



# '97

## Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation**

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# TRENDS IN THE WELL-BEING OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN & YOUTH



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## INTRODUCTION

This is the second edition of an annual report from HHS on trends in the well-being of our nation's children and youth. The report presents the most recent and reliable estimates on more than 80 indicators of well-being. It is intended to provide the policy community, the media, and all interested citizens with an accessible overview of data describing the condition of children in the United States.

The indicators have been organized into five broad areas:

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

For each indicator, the report provides one or more graphics to highlight key trends and important population sub-group differences, and tables that provide more detailed information for the interested user. These are accompanied by text which briefly describes the importance of each indicator and highlights the most salient features of the data.

### *INDICATORS INCLUDED IN THE REPORT*

This report presents a broad and carefully chosen collection of national estimates of child and youth well-being. It reports indicators that have been collected more than once over the last few years so that trends may be presented. Where possible, trends are presented from the 1970s through the 1990s. In a few cases, data for earlier years are also presented, as are projections into the 21st century.

Decisions regarding which indicators were to be included in the report have been guided by a combination of scientific and practical considerations. In preparation for the first edition of this report, a list of indicators were culled from over 20 papers presented at a major national conference on indicators of child well-being. At this conference, nationally recognized experts representing a broad spectrum of disciplines and research interests related to child well-being recommended key indicators that should be tracked on a regular basis by the federal statistical system.

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 available 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).

Other important indicators have been added for this second edition based on recommendations from the staff of statistical agencies who are participating in the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, described below. Additional measures will be added to new editions of the report over time as new data become available.

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## ***A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH***

This report is intended to help readers develop a sense of how children and youth are faring overall. As an example, we offer below a selection of findings from the report that relate to the experience of teenagers.

- The teen birth rate for 15-19 year old young women has been dropping since 1991, with the largest decreases among black teens.
- Use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and cocaine by high school students has increased during the 1990s, following periods of decreasing use during the previous decade.
- 17-year-old students have made modest gains in mathematics and science proficiency since the early 1980s.
- The mortality rate for black youth ages 15-19, following a sustained period of decline, increased dramatically during the late 1980s, and has remained at a very high level since 1991. During that same time period, mortality rates among white youth ages 15-19 declined.
- Receipt of early prenatal care by teen mothers has increased steadily during the 1990s.

## ***THE NEED FOR BETTER DATA ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH***

As this report demonstrates, the data available for tracking the well-being of children and youth at the national level are fairly extensive. Even so, there remain major gaps in the federal statistical system that must be filled if we are to have a complete picture of the quality of our children's lives.

We have few measures of social development and health-related behaviors for very young and pre-teenage children which are measured on a regular basis. For example, we currently lack good indicators of school readiness for young children. Measures of mental health for any age child are rare, though one such measure was recently added to the National Health Interview Survey. Positive measures of social development and related behaviors are also sparse, with the result that the current set of indicators may present a gloomier picture of our children's overall well-being than is in fact the case. New indicators which reflect the positive developments we desire for our children and youth clearly need to be developed and incorporated into the federal statistical system.

We have very few indicators available that reflect important social processes affecting child well-being that go on inside the family and within the neighborhood. Measures of parent-child interactions, critical to the social and intellectual development of children, are only now beginning to work their way into regularly repeated national surveys. Indicators related to fathering are virtually nonexistent and in need of development. We currently lack an annual measure of whether both biological parents of a child are in the household. Reliable indicators of child homelessness also need to be developed.

Other important areas in need of measurement development or improvements in the quality, consistency, and frequency of available data include child abuse and neglect, youth violent crime, day care quality, learning disabilities, and measures of children in institutionalized care.

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Finally, data which can be used to track the well-being of children at the state and local levels are much less plentiful than at the national level. As state and local governments take on increasing levels of responsibility for the design and implementation of government programs of all sorts affecting children, youth, and their families, the need for such information is increasing. The federal statistical system is positioned to play a significant role in increasing the availability of such data for use at the state and local level.

### ***FEDERAL INTERAGENCY FORUM ON CHILD AND FAMILY STATISTICS***

The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, an interagency group of leaders of federal agencies and departments responsible for collecting or analyzing data on children and youth, has adopted a mandate to improve the federal statistical system regarding data on children, youth, and their families. Member agencies have played a crucial role in the production of this report, providing data and carefully reviewing relevant text. This forum will continue to develop strategies for improving the federal statistical system in ways that preserve existing data in these areas while filling in the data gaps described above. As data from these efforts become available they will be incorporated into new editions of this annual report. The forum, in response to the President's Executive Order No. 13045, also publishes an annual report on *key* indicators of child and youth well-being, entitled *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*.

### ***USING THE DOCUMENT***

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

Practical considerations did not allow for the use of tests of statistical significance for all cross-time and between-group differences discussed in the text, though they were used in many cases. When such tests were not available, small differences were either not reported in the text, or were reported cautiously. Often in such cases estimates were simply reported without any claims as to which were in fact higher or lower.

Finally, the user should note that, in all tables and figures, unless otherwise clearly specified, race-specific estimates (e.g., white, black, Native American, Asian) include Hispanics of those races even when a separate estimate is given for Hispanics. In cases where Hispanics have been separated out, "non-Hispanic" will follow the race designation as in "white, non-Hispanic." By contrast, in the textual descriptions of the data, races are in most cases referred to simply as white, black, Native American, or Asian, whether or not they include Hispanics. When Hispanics have been excluded, this is noted in a footnote.

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