

# A Look at America's Children and Their Families

Carolyn C. Rogers  
202-694-5436  
crogers@ers.usda.gov

**T**he number of children in the United States continued to grow in the last decade of the 20th century, though children now represent a smaller proportion of the Nation's total population than they did in the mid-1960s. Racial and ethnic diversity in the child population has increased dramatically in the last three decades. The structure of American families has also changed significantly, and more children today can expect to live in a single-parent family at some point in their lives due to both high rates of divorce and increased out-of-wedlock childbearing. Mother-only families are more apt to be poor. Trends in children's well-being over the past two to three decades have been mixed, with social changes such as later, more stable marriages and smaller families having positive implications for children.

The well-being of children is a multifaceted issue that is important for community planning because families are the building blocks of the community. An understanding of the social and economic well-being of children is important for shaping successful public policies to improve the condition of children and to help them attain their potential. For example, statistics on child poverty may assist in evaluating the

effects of welfare reform. This article examines recent trends for children and their families, including the size and composition of the child population, family circumstances and living arrangements of children, and measures of the economic and physical well-being of children. Findings are based on data from the March 2000 Current Population Survey (CPS) data file and published data sources for previous years.

## Number of Hispanic Children Increased Dramatically

The overall size of the child population in the United States has fluctuated markedly since the 1960s, reflecting the high fertility of the postwar baby boom (1946-64), the subsequent low fertility of the 1970s, and the increased fertility of the late 1980s. In 1980, the child population was 63.7 million, increasing to 64.2 million in 1990. Beginning in 1990, the rate of growth in the number of children increased, although not as rapidly as during the baby boom. Children under age 18 totaled 70.4 million in America in the year 2000; the U.S. Census Bureau projects the number of children will reach 77.2 million by 2020. The size of the child population determines the demand for schools, health care, and other services and facilities that serve children and their families.

Although the number of children continues to increase, children under age 18 now constitute a smaller, but still substantial, proportion of the U.S. population than in the 1960s. In the mid-1960s, the proportion of children peaked at 36 percent of the total population, but by 1980, children represented 28 percent of the total population, declining to 26 percent in 2000. As the Nation's population ages, the child population is projected to be a smaller share of the total, reaching 24 percent by 2020.

Racial and ethnic diversity has increased dramatically in the United States in the last three decades, and such diversity is projected to increase even more in the coming decades. The child population in the year 2000 contains a larger share of minority youth due to high Black and Hispanic fertility rates and substantial immigration of Hispanics and Caribbean Blacks to the United States. The proportion of children who are White, non-Hispanic decreased from 74 percent in 1980 to 64 percent in 2000, while the proportion of children who are minorities increased (table 1).

As a proportion of the U.S. child population, the shares of Black, non-Hispanic children and American Indian children have been fairly stable between 1980 and 2000. However, the percentage of Hispanic children has increased faster than any other racial and ethnic group,

The author is a demographer with the Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, USDA.

growing from 9 percent of the child population in 1980 to 16 percent in 2000. Much of the growth in the percentage of Hispanic children is due to the relatively high fertility of Hispanic women, particularly Mexicans, who have the highest fertility of all Hispanic groups. The percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander children doubled from 2 to 4 percent of all children between 1980 and 2000 and is projected to increase to 6 percent by 2020. Based on these racial/ethnic trends, the child population in 2020 is projected to decline for Whites, remain essentially the same for Blacks, and increase substantially for Hispanics and moderately for Asians.

Most U.S. children reside in urban areas, although racial/ethnic groups differ in residential concentration. White children are more likely to live in rural areas than Black children or Hispanic children (fig. 1). Among all children in 2000, the highest proportion (34 percent) resided in the South. Minority children tend to concentrate in certain regions, with over half of all Black children residing in the South and nearly half of all Hispanic children residing in the West.

### Family Size Has Declined

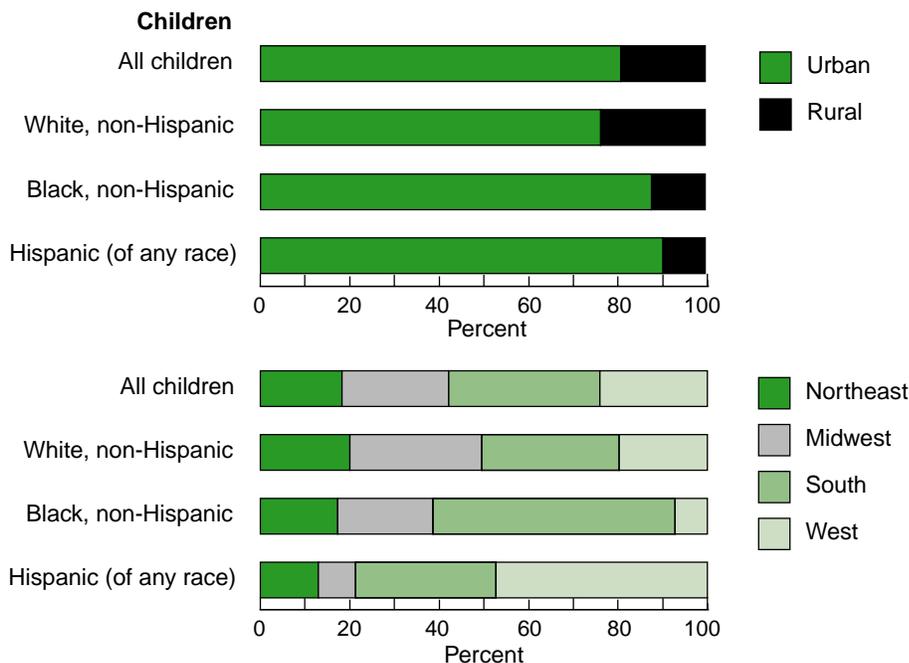
Changes in family composition and childbearing patterns have resulted in families that, on average, include fewer persons than in the past. Much of the decline in family size is due to lower fertility, fewer children per family, and more single-parent families. Average family size has declined steadily since 1960, and by 1998, families averaged 3.0 persons for Whites, 3.4 persons for Blacks, and 3.9 persons for Hispanics. A family is defined as a group of two or more persons who live in the same household and who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. All racial/ethnic groups experienced declines in family size over

Table 1  
**Minority Children Represent an Increasing Share of the U.S. Child Population**

Children	1980	1990	2000	2020 (Projection)
<i>Millions</i>				
Total, under age 18	63.7	64.2	70.4	77.2
Ages:				
0-5	19.6	22.5	22.7	26.3
6-11	20.8	21.6	24.1	25.6
12-17	23.3	20.1	23.6	25.2
<i>Percent</i>				
Race-ethnicity				
Under age 18:				
White, non-Hispanic	74	69	64	55
Black, non-Hispanic	15	15	15	14
Hispanic	9	12	16	23
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	3	4	6
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	1	1	1
Children as share of total U.S. population	28	26	26	24

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "Preliminary Estimates of the Population of the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: 1970 to 1981" (Series P-25, No. 917); "Estimates of the Population of the United States by Age, Sex, and Race: 1980 to 1985" (Series P-25, No. 985); unpublished estimates and projections from the Census Bureau Web site ([www.census.gov/population/estimates/nation](http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/nation)); and Federal Inter-agency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2000*, Web site ([www.childstats.gov](http://www.childstats.gov)).

Figure 1  
**Most Children Under Age 18 Reside in Urban Areas**



Source: Calculated by ERS from the March 2000 Current Population Survey.

time, although minority families remain larger than White families.

Minorities tend to have larger families than Whites, with Hispanics having the largest families. About 17 percent of both Black children and Hispanic children lived in families with three or more siblings, compared with 11 percent of White children. Larger families tend to reduce the amount of time and resources parents can devote to each child, although older siblings may help care for their younger brothers or sisters. By contrast, smaller families imply improved opportunities for educational, occupational, and economic advancement. Two-child families now constitute the most common family size. Within 25 years, Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics are expected to have nearly identical and comparatively smaller family sizes, with an average of less than two children per family.

## More Children Today Live in Single-Parent Families

In 2000, 72 percent of U.S. children under age 18 lived in two-parent families, compared with 77 percent in 1980 (table 2). Minorities experienced living-arrangement changes similar to those among Whites, with declines in married-couple families and increases in mother-only families. The decline in the proportion of children in married-couple families reflects higher rates of marital disruption and divorce and increased childbearing and rearing by unmarried women.

Two-parent families represented a lower proportion of households in 2000 than in 1980 for all racial/ethnic groups. Blacks had the lowest proportion of married-couple families and the greatest decline in this proportion over time. Hispanics have generally followed the same trends of increasing family instability as Whites since 1960.

The increase in the number of mother-only families was one of the

major changes in family composition during the 1970s, continuing in the 1980s but at a much slower pace. The proportion of children living with mothers only rose among all racial/ethnic groups from 16 percent in 1980 to 23 percent in 2000. Black children are more likely than White or Hispanic children to live in mother-only families; in 2000, 54 percent of Black children lived with their mother only, more than three times the percentage of White children. While only a small proportion of children live with their fathers only, this share, too, increased between 1980 and 2000. Based on late-1980s trends, 50 percent to perhaps 60 percent of children born in the late 1980s are projected to spend some part of their childhood living in single parent families.

Racial differences in the family living arrangements of children have grown since the 1960s. The proportion of White children living with two parents declined by 4 percentage points between 1980 and 2000, but it declined more for Blacks—6 percentage points. Mothers heading families alone often face

multiple burdens, such as lower average incomes and higher unemployment. Never-married mothers are likely to have the additional disadvantages of younger age and less education. Furthermore, many children in mother-only families lack contact with or support from their fathers and must rely on government assistance for support.

Family structure has an enormous impact on the well-being of children. The number of parents living with a child is generally linked to the amount of human and economic resources available to that child. The households of children living with one parent are substantially more likely to have family incomes below the poverty line than are households of children living with two parents. One-parent families have an economic disadvantage because only one parent generates income and that effort is often limited by child care responsibilities. Children in single-parent families tend to face more disadvantages than children in intact two-parent families—they may receive less care and attention from parents; they tend to have

Table 2  
Nearly 3 Out of 10 U.S. Children Live in Single-Parent Families

Children	1980	2000	
		Percent	
Living with both parents:			
All children	76.6	71.9	72.2
White, non-Hispanic	83.2	80.4	79.5
Black, non-Hispanic	46.9	37.0	41.1
Hispanic (of any race)	71.1	64.0	68.8
Living with mother only:			
All children	16.3	20.0	23.4
White, non-Hispanic	11.4	13.4	16.1
Black, non-Hispanic	39.2	49.3	54.2
Hispanic (of any race)	19.8	24.0	26.6
Living with father only:			
All children	2.0	3.9	4.4
White, non-Hispanic	2.0	3.3	4.4
Black, non-Hispanic	2.8	5.4	4.7
Hispanic (of any race)	1.6	5.9	4.6

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Reports*, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements," annual reports for 1980 and 1990 (Series P-20); and unpublished estimates calculated by ERS from the March 2000 Current Population Survey.



High divorce rates and increased out-of-wedlock childbearing have made single-parent households, both mother-only and father-only, a fact of life for many U.S. children.

more school-related, health, and behavioral problems; they live in families with lower incomes; and they complete fewer years of schooling and earn less in future years.

The trend to marry at later ages may have a positive effect on the well-being of children as later marriages are more likely to endure than marriages that occur in the teenage years or the early twenties. Another change affecting the well-being of children is the increased probability of having mothers working for pay outside the home. Working mothers add to family income, which is particularly important for low-income families. Employed mothers also tend to have fewer children than unemployed mothers, and smaller families imply that more economic resources are available per child. As maternal employment has risen, the need for substitute care for the children of working mothers has increased and the location of this care has shifted outside of the child's home.

## Child Poverty Declined Slightly in the 1990s

Assessing the economic well-being of children helps identify those in need of assistance and serves as a benchmark to evaluate the potential effects of welfare reform and other policies on the condition of children. In 1999, 11.5 million children under age 18 were

poor, representing 37 percent of the poverty population. That year, the poverty threshold for a family of four (including two children) was \$16,895. Many factors contribute to high child-poverty rates, including the reduced earnings of mothers as they work fewer hours to accommodate the presence of children, the assumption of greater household needs when children are present, and the explicit raising of the poverty threshold as family size increases, with fewer per child resources available in larger families.

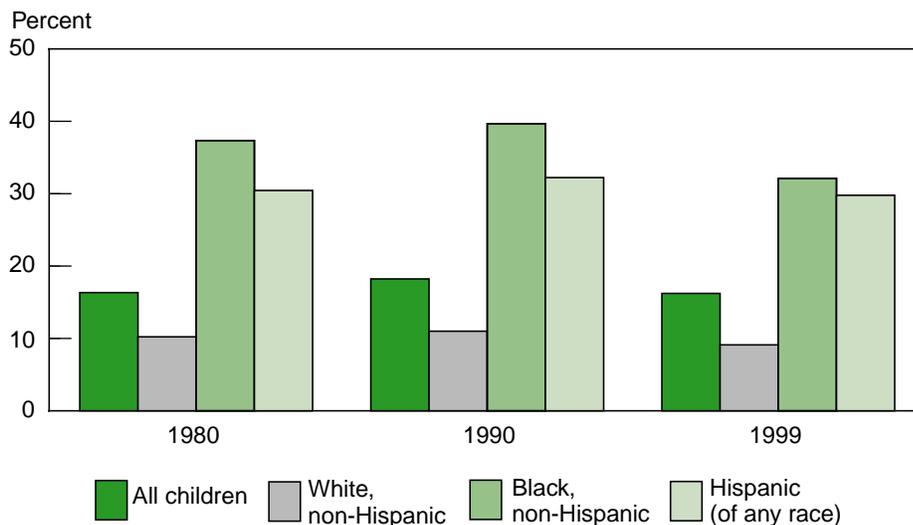
Children have a higher probability of being poor than adults. In 1999, 16.2 percent of U.S. children were poor, compared with 11.8 percent of the general population. Still, despite fluctuations over time, poverty among children under age 18 has declined substantially since the early 1960s (when the rate was 27.3 percent).

The poverty rate among all racial/ethnic groups increased between 1980 and 1990 but declined by 1999 (fig. 2). Black children and Hispanic children are more likely to be poor than are White children and are over-represented in the count of

poor children relative to their share in the general population. While most poor children are non-Hispanic Whites, the 1999 poverty rate for Black children (32 percent) or Hispanic children (30 percent) is much higher than the poverty rate for White children (9 percent).

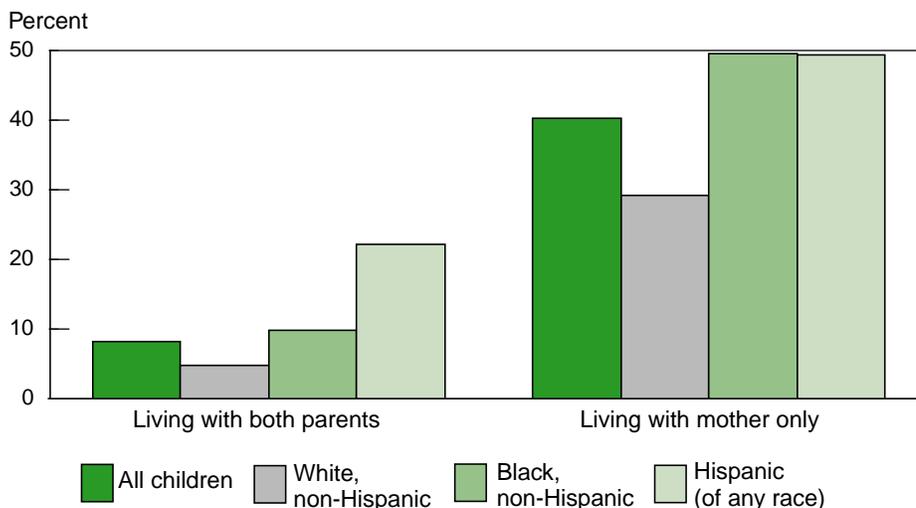
The gap in childhood poverty among races has decreased since the 1960s, but differences persist because a growing proportion of Black children lives in mother-only families. Children living with only their mothers have a greater chance of being poor than children living with two parents. In 1999, 40 percent of children in mother-only families were in poverty, compared with 8 percent of children in two-parent families (fig. 3). Among children in mother-only families, about half of Black children and Hispanic children are poor, compared with 29 percent of White children. The contrast by family structure is especially pronounced by racial/ethnic group. For example, in 1999, 10 percent of Black children in two-parent families were poor, compared with 50 percent of Black children in mother-only families. Children in

Figure 2  
Child Poverty Rates Declined Slightly in the 1990s



Source: Calculated by ERS from the March 2000 Current Population Survey.

Figure 3  
**Children in Mother-Only Families Are Five Times More Likely To Be Poor**



Source: Calculated by ERS from the March 2000 Current Population Survey.

mother-only families often suffer economically because their mothers usually have low earnings, their fathers often do not contribute to child support, and their financial assistance benefits may not cover their needs.

Childhood poverty has both immediate and long-term negative effects. Children in low-income families fare less well than children in more affluent families on many indicators of economic security, health, and education. Compared with children living in families above the poverty line, children living below the poverty line are more likely to have difficulty in school, to become teenage parents, and, as adults, to earn less and be unemployed more frequently. The cost of child poverty to the Nation is high because child poverty may affect the future productivity and competitiveness of the labor force.

### Some Measures Show Children in Good Health

Several measures indicate that the overall physical health of children in the United States is better today

than in 1960, although recent evidence shows an alarming increase in obesity and related diseases (see “Overweight Children: Is Parental Nutrition Knowledge a Factor?” elsewhere in this issue). Most children (81 percent) reported themselves in very good or excellent health in 1997 (self-reports of health have been found to track very closely with results of physical exams). Self-reported health status differs along the poverty line, however, with 68 percent of poor children rating their health as very good or excellent, compared with 86 percent of children at or above the poverty line. Furthermore, the infant mortality rate—the proportion of babies who die within the first year of life—declined from 26.0 in 1960 to 6.9 in 1999, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Although infant mortality rates have improved for both Blacks and Whites, a gap among races persists. In general, Black and Hispanic children, especially those in central cities or rural areas, are less healthy than White children. Poor children and children with less-educated parents tend to be less healthy than

children of better educated, affluent parents.

Most children age 19-35 months have been vaccinated for selected diseases. As of 1998, 79 percent of these young children had been vaccinated in the combined series consisting of diphtheria and tetanus toxoids and pertussis vaccine, polio vaccine, a measles-containing vaccine, and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b vaccine. White children (82 percent) were more likely to have been vaccinated than were Black children (73 percent) and Hispanic children (75 percent). Seventy-four percent of children below the poverty level were vaccinated, compared with 82 percent at or above the poverty level.

Children’s good health and development depend on a diet sufficient in nutrients and calories. Food security has been defined as access at all times to enough nourishment for an active, healthy life. A family’s ability to provide for children’s nutritional needs is linked to income or other resources and secure access to adequate, nutritious food without relying on emergency feeding programs or resorting to scavenging or stealing. According to USDA’s Economic Research Service, 3.8 percent of children in 1999 lived in households experiencing food insecurity with hunger, a level of food deprivation so severe that one or more household members were hungry at times because they could not afford enough food. The number of children in food-insecure households with hunger who actually experience hunger themselves is significantly smaller than the total number of children living in such households because in most of these households the adults go without food, if necessary, so that the children will have food.

Most food-insecure households do not report actual hunger; in 1999, 13.1 percent of all children and 32.2 percent of poor children lived in households experiencing food

insecurity without hunger. Food-insecure households without hunger have difficulty obtaining food, lower quality diets, and anxiety about their food supply, and increasingly rely on emergency food sources.

Children with access to health care have reasonable assurance of obtaining the medical and dental attention needed to maintain their physical well-being. Health care access involves both the availability of a regular source of care and the ability of the child's family to pay for it. The Census Bureau shows that in 1999, 23 percent of children from families below the poverty line were not covered by some form of health insurance; of the Nation's total child population, 14 percent had no health insurance. Health insurance coverage also varies by racial/ethnic group, with 9 percent of White, non-Hispanic children uninsured, 18 percent of Black, non-Hispanic children uninsured, and 27 percent of Hispanic children uninsured. The percentage of children who have health insurance coverage at least part of the year is one measure of the extent to which families can obtain preventive care or health care for a sick or injured child.

## Indicators of Children's Well-Being Are Mixed

The family remains the central institution in children's lives. The family environment and the financial resources available to children as they grow up will affect both their educational attainment and future productivity in the workforce. Trends in children's well-being have been mixed, with improvement and stability in some areas but deterioration in others.

Increases in maternal employment have resulted in greater family

incomes for at least two-parent families, as well as a greater demand for child care outside the home. Family disruptions, such as divorce, and out-of-wedlock childbearing and rearing have also increased over time, resulting in a greater number of children being raised in single-parent, most often mother-only, families. Other trends, such as higher levels of parental education, later marriages, and smaller families, are generally positive for children. Fewer children imply less competition for resources in the home as well as social services for children, such as public schooling.

Recent demographic changes in American society, such as increases in both maternal employment and mother-only families, imply changing demands for services such as child care and a need for more convenience services for working parents. The future of America's children will depend on how families adapt to meet their needs. An understanding of the impact of the increase in mother-only families on child poverty is important in planning welfare and program assistance such as food stamps, free school meal programs, and health insurance coverage. Because of the increased racial/ethnic diversity of the child population and the large proportion of minority children who are poor, policymakers will need to pay greater attention to the needs of America's minority children to ensure their health and access to education, training, and other resources.

## References

Bean, Frank D., and Marta Tienda. *The Hispanic Population of the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987.

Farley, Reynolds, and Walter R. Allen. *The Color Line and the Quality of Life in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989.

Hernandez, Donald J. *America's Children: Resources from Family, Government and the Economy*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993.

Interagency Forum on Children and Families. *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*. 2000.

Miller, Louisa, and Jeanne Moorman. "Married-Couple Families with Children," *Current Population Reports*, Series P-23, No. 162, 1989.

Morrison, Peter A. *Congress and the Year 2000: A Perspective on Future Issues*. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1991.

O'Hare, William P. "America's Minorities—The Demographics of Diversity," *Population Bulletin*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 1992.

Rogers, Carolyn C. "Age and Family Structure, by Race-Ethnicity and Place of Residence: 1980 to 1990," *Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Rural Areas: Progress and Stagnation, 1980-90*, Agricultural Economics Report No. 731. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1997.

Rogers, Carolyn C., and Suzanne Bianchi. "The Socioeconomic Status of America's Children and Youth," *Principles and Practices of Student Health*. College of Health and Human Services, San Diego State University, 1992.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Household and Family Characteristics: March 1998 (Update)," *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 515, 1998.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics. "Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for November 1999," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 48, No. 17, 2000. ■