



Introduction

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2004*. Since 1997, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics has published *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, a report that includes detailed information on a set of key indicators of child well-being. To make better use of its resources, the Forum has decided to update all data annually on its enhanced website (<http://childstats.gov>), and to alternate publishing the more detailed report with a new condensed version—*America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*—that highlights selected indicators. Thus, this July, the Forum is publishing the *Brief*; in July 2005 the Forum will publish the more detailed report, returning to the *Brief* in July 2006.

The indicators and background measures presented in this *Brief* are those that have been reported previously by the Forum. In the mid-1990s, careful consideration was given to selecting a small set of key indicators that describe children's well-being. The 25 key indicators were chosen because they are easy to understand; are based on substantial research connecting them to child well-being; vary across important areas of children's lives; are measured regularly so that they can be updated and show trends over time; and represent large segments of the population, rather than one particular group.

The first section of *America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2004* describes the context in which children live (such as changes in children's family settings and living arrangements). The four sections that follow—economic security, health, behavior and social environment, and education—highlight improvements in children's well-being as well as areas where there has been less progress. This year's report reveals that birth rates for adolescents have continued to decline, victimization rates for youths and violent crime offending rates by youths are down, and high school advanced coursetaking rates are at the highest levels of the past 20 years. However, the prevalence of overweight among U.S. children has increased sharply, and the percentage of children living in poverty rose slightly, while remaining below its recent peak. The *Brief* concludes with a summary list highlighting recent changes in all 25 key indicators. For information on longer-term trends, specific data tables can be accessed on the Forum's website, <http://childstats.gov>.

About the Forum

The Forum fosters coordination and integration among 20 Federal agencies that produce or use statistical data on children and families. The *America's Children* reports provide an accessible compendium of indicators drawn from the most reliable official statistics, and are designed to complement other more specialized, technical, or comprehensive reports produced by various Forum agencies.

For further information

The Forum's website, <http://childstats.gov>, provides the following information:

- [Detailed data tables and figures](#) that display additional data, including trend data, not discussed in this *Brief*.
- [Data source descriptions](#) that provide information about the sources and surveys used to generate the background measures and indicators as well as information on how to contact the agency responsible for collecting the data or administering the relevant survey.
- [Previous *America's Children* reports](#) from 1997 through 2003.
- [Links to Forum agencies, publications, and related reports](#) that offer further information about child and family statistics as well as international comparative data.
- [Information on the Forum](#) that describes its overall structure and organization, other Forum reports, and news on current activities.

Population and family characteristics

Background measures, such as family structure, the marital status of mothers, the nativity of children and their parents, and air quality, tell us about the context in which our Nation's children live.

In 2002, 72.9 million children under age 18 lived in the United States and represented 25 percent of the population, down from a peak of 36 percent at the end of the baby boom in 1964. Children are projected to be 24 percent of the population in 2020.

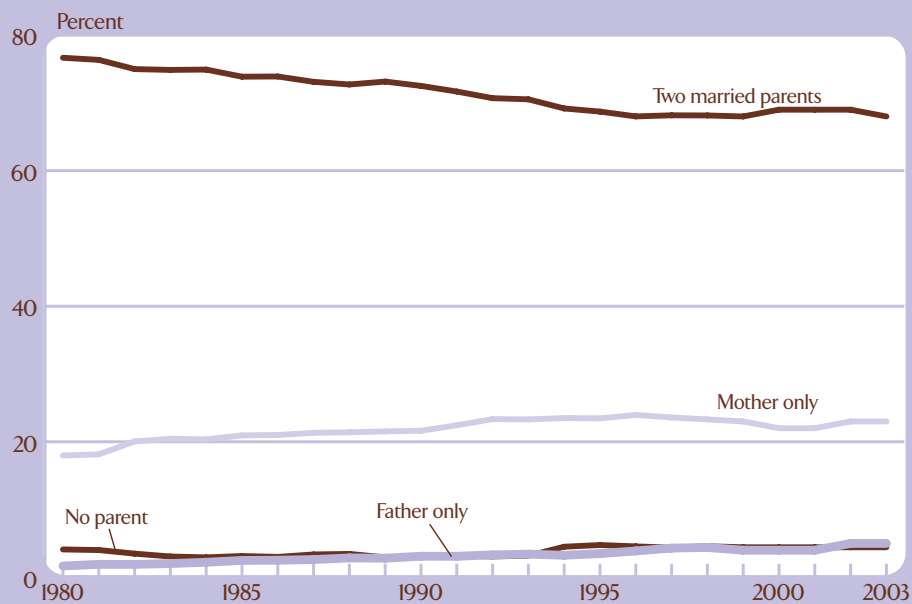
Family structure is associated with the economic, parental, and community resources available to children, as well as their overall well-being. On average, living with two parents who are married to each other is associated with more favorable outcomes for children both through, and independent of, the higher income that characterizes these families.¹ In 2003, 68 percent of children under age 18 lived with two married parents,² down from 77 percent in 1980. However, the percentage has remained stable since 1995, ending a long-standing downward trend.

While the majority of children live with two married parents, 32 percent do not. In 2003, 23 percent of children lived with only their mothers, 5 percent lived with only their fathers, and 4 percent lived with neither of their parents (Figure 1).

Family structure is also affected by a mother's marital status at the time of birth. In 2002, just over one-third (34 percent) of all births in the United States were to unmarried women,

FIGURE 1

Percentage of children under age 18 by presence of married parents in the household, 1980-2003



NOTE: The category "two married parents" includes children who live with a biological, step, or adoptive parent who is married with his or her spouse present. If a second parent is present and not married to the first parent, then the child is identified as living with a single parent.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social Economic Supplements.

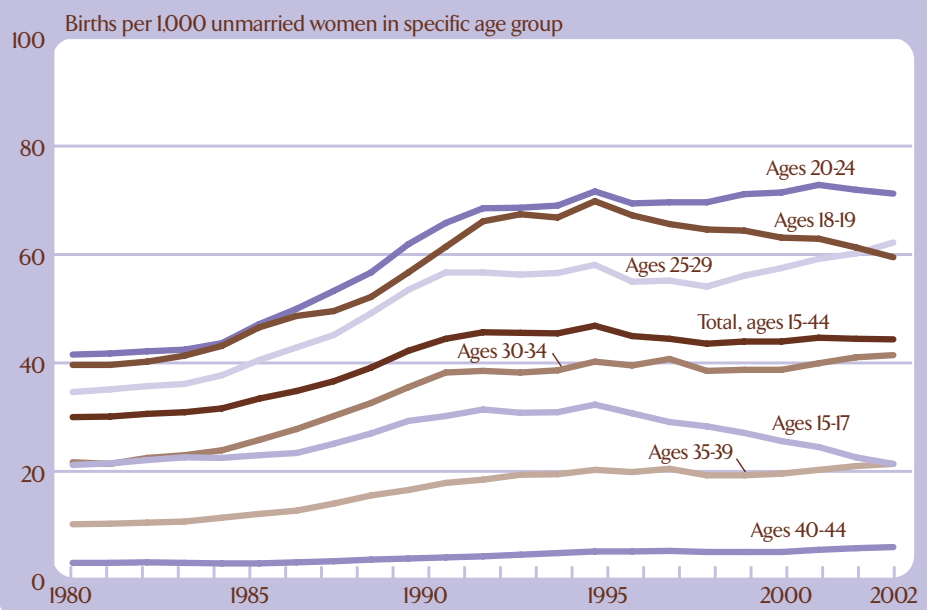
¹ Biblarz, T.J. and Raferty, A.E. (1999). Family Structure, Educational Attainment, and Socioeconomic Success: Rethinking the Pathology of Matriarchy. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105 (2), 321-365.

² In these data, children in step-families are not differentiated from children in biological or adoptive two-parent families. Research indicates that children in step-families are more at risk than children in other married two-parent families. Coleman, M., Ganong, L., and Fine, M. (2000). Reinvestigating Remarriage: Another Decade of Progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 1288-1307.

up from 32 percent in 1995. In part, this recent increase mirrors the fact that there are more unmarried women ages 15-44 than ever before.

The birth rate among unmarried women reflects changes in childbearing within this group. In 2002, there were 44 births per 1,000 unmarried women ages 15 to 44 (Figure 2). While the overall birth rate among unmarried women has changed little since 1995, there are important differences by age. The birth rate for unmarried teenagers ages 15 to 19 has declined by more than one-fifth since 1994. Meanwhile, birth rates for unmarried women ages 20 and older continue to increase, though much less rapidly than in the 1980s and early 1990s.

FIGURE 2 Birth rates for unmarried women by age of mother, 1980-2002



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System.

Children with foreign-born parents may need additional resources at school and at home as a result of language and cultural barriers confronting both the children themselves and their parents. The percentage of children with at least one foreign-born parent rose from 15 percent in 1994 to 20 percent in 2003.

Among all U.S. children, 15 percent have a parent who has not received a high school diploma. This percentage rises substantially among children who are foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent. In 2003, 43 percent of foreign-born children with at least one foreign-born parent and 34 percent of native children with at least one foreign-born parent had a parent with less than a high school diploma, compared with 10 percent of native children with native parents.

The environment in which children live, such as air quality, plays an important role in their health and development. In 2002, 34 percent of children under 18 lived in areas that did not meet one or more of the Primary National Ambient Air Quality Standards,³ up significantly from 19 percent in 2001. Over the past decade, this percentage has fluctuated between 16 percent and 34 percent.

³ The air quality standard for ground-level ozone is the standard exceeded most frequently in each year. Changing weather patterns (e.g., high summer temperatures) contribute to yearly differences in ozone concentrations.