. Census.

INDICATORS INCLUDED IN THE REPORT

This report presents indicators of child and youth well-being that are reliably and regularly collected at the national level. The report does not present data at the state or local level. It presents only indicators that have been collected more than once over the past few years. Where possible, we present data from the 1970s to the 1990s. The lives of children and youth have changed dramatically over this period. In some cases, data are presented for periods before the 1970s or projections into the 21st century.

In deciding which indicators to include in part one of this report, we were guided by a combination of scientific and practical considerations. In November of 1994, a major national conference was held on indicators of child well-being. Nationally recognized experts representing a broad spectrum of disciplines and research interests related to child well-being presented over 20 papers recommending key indicators that should be tracked on a regular basis by the federal statistical system. Recommendations were gleaned from the papers and from conference discussions into a single list and used as the starting point for choosing a final set of indicators to be included in the report.

The final list of indicators was modified based on a number of practical considerations including data availability (the data needed to be available for a nationally representative sample and collected on a regular basis), timeliness (the most recent estimates had to be available for 1990 or later), and quality and consistency (the data had to be both reliable and consistently measured over time). In addition, it was decided that indicators related to federal program participation would be held to a very few direct measures of participation in key programs like AFDC and Food Stamps. Indicators that did not meet these practical criteria were removed from the list, and other important measures which were not on the original list, but met the remaining criteria, were added. It is anticipated that additional measures will be added to new editions of the report over time as new data become available, and in response to feedback from users.

THE NEED FOR BETTER DATA ON CHILDREN

There are some major gaps in the federal statistical system that limit our capacity to monitor the well-being of our nation's children and youth. The largest gaps exist in the areas of social development and behavioral health. Very little data of this sort are collected on a regular basis for children prior to the teenage years. Data describing social development and behavioral health—broken down by age group—would be particularly informative. Data on the co-occurrence of difficulties and

deficiencies, or positive indicators, would be particularly useful. Promising efforts are being made to incorporate some such measures into regularly fielded national surveys such as the National Household Education Survey, the National Health Interview Survey, the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse, and reports such as *Mental Health, United States*, but such efforts only begin to fill this substantial data gap. At least 1 in 20—or as many as 3 million young people—may have a “serious emotional disturbance.”

In addition, most of the federal data collected on teens in this area are limited to student surveys. This leaves us with limited information concerning the social development, risk- and health-related behaviors of teens who have dropped out of school, a group which is particularly likely to be experiencing difficulties.

There are relatively few positive measures of social development and behaviors for any age group. Most emphasize difficulties and deficiencies rather than positive outcomes. As a result, the collection of indicators presented in this volume may paint a somewhat gloomier picture of our children’s overall well-being than is in fact the case. New, positive indicators need to be developed and incorporated into the federal statistical system.

Other important areas where data are lacking include child abuse and neglect, child mental health and substance abuse, learning disabilities, institutionalized children, and those in alternative living arrangements. Also lacking are data on the types of interventions used for children with these problems or other health and behavior problems.

FEDERAL INTERAGENCY FORUM ON CHILD AND FAMILY STATISTICS

The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, a recently-formed group of leaders of Federal agencies and departments responsible for collecting data on children and youth, has adopted a mandate to improve the Federal statistical system regarding data on children, youth, and their families. This forum, which assisted in the production of this report, will continue to develop strategies for improving the Federal statistical system in ways that preserve the data that support key indicators and develop new measures that begin to fill the gaps described above. As data for new indicators resulting from these efforts become available they will be incorporated into new editions of this annual report.

USING THE DOCUMENT

In the presentation of data for this report, percents and rates are as a rule rounded to the nearest whole number. Estimates based on the Decennial Census, Vital Statistics, and surveys with very large sample sizes are often presented to one decimal place since differences of less than one percentage point from such sources may be significant.

Practical considerations did not allow us to test for the statistical significance of differences in the value of indicators across groups or over time. Because of this, small differences have been interpreted cautiously in the textual descriptions when estimates are based on relatively small sample sizes.

Finally the user should note that, unless otherwise clearly specified, race-specific estimates (e.g., white, black, Asian, Native American, and “other”) include Hispanics of those races, even when a separate estimate is given for Hispanics. This is particularly important when interpreting the meaning for the white and “other” race groups, a significant proportion of whom are also Hispanic. In cases where Hispanics are separated out, “non-Hispanic” will follow the race designation, as in “white, non-Hispanic.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first section of this report was produced under contract by Child Trends, Inc., of Washington, D.C. Brett Brown, Ph.D., served as project director. He was assisted by Lisa Anderson, Connie Blumenthal, Christopher Botsko, Carla Butler, Deanna

Cooke, Robin Dion, Dana Gleib, Angela Dungee Greene, Charles Halla, Fanette Jones, Jennifer Manlove, Suzanne Miller, Kristin Moore, Donna Morrison, Nancy Snyder, Barbara Sugland, and Martha Zaslow.

The second section of this report was produced by Donald J. Hernandez of the United States Bureau of the Census. The author is indebted to Arthur J. Norton and the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Thanks are due also to Edith Reeves, Catherine O'Brien, and Stephanie Kennedy. The author bears sole responsibility for the results and opinions presented here.

The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics supported the production of this document. Member agencies include the Bureau of the Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Center for Health Statistics, the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at HHS.

Several individuals and groups supplied unpublished data or analyses, including Greg Duncan of Northwestern University; Paul Jargowski of the University of Texas at Dallas; William Frey of the University of Michigan; the Survey Research Center and Institute for Social Research of University of Michigan; and the Educational Testing Service.

Many agencies supplied data and/or reviewed tables and text. They include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Administration for Children and Families, the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, the Bureau of the Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the National Center for Education Statistics.