

# Research Brief

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Child **TRENDS**

## A Fifteen-Year (1997-2012) Profile Of Children's Overall Health:

NATIONAL AND STATE ESTIMATES, BY FAMILY INCOME LEVEL

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### OVERVIEW

Having good overall health is basic to children's optimal development. Reports citing long-term trends for overweight, poor dietary habits, and lack of physical activity may create the impression that threats to children's health in the U.S. are widespread. Health disparities related to poverty, and variability in access to government-assisted insurance across states, heighten this concern. But what do we know about children's overall health?

Here we estimate the proportion of children reported by parents to be in "very good" or "excellent" health, between 1997 and 2012. We examine trends in health status for children ages birth through 17, nationally and across states, and across family income-levels.

### KEY FINDINGS

- A large majority of children in the U.S. are in good health, regardless of family income, although low-income children are much less likely than their more affluent counterparts to be in excellent or very good health.
- Between 1997 and 2011/12, the proportion of children in excellent or very good health increased significantly, both for those living in low-income families, and for those in more affluent families. For the 13 states where data were available for all survey years, change over time was generally small, though no state showed a decline on this indicator. As of 2011/12, the gap between children in low-income families and those in more affluent families varied widely across states, from 24 percentage points (in California) to no significant difference (in South Dakota).
- Parents' ratings of child health may not coincide with those of health professionals. However, the relative stability of these data suggests the need for increased attention to that minority of children, including those in low-income families, whose health is less than optimal.

## BACKGROUND

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Physical health has implications for all areas of functioning. Healthy children are more likely to demonstrate self-esteem and self-confidence, have wider social networks,<sup>1</sup> perform well in school, and engage in physical activity.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, accumulating evidence points to significant threats to children's health. One in three U.S. children is overweight or obese,<sup>3</sup> nearly seven million have asthma, and five million do not have access to health care.<sup>4</sup> Children living in poverty are more likely to experience poor health than their non-poor counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

Examining trends in children's wellness over time is critical to understanding whether we are making national progress in this area. Because states vary in their policies regarding the provision of, and eligibility for, health-related services, examining this indicator by state and by family income is also important. Data from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), collected in 1997, 1999, and 2002; and the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), collected in 2003, 2007 and 2011-2012, make such analyses possible.

## CURRENT ANALYSES

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Parents were asked to rate their child's overall health. (See table on page three for more details on this measure.) For the purposes of this brief, we defined "healthy" children as the proportion of who were in excellent or very good health.

While NSAF included 13 states only, NSCH includes all 50 states and the District of Columbia; both surveys also provide national estimates. We created estimates of *excellent* or *very good* health, disaggregated by income level, at the national and state level. Family income was categorized as either at or below twice the federal poverty level ("low-income"), or above that cut-off ("not low-income").

Regardless of income level, the majority of U.S. children are in *very good* or *excellent health*. However, children in non-low-income families are more likely to be healthy by this measure than are their low-income counterparts. For example, between 1997 and 2011/12, about nine in ten non-low-income children were reported to be healthy, compared with about three in four low-income children.

Between 1997 and 2011/12, the proportion of low-income children in *excellent* or *very good* health rose three percentage points, a statistically significant increase; among more affluent children, the corresponding proportion rose by 1.5 points (also statistically significant). Subsequent years' data will be required in order to determine whether these trends continue.

### State-Level Estimates of Children with Excellent or Very Good Health

#### In Low-Income Families

For children living at or below twice the federal poverty level, there was large variation across states over the 15-year span. For example, in 2011/12, estimates of the proportion of healthy children ranged from 64 percent (California) to 89 percent (South Dakota) (Table, p. 3).

Among the 13 states where data were available for all survey years, three (Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas) showed a significant change on this indicator between 1997 and 2011/12 (gains of six, nine, and seven percentage points, respectively). For the remaining 38 states where data were available only between 2003 and 2011/12, there was no significant change on this indicator during that period (Table, p. 3).

**In Non-Low-Income Families**

Over the period covered here, there was much less variation by state among children living in non-low-income families than for poorer children: the proportion in *very good* or *excellent* health in 2011/12 ranged from 88 percent (California) to 95 percent (Kansas).

Four states among the 13 where data were available for all survey years had significant change over the 15 years: Alabama, Colorado, Florida, and Michigan had gains of five, three, four, and three percentage points, respectively. In the remaining 38 states, this proportion changed between 2003 and 2011/12 only in Wyoming, which had a decrease of four percentage points.

**The Health Gap by Income Level**

As of 2011/12, there was a gap of 16 percentage points between low-income and non-low-income children in the proportion in *very good* or *excellent* health. By state, this disparity ranged from a low of seven points (in Alaska), to 24 points (in California). In South Dakota, there was no significant difference. It is likely that a number of state-level factors, including population characteristics, as well as access to and utilization of health care services, account for states' variability in the magnitude of this gap.

**Table: Of children (ages 0-17), percentage in "excellent" or "very good" health, as reported by parents, by state and poverty status**

Family income at or below/above twice the federal poverty level	1997	1999	2002	2003	2007	2011-2012
<b>United States</b>						
Below	72.1	74.7	73.0	74.2	74.0	75.2
Above	89.7	87.5	86.4	90.9	91.2	91.2
<b>Alabama</b>						
Below	72.1	73.7	72.7	74.9	76.3	78.5
Above	87.4	89.4	88.3	90.9	91.7	92.0
<b>Alaska</b>						
Below	—	—	—	84.4	84.6	84.7
Above	—	—	—	91.5	91.9	91.4
<b>Arizona</b>						
Below	—	—	—	69.1	69.3	70.3
Above	—	—	—	90.8	89.6	90.3
<b>Arkansas</b>						
Below	—	—	—	74.9	75.1	75.2
Above	—	—	—	90.8	89.5	89.0
<b>California</b>						
Below	61.5	67.4	62.6	65.4	62.0	64.1
Above	87.5	86.0	82.6	87.4	88.1	88.3
<b>Colorado</b>						
Below	74.7	74.9	73.8	74.3	71.5	78.0
Above	90.1	88.9	88.8	92.6	91.3	92.8

Family income at or below/above twice the federal poverty level	1997	1999	2002	2003	2007	2011-2012
<b>Connecticut</b>						
Below	—	—	—	76.0	75.6	72.4
Above	—	—	—	91.1	92.5	91.7
<b>Delaware</b>						
Below	—	—	—	75.2	72.7	72.0
Above	—	—	—	90.6	90.4	91.2
<b>District of Columbia</b>						
Below	—	—	—	75.8	77.4	72.7
Above	—	—	—	90.4	91.0	89.9
<b>Florida</b>						
Below	76.4	74.4	70.6	78.5	83.8	75.3
Above	87.7	88.4	89.6	92.7	92.4	91.9
<b>Georgia</b>						
Below	—	—	—	76.1	77.7	79.5
Above	—	—	—	92.6	92.5	91.2
<b>Hawaii</b>						
Below	—	—	—	79.7	80.4	79.8
Above	—	—	—	92.0	90.3	90.5
<b>Idaho</b>						
Below	—	—	—	80.1	79.1	82.3
Above	—	—	—	92.8	91.8	92.8
<b>Illinois</b>						
Below	—	—	—	72.3	72.4	72.3
Above	—	—	—	89.9	91.7	92.7
<b>Indiana</b>						
Below	—	—	—	80.2	76.8	77.9
Above	—	—	—	91.9	91.1	89.1
<b>Iowa</b>						
Below	—	—	—	81.8	80.1	83.0
Above	—	—	—	91.7	91.4	92.0
<b>Kansas</b>						
Below	—	—	—	78.1	77.7	76.8
Above	—	—	—	91.8	90.0	94.5
<b>Kentucky</b>						
Below	—	—	—	81.0	80.7	79.3
Above	—	—	—	92.0	90.9	91.8

Family income at or below/above twice the federal poverty level	1997	1999	2002	2003	2007	2011-2012
<b>Louisiana</b>						
Below	—	—	—	75.3	70.1	80.0
Above	—	—	—	90.2	90.2	91.1
<b>Maine</b>						
Below	—	—	—	86.2	85.4	82.8
Above	—	—	—	93.8	94.1	93.0
<b>Maryland</b>						
Below	—	—	—	79.2	79.9	76.3
Above	—	—	—	91.0	93.7	90.7
<b>Massachusetts</b>						
Below	77.2	80.2	76.0	76.5	77.9	78.1
Above	90.9	90.7	90.4	93.1	92.3	93.1
<b>Michigan</b>						
Below	80.4	77.1	79.5	74.6	79.0	83.1
Above	89.1	86.7	87.9	90.5	91.2	92.1
<b>Minnesota</b>						
Below	81.6	77.6	79.4	84.1	83.2	80.0
Above	89.5	87.3	89.2	93.0	95.0	91.4
<b>Mississippi</b>						
Below	70.1	65.6	65.6	74.4	76.8	79.0
Above	89.0	84.9	86.2	89.6	89.0	92.0
<b>Missouri</b>						
Below	—	—	—	82.8	81.1	85.0
Above	—	—	—	91.1	91.7	93.6
<b>Montana</b>						
Below	—	—	—	86.7	83.8	84.5
Above	—	—	—	93.0	91.6	94.0
<b>Nebraska</b>						
Below	—	—	—	77.3	77.4	76.9
Above	—	—	—	92.1	92.2	93.9
<b>Nevada</b>						
Below	—	—	—	68.1	64.8	67.9
Above	—	—	—	88.0	88.4	89.4
<b>New Hampshire</b>						
Below	—	—	—	87.9	79.6	83.3
Above	—	—	—	93.0	94.3	93.8

Family income at or below/above twice the federal poverty level	1997	1999	2002	2003	2007	2011-2012
<b>New Jersey</b>						
Below	67.1	70.3	65.9	68.9	71.5	68.2
Above	88.8	86.9	85.8	90.2	90.8	91.0
<b>New Mexico</b>						
Below	—	—	—	76.2	79.1	73.9
Above	—	—	—	88.6	91.4	91.0
<b>New York</b>						
Below	71.5	69.9	67.7	72.0	70.8	72.5
Above	89.1	86.8	86.5	90.3	91.3	90.7
<b>North Carolina</b>						
Below	—	—	—	78.7	79.1	77.3
Above	—	—	—	91.0	92.1	92.2
<b>North Dakota</b>						
Below	—	—	—	88.1	84.8	86.3
Above	—	—	—	92.3	93.6	93.9
<b>Ohio</b>						
Below	—	—	—	81.8	77.0	80.9
Above	—	—	—	93.6	93.1	91.8
<b>Oklahoma</b>						
Below	—	—	—	80.6	81.1	79.1
Above	—	—	—	92.1	90.5	89.5
<b>Oregon</b>						
Below	—	—	—	78.2	76.2	74.7
Above	—	—	—	91.9	93.5	90.7
<b>Pennsylvania</b>						
Below	—	—	—	78.1	82.5	77.8
Above	—	—	—	92.7	92.2	93.0
<b>Rhode Island</b>						
Below	—	—	—	75.9	72.1	77.9
Above	—	—	—	92.6	93.5	92.5
<b>South Carolina</b>						
Below	—	—	—	74.5	76.9	81.1
Above	—	—	—	89.7	90.6	91.3
<b>South Dakota</b>						
Below	—	—	—	84.3	83.7	89.4
Above	—	—	—	92.3	94.1	93.1

Family income at or below/above twice the federal poverty level	1997	1999	2002	2003	2007	2011-2012
<b>Tennessee</b>						
Below	—	—	—	79.7	75.7	76.2
Above	—	—	—	90.1	91.7	92.3
<b>Texas</b>						
Below	66.2	67.3	65.5	64.3	66.2	73.6
Above	87.8	86.8	84.0	89.4	89.4	90.4
<b>Utah</b>						
Below	—	—	—	84.0	83.2	79.8
Above	—	—	—	92.9	94.1	91.8
<b>Vermont</b>						
Below	—	—	—	88.3	89.0	82.9
Above	—	—	—	95.5	94.1	93.6
<b>Virginia</b>						
Below	—	—	—	83.7	77.8	80.9
Above	—	—	—	93.0	92.7	93.5
<b>Washington</b>						
Below	76.9	76.4	73.1	81.3	73.4	72.9
Above	90.4	88.5	88.4	91.0	92.0	91.7
<b>West Virginia</b>						
Below	—	—	—	78.9	80.4	80.0
Above	—	—	—	90.4	92.6	91.6
<b>Wisconsin</b>						
Below	80.4	78.2	77.1	79.9	76.4	81.1
Above	91.8	90.1	90.0	92.5	92.6	92.4
<b>Wyoming</b>						
Below	—	—	—	81.5	81.6	81.2
Above	—	—	—	93.9	91.1	90.3

Sources: Parent-reported data from the National Survey of America's Families (1997, 1999 and 2002 waves) and the National Survey of Children's Health (2003, 2007, and 2011-2012 waves)

### 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, oversize 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.

#### Variable

##### *Child Health Status*

*In general, how would you describe [S.C.]'s health? Would you say [his/her] health is excellent, Very good, good, fair, or poor?* Global rating of child's health was coded as "excellent" or "very good."

##### *Family Income*

Family income was coded according to multiples of the contemporary federal poverty level (FPL): at or below two times FPL or above two times FPL.

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