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

# 1999

Part One of this document was produced by Child Trends, Inc.  
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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
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# Trends in the Well-Being of America’s Children and Youth

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Part 1:

#### INDICATORS OF CHILDREN’S WELL-BEING

by Child Trends, Inc.

#### INTRODUCTION ..... 9

#### SECTION 1 POPULATION, FAMILY, AND NEIGHBORHOOD (PF)

##### CHILD POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

PF 1.1 Number of children under age 18 in the United States .....	14
PF 1.2 Children as a percentage of the total population .....	16
PF 1.3 Percentage of families with children and distribution of families by number of children .....	18
PF 1.4 Racial and ethnic composition of the child population of the United States .....	22
PF 1.5 Immigrant children .....	24
PF 1.6 Children as a percentage of the dependent population .....	28
PF 1.7 Fertility rate and number of births .....	30

##### FAMILY STRUCTURE

PF 2.1 Percentage distribution of children in the United States by number of parents in household .....	38
PF 2.2 Percentage of all births to unmarried women .....	44
PF 2.3 Children living in foster care .....	50

##### NEIGHBORHOODS

PF 3.1 Residential stability: Percentage of children under age 18 who have moved within the last year .....	52
PF 3.2 Children in poor and very poor neighborhoods .....	54

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## **SECTION 2 ECONOMIC SECURITY (ES)**

### **POVERTY AND INCOME**

ES 1.1 Median family income .....	60
ES 1.2 The income distribution: The income-to-poverty ratio of families with children, by income quintile .....	64
ES 1.3 Children in poverty .....	68
ES 1.4 Long-term childhood poverty .....	78

### **FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

ES 2.1 Effect of government cash and near-cash transfer programs on poverty among persons living in families with children under age 18 .....	82
ES 2.2 Means-tested assistance: AFDC and Food Stamps .....	86
ES 2.3 Long-term welfare dependence .....	90
ES 2.4 Sources of income and payment of federal taxes for families with children .....	94
ES 2.5 Child support nonpayment .....	100

### **PARENTAL AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT**

ES 3.1 Parental labor force participation: Percentage of children with both parents or only resident parent in the labor force .....	102
ES 3.2 Maternal employment: Percentage of mothers with children under age 18 who are employed, full-time and part-time .....	106
ES 3.3 Parental labor force detachment: The percentage of children under age 18 with no resident parents in the labor force .....	110
ES 3.4 Secure parental labor force attachment: Percentage of children with at least one fully employed (full-time, full-year) resident parent .....	114
ES 3.5 Child care .....	118
ES 3.6 Detached youth: Percentage of 16- through 19-year-olds not in school and not working .....	124

### **CONSUMPTION**

ES 4.1 Housing problems .....	126
ES 4.2 Food security .....	130

## **SECTION 3 HEALTH CONDITIONS AND HEALTH CARE (HC)**

### **MORTALITY**

HC 1.1 Infant mortality .....	136
HC 1.2 Child and youth deaths .....	142
HC 1.3 Youth motor vehicle crash deaths .....	148
HC 1.4 Youth homicides .....	152

HC 1.5 Youth suicides .....	158
HC 1.6 Firearm-related deaths .....	162

## HEALTH CONDITIONS

HC 2.1 Healthy births .....	166
HC 2.2 Low birth weight .....	170
HC 2.3 Very low birth weight .....	176
HC 2.4 General health conditions: Percentage of children in very good or excellent health .....	180
HC 2.5 Chronic health conditions .....	184
HC 2.6 Overweight prevalence among children and adolescents .....	188
HC 2.7 Abuse and neglect .....	192
HC 2.8 Suicidal teens: Youth who have thought seriously about or attempted suicide .....	194
HC 2.9 Activity limitations .....	198
HC 2.10 Lead exposure .....	206
HC 2.11 Violent victimization of teens .....	210
HC 2.12 Dental caries .....	214
HC 2.13 Children and adolescents with HIV/AIDS .....	218
HC 2.14 Sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents .....	224

## HEALTH CARE

HC 3.1 Health insurance coverage .....	232
HC 3.2 Early prenatal care: Receipt of prenatal care in the first trimester .....	238
HC 3.3 Late or no prenatal care .....	242
HC 3.4 Inadequate prenatal care .....	246
HC 3.5 Immunization: Percentage of children ages 19 months to 35 months who are fully immunized .....	248

# SECTION 4 SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, BEHAVIORAL HEALTH, AND TEEN FERTILITY (SD)

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

SD 1.1 Life goals: The percentage of high school seniors who rated selected personal and social goals as extremely important .....	256
SD 1.2 Peer approval .....	262
SD 1.3 Religious attendance and religiosity .....	268
SD 1.4 Voting behavior of young adults .....	272
SD 1.5 Television viewing habits .....	278
SD 1.6 Youth violent crime arrest rates .....	284

SD 1.7 Low-risk teen cumulative risk index .....	288
SD 1.8 Closeness with parents .....	292
SD 1.9 Parents' activities with children .....	296

### **BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: PHYSICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY**

SD 2.1 Physical fighting by youth .....	302
SD 2.2 Weapons carrying among high school youth .....	306
SD 2.3 Seat belt use .....	312
SD 2.4 Regular physical exercise .....	314
SD 2.5 Sufficient hours of sleep .....	318

### **BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: SMOKING, ALCOHOL, AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

SD 3.1 Cigarette smoking among youth .....	322
SD 3.2 Smokeless tobacco use among youth .....	328
SD 3.3 Alcohol use among youth .....	334
SD 3.4 Exposure to drunk driving .....	342
SD 3.5 Drug use among youth: Marijuana, inhalants, hallucinogens, and cocaine .....	346
SD 3.6 Peer attitudes towards alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and smoking .....	356
SD 3.7 Abuse of alcohol or other controlled substances .....	360

### **BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: SEXUAL ACTIVITY AND FERTILITY**

SD 4.1 Sexually experienced teens .....	362
SD 4.2 Sexually active teens .....	368
SD 4.3 Contraceptive use by teens .....	372
SD 4.4 Number of sexual partners .....	376
SD 4.5 Teen pregnancy .....	380
SD 4.6 Abortion among teens .....	384
SD 4.7 Teen births .....	388
SD 4.8 Teen nonmarital births .....	394
SD 4.9 Second- and higher- order births to teens .....	400

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## SECTION 5 EDUCATION AND ACHIEVEMENT (EA)

### ENROLLMENT/ATTENDANCE

EA 1.1 Early childhood program enrollment .....	404
EA 1.2 Grade retention: Percentage of current 2nd graders who were retained in kindergarten and/or 1st grade .....	410
EA 1.3 School absenteeism .....	414
EA 1.4 High school dropouts: Event dropout rate for grades 10 through 12 .....	418
EA 1.5 High school completion rates for 18- through 24-year-olds .....	422
EA 1.6 College attendance and attainment .....	426

### ACHIEVEMENT/PROFICIENCY

EA 2.1 Reading proficiency for children ages 9, 13, and 17 .....	430
EA 2.2 Mathematics proficiency for children ages 9, 13, and 17 .....	436
EA 2.3 Science proficiency for children ages 9, 13, and 17 .....	442
EA 2.4 Arts proficiency for children in grade 8 .....	448

### RELATED BEHAVIORS AND CHARACTERISTICS

EA 3.1 Family-child engagement in literacy activities .....	452
EA 3.2 Reading habits of children and youth .....	456
EA 3.3 Parental involvement in child's school .....	460
EA 3.4 Difficulty speaking English .....	464
EA 3.5 Student computer use .....	468

## Part 2:

### **CHANGES IN RISK-TAKING AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS 1991-1997: Evidence from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveys .....475**

by Scott Boggess, Laura Duberstein Lindberg, and Laura Porter

## Part 3:

### **MULTIPLE THREATS: The Co-Occurrence of Teen Health Risk Behaviors .....489**

by Laura Duberstein Lindberg, Scott Boggess, Sean Williams

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# Introduction

## PART 1

This is the fourth edition of an annual report from the Department of Health and Human Services (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 90 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 graphics to highlight key trends and important population subgroup differences, and tables that provide more detailed information for the interested user. These are accompanied by text that 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 to include 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 was 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 on a regular basis), timeliness (the 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).

Important indicators have been added based on recommendations from the staff of statistical agencies that are participating in the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, described below. Additional indicators have been added based on the work of researchers from the Family and Child Well-being Research Network, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), who have developed new indicators from existing data sources.

**New indicators for this edition of the report include:**

- Arts proficiency for children in grade 8 (EA 2.4)
- Student computer use (EA 3.5)

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## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

**This report is intended to help readers develop a sense of how children and youth are faring overall. Here is a sample of recent findings:**

- Youth violence has been decreasing, with homicide rates down from 20.7 to 12.8 per thousand youth ages 15 to 19 between 1993 and 1997, and declines in reported weapon carrying among 9th – 12th grade students from 26 percent in 1991 to 18 percent in 1997.
- After increases between 1985 and 1991, the birth rate for teen females ages 15 to 19 continues its downward trend from 62.1 births per thousand in 1991 to 52.3 per thousand in 1997.
- Median income for families with children increased between 1996 and 1997, from \$41,925 to \$43,545.
- The percentage of families with children receiving welfare payments decreased steadily between 1993 and 1997 from 14 percent to 9 percent.
- The percentage of single mothers who were in the labor force increased from 66 percent in 1996 to 74 percent in 1998.

## THE NEED FOR BETTER DATA ON CHILDREN

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 that 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 that 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. 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.

Finally, data that 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 all sorts of government programs 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.

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## 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 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, created in 1995, 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.

For example, member agencies have recently been working to develop new indicators in several areas where they are currently lacking. A subcommittee on fatherhood has been established and is working with agency researchers and members of the NICHD Family and Child Well-being Research Network to develop new indicators related to fathering and male fertility and incorporating them into federal surveys where appropriate. Several indicators developed through this effort are included in this year's report (See SD 1.8 *closeness with parents*, and SD 1.9 *parent's activities with children*). In addition, the Department of Agriculture has recently developed a measure of food security for children which is also included in this report. As additional measures from these and similar efforts become available, they will be incorporated into future editions of the report.

### 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, "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.