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**2005 INDEX OF CHILD WELL-BEING SHOWS MIXED PICTURE FOR AMERICA'S
CHILDREN: HUGE DECLINES IN CRIME, VIOLENCE, AND RISKY BEHAVIOR
AMID INCREASING POVERTY AND WORSENING HEALTH**

*New Index Report Finds Virtually No Improvement In Reading
And Math Test Scores Since 1975; Obesity Epidemic Continues To Worsen*

Washington, D.C. – Dramatic declines in rates of violence and risky behaviors such as teen births, smoking, and alcohol and illegal drug use during the past 10 years have contributed substantially to modest and slow progress in the overall well-being of America's children, according to the 2005 Index of Child Well-Being (CWI), released today by the Foundation for Child Development (FCD).

Overall child well-being improved only fractionally, from 104.48 in 2002 to 104.56 in 2003 – a gain of just 4.5 percent over the base year of 1975. Several of the underlying trends are discouraging. The rate of educational attainment – as measured by student test scores in reading and mathematics – remains stagnant, despite two decades of national focus on how to improve the education system. More children live in poverty today than did in 1975. In addition, persistent high rates of obesity – which have more than tripled in 30 years – are seriously hurting children's health, the CWI found.

“If you took away the huge declines in crime, violence, and risky behaviors since the early 1990s, the picture for America's children would be bleak,” said Kenneth Land, Ph.D., developer of the CWI and a sociologist at Duke University. “We need to do a better job of investing in our children's futures.”

Land noted that two factors that likely played a major role in reducing youth violence – a strong national economy and increased federal funding for community policing – are no longer in play. In particular, federal budget cuts could take up to 88,000 local police off the streets. “We may soon see an upswing in youth violence,” he said.

FCD President Ruby Takanishi said that proposed reductions in early education programs could also have negative effects on children and their families. “In fundamental areas such as health, financial security, and education, our children are either doing poorly or barely treading water,” Takanishi said. “Policymakers must give serious thought to how they can better support families. Early intervention and pre-kindergarten programs that have demonstrated outcomes should be expanded.”

On the positive side, the CWI shows that violent criminal activity among adolescents and teens has plummeted by more than 64 percent since 1975 and violent crime victimization of children

has fallen by more than 38 percent. Meanwhile, births to adolescent and teenage mothers have dropped by nearly 37 percent. Smoking among young people continues to decline, although the rate of binge alcohol drinking increased from 27.9 percent in 2003 to 29.2 percent in 2004.

Land said a number of factors probably played a role in those improvements, including the end of the crack cocaine epidemic, a booming economy during the mid-to-late 1990s, increased community policing, and the generally more active parenting style of the Baby Boomer generation.

“Parents who grew up during the seventies and early eighties saw firsthand – and possibly even experienced – the harmful effects of marijuana and cocaine use,” Land said. “Because of that, they may be more assertive about controlling their children’s behavior.” For example, increased scheduling of children’s free time and the substitution of video game and computer entertainment for outdoor play may have reduced their exposure to crime, violence, drug use, and other risky behaviors.

As a result, young people today may be more team-oriented and attached to mainstream institutions, such as school and family, than their parents were as teens. “For the Boomer generation, ‘question authority’ was the motto of the day,” Land said. “But today’s kids are more likely to accept authority, and, accordingly, less likely to run afoul of established social values.”

Other highlights from the CWI include the following:

- The financial status of American families with children continues its decline from 2000. In 2003, the poverty rate for families with children rose above 1975 baseline levels for the first time since 1998. Median family income has fallen steadily since 1999, and is projected to decline further for 2004.
- Downward trends in overall child health persist, solely because of obesity. The overall child health score for 2003 is some 17 percent below 1975 levels due primarily to the continuing obesity crisis. Land said the problem will not go away any time soon. “It took a generation for overweight and obesity to reach these extreme levels, and it’s going to take at least a generation to turn those levels back,” he said.
- Test scores for reading and mathematics have shown little improvement since 1975. Overall, math scores have risen more than reading scores, possibly because of the increasing number of school children from immigrant families who do not speak English as their first language.

The Index of Child Well-Being is a national, research-based composite measure updated annually that describes how young people in the United States have fared since 1975, by combining data from 28 indicators across seven domains into a single number for child well-being. Those quality-of-life domains are: Family Economic Well-Being, Health, Safety/Behavioral Concerns, Educational Attainment, Community Connectedness, Social Relationships, and Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being.

The Foundation for Child Development (FCD) is a national private philanthropy dedicated to the principle that all families should have the social and material resources to raise their children to be healthy, educated, and productive members of their communities.

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