

U.S. Children Are Safer, Better-Educated, and Fatter

By many measures, life for U.S. kids has improved in the past two decades.

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Editor's Note: View the full 2014 Child Well-Being Index report here:

<http://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Child-Well-Being-Report.pdf>.

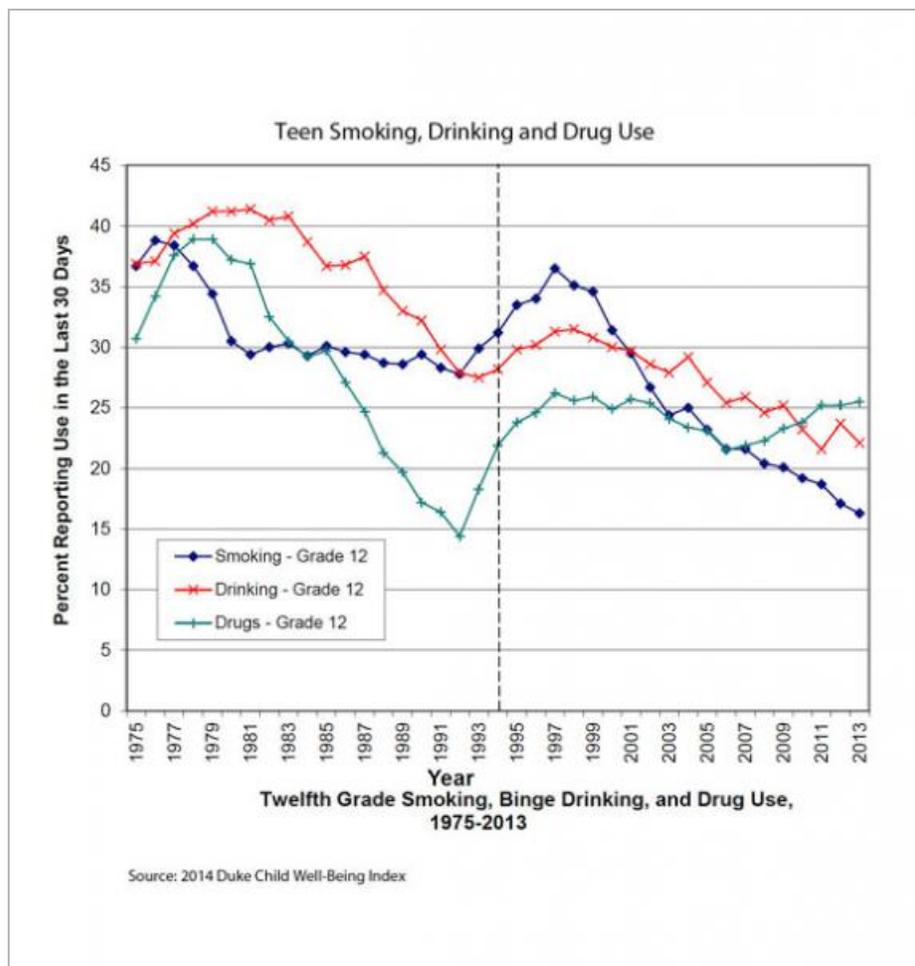
For charts that accompany the findings, please contact Alison Jones.

DURHAM, NC - American children are generally safer and better-educated than they have been in 20 years, a new report from Duke University finds.

Stubborn problems remain, including high rates of child poverty and a still-raging obesity epidemic, the 2014 National Child and Youth Well-Being Index Report notes.

But "compared to 20 years ago, U.S. children are doing pretty well," said the report's lead author, Kenneth Land, the John Franklin Crowell Professor of Sociology at Duke.

The report is based on the Duke Child Well-Being Index, a comprehensive measure of quality-of-life trends that tracks children's well-being since 1975. The report draws upon a rich trove of data from sources, including the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Center for Health Statistics and the Monitoring the Future study.



This year's report includes snapshots of how America's children are doing in a wide range of

areas. It notes improvements in key areas, including:

-- **Safety and Risky Behavior:** Many fewer youths are victims of violent crimes than 20 years ago. Suicide rates have also declined in the past 20 years, as have risky behaviors such as smoking and binge drinking. Teen births, meanwhile, have declined steadily since 1975. Only one category of risky behavior saw increases: Illicit drug use is up compared to 20 years ago, thanks to the growing popularity of marijuana.

-- **Education:** American children and youths are pursuing more education at every level, the report suggests. The percentage of young Americans with a bachelor's degree is up, as are preschool enrollments. High school diplomas have increased, too, though more modestly.

U.S. children's test scores are also on the rise. Overall, test scores for U.S. kids are up slightly since 1975. The gains are much stronger in elementary and middle school.

-- **Stability:** The rise of single-parenthood has slowed, after steep increases beginning in the 1980s. Roughly 28 percent of American children lived in single-parent families in 2013, about the same percentage as in 1995. And families with young children are moving much less often since the number of moves peaked in 1986.

The numbers suggest that U.S. society is starting to adapt to large-scale changes of past decades, Land said. Child well-being hit a low point in the 1990s, due to huge shifts that heavily affected the American family. The decline of the U.S. manufacturing sector, the rise of women in the workforce and the rise of single parenthood meant many parents had less time for child care, Land said. In the days before afterschool care became common, many children spent long hours at home alone.

"These were major shifts that profoundly affected children and families," Land said. "It took some time for social institutions to adapt to these changes."

Despite the improvements, two major problem areas still darken the overall picture for U.S. children -- child obesity and poverty:

-- **Poverty:** Children and families are still feeling lingering effects from the recent Great Recession and the subsequent slow recovery. Family median income has risen in the past 20 years, but it has yet to equal its peak in 2000. Meanwhile, child poverty remains a serious and stubborn problem, affecting millions of children. About 20 percent of U.S. children lived below the poverty line in 2013, about the same as in 1995.

-- **Health:** There is much to celebrate in the health category. Fewer young people are dying, for starters. Youth death rates are now about a third what they were in 1975. Infant mortality rates have declined as well, and more children now have health insurance. Nevertheless, child health gets a poor score overall in the new report, due to the continuing obesity epidemic.

Technology may play a role in the changing health trends, Land said. Children and teens spend increasing numbers of hours indoors, playing video games and interacting with mobile devices. Staying inside may protect youths from some physical dangers, but in the fight against obesity, he said, all those hours of sedentary activity can't help.

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MORE INFORMATION

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