



State-Level Changes in Children's Well-Being and Family Environment

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Because policies and programs affecting children and families are often established at the state or local level, it is important to monitor the circumstances of children and their families at the state level. While these circumstances vary substantially across states, the most notable trends are a *decline* in child poverty between 1996 and 2001 (for 12 of the 13 states examined),¹ a *decline* between 1997 and 2002 in school engagement (for 10 states), and an *increase* in the percentage of preschool-age children who were read to or told stories (for 5 states).

These contrasting trends exemplify the improvements and setbacks experienced by children over this period. Of the 15 indicators explored in this Snapshot, 6 showed deterioration nationwide between 1997 and 2002, 4 showed improvement, and 5 remained unchanged (table 1).

Substantial gaps persisted between the well-being of children in higher-income families and lower-income families throughout the 1997–2002 period (Vandivere et al. 2004) and for most indicators for most states. For example, the percentage of children in fair or poor health was higher for children in low-income families than for children in higher-income families throughout the period for all 13 states (not shown).

There was more cross-state variation for some indicators than for others. For children of all income levels, participation in extracurricular activities, school engagement, and behavioral and emotional problems varied within a relatively narrow range. In contrast, frequency of parental storytelling and attendance at religious services, children living in poverty, and children with poor or fair health were at least three times higher in the highest state than in the lowest

state. For children in low-income families, participation in extracurricular activities and parental volunteering varied within a relatively narrow range, while frequency of attendance at religious services, skipping school, and children with fair or poor health were at least three times higher in the highest state than in the lowest state.

Consistency in state rankings across the indicators was limited. For children of all income levels, three states (Massachusetts,

Michigan, and Minnesota) ranked in the top five on at least 7 of 15 indicators, while two states (Alabama and Mississippi) ranked in the bottom five on at least 7 indicators. For children in low-income families, rankings were somewhat more consistent: six states (California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Texas, and Wisconsin) ranked in the top five on at least 7 of 14 indicators,² while two states (Alabama and New York) ranked in the bottom five on at least 7 indicators.

These analyses are based on data for the United States and 13 states from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF).³ The measures are divided into six categories: (1) reading and storytelling and engagement in

school; (2) activities outside the home; (3) child school and behavior problems; (4) parental aggravation and mental health; (5) income and family structure; and (6) activity limitations and health. In addition, we discuss persistent differences in these measures by family income. Families are considered low-income if their income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold and higher-income if their income is at or above 200 percent of the poverty threshold. The Snapshot concludes with a discussion of the social, economic, and political contexts in which these changes have taken place.

DATA AT A GLANCE

THE SHARE OF CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY
DROPPED BETWEEN 1996 AND 2001
IN ALL 13 STATES STUDIED EXCEPT ALABAMA.

YOUNG CHILDREN WERE MORE LIKELY
TO BE READ TO OR TOLD STORIES
IN 5 OF THE 13 STATES.

CHILDREN BECAME LESS ENGAGED IN
SCHOOL IN 10 OF THE 13 STATES.



Table 1. Family Environment of Children under Age 18 in 2002 and Changes since 1997

| AL | CA | CO | FL | MA | MI | MN | MS | NJ | NY | TX | WA | WI | US |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Children age 1–5 who are read to or told stories less than three times a week[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 18.7 | 17.2 [°] | 11.3 [°] | 16.1 | 6.6 [°] | 10.9 | 12.2 | 17.0 [°] | 18.0 [°] | 13.6 | 21.6 | 11.6 [°] | 13.1 | 14.1 [°] |
| Children age 0–5 who are taken on outings more than once a day | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 16.9 | 24.4 | 28.3 | 23.0 | 33.1 [^] | 21.9 | 26.4 | 20.1 | 28.1 | 25.1 | 16.6 | 27.9 | 25.8 | 22.8 |
| Children age 0–17 whose parent never attends religious services[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 11.5 | 20.3 | 24.4 [^] | 20.4 | 22.4 [^] | 17.4 | 11.8 | 8.2 | 18.2 [^] | 19.0 [^] | 14.6 | 26.8 | 15.8 | 17.8 [^] |
| Children age 0–17 whose parent never volunteers[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 23.9 | 34.4 | 28.4 [^] | 32.7 [^] | 32.6 [^] | 25.7 | 23.9 [°] | 26.7 [^] | 33.1 [^] | 37.4 | 33.5 | 27.3 [°] | 24.9 | 30.2 [°] |
| Children age 6–17 who participate in any extracurricular activities | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 78.5 | 79.7 [°] | 83.5 | 78.1 | 86.1 | 85.8 [°] | 88.3 | 80.8 | 84.6 [°] | 82.6 | 78.2 | 85.1 | 85.2 | 81.3 [°] |
| Children age 0–17 whose parent is highly aggravated[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 11.1 | 10.1 | 7.1 | 11.1 | 11.4 | 11.7 [°] | 6.6 | 13.0 | 12.2 | 13.0 | 9.4 | 10.7 [°] | 9.5 | 10.4 [°] |
| Children age 0–17 whose parent report symptoms of poor mental health[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 20.2 | 14.9 [°] | 12.2 | 16.8 | 16.3 | 15.3 | 10.6 [°] | 23.6 | 16.6 | 18.6 | 16.9 | 14.6 | 13.7 | 16.6 |
| Children age 0–17 living in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 20.8 | 19.7 [°] | 12.1 [°] | 18.7 [°] | 10.3 [°] | 11.8 [°] | 7.3 [°] | 26.9 [°] | 11.0 [°] | 19.6 [°] | 20.1 [°] | 12.9 [°] | 10.7 [°] | 16.5 [°] |
| Children age 0–17 living with single parents or no parents[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 45.9 | 33.1 [°] | 33.8 | 42.4 | 30.3 | 37.8 | 28.6 | 52.2 | 29.6 | 36.2 [°] | 28.2 | 36.4 | 33.7 | 36.6 [°] |

Sources: 1997 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

[†] This indicator has a negative association with child outcomes. Therefore, its decrease over time represents an improvement in child well-being, while an increase over time implies a setback.

[^] Increase from 1997 is significant at the 0.10 level.

[°] Decrease from 1997 is significant at the 0.10 level.

Reading and Storytelling and School Engagement

All the significant trends represent improvements in reading to preschoolers. Between 1997 and 2002, children age 1 to 5 in five states (California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Washington) became more likely to be read to or told stories by their parents (table 1).⁴ Among the 13 states, the share read or told stories to less than three times a week ranged between 11.3 percent in Colorado and 21.6 percent in Texas in 2002.

All the significant trends in school engagement, however, represent setbacks. The share of children who were highly engaged in school declined in 10 of 13 states (table 2).⁵ There was a significant decline in school engagement between 1997 and 2002 for children in low-income families in six states and for higher-income families in eight states (not shown). The share of all children who were highly engaged in school ranged from 29.5 percent in Texas to 36.9 percent in New Jersey.

Activities Outside the Home

Parents in several states became less likely to participate in activities outside the home between 1997 and 2002.⁶ These included religious attendance and parent volunteering, but not

child outings. There was a mixed pattern for children's participation in extracurricular activities.

All the states with significant changes show an increase in the percentage of children with a parent who never attends religious services (and parental religious participation, other things equal, is associated with positive outcomes for children). States with an increase in religious nonparticipation are Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York (table 1). The share of children with a parent who never attends religious services ranged between 8.2 percent in Mississippi and 26.8 percent in Washington in 2002.

Similarly, the data indicate a significant increase in the percentage of children with a parent who never volunteers in Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Washington (table 1).⁷ In 2002, the share ranged between 23.9 percent in Alabama and Minnesota and 37.4 percent in New York.

Only Massachusetts experienced a significant increase in child outings from 1997 to 2002 (table 1). The percentage of children age 0–5 taken on outings frequently ranged between 16.6 percent in Texas and 33.1 percent in Massachusetts.

The percentage of children age 6–17 who participated in some type of extracurricular activities decreased in California and New Jersey,

Table 2. Well-Being of Children under Age 18 in 2002 and Changes since 1997

| AL | CA | CO | FL | MA | MI | MN | MS | NJ | NY | TX | WA | WI | US |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Children age 6–17 who are highly engaged in school | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 35.2 | 31.7 ^v | 33.5 | 31.7 ^v | 33.8 ^v | 31.8 ^v | 36.5 ^v | 34.4 | 36.9 ^v | 33.4 ^v | 29.5 ^v | 31.7 ^v | 33.5 ^v | 32.8 ^v |
| Children age 12–17 who skipped school two or more times[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6.3 | 11.5 | 13.0 | 8.2 | 6.5 | 8.6 | 7.7 | 4.6 ^v | 8.3 | 13.2 | 6.5 | 10.0 | 9.7 | 8.9 ^v |
| Children age 12–17 who were expelled or suspended from school | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 16.3 | 13.7 | 13.7 | 20.7 [^] | 8.6 | 18.2 | 12.1 | 19.6 | 12.6 | 10.9 | 12.4 | 11.7 | 9.5 | 14.8 |
| Children age 6–17 with high levels of behavioral and emotional problems[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7.8 | 7.2 | 8.6 ^v | 7.7 | 7.2 | 7.5 | 6.9 | 8.5 | 6.1 | 8.3 | 8.3 | 8.6 | 8.2 | 7.7 |
| Children age 0–17 with an activity-limiting physical, learning, or mental health condition[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10.4 | 8.0 | 10.4 [^] | 10.3 | 11.6 | 9.9 | 9.2 | 10.9 [^] | 10.4 [^] | 10.1 | 9.8 | 10.1 [^] | 10.1 | 10.1 [^] |
| Children age 0–17 in fair or poor health[†] | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5.6 | 7.2 | 4.3 | 4.7 | 2.9 | 3.1 | 2.3 | 7.7 [^] | 4.5 | 6.5 [^] | 6.5 | 4.1 | 3.2 | 4.7 |

Sources: 1997 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

[†] This indicator has a negative association with child outcomes. Therefore, its decrease over time represents an improvement in child well-being, while an increase over time implies a setback.

[^] Increase from 1997 is significant at the 0.10 level.

^v Decrease from 1997 is significant at the 0.10 level.

while it increased in Michigan (table 1). In 2002, the share of children who participated in extracurricular activities ranged between 78.1 percent in Florida and 88.3 percent in Minnesota.

Child School and Behavior Problems

In Mississippi, the percentage of children age 12–17 who skipped school two or more times decreased (table 2). In 2002, the share of children who skipped school two or more times ranged from 4.6 percent in Mississippi to 13.2 percent in New York.

In Florida, the percentage of children age 12–17 who were expelled or suspended from school increased (table 2). In 2002, the share of children who were expelled or suspended from school ranged from 8.6 percent in Massachusetts and 20.7 percent in Florida.

In 2002, the share of children with high levels of behavioral and emotional problems ranged between 6.1 percent in New Jersey and 8.6 percent in both Colorado and Washington. Changes over time were modest.

Parental Aggravation and Mental Health

Between 1997 and 2002, the percentage of children in higher-income families with a highly aggravated parent increased for Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Washington (not shown).⁸ The pattern for low-income families was not consistent (not shown). In 2002, the share of all children with a highly aggravated parent ranged between 6.6 percent in Minnesota and 13.0 percent in Mississippi and New York.

In California and Minnesota, the percentage of parents reporting symptoms of poor mental health decreased (table 1).

In 2002, the share of children with a parent who reported symptoms of poor mental health ranged between 10.6 percent in Minnesota and 23.6 percent in Mississippi.

Income and Family Structure

Between 1997 and 2002, the percentage of children living in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold in the previous year decreased in all 13 states studied except Alabama (table 1).⁹ The share of children living in families who were poor in 2001 varied from 7.3 percent in Minnesota to 26.9 percent in Mississippi.

In California and New York, there was a small decline between 1997 and 2002 in the percentage of children living with single parents or no parents (table 1), while Florida and Massachusetts followed this trend among low-income families only (not shown). The percentage of children living in higher-income families with single parents or no parents, however, *increased* in Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, and Washington (not shown). In 2002, the share of all children living with single parents or no parents ranged between 28.2 percent in Texas and 52.2 percent in Mississippi.

Activity Limitations and Health

Between 1997 and 2002, in Colorado, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Washington the percentage of children with an activity-limiting physical, learning, or mental health condition increased (table 2). In 2002, the share of children with activity limitations fluctuated between 8.0 percent in California and 11.6 percent in Massachusetts.

Between 1997 and 2002, the percentage of children in fair or poor health increased in Mississippi and New York (table 2). In 2002, the share of children in fair or poor health fluctuated between 2.3 percent in Minnesota and 7.7 percent in Mississippi.

Discussion

Of the 15 indicators explored in this Snapshot, 6 showed deterioration nationwide between 1997 and 2002, 4 showed improvement, and 5 remained unchanged, although many states did not follow the national trends.

The clearest positive change is the decline in poverty through 2001, a pattern found in 12 of the 13 states. In addition, there were declines in the percentage of children living in single-parent families in two states. Since children's well-being is consistently lower in poor families and in single-parent families, improvements in child well-being would have seemed likely over this period.

But improvements are scattered, and the most consistent trend for children is a decline in children's engagement in school. The lack of improvement may reflect the modest changes in poverty and family structure; the relatively short time frame; such larger social forces as anxiety about the threat of terrorism; more local factors, such as state and local health care and after-school programs; and an economic slowdown that began in 1999, culminating in the 2001 recession.¹⁰

Given the variability in these patterns across states and the higher rate of child poverty nationwide in 2003–04, further analyses of the policy, economic, and social factors associated with these patterns seem warranted.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The poverty status of a family in each year is based on income reported by the family for the previous calendar year.
- ² Percent of children living in families with incomes below 100% of the poverty threshold was omitted from the list of indicators for low-income families.
- ³ The 13 states were selected based on how well they represented the nation as a whole on characteristics important to the goal of the survey. Collectively they account for over half the U.S. population and represent a broad array of government programs, fiscal capacity, and demographic characteristics.
- ⁴ More specifically, in these states the percentage of children to whom parents were reading or telling stories infrequently (less than three times a week) decreased.
- ⁵ School engagement was measured using the parent's answers to four questions: how often their child "cares about doing well in school," "only works on schoolwork when forced to," "does just enough to get by," and "always does homework." Research shows that school engagement is associated with cognitive achievement, graduation from high school, and increased opportunities in adulthood, especially for disadvantaged children (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2003).
- ⁶ This is not due to an increase in the percentage of women who were employed, since this percentage was essentially the same in the two years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005, table 7). Information about parental activities was collected only for the adult in the household who was "most knowledgeable" about the child. For the vast majority of the children, this person was a parent of the child, and, for about 75 percent of the children, the most knowledgeable adult was the mother. Consequently, this Snapshot refers to the most knowledgeable adult as the child's parent.
- ⁷ The evidence of a positive association between parental volunteering and child outcomes is not as strong as for religious attendance.
- ⁸ Parental aggravation was measured using the parent's answers to five questions (how often the parent had been a very nervous person, felt calm or peaceful, felt downhearted and blue, had been a happy person, and felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer him or her up).
- ⁹ The decrease in Alabama was substantial but not statistically significant.
- ¹⁰ See "Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions," at www.nber.org/cycles.htm.

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Snapshots of America's Families III, No. 24



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Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://anf.urban.org>.

The *Assessing the New Federalism* project is currently supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and The California Endowment.

Olivia A. Golden is the director of *Assessing the New Federalism*. Design of *Snapshots III* is by Bremmer & Goris Communications.



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