

Indices of Child Well-Being at the National and State Level

U.S. governments at the national, state and, in some cases, local levels have increasingly turned to monitoring outcomes, particularly economic outcomes, as a strategy for accountability. While child well-being represents a potential outcome to be monitored, indicators of child well-being are in short supply at the state and local level; and many aspects of the well-being of children, particularly socioemotional development, are not assessed even at the national level. Moreover, polling data indicate that the public is not aware of even the most important national trends, such as the decade-long decline in the teen birth rate, the drop in the welfare rolls, and decreasing rates of violence among youth.

One response to these conflicting issues is to develop summary indices of child well-being at the national and state level that can be tracked over time and shared with the media, the public, and policy makers regularly and efficiently. Existing efforts to develop such indices have been handicapped by the uneven coverage of aspects of child well-being. (For example, the Index of Child Well-Being developed for the Foundation for Child Development is only able to assess social development with indicators of suicide and religiosity.)

However, a major new data resource has recently been released --the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH). Collected in 2002-03 by telephone by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department of the Health and Human Services, it provides rich data on a broad array of family background and child outcome variables for a total sample of 102,000 children across the nation. State-specific samples of approximately 2,000 children are available for all states and the District of Columbia.

We are using these new data to develop indices of child well-being that cover four broad domains: (1) physical health; (2) psychological health; (3) social health; and (4) educational achievement/cognitive development as separate domain-specific indices and as an overall index of child well-being for the nation and for each state and D.C. In addition, we are developing an index of the condition of children that includes these four domains of child development but which also includes three additional contextual domains: (4) family processes and parenting; (5) sociodemographic risk; and (6) neighborhood. Again, individual indices are produced for each domain, and a summary index of the condition of children is produced for the nation, and for each state and D.C. Because the NSCH is a micro data base, it is possible not only to produce aggregate indices at the macro level but micro level indices that assess cumulative problems as well as the normative development of children.

In our poster, we will present indices for the nation, states and D.C. We will discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of indices built from micro versus macro data. In addition, the advantages and disadvantages of monitoring individual indicators, domain indices, an index of child well-being, and an index of the condition of children will be discussed.