



FOUNDATION for  
CHILD DEVELOPMENT

## The 2005 FCD Index of Child Well-Being (CWI): Implications for Policymakers

Kenneth C. Land, Ph.D.

FCD POLICY BRIEF SERIES No. 2

MARCH 2005

*Index of Child Well-Being*

**A**lthough the big picture for America's children is the best it's been since 1975, current progress is slow and modest, according to the 2005 FCD Index of Child Well-Being (CWI) report.

Overall child well-being improved only fractionally from 104.48 in 2002 to 104.56 in 2003 -- a gain of approximately 4.5 percent over the base year of 1975.

The good news is that children are doing better in recent years, recovering from losses in well-being during the 1980s. The overall score for child well-being hit its nadir in 1993, but has improved every year since 1994, increasing by nearly 12 percent during this period.

Despite these overall improvements, below the surface, the picture of child well-being in the United States is more complex, with both positive and negative trends. Most notably, substantial and dramatic improvements in safety and risky behavior among young people have compensated for recent declines in other areas of their lives, such as health and economic well-being.

In particular, positive trends in both violent victimization of children and violent criminal activity by youth, have had major impacts on young people's overall quality of life. Despite two decades of concerted national efforts to improve education, levels of achievement have not changed. In addition, more children live in poverty today than in 1975, despite significant improvements since the early 1990s.

For policymakers interested in the well-being of America's children, these trends raise important questions. How have changes in specific areas of children's lives – health, education, economic security, family, community, and religious life – affected children's overall well-being? What role has public policy played in these developments? Where should policymakers focus future efforts and how should they invest limited resources to improve children's lives?

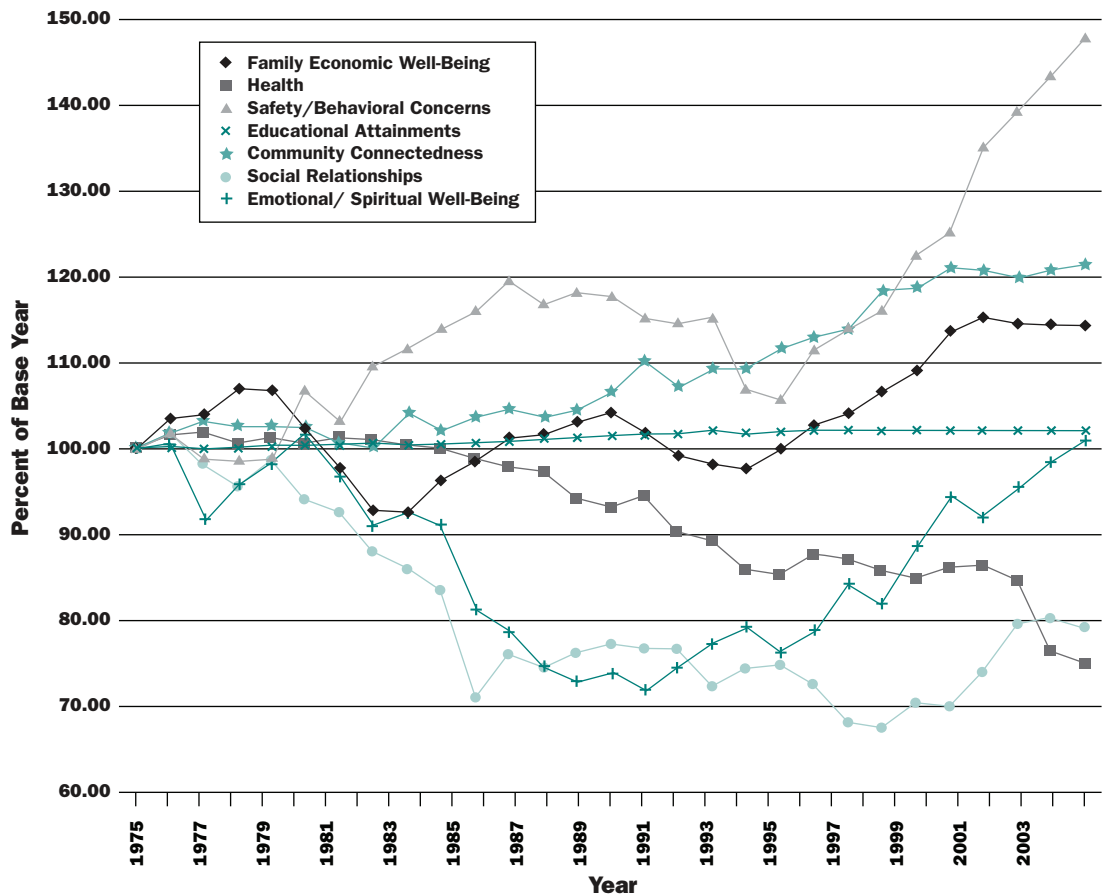
This policy brief summarizes the main findings from the 2005 CWI report, with particular focus on trends in safety and risky behavior among young people. Dramatic progress across all indicators in this area of children's lives has made a substantial impact on child well-being and has led overall improvement in the CWI since 1994. In addition, this brief discusses the possible impact of recent policy changes on some of these developments and concludes with questions for policymakers to consider in light of these findings.

# The CWI: A Snapshot of Child Well-Being

*The CWI is a national, research-based composite measure that describes how children and young people in the United States have fared since 1975. The Foundation for Child Development (FCD) releases the CWI annually to track changes in child well-being.*

In general, the CWI analyzes trends over time in the quality of American children's lives. By assessing changes in specific aspects of children's lives annually, the CWI gives both an overall measure of children's well-being and a detailed examination of key issues. The CWI was created by researchers at Duke University and is based on time series data from numerous vital statistics and sample surveys.\* It combines data from 28 indicators across seven domains into a single number measuring child well-being every year since 1975. Those quality-of-life domains are: Family Economic Well-Being, Health, Safety/Behavioral Concerns, Educational Attainments, Community Connectedness, Social Relationships, and Emotional/Spiritual Well-Being. The CWI shows how changes within each of these domains affect the overall well-being of American children. (See Figure 1 below.)

**Figure 1.** Domain-Specific Indices of Child and Youth Well-Being 1975-2003 with projections for 2004



\* For more detailed information regarding the data sources for the Index please see Appendix B of *The Foundation for Child Development Index of Child Well-Being (CWI), 1975-2003 with Projections for 2004* at [www.fcd-us.org](http://www.fcd-us.org).

*Key trends in individual domains from the 2005 CWI report include the following:*

- The Safety/Behavioral Concerns Domain has shown the most improvement since 1975, and in 2003 was 44 percent higher than its baseline level. This large gain is due to improvements in several domain indicators: teen birth rates, violent child victimization rates, violent criminal activity rates, smoking, and alcohol and illicit drug use. These trends will be discussed in greater detail later in this report.
- The Educational Attainment Domain has remained relatively stagnant, at a level slightly above the 1975 baseline level, despite ongoing national efforts to improve education beginning around 1983 and major increases in per-pupil spending.
- Despite improvements during the 1990s, the financial status of American families with children has declined since 2001. For example, the 2003 poverty rate for families with children under the age of 18 rose above 1975 baseline levels for the first time since 1998 (17.2 percent versus 16.8 percent), although it remains below levels of the mid-1990s. Perhaps more significantly, median family income in families with children peaked in the year 2000, but has continued to fall since then.
- The Health Domain continues to decline. Although significant improvements have been made in preventing mortality among infants, children, and youth since 1975, levels of obesity have grown steadily at a pace that has obscured those accomplishments. Today, the Health Domain is some 17 percent below baseline levels due primarily to increased obesity rates among children and youth.
- Although the Social Relationships Domain has recovered some ground since hitting its lowest point in 1997, it remains below the 1975 base year level. Deterioration in this domain is due to increases in the percent of children living in single-parent families.
- The Community Connectedness Domain has improved since 2001, due to increases in the percentage of young adults receiving college degrees, as well as the percentage of 3-to-4-year-olds who attend pre-school. Findings suggest that this domain will continue to improve through 2004. Increased voter turnout among youth during the last Presidential election will likely push this domain even higher.
- Recent decreases in suicide rates and an increase in the percent of high school seniors who report religion as an important part of their lives have boosted the Emotional/Spiritual Domain. In 2003, this domain recovered to its baseline level and, by 2004, will likely surpass it.

## Safety/Behavioral Concerns Domain: Significant, Steady Improvement in Youth Behavior

*During the past eight years, dramatic and substantial improvements in the Safety/Behavioral Domain have had a major, positive impact on overall child well-being.*

The Safety/Behavioral Concerns Domain consists of six indicators:

- Births among girls ages 10 to 17
- Violent crime victimization of youths ages 12 to 17
- Violent crime offenders among youths ages 12 to 17
- Cigarette smoking among 12th graders
- Binge alcohol drinking among 12th graders (binge drinking is defined as consumption of five or more consecutive drinks in one setting within the past two weeks)
- Illicit drug use among 12th graders

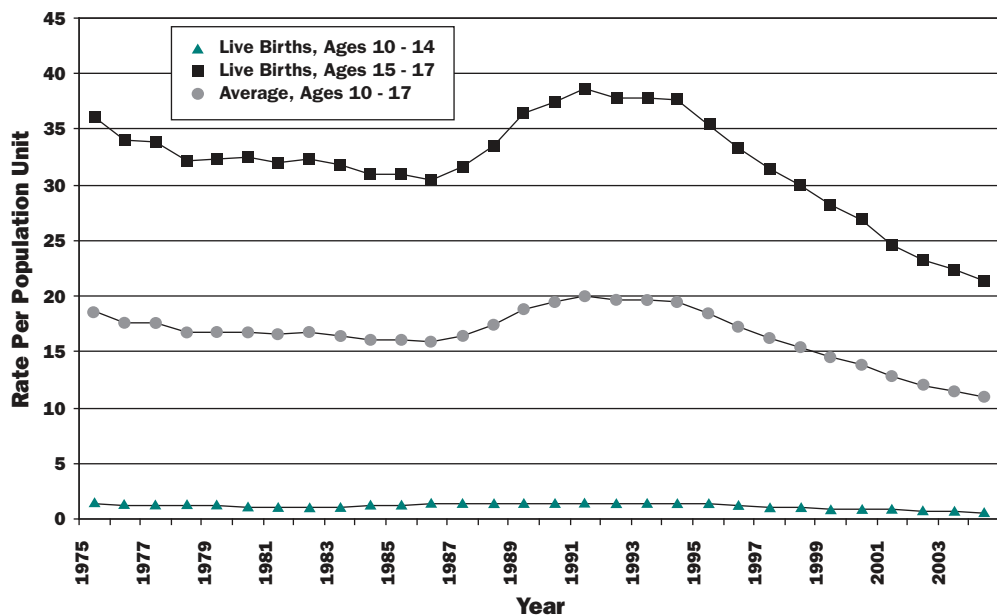
With the exception of binge drinking, each indicator in this domain showed improvement between 2003 and 2004.

Interestingly, the overall CWI trend mirrors the trend in the Safety/Behavioral Domain, with sizable increases in well-being since the early to mid-1990s. Clearly, the impact of trends in violent victimization and offending on the well-being of children and youth should not be underestimated. Changes in the Safety/Behavioral Domain have led the overall improvements in the CWI since 1994.

Figure 2 shows how the rate of births to teenage mothers has decreased since the early 1990s – slowly in the early-1990s and more rapidly in the last 10 years. By 2004, the CWI projects that the teenage birth rate will have fallen approximately 55 percent from its peak in 1991.

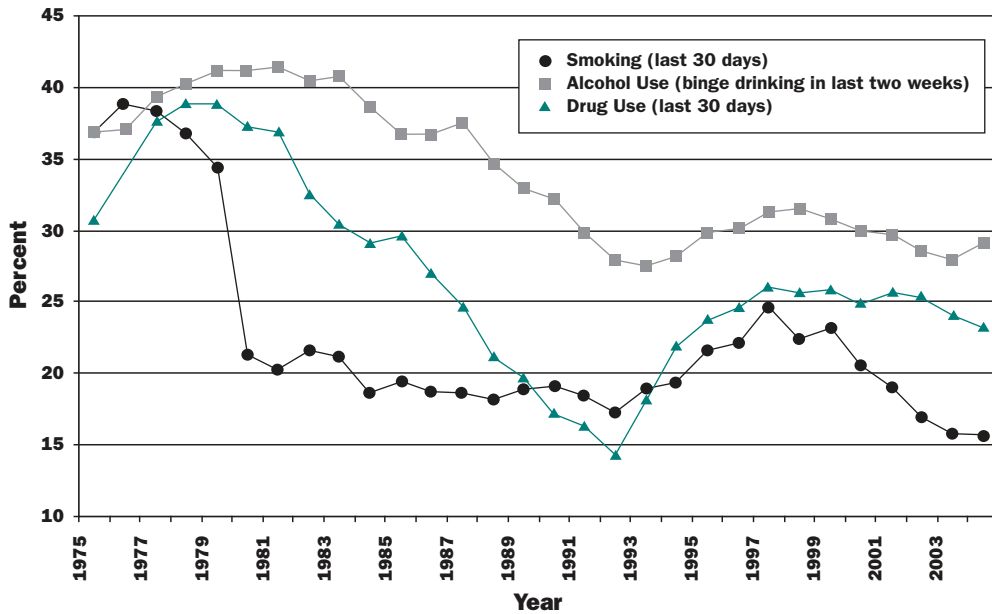
**Figure 2.**

Adolescent/Teenage Birth Rate, 1975–2003, with Projections for 2004.



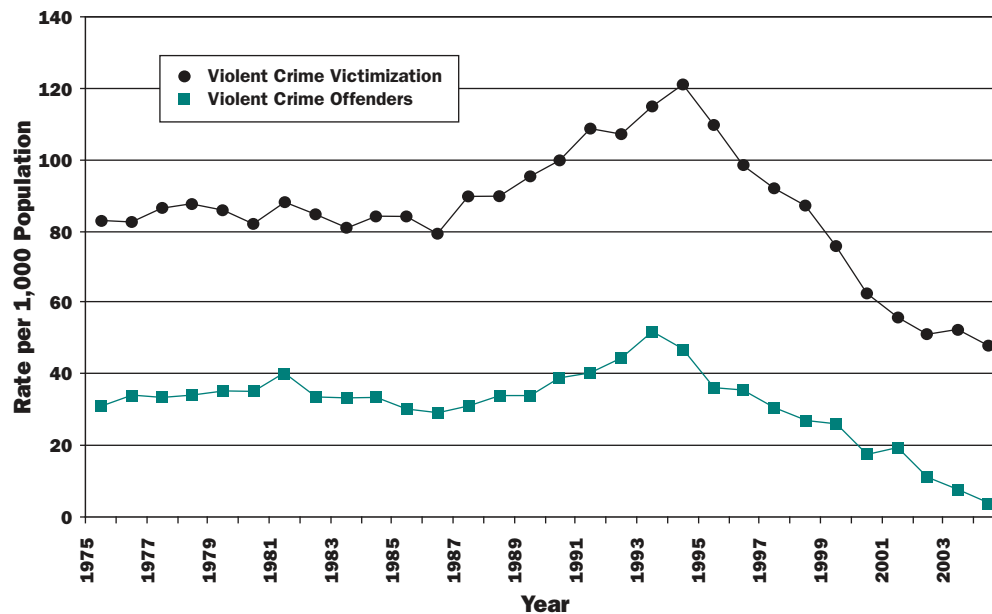
Rates of cigarette smoking, alcohol use, and illicit drug consumption among young people have declined since the late-1990s (Figure 3). From 2003 to 2004, smoking prevalence decreased from 15.8 percent to 15.6 percent and prevalence of drug use dropped from 24.1 percent to 23.4 percent. However, alcohol use, specifically binge drinking, increased from 27.9 percent in 2003 to 29.2 percent in 2004, following a downward trend since the late 1990s. Still, overall, risky health behavior among teens has fallen markedly over the long term.

**Figure 3.** Smoking, Drug Use, and Alcohol Use among High School Seniors, 1975–2004



The most significant improvements have been in crime victimization and offending. As illustrated in Figure 4, both rates peaked in the early 1990s, and dramatic declines since then have resulted in criminal offending and criminal victimization rates that are well below 1975 levels. Projections for 2003 and 2004 indicate that these trends are likely to continue.

**Figure 4.** Violent Crime Victimization and Offender Rates Ages 12–17, 1975–2002, with Projections for 2003 (Offending) and 2004 (Offending and Victimization).



## **Underlying Causes and Policy Implications**

*Social scientists have identified several social changes and public policies that help to account for the improvements that began in the 1990s. Explanations for the continuing declines in the new millennium are less well established.*

Criminologists have identified three factors as major contributors to reductions in violent crime offending and victimization rates from 1993 through 1999:

- The decline of the crack cocaine epidemic and associated violence, beginning in the mid-1990s
- Generally strong economic expansion during the mid-to-late-1990s that improved job opportunities for young men and women and contributed to declines in youthful crime and other risky behavior, such as sexual activity
- Federal funding, during the Clinton administration, for an additional 70,000 local police officers and the adoption by many police departments across the country of community-oriented policing and problem-solving (COPPS) strategies associated with better crime control

These improvements have continued into the early-2000s, well beyond the big decline in the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1990s and during an economic downturn. In addition, the improvements in youthful behavior include not only drop-offs in criminal activity but also substantial declines in teenage birth rates and, in recent years, large reductions in cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption and at least a slight decline in the use of illicit drugs.

Public policy has also contributed to the improvement in child well-being. Since the upsurge in youthful pregnancies, crime, and use of illicit drugs in the late-1980s and early-to-mid-1990s, numerous changes in public policies have taken aim at discouraging or raising the cost of these problem behaviors.

First, since the early-1990s, some states have adopted parental notification laws for adolescent abortions, although it is unlikely that this development alone played a major role in the decline of teen births. In addition, numerous organizations – public and private, local as well as national – over the years have engaged in very active initiatives to prevent or reduce teenage pregnancies and childbearing.

Second, during the 1990s, many states also toughened their laws for the criminal justice treatment of adolescent and teenager violent offending, most notably by allowing adolescents who commit violent crimes to be treated as adults by the criminal justice system.

Third, the 1998 tobacco settlement and associated agreements aimed at reductions in cigarette advertising targeted at children and greater legal controls on sales of cigarettes and alcohol to minors may have had impacts on the recent declines in the use of those substances. In addition, parents, colleges, and universities have made concerted efforts to crack down on binge drinking among adolescents and teenagers that appear to have made a significant impact over the long term, despite the recent uptick in this trend. Other organizations – again, both public and private – have launched ongoing social marketing campaigns with strong anti-smoking and drug messages aimed at young people.

Fourth, community-oriented policing remains a strategy used by local police departments that appears to continue to assist neighborhoods and schools in controlling youthful crime and delinquent behavior. But, due to competing efforts to direct resources to homeland security, federal funding of community policing has declined since 2002. Federal budget cuts could take up to 88,000 local police off the streets.



## Looking Ahead

It is difficult to say with certainty what effects these and other policies have had on young people's behavior in recent years. However, the trends identified here raise numerous issues for policymakers to consider, including the following:

- How should policymakers concerned about child safety and risky behavior respond to economic downturns? Should more emphasis be placed on programs for youth training and employment programs?

Should the many disparate efforts to combat childhood obesity be coordinated under a national umbrella, such as a Surgeon General's Task Force, in the same way that efforts to reduce smoking have been coordinated?

- How should Head Start and No Child Left Behind be revised in order to generate improvement in educational achievement?
- To what extent should states attempt to reduce sexual activity among adolescents through legislation?
- Are tougher juvenile justice laws deterring young people from engaging in criminal activity? If so, at what point does their effectiveness diminish?
- Do reductions in federal funding for community policing put society at risk for a new round of increases in youthful crime offending and victimization in the near future? If so, what can be done to compensate these losses?

The CWI will continue to monitor and report developments in children's lives, and, in that way, identify drivers of child well-being, helping to inform and stimulate policy debate and serving as a guide for action.

### About the Research Coordinator for the CWI

Kenneth C. Land, Ph.D., is the John Franklin Crowell Professor of Sociology at Duke University. He has conducted extensive research on contemporary social trends and quality-of-life measurement, social problems, demography, criminology, organizations, and mathematical and statistical models and methods for the study of social and demographic processes. He is the co-author of five books, more than 100 research articles, and numerous book chapters. Dr. Land has been elected a Fellow of the American Statistical Association, the Sociological Research Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies, and the American Society of Criminology.

### About the Foundation for Child Development

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.

The Foundation seeks to understand children, particularly the disadvantaged, and to promote their well-being. We believe that families, schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses and government at all levels share complementary responsibilities in the critical task of raising new generations.

*The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Foundation for Child Development or its Board of Directors.*



FOUNDATION *for*  
CHILD DEVELOPMENT

145 EAST 32ND STREET  
NEW YORK, NY 10016-6055  
[WWW.FCD-US.ORG](http://WWW.FCD-US.ORG)