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Assessing
the New
Federalism

An Urban Institute Program
to Assess Changing
Social Policies



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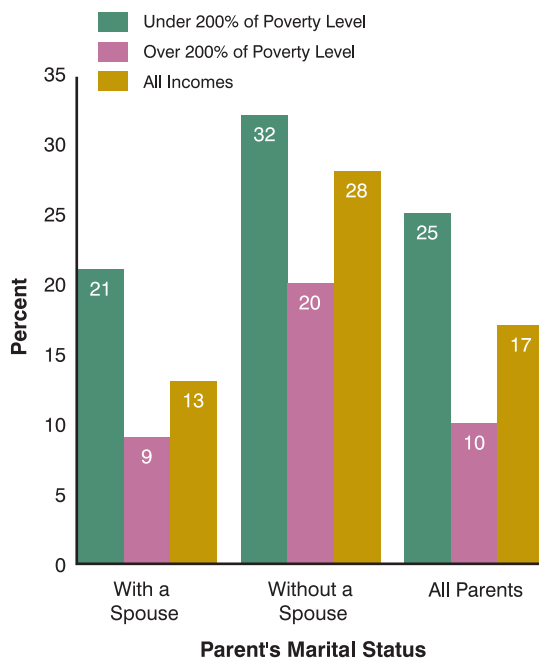
Adults' Environment and Behavior

Mental Health of Parents

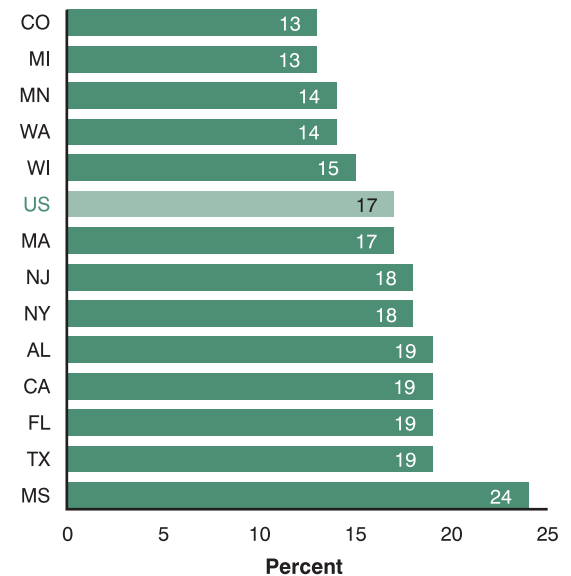
A child's well-being depends in part upon the mental health of his or her parents. If a parent's mental health is compromised, he or she may be less able to nurture, love, care for, and pay attention to the child. Several studies indicate that single mothers on welfare with young children are at considerable risk of exhibiting symptoms of depression. Parents with such symptoms provide less emotional support and tend to employ harsh disciplinary practices. Further, children of depressed parents exhibit more behavioral problems, frequently display deficits in social and academic competence, and are in poorer physical health than children of nondepressed parents.

It is not certain how changes in welfare programs will affect the mental health of parents. Mental health may worsen if parents have difficulty obtaining or keeping a job or if they have difficulty complying with more demanding welfare program rules. On the other hand, mental health may improve if a parent's job enhances family income or the parent's social contacts. The effects may not become apparent until after parents have taken on new employment or reached welfare time limits.

Children Living with a Parent Whose Symptoms Suggested Poor Mental Health, by Family Income and Parent's Marital Status, 1997



Children Living with a Parent Whose Symptoms Suggested Poor Mental Health, by State, 1997



Parents were asked to rate their feelings of anxiety and depression, loss of behavioral or emotional control, and psychological well-being during the past month. A score of 67 or less out of 100 points was considered indicative of poor mental health.

Nationally, 17 percent of children lived with a parent whose survey responses suggested poor mental health. Of children in families with low incomes (below 200 percent of the poverty level), 25 percent lived with a parent who had symptoms of poor mental health, compared to only 10 percent of children in

This Snapshot presents findings from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), a 1997 survey of 44,461 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 states. As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error.

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families with higher incomes, a statistically significant difference. Children of parents without a spouse were significantly more likely than other children to be living with a parent in poor mental health—28 percent versus 13 percent.

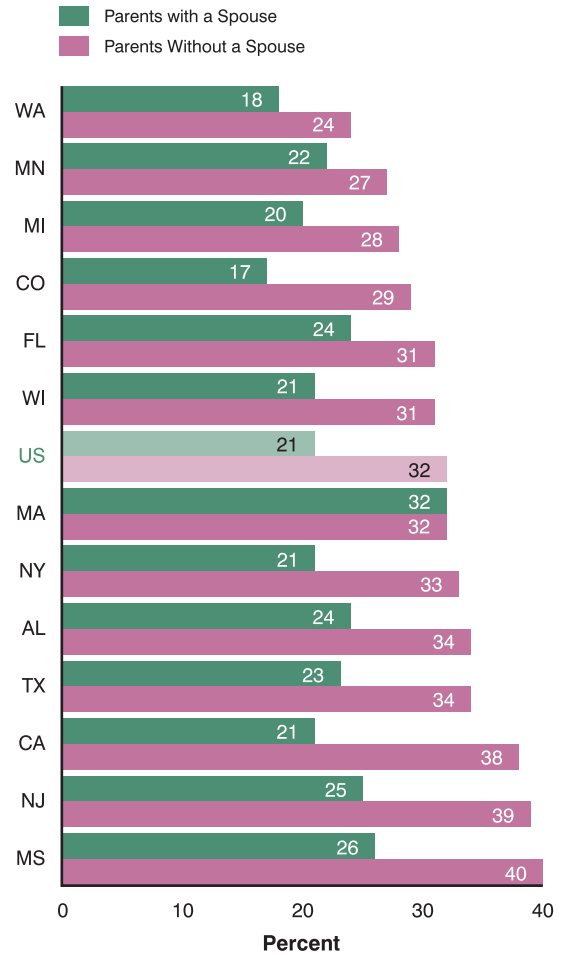
In the 13 states surveyed, 13 percent to 24 percent of all children lived with a parent who exhibited symptoms of poor mental health. Three states had higher percentages than the national average: Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi. Five states had percentages below the national average: Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Of children in low-income families, 20 percent to 34 percent lived with a parent whose responses suggested poor mental health. The percentage of low-income children living with a parent in poor mental health was higher than the national average in Massachusetts, Mississippi, and New Jersey. The percentage was below the national average in Colorado and Washington.

In low-income families where the parent did not have a spouse, 24 percent to 40 percent of children lived with a parent who had symptoms of poor mental health. The percentage was above the national average in Mississippi and New Jersey. In Washington, it was below average.

The five-item mental health scale (MHI-5) was constructed for the Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) using questions from the 38-item Mental Health Inventory (MHI). Ware, J.E., and D.C. Sherbourne. 1992. The MOS 36-Item Short-Form Health Survey (SF-36). *Medical Care* 30:473–81.

Low-Income Children Living with a Parent Whose Symptoms Suggested Poor Mental Health, by Parent's Marital Status and State, 1997



Source: Child Trends and Urban Institute

Children (%) Living with a Parent Whose Symptoms Suggested Poor Mental Health, 1997

Parent's Marital Status	AL	CA	CO	FL	MA	MI	MN	MS	NJ	NY	TX	WA	WI	US
Under 200% of poverty level														
With a spouse	23.6	20.8	16.6	24.1	31.7	20.2	21.5	26.5	24.6	21.2	22.6	17.5	20.8	20.9
Without a spouse	33.5	37.9	28.6	31.1	32.1	28.2	26.7	40.2	38.9	33.3	33.6	24.0	31.2	31.6
All parents	29.0	27.5	21.1	27.4	31.9	24.2	23.5	34.4	31.4	27.5	27.0	19.7	25.0	25.4
Over 200% of poverty level														
With a spouse	9.2	8.7	7.7	9.6	9.3	7.3	8.6	10.7	11.1	9.2	9.4	9.9	9.1	8.7
Without a spouse	18.7	15.8	18.8	17.5	18.8	10.2	18.4	13.8	23.4	21.9	19.9	14.3	14.3	19.6
All parents	10.3	9.9	9.0	10.8	10.3	7.6	9.6	11.1	12.5	11.2	10.6	10.4	9.6	10.1
All incomes														
With a spouse	13.8	13.7	10.1	14.8	13.5	10.2	11.5	16.9	13.7	12.9	14.6	12.2	11.9	12.7
Without a spouse	30.7	31.3	24.9	27.5	27.6	23.0	23.6	36.3	33.2	30.1	30.6	20.2	25.2	28.1
All parents	19.3	18.6	13.2	18.8	16.8	13.2	13.8	24.5	17.9	18.3	18.7	13.7	14.5	16.6

Figures in color represent statistically significant differences from the national average at the .05 confidence level. Figures in black are not statistically significantly different from the national average. All figures in text, charts, and table are rounded.

Source: Child Trends and Urban Institute