

TRENDS AND DISPARITIES IN BLACK, HISPANIC AND WHITE CHILD AND YOUTH WELL-BEING: 1985-2000

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As the United States has become an increasingly multiracial and multiethnic society in recent decades, major concerns about child and youth well-being have focused both on improvements in the circumstances of children's lives within specific race/ethnic groups and on levels of disparity among these groups. In brief, parents, members of public interest groups, policymakers, and public and private agency administrators and personnel would like to see improvements in the circumstances of all children within race/ethnic groups as compared to past levels of child and youth well-being within their own groups. In addition, levels of disparity in well-being among race/ethnic groups also are a concern, as Black and Hispanic populations historically have experienced discrimination in American society and disadvantages, on average, in life circumstances. Accordingly, growing disparities in child and youth well-being for Black and Hispanic populations are a matter of public concern and for which demographers should engage in monitoring and social reporting.

To consider the trends of race/ethnic well-being and between-group disparities, we have collected 26 national-level time series of demographic and social indicators by race/ethnicity in seven quality-of-life domains—material well-being (e.g, child poverty rates), health (e.g., infant mortality rates), safety/behavioral concerns (e.g., cigarette smoking rates), education (e.g, NAEP math and reading scores), place in community (e.g, high school graduation rates), social relationships (e.g, residential mobility rates), and emotional/spiritual well-being, (e.g, spiritual attitudes)—for the years 1985 to 2000. The indicators are indexed by percentage change from

1985, the base year, and the subsequent annual observation. Indices are calculated for each domain, as well as summary overall well-being indices for each race/ethnic group.

The summary indices show that, compared to 1985 levels, the well-being of White youths has improved slowly until 1997, upon which time the rate of improvement has increased. For the minority youths, the overall well-being of Black and Hispanic youths declined to a low point in 1993. After that time the well-being of minority youths has improved at an accelerated rate such that their trends of improvement (compared to their respective 1985 rates) converge with that of the White youth. Improvements in material well-being, health, and safety/behavioral concerns have contributed to the race-specific trends of accelerated improvements in the late 1990s.

The domain-specific trends are mixed for the individual race/ethnic groups. For all three groups, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed declines in emotional/spiritual well-being. African American and Hispanic youth also experienced declines in other domains during this period as well. The majority of the domain trends improved for all groups at the end of the 1990s relative to 1985, the base year.

Racial disparities were also calculated for the time series indicators. For each indicator, Blacks and Hispanics were compared with Whites. The gap (in terms of absolute value) between the White and Black (or Hispanic) indicator in 1985 defines a baseline of 100% disparity. For each subsequent year, absolute values of the disparities are calculated and computed as a percentage of the disparity level at base year. The resultant trend shows how annual between-race disparities have increased or decreased relative to the 1985 levels.

For Black/White comparisons, by the year 2000 the disparities have increased to over 20% of the 1985 levels. The sources of higher Black/White absolute disparities are in the following domains: emotional well-being (Black advantage), social relationships (White

advantage), and material well-being (White advantage). Through the 1990s there have been reduced Black/White disparities in safety/behavioral concerns and health. There has been little change in disparities for trends in educational assessment and place in community (educational achievement).

The trend for Hispanic/White comparisons indicates fewer changes in disparities between the two groups for the period 1985-2000. There was an increase in health disparities in the middle of the series, with Hispanics being more disadvantaged. Smaller Hispanic/White disparities were found for the trends of safety/behavioral concerns (Hispanic advantage), emotional/spiritual well-being (White advantage) and social relationships (White advantage). As with the Black/White comparisons, there was little change in Hispanic/White disparities in educational assessment and place in community.

Although all race/ethnic groups are doing better overall relative to their summary baseline 1985 measures, these findings point to large Black/White disparities in the 1990s. Smaller disparity changes were found in the Hispanic/White comparisons. The significance and policy implications of these findings will be discussed.