



FOUNDATION *for*
CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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**AMERICAN CHILDREN ONLY SLIGHTLY BETTER OFF TODAY THAN 30
YEARS AGO; HEALTH STATUS DETERIORATING DUE TO OBESITY**

***First-Ever Index Reports, Over Time, Serious Problems With Obesity; More Children
Living in Poverty; Teen Suicide Rates Still a Problem; But Children Are Safer and
More Involved in Communities***

Washington, D.C. – A new national composite index on the health and well-being of American children over the past 30 years offers a mixed report card – more children are obese, live in poverty and attempt suicide than thirty years ago, but they are safer and more connected to their communities. Overall, children are faring slightly better – just 5 percent above 1975 levels. From 1975 to 2002, the index rose from its base of 100 to 105.07.

According to the FCD Index of *Child Well-Being (CWI)*, childhood obesity is the single most widespread health problem facing children today. When obesity is counted in gauging how children have fared since the mid-1970s, health well-being plummets nearly 15 percent below 1975 levels. Without the upward trend in obesity, the health well-being category would have increased by about 15 percent compared to 1975 and have been relatively steady since the mid-1980s, says the CWI, an evidence-based measure that will be updated yearly.

The CWI was compiled and analyzed by researchers at Duke University and released today at The Brookings Institution.

The news is not all bad. In fact, according to the CWI, children are far safer than they were 30 years ago. They are much more involved in and connected to their communities, and there have been numerous health and behavioral advances, including a decline in teenage birth rates.

“Kids are doing better, but they are not doing nearly as well as they should be given this country’s advances in education, health, and social programs,” says Kenneth Land, Ph.D.,

developer of the CWI and a Duke University sociologist. “As parents, and as a country, we ought to be doing better by our children.”

According to Land, increases in child well-being have been slow to attain given the fact that children were negatively affected in the mid-1980s and early 1990s by economic conditions and changes in the overall American family structure.

“The years 1981-1994 were a particularly troubling time for children and youth in America,” says Land. “An economic recession and changes in the family structure that left many children under age 18 in single-parent households led to a notable downturn in the well-being index. It’s taken us almost 15 years to recover from that time and to re-create supportive family environments.”

“It should not be surprising that child well-being is strongly associated with the economy; this has been evident in the child development literature for some time. It may now be time for policymakers to consider the impact of macroeconomic policies not just on jobs or interest rates but on children as well,” commented Ruby Takanishi, president of the Foundation for Child Development.

The Index: A One-Number Answer to “How are our Children Doing?”

The FCD Child Well-Being Index is the first evidence-based use of a composite number to analyze trends over time in the quality of life of America’s children. The CWI assesses trends in seven quality-of-life areas for children and youth, ages 1 to 19. Trends have been tracked from 1975 to 2002 (the latest year for which data are available) and projections are made into the future. In general, the report examines whether well-being improved or deteriorated, by how much, and in which areas; and whether specific age groups or race/ethnic groups are affected. The CWI is funded by the Foundation for Child Development, a philanthropy based in New York City.

The seven quality-of-life categories considered are the most commonly used to study quality of life trends: Material Well-Being, Health, Safety/Behavioral, Productivity Activity or Educational Attainment, Place in Community, Social Relationships, and Emotional/Spiritual Well-Being. Within those domains are 28 indicators that reflect how children are doing in specific areas* (see attachment).

“We’re pleased to see that children’s lives have improved since 1975, but given America’s resources and knowledge, children can and should be doing much better,” says Takanishi. “It’s clear that there are areas that need major improvements that will demand the attention of advocates and policymakers to get us to where we should be.”

One-Parent Households Contribute to Well-Being Declines

The report also tracked declines in two other well-being categories related to children: the social relationship domain and the emotional/spiritual category. The report found that:

- The social relationship domain remains below 1975 levels for all 27 years examined because of the percent of children under age 18 who live in single parent households, which has increased and/or remained above base levels in every year since 1975. The majority of these children reside with their mothers.
- An increase in the adolescent suicide rate; and decreases in the percent of high school seniors who report regular attendance at religious services; and the percent of high school seniors who report that religion is very important account for the below base year levels of the emotional/spiritual category since the late 1980s.

Decreasing Criminal Activity and Victimization, Fewer Teen Births

While the health domain has shown the greatest decline since 1975, the safety/behavioral domain has shown the most improvement..

- In 2002, child safety was 44 percent higher than it was in 1975, due to decreases in the rate of children and youth who are serious criminal offenders and victims of violent crime as well as a dramatic drop in the rate of teens giving birth, which began to show a steep decline beginning in 1994.

“Taken together, the trends in these three indicators account for much of the improvement in child and youth well-being since the mid-1990s,” says Land. He predicts that the safety/behavioral domain will continue to improve. In 2003, reduction in health threats triggered a rise in health well-being of nearly 50 percent above 1975 levels.

There also have been improvements in the “place in community” (community connectedness) and “material well-being” categories, which cover economic status and educational achievement.

- The percent of 25- to 29- year- olds who have received a bachelor’s degree has increased from nearly 22 percent in 1975 to 28.7 percent in 2001 (the most recent year in which data are available).
- There also has been a rise in pre-school enrollment, and fewer 16-19-year-olds are either unemployed or have dropped out of school.

All of these factors have pushed the place in community domain to about 20 percent above the 1975 level.

- Declining poverty rates, rising family income, and increases in the rate of children with health insurance coverage have helped push the material well-being domain slightly above 1975 levels.

Recouping Lost Ground Due To The Recession

A key reason the CWI is not at the levels that Land and his colleagues think it could be is due to a 15-year slowdown in child well-being that began in the 1980s and ran through

the early 1990s. Child well-being declined through the mid-1990s, reaching a nadir in 1993, when it fell 7 percent below 1975 base-year levels.

In fact, the worst five years in child well-being occurred in the early- to mid-1990s, when the percentage of children living at or below the federal poverty level rose to its highest level since 1975. Minority children were more severely affected by the economic downturn in the 1980s than other children. In general, decreases in CWI values throughout the 27-year period examined is much steeper for African American and Hispanic children, says the report.

The one area in which there have been only slight improvements or near stability over the past three decades is in educational attainment, which encompasses reading and math test scores. This category remained relatively steady at levels only slightly above the 1975 base-year level.

Outlook

Although children in America fared better in 2002 than children in 1975 across many indicators of social life, Land warns that overall childhood well-being could see “slight declines over the next few years” since so many indicators follow economic trends. Four of the 28 indicators that Land and his colleagues examined – rates of criminality, criminal victimization, suicide and obesity – have had a “significant and influential” effect on overall well-being trends over the past 30 years, he says.

Since the mid-1990s, most of these quality-of-life indicators, except obesity, have improved. Rising obesity rates among children are already slowing improvements in well-being. If suicide rates or juvenile crime or victimization rates start rising again, it could slow progress even more.

Land warns that with childhood obesity now to a point where it can be considered a modern day epidemic, this health indicator will decline even more in the future, further dampening overall 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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