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America's Children Key National Indicators of Well-Being 2000

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Nation's Children Gain In Many Areas: Childhood Mortality, Poverty Rates Drop

American children are less likely to die during childhood, less likely to live in poverty, less likely to be at risk for hunger, and more likely to have at least one working parent according to the fourth annual report, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being 2000*. This report is the U.S. government's annual monitoring report on the status of America's children.

"From toddlers through teens, there's good news in this report," said Duane Alexander, M.D., Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). "The adolescent birth rate has dropped to the lowest level ever recorded. This is a true success story. Child rearing during adolescence is a hardship on mothers, their children, and society."

The birth rate for teenagers reached a record low of 30 births per 1000 girls ages 15 to 17 in 1998, showing a steady decline from the rate of 39 per 1,000 in 1991. The sharpest decline was in the birth rate for black, non-Hispanic girls ages 15 to 17, for whom the rate dropped by nearly one-third from 1991 to 1998.

The report was compiled by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, a consortium of 20 Federal agencies that gather data on children. The report provides a comprehensive look at critical aspects of child well-being, such as economic security, health, behavior and social environment, and education.

The decline in childhood death rates was particularly striking, according to Edward Sondik, Ph.D., Director of the National Center for Health Statistics. "Between 1980 and 1998, the death rate for children from ages 1 to 4 dropped by almost half; and the death rate for children 5 to 14 was reduced by a third," Dr. Sondik said.

The leading cause of death for children was unintentional injuries, many resulting from motor vehicle crashes. Over two-thirds of children ages one to 14 whose deaths were attributed to motor vehicle crashes in 1997 were not in car seats or wearing safety belts at the time of the crash.

The adolescent death rate also continued to decline from recent years, but not as rapidly as did the rate for children. Major causes of death for teenagers included injuries resulting from motor vehicle crashes and firearms.

The poverty rate for children related to the householder dropped from 19 percent in 1997, to 18 percent in 1998. The childhood poverty rate has declined steadily since 1993, when it was 22 percent. Children living in poverty are more likely to have difficulties in school and to become teen parents than are children above the poverty level. As adults, children from impoverished backgrounds tend to earn less than other adults and are more often unemployed.

Among children living with single mothers, 33 percent had mothers who were working in 1993, compared to 44 percent in 1998. In addition, the percentage of children who live with their parents and have at least one parent working full-time all year increased from 76 percent in 1997 to 77 percent in 1998. The increase was greatest among children living in poverty and in families headed by single mothers.

There was a decline in the percentage of children experiencing food insecurity with moderate or

severe hunger. This indicator measures the number of children being at risk for not getting enough nourishment for an active, healthy life. The percentage of food insecurity dropped from 4.7 in 1998 to 3.8 in 1999. The decline in the percentage of children living in food insecure households with moderate or severe hunger between 1998 and 1999 was most pronounced among children living in poverty, from 14.2 percent in 1998 to 11.8 percent in 1999.

In 1999, 20 million--54 percent--of children from birth through grade three were enrolled in child care, up from 51 percent in 1995. This measure included children in a variety of child care situations, from care in a home to care in an organized center.

Gary W. Phillips, Acting Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, said that "enrollment in early childhood education is up, particularly among children living in poverty, children with mothers who were not in the labor force, and among black, non-Hispanic children."

Between 1996-1999, the percentage of children from ages three to five who had not yet entered kindergarten, but were enrolled in early childhood education programs, increased from 55 percent to 59 percent. Black, non-Hispanic children were more likely to be in early childhood education programs (73 percent) than were white, non-Hispanic children (59 percent) or Hispanic children (44 percent). The report noted that participation in early childhood education programs can increase the likelihood of later educational success.

The childhood immunization rate has also steadily improved, with 79 percent of children ages 19-35 months receiving the combined vaccination series in 1998, up from 76 percent in 1997.

The 1998 infant mortality rate of 7.2 deaths per 1,000 live births remained the same as the previous year, despite the substantial decline in infant mortality rate over the past several decades. One factor closely associated with infant mortality is low birth weight (less than 5.5 pounds), and the percentage of low birth weight infants has risen slowly each year since the mid-1980s. Very low birth weight infants (less than 3.3 pounds) are at greatest risk of death and the number of very low birth weight infants has also been steadily moving upward. The report noted that the increase in low birth weight is due in part to the dramatic increase in multiple births in the United States.

In 1999, the percentage of children from age three to five who were read to by family members returned to levels observed in 1993 (about 53 percent) after increasing to 57 percent in 1996. According to the report, family reading is correlated with later reading comprehension and greater school success. The report also said that family reading was more common among mothers with higher education levels.

The rate of serious violent crimes committed by young people continued to decline. In 1998, the offending rate for youth was 27 crimes per 1,000 adolescents ages 12 to 17. The rate dropped by more than half from the 1993 high, and was the lowest recorded since data were first collected in 1973. Also declining was the rate of serious violent crimes against youth, which was 25 per 1,000 in 1998, down from the peak of 44 per 1,000 in 1993. The pronounced drop in rates for both indicators, while not statistically significant from 1997 to 1998, represents a continued decline.

This year's report also noted that 70.2 million children under age 18 live in the United States; about 26 percent of the population. The racial and ethnic diversity of America's children has continued to increase in recent years. For 1999, 65 percent were white, non-Hispanic, 15 percent were black, non-Hispanic, 4 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1 percent was American Indian or Alaska

Native. Of all ethnic groups, the proportion of Hispanic children has grown the most rapidly, from 9 percent in 1980, to 16 percent in 1999.

Although this year's report cites positive changes for most ethnic and racial groups, significant disparities remain between racial and ethnic groups for a number of measures. Such disparities include income distribution, access to health care, infant mortality, and the adolescent birth rate.

The 2000 report included two special features, Beginning Kindergartners' Knowledge and Skills, and Youth Participation in Volunteer Activities [see accompanying backgrounders for more information.] Special features are included in each year's America's Children report. These measures present information that is not available with enough frequency to be used as regular indicators.

The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics was entrusted with creating the America's Children Report by Executive Order 13045.

Members of the public may obtain single copies of the Forum report through the National Maternal and Child Health Clearinghouse (while supplies last) at NMCHC, 2070 Chain Bridge Road, Suite 450, Vienna, VA 22182, phone 703-356-1964, email nmchc@cirosl.com. The report is also available from the Forum's website at <http://childstats.gov>.