

# Research Brief



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## Do Parents Feel More Aggravated These Days?

PARENTAL  
AGGRAVATION IN THE  
U.S., 1997 TO 2012

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### OVERVIEW

Parenting is an important job, yet its demands and responsibilities can sometimes lead to high levels of anxiety and frustration. Because parental functioning is one of the critical factors determining whether children flourish, it is important to examine stress that can jeopardize effective parenting. Very little research has examined the prevalence of parental aggravation, whether it has changed over time, or how it may vary across states. In this brief, we examine data on this measure collected from two nationally representative surveys: the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), fielded in 1997, 1999, and 2002; and the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), fielded in 2003, 2007, and 2011/12. While NSAF included representative data on 13 states only, NSCH yields representative data for all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia; both surveys also provide national estimates. Thus, we are able to examine national trends and trends for 13 states over a 15-year period, and trends for 38 states (including the District of Columbia) over a nine-year period.

### KEY FINDINGS

- At the national level, between 1997 and 2007 the proportion of parents reporting aggravation increased substantially, from 20 to 35 percent.<sup>i</sup> However, over the most recent five years there has been no statistically significant change. The prevalence for 2011/12 was 33 percent.
- At the state level, there has been a similar pattern. Whether state-level data are available for all six survey waves or for just the most recent three, the prevalence of parental aggravation increased substantially over time in nearly every state. However, between 2007 and 2011/12, the prevalence was statistically unchanged in 49 states and in the District of Columbia, decreasing significantly only in Iowa.
- These data show no clear link between the prevalence of parental aggravation and the national economic downturn of 2007-2009. It is likely that aggravation in the parental role is affected by numerous factors, including the characteristics of both child and parent, parental education, and the availability of social support. Further research is needed to explore in more depth how such influences interact to strengthen or weaken positive parenting.

<sup>i</sup> Some proportion of the change is likely due to a change in response choices between 2003 and 2007. However, there were significant increases between 1997 and 2003 as well.

**BACKGROUND**

The ways parents cope with the demands of their role have a significant influence on how they interact with their children.<sup>1</sup> High levels of stress associated with the parenting role, and parents’ impatience with their child, may be reflected in inappropriately high behavioral expectations and/or coercive discipline.<sup>2</sup> Over time, this parenting pattern can negatively affect child outcomes ranging from physical health, to academic success, to psychological and social well-being.<sup>3</sup> Research finds that, on average, children of parents with high levels of aggravation are less well-adjusted and experience more negative outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

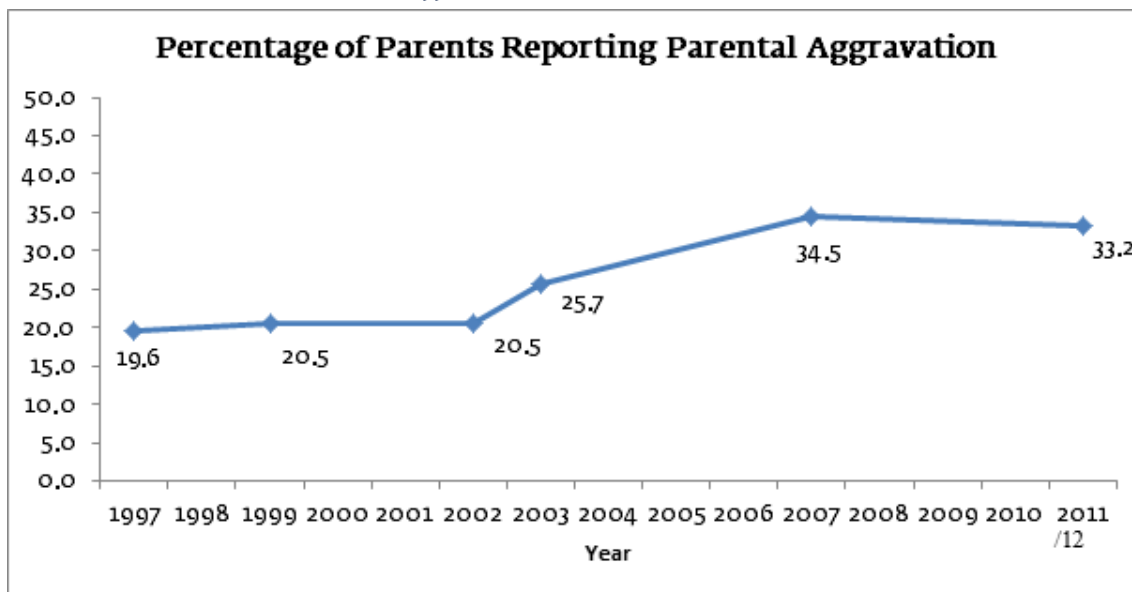
However, we know little about the overall prevalence of parental aggravation, or about how this indicator may vary at a state level. Little is known, moreover, about whether the prevalence of parental aggravation has changed over recent years, a period which has seen increases in the prevalence of parental employment, changes in family structure, changing participation in public assistance programs, and greater economic insecurity.

We looked at three markers of aggravation among parents living with their children, ages birth through 17: how often the child does things that really bother the parent; how often the parent has felt the child is much harder to care for than most other children of the same age; and how often the parent has felt angry with the child. (See Data Box on p. 5.) Parental aggravation was considered present if a parent reported they had such feelings at least “sometimes” on all three items, or if any combination of responses yielded a total score of three or higher on a zero-to-nine-point scale. We examined trends over time at the national level, and for the states.

**National Estimates of Parental Aggravation, 1997-2011/12**

Between 1997 and 2003, rates of parental aggravation increased substantially (from 20 to 26 percent). Rates also increased between 2003 and 2007, from 26 to 35 percent, although some part of this increase could be due to changes in the response options. More recent data suggest a plateau: parental aggravation was 33 percent in 2011/12. Figure 1 shows this trend across parents with children ages birth through 17.

**FIGURE 1: National Estimates of Parental Aggravation between 1997 and 2011/12**



Source: All estimates were based on data collected from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 waves of the National Survey of American Families, and the 2003, 2007 and 2011/12 waves of the National Survey of Children’s Health.

**State Estimates of Parental Aggravation, 1997-2011/12**

There is considerable variation across and within states over this 15-year span, with the share of parents reporting aggravation as low as 17 percent, and as high as 39 percent (see Table 1). Among the 13 states where data were available for all survey years, none had consistent year-to-year increases. Rates in California decreased between 1997 and 2002, before increasing between 2002 and 2007. Although parental aggravation was not significantly different from the national average in any of these states in 2007 or 2011/12, prior to 2007, Alabama and Colorado were consistently below the national average, and Mississippi was consistently above.

For the remaining 38 states, for which data were available only for the three most recent time-points, the proportion of parents reporting aggravation increased in nearly every state between 2003 and 2007 (see Table 1), but stayed fairly constant in most states between 2007 and 2011/12. Parental aggravation in Kentucky and West Virginia was consistently below the national average.

**Table 1: Percentage of Parents Reporting Parental Aggravation<sup>1</sup> between 1997 and 2011/12<sup>2</sup>**

	1997	1999	2002	2003	2007 <sup>3</sup>	2011-2012 <sup>3</sup>
<b>United States</b>	<b>19.6</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>33.2</b>
Alabama	19.0	19.7	19.5	22.5	33.6	30.9
Alaska				23.6	31.2	27.0
Arizona				27.2	34.3	36.8
Arkansas				21.5	32.9	33.7
California	23.3	21.9	20.5	28.8	37.9	35.2
Colorado	18.6	19.6	20.8	22.4	34.3	34.8
Connecticut				25.0	34.0	32.9
Delaware				25.1	32.2	29.5
District of Columbia				28.0	35.5	34.7
Florida	19.0	18.4	17.4	24.6	31.7	31.3
Georgia				27.1	27.6	31.3
Hawaii				28.0	35.4	31.0
Idaho				22.6	32.4	29.8
Illinois				26.1	35.6	33.5
Indiana				24.0	32.5	35.6
Iowa				23.8	38.3	31.7
Kansas				23.6	34.8	31.8
Kentucky				22.6	30.0	28.7
Louisiana				26.4	35.9	32.3
Maine				23.9	32.9	30.3
Maryland				25.1	34.0	32.4
Massachusetts	18.8	21.3	20.8	27.8	33.3	33.3
Michigan	21.4	19.6	21.5	23.8	32.8	31.9
Minnesota	20.0	20.0	21.2	25.2	35.2	30.9

**Table 1: Percentage of Parents Reporting Parental Aggravation<sup>1</sup> between 1997 and 2011/12<sup>2</sup>**

	1997	1999	2002	2003	2007 <sup>3</sup>	2011-2012 <sup>3</sup>
Mississippi	22.6	22.9	19.2	30.4	34.5	33.1
Missouri				25.0	32.5	28.8
Montana				23.5	33.8	30.0
Nebraska				24.1	34.8	31.6
Nevada				25.1	35.2	33.4
New Hampshire				23.7	32.5	33.3
New Jersey	21.2	20.9	19.8	26.6	33.7	33.4
New Mexico				27.2	30.7	33.2
New York	19.3	21.1	23.1	25.6	33.2	35.1
North Carolina				24.0	35.7	34.9
North Dakota				19.8	31.1	30.5
Ohio				24.6	33.1	32.8
Oklahoma				23.0	30.9	29.4
Oregon				24.5	35.2	35.4
Pennsylvania				24.9	34.3	36.4
Rhode Island				26.6	33.6	34.6
South Carolina				25.1	32.3	30.0
South Dakota				23.9	34.1	28.8
Tennessee				23.6	31.6	31.7
Texas	20.4	21.3	20.4	27.9	38.8	32.7
Utah				23.9	37.5	35.7
Vermont				24.2	34.9	31.6
Virginia				25.3	34.4	31.1
Washington	17.0	18.8	21.0	24.1	34.8	35.5
West Virginia				21.7	29.6	29.5
Wisconsin	20.5	23.1	22.4	25.7	34.6	32.3
Wyoming				22.1	36.0	31.0

1 Parental aggravation was based on a summary score of three items assessing parental aggravation. Parental aggravation was defined as “3 or greater” on the summary scale of zero to nine.

2 All estimates were based on data collected from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 waves of the National Survey of America's Families, and the 2003, 2007, and 2011/12 waves of the National Survey of Children's Health.

3 Data for 2007 and 2011/12 included “rarely” as a possible response, so data are not strictly comparable to earlier years.

### Data and Variables

#### National Survey of America's Families

The National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) was a telephone survey of U.S. parents (usually the child's mother) or parent-figures, conducted in 1997, 1999, and 2002 by the Urban Institute and Child Trends as one component of the "Assessing the New Federalism" project. For all rounds of data collection, over-samples were drawn in 13 states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin) to allow the production of reliable estimates at the state level. Interviews were conducted with more than 40,000 families, yielding information on more than 100,000 people.

#### National Survey of Children's Health

The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) was conducted in 2003, 2007 and 2011/12 in all 50 states and the District of Columbia by the National Center for Health Statistics, with funding from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau. Telephone numbers selected by a random sampling process were used to contact households, and one child in each household with children was randomly selected to be the focus of the study. An adult in the household knowledgeable about the child answered questions about the child and themselves. The survey is representative of children under 18 years old, nationwide and also within each state. A total of 95,677 interviews were completed in 2011/12, the most current wave of data collection. Cell phone numbers were included in the survey for the first time in 2011/12.

#### *Parental Aggravation*

During the past month:

- how often have you felt [CHILD's NAME] is much harder to care for than most children [his/her] age?;
- how often have you felt [he/she] does things that really bother you a lot?; and
- how often have you felt angry with [him/her]? (never, rarely, sometimes, usually, always)

Before 2003, response options were "never," "sometimes," "usually," and "always," with the first scored as "zero," and the remaining options as "1," "2," and "3," respectively. In 2007 and 2011/12, the option of "rarely" was added, and, together with "sometimes," was coded as "1," with the other response options coded as before. The parent aggravation scale was created by compiling parents' responses to the three items listed above. Answers, converted to numbers (with "0" corresponding to "never," "1" to "sometimes" or "rarely," "2" to "usually," and "3" to "always") were summed to create a summary scale from 0 - 9. Parental aggravation was defined as "3 or greater" on the summary scale.

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