

## Economic and social conditions of children and the elderly

*Both the elderly and children have experienced improvements in their health status, but do not share the same enhancements in economic well-being; data for the elderly are compared with data from a recent report on indicators of child well-being*

David Scott Johnson

Over the past four decades, the proportion of children in the U.S. population has fallen from 36 percent (in 1960) to 26 percent (in 1998), and is expected to drop to approximately 24 percent in 2020. (See chart 1.) Over the same period, in contrast, the share of elderly persons has risen from about 9 percent of the population to 13 percent, and is projected to increase to 16 percent by 2020. The 1998 United Nations World Population report shows that these changes in composition are occurring throughout the world.<sup>1</sup>

As these populations of children and the elderly have changed, so have their economic and social circumstances. Based on many socioeconomic measures, the elderly today are as well off as, and perhaps better off than, the nonelderly. It is important to note that socioeconomic measures for the elderly are better than those for children. The data also show that children are an increasing fraction of the poor, despite the reduction in family size. A 1984 study first noted this trend.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, several authors have revisited this issue and found that the elderly are better off economically than are children (as measured by, for example, relative family incomes) and also are better off in noneconomic ways as well, such as improved health insurance coverage.<sup>3</sup>

This article expands on previous studies, and provides a wider range of socioeconomic indicators to compare the status of the elderly and children. It uses a report, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-being, 1999*, which presents 23 indicators of "child well-being and

six population and family background measures.<sup>4</sup> The report examines the trends during the past two decades. These indicators are monitored through official Federal statistics covering children's economic security, health, behavior, social environment, and education. They were chosen because they are easy to understand, objectively based on reliable data, and measured regularly. Also, they represent large segments of the population from infancy to age 18 and a balanced mix of the "well-being" domain. For the elderly, this article uses studies similar to those used to compile the data for *America's Children* to develop socioeconomic indicators by which to compare with the data for children. (See notes to table 1.)

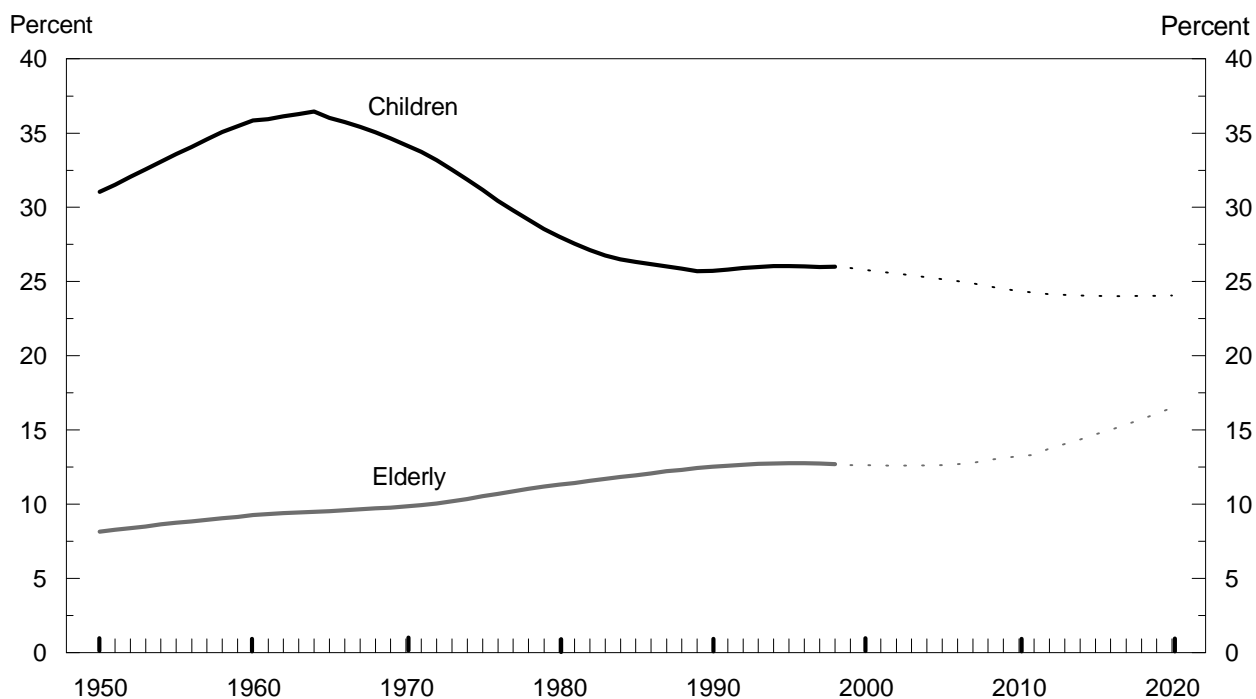
Many of the socioeconomic indicators are important for monitoring the quality of life for both children and the elderly.<sup>5</sup> This article compares many of these indicators for children from infancy to 18 years of age with those of the elderly age 65 and older. Table 1 shows the comparable indicators for both children and the elderly for selected years between 1980 and 1998. One can observe the socioeconomic conditions of the two groups for a particular year, and can compare the changes that have occurred since 1980.

### Population family characteristics

The report on *America's Children* highlights the changes in demographics in the population among children. For instance, as the proportion

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**Chart 1. Children and the elderly as a percentage of the U.S. population, 1950-98 and projected 1999-2020**



SOURCE: Bureau of the Census.

of children in the population has decreased over the years, the proportion of elderly has increased. (See chart 1.) Also, today's children are living in environments with greater racial and ethnic diversity than did previous generations.<sup>6</sup> Another major change for children is in their family structure, with a much lower percentage of children living with both parents in 1987, compared with those who did in 1980.

In comparison, the family structure of the elderly has remained the same, with a stable percentage of elderly living with their spouse. This figure differs for men and women, however. Elderly women are much more likely than elderly men to live alone, because the life expectancy for women exceeds that for men by about 5 years at age 65 and because older men tend to marry younger women. The data also show an increasing share of children living in a household maintained by their grandparents.<sup>7</sup>

### Economic security

The indicators of economic security highlight the main disparities between children and the elderly. The poverty rate among the elderly has fallen rapidly, while the poverty rate of children has risen significantly. (See chart 2, page 24.) The poverty rate for the elderly is now below the poverty rate for nonelderly adults. Although the poverty rate among children

as a whole has modestly declined in recent years, there is a great and growing distributional disparity among children. While some children are doing well, there is a large fraction of children whose economic, health, and social status has declined.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, children are more than three times as likely as the elderly to live in families with income below 50 percent of the poverty line and these children are at much greater risk of experiencing adverse outcomes (such as lower standardized test scores).<sup>9</sup> Similar proportions of children and the elderly live in families with income that is more than 400 percent of the poverty line.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that there is greater income disparity among families with children than among the elderly and that this disparity is increasing for families with children.

However, economic disparity between families with children and the elderly depends on the poverty measure used in the analysis. While the official poverty measure in 1997 indicates that children are more than 80 percent more likely to be poor, an experimental measure for 1997, using a method similar to one proposed by the National Academy of Sciences, shows that children are less than 15 percent more likely to be classified as poor.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the poverty rate for the elderly has fallen from 12.2 percent in 1990 to 10.5 percent in 1997, while the experimental rate for the elderly has remained fairly constant. Alternatively, the official child poverty rate has fallen less than 1 percentage point since 1990, while the experimen-

**Table 1. Socioeconomic indicators for children and the elderly, selected years between 1980 and 1998**

Description of indicator or characteristic	Early period		Current period	
	Year	Value	Year	Value
<b>Population</b>				
In millions				
Children <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	63.7	1998	69.9
Elderly <sup>2</sup> .....	1980	25.7	1998	34.4
In percent				
Children <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	28.0	1998	26.0
Elderly <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	11.0	1998	13.0
<b>Racial and ethnic origin (in percent)</b>				
Children:				
White, non-Hispanic <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	74.0	1998	65.0
Black, non-Hispanic <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	15.0	1998	15.0
Hispanic <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	9.0	1998	15.0
Elderly:				
White, non-Hispanic <sup>2</sup> .....	1980	88.0	1998	84.0
Black, non-Hispanic <sup>2</sup> .....	1980	8.0	1998	8.0
Hispanic <sup>2</sup> .....	1980	3.0	1998	5.0
<b>Family structure (in percent)</b>				
Children living with two parents <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	77.0	1998	68.0
Children living with one parent <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	20.0	1998	27.0
Children living with grandparents <sup>3</sup> .....	1980	3.6	1998	5.6
Elderly living with spouse <sup>3</sup> .....	1980	53.6	1998	54.2
Men .....	—	—	1998	72.6
Women .....	—	—	1998	40.7
Elderly living alone or with nonrelatives <sup>3</sup> .....	1980	32.3	1998	31.9
Men .....	—	—	1998	18.3
Women .....	—	—	1998	41.7
<b>Poverty and family income (in percent)</b>				
Official poverty measure:				
Related children in poverty <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	17.9	1997	19.3
Elderly in poverty <sup>4</sup> .....	1980	15.7	1997	10.5
Experimental poverty measure:				
Children in poverty <sup>5</sup> .....	1990	23.0	1997	20.8
Elderly in poverty <sup>5</sup> .....	1990	18.1	1997	18.4
Income distribution:				
Children in families with incomes below 50 percent of poverty <sup>1</sup> .....				
Elderly with incomes below 50 percent of poverty <sup>4</sup> .....	1980	6.6	1997	8.5
Elderly with incomes below 50 percent of poverty <sup>4</sup> .....	1980	2.1	1997	2.2
Children in families with incomes between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty <sup>1</sup> .....				
Elderly with incomes between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty <sup>4</sup> .....	1980	24.0	1997	21.4
Elderly with incomes between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty <sup>4</sup> .....	1980	33.5	1997	28.1
Children in families with incomes over 400 percent of poverty <sup>1</sup> .....				
Elderly with incomes over 400 percent of poverty <sup>4</sup> .....	1980	16.8	1997	25.0
Elderly with incomes over 400 percent of poverty <sup>4</sup> .....	1980	18.4	1997	26.0
<b>Employment (in percent)</b>				
Children living with parents with at least one parent employed full-time all year <sup>1</sup> .....				
Children living with parents with both parents or only parent employed full-time all year <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	70.0	1997	77.0
Elderly employed <sup>6</sup> .....	1980	20.0	1997	35.0
Elderly employed <sup>6</sup> .....	1980	12.2	1998	11.6
<b>Housing (in percent)</b>				
Households with children reporting: <sup>1</sup>				
Inadequate housing .....	1983	8.0	1997	7.4
Crowded housing .....	1983	8.0	1995	7.0
Households headed by elderly person reporting: <sup>7</sup>				
Inadequate housing .....	1987	6.5	1997	5.8
Crowded housing .....	1987	.5	1995	.3
<b>Food security (in percent)</b>				
Children in households experiencing food insecurity with moderate or severe hunger <sup>1</sup> .....				
Children ages 2 to 5 with good diet quality <sup>1</sup> .....	—	—	1997	4.2
Children ages 2 to 5 with good diet quality <sup>1</sup> .....	—	—	1996	24.0
Children ages 6 to 12 with good diet quality <sup>1</sup> .....	—	—	1996	12.0
Children ages 12 to 18 with good diet quality <sup>1</sup> .....	—	—	1996	6.0
Households with elderly persons and (no children) experiencing food insecurity with moderate or severe hunger <sup>8</sup> .....				
Elderly with good diet quality <sup>9</sup> .....	—	—	1997	1.4
Elderly with good diet quality <sup>9</sup> .....	—	—	1994–96	21.0

See footnotes at end of table.

**Table 1.** Continued—Socioeconomic Indicators for children and the elderly, selected years between 1980 and 1997

Description of Indicators or characteristic	Early period		Current period	
	Year	Value	Year	Value
<b>Access to health care (in percent)</b>				
Children covered by:				
Private health insurance <sup>1</sup> .....	1987	87.0	1997	85.0
Public health insurance <sup>1</sup> .....	1987	19.0	1997	23.0
Elderly covered by:				
Private health insurance <sup>10</sup> .....	1987	99.0	1997	99.0
Public health insurance .....	1987	96.0	1997	96.0
<b>Health status and activity limitation (in percent)</b>				
Children in very good or excellent health <sup>1</sup> .....	1984	78.0	1996	81.0
Children in poverty .....	1984	62.0	1996	65.0
Elderly in very good or excellent health <sup>11</sup> .....	1984	36.3	1996	38.0
Elderly in poverty .....	1984	29.6	1996	27.5
Children ages 5 to 17 with any limitation in activity resulting from chronic conditions <sup>1</sup> .....	1984	6.1	1996	7.5
Children in poverty .....	1984	8.7	1996	12.0
Elderly with activity limitation <sup>11</sup> .....	1984	39.0	1996	36.3
Elderly in poverty .....	—	—	1996	49.7
<b>Mortality</b>				
Deaths before the first birthday per 1,000 live births <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	12.6	1997	7.2
Deaths per 100,000:				
Children ages 1 to 4 <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	63.9	1997	35.8
Children ages 5 to 14 <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	30.6	1997	20.8
Adolescents ages 15 to 19 <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	97.9	1997	74.8
Number of deaths per 100,000:				
Elderly ages 65 to 75 <sup>12</sup> .....	1980	2,995	1997	2,510
Elderly ages 75 to 85 <sup>12</sup> .....	1980	6,693	1997	5,728
Elderly ages 85 and older <sup>12</sup> .....	1980	15,980	1997	15,345
Deaths per 100,000 by firearm:				
Adolescents ages 15 to 19 <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	14.7	1996	21.2
Elderly ages 65 and older <sup>12</sup> .....	1980	13.5	1996	13.9
Deaths per 100,000 by motor vehicle:				
Adolescents ages 15 to 19 <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	42.3	1996	28.2
Elderly ages 65 and older <sup>12</sup> .....	1980	22.5	1996	23.0
Life expectancy (in years):				
Years remaining at birth <sup>12</sup> .....	1980	73.7	1997	76.5
Years remaining at age 65 <sup>12</sup> .....	1980	16.4	1997	17.6
<b>Behavior and social environment</b>				
Cigarette smoking:				
12th grade students who reported smoking daily in the previous 30 days <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	21.3	1998	22.4
Elderly who smoke on some days: <sup>11</sup>				
Men .....	1979	20.9	1995	14.9
Women .....	1979	13.2	1995	11.5
Victims of violent crime:				
Per 1,000 youth ages 12 to 17 <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	37.6	1997	27.1
Per 1,000 elderly (including simple assaults) <sup>13</sup> .....	1980	7.2	1997	4.4
<b>Educational achievements</b>				
Average reading scale scores, students age 13 <sup>1</sup> .....	1982	<sup>14</sup> 259	1996	<sup>14</sup> 259
Average mathematics scale scores, students age 13 <sup>1</sup> .....	1982	<sup>14</sup> 269	1996	<sup>14</sup> 274
Literacy (in percent):				
Youth ages 16 to 18 with limited prose literacy <sup>15</sup> .....	—	—	1992	51.0
Youth ages 16 to 18 with limited quantitative literacy <sup>15</sup> .....	—	—	1992	55.0
Elderly with limited prose literacy <sup>15</sup> .....	—	—	1992	76.0
Elderly with limited quantitative literacy <sup>15</sup> .....	—	—	1992	71.0
High school completion rates (in percent):				
Young adults, ages 18 to 24 <sup>1</sup> .....	1980	84.0	1997	86.0
Elderly <sup>16</sup> .....	1980	40.7	1997	67.0

See footnotes at end of table.

**Table 1. Footnotes—Socioeconomic Indicators for children and the elderly, selected years between 1980 and 1997**

- <sup>1</sup> *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being* (Federal Inter-agency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> *Current Population Reports*, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- <sup>3</sup> *Current Population Reports, Marital Status and Living Arrangements*, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- <sup>4</sup> *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60 and unpublished tables, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- <sup>5</sup> *Experimental Poverty Measures*, P60–205, U.S. Bureau of the Census, table B8e.
- <sup>6</sup> *Employment and Earnings*, Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- <sup>7</sup> American Housing Survey, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- <sup>8</sup> *Measuring food security in the United States, 1995–1998 (Advanced Report)*, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- <sup>9</sup> Unpublished tables, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

- <sup>10</sup> Table H1–2, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- <sup>11</sup> Current estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, 1984 and 1996 unpublished tables, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics.
- <sup>12</sup> *Deaths: Final Data for 1997*, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics.
- <sup>13</sup> National Crime Victimization Reports, U.S. Department of Justice.
- <sup>14</sup> The reading and mathematics proficiency scales have a range from 0 to 500. For reading, the scale score at level 250 implies that the individual is able to interrelate ideas and make generalizations. For math, the score at level 250 implies that the individual can perform numerical operations and beginning problem solving.
- <sup>15</sup> *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1997, National Center for Education Statistics.
- <sup>16</sup> *Current Population Reports, Educational Attainment in the U.S.*, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

NOTE: Dash indicates data not available.

tal rate has fallen by more than 2 percentage points. (See chart 3, page 24.)<sup>12</sup>

As with most age groups in the total population, there has been a recent improvement in the economic well-being of children. Since 1993, the poverty rate for children has fallen and more children are living with an employed parent. Moreover, the percentage of children living with both parents working full-time all year has almost doubled since 1980, increasing from 20 percent to 37 percent. Alternatively, the percentage of all elderly employed has stayed relatively constant since 1980.

The economic security of children and the elderly also affects the incidence of hunger and the likelihood that these groups have a sufficiently good diet. Children are more likely to experience hunger than the elderly, with 4.2 percent living in households with moderate to severe hunger in 1997, compared with 1.4 percent of households with an elderly person (and no children). In 1996, most children and adolescents had a diet that was poor or needed improvement, as indicated by their Healthy Eating Index.<sup>13</sup> Table 1 shows that as children get older, their diet quality declines. In 1996, among children ages 2 to 5, 24 percent had a good diet. For those ages 13 to 18, 6 percent had a good diet. The elderly tend to have a diet quality that is similar to that for young children. In the 1994–96 period, 21 percent of the elderly had a good diet.

In addition to insufficient food quality, inadequate or crowded housing can pose serious problems to a person's physical, psychological, or material well-being. Table 1 also shows that children are much more likely to live in inadequate or crowded housing. In 1995, 7 percent of households with children reported living in crowded housing, while the share for the elderly is less than 0.5 percent.

## Health status

Another important social indicator of well-being is health status. Consequently, a person's access to health care can sug-

gest that they have a reasonable assurance of obtaining the medical and dental attention needed to maintain their physical well-being. The report on *America's Children* shows that the proportion of children covered by health insurance has remained constant since 1987; however, during the same period, the proportion of children covered by private health insurance has decreased and the percentage of children covered by public health insurance has increased. Almost all of the elderly have public health insurance and this has remained stable since 1980.

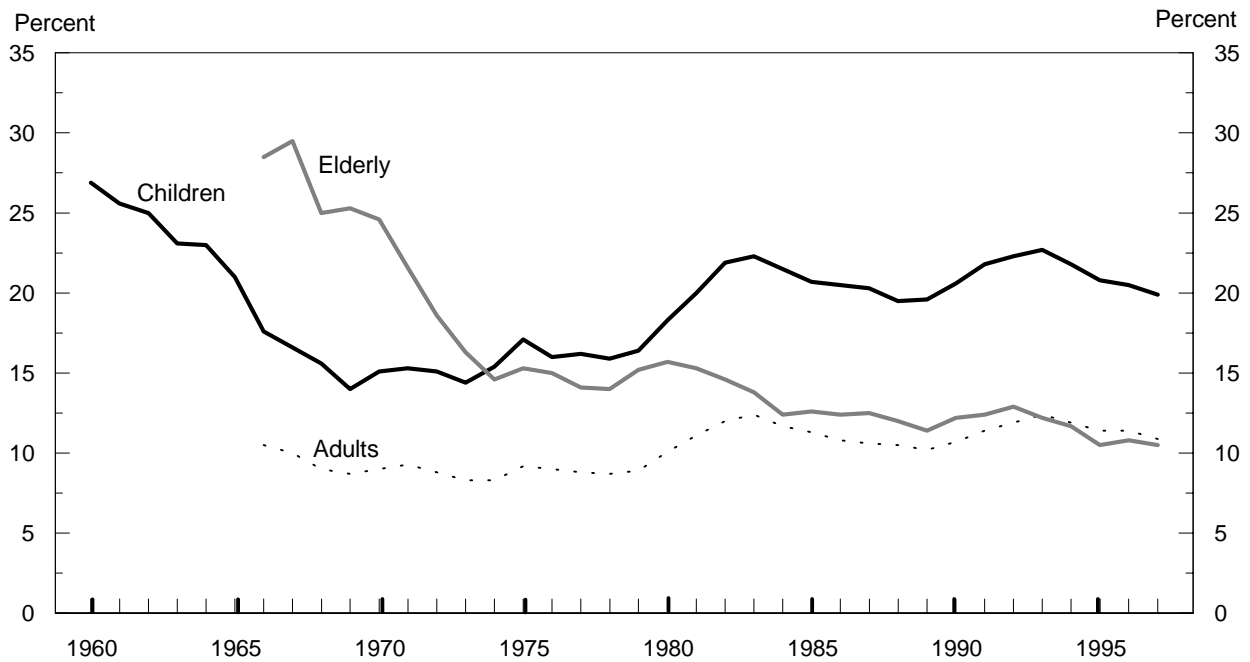
Both children and the elderly have experienced slight improvements in their reported health status since 1980. (See table 1.) The percentage of elderly who say that they are in very good or excellent health has increased from 36 percent in 1984 to 38 percent in 1996 and the percentage of children whose parents report that their children are in very good or excellent health has increased from 78 percent in 1984 to 81 percent in 1996.

While the health status of children has increased, the percentage of children who have limitations in activity (such as difficulty playing or attending school, due to chronic conditions) has increased over the 1984–96 period. The elderly, however, have experienced a decrease in the rate at which they suffer limitations in activity. Poor children and poor elderly persons are much more likely than their nonpoor counterparts to have worse health status and experience activity limitation.

One of the major improvements in the health status of children and the elderly is indicated by the decrease in mortality rates. There has been a dramatic decrease in mortality rates for all age groups. As a result, life expectancy at birth has increased 2.1 years, and life expectancy at age 65 has increased 1 year.

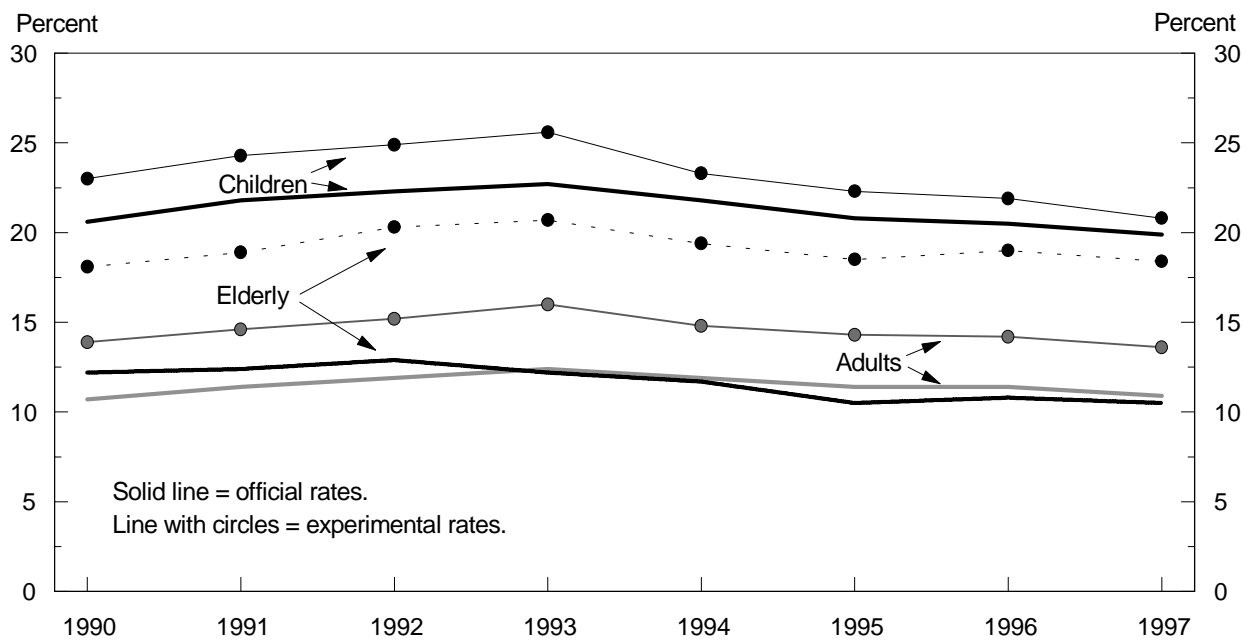
An area in which children have experienced a reduction in well-being is in the firearm mortality rates for adolescents. Almost 30 percent of all deaths for adolescents ages 15 to 19

**Chart 2. Official poverty rates for children, adults (ages 18 to 64), and the elderly, 1960-97**



SOURCE: *Poverty in the United States 1997*, Series P-60 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).

**Chart 3. Official and experimental poverty rates for children, adults (ages 18 to 64), and the elderly, 1990-97**



SOURCE: K. Short and others, *Experimental Poverty Measures: 1990-1997* (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999), table B8e.

are caused by firearm injuries and this rate has almost doubled since 1980, while the rate for the elderly is a small percentage of total deaths and has increased modestly.

## Behavior and social environment

A third area that is useful in assessing the well-being of children and the elderly is their exposure to high-risk behavior. Although the report on *America's Children* presents data on youth's drug and alcohol use, we compare the prevalence of cigarette smoking. Twelfth graders are much more likely to smoke than the elderly, and the proportion of youth who smoke has increased, especially over the last 5 years, while the share among the elderly has fallen.<sup>14</sup>

It also appears that children are much more likely to be victims of violent crimes than are the elderly; however, the rate of children victimized by violent crime has fallen slightly since 1980.

## Education

A higher level of education can reflect a higher level of well-being, in terms of increased economic opportunity and the ability to adjust to changing economic situations. Table 1 shows that today's young adults are much more educated than today's elderly. The high school completion rate for young adults (ages 18 to 24) is 86 percent, compared with 67 percent for the elderly. This completion rate for young adults

has remained fairly constant since 1980, while the rate for the elderly and all other age groups has increased dramatically. While this measure of high school completion suggests an improved picture of the education of the elderly, they are still less likely to have a high school education and much more likely to have limited literacy. About three-fourths of the elderly have limited prose and quantitative literacy.

BOTH THE ELDERLY AND CHILDREN are experiencing improvements in health status, but do not share the same increases in economic well-being. In addition, recent indicators suggest that children are experiencing more behavioral and social environment problems. These data, however, do not show the distribution of well-being within the populations of children and the elderly and, hence, do not show the disparity among each grouping. While this disparity is difficult to measure, one method is to determine if these social indicators vary for different demographic groups. For example, the report shows that poor children are more likely than nonpoor children to have lower health status, to have activity limitations, and to experience hunger. Similarly, the elderly who are poor are more likely than nonpoor elderly to experience these same negative outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

In some respects, it appears that the elderly are better off than children, however, if this continues, today's children could face a brighter future as older Americans. In most cases, the socioeconomic indicators also could suggest that the well-being of our most vulnerable populations, children and the elderly, are at a great risk of experiencing detrimental outcomes. □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 1998 *State of the World Population: THE NEW GENERATIONS* (New York, NY, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> S. Preston, "Children and the Elderly: Divergent Paths for America's Dependents," *Demography*, 1984, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 435–57.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-being* (Washington, Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1999); J. Palmer, T. Smeeding, and B. B. Torrey, *The Vulnerable* (Washington, The Urban Institute Press, 1988); and *A Profile of Older Americans: 1997* (Washington, U.S. Administration on Aging, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *America's Children: Key National Indicators*, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> C. Jencks and B. Torrey "Beyond Income and Poverty: Trends in Social Welfare among Children and the Elderly Since 1960," in J. Palmer, T. Smeeding, and B.B. Torrey, eds., *The Vulnerable* (Washington, The Urban Institute Press, 1988), pp. 229–65; and *Profile of Older Americans*, Administration on Aging.

<sup>6</sup> *America's Children: Key National Indicators*, 1999; and *A Profile of Older Americans*.

<sup>7</sup> L. Casper, and K. Bryson, "Co-resident Grandparents and their Grandchildren: Grandparent Maintained Families," Working Paper no. 26 (Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> *America's Children: Key National Indicators*, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> G. Duncan, J. Yeung, J. Brooks-Gunn, and J.R. Smith, "How much does child poverty affect the life chances of children?" *American So-*

*ciological Review*, 1998 June, pp. 406–23.

<sup>10</sup> L. Rainwater and T. Smeeding "Doing Poorly: The Real Income of American Children in a Comparative Perspective," Luxembourg Income Study Working Paper (Syracuse, NY, 1995). Rainwater and Smeeding show that the well-being of these children compares favorably to the well-being of similar children in other countries.

<sup>11</sup> See Connie F. Citro and Robert T. Michael, *Measuring Poverty: A New Approach* (Washington, National Academy Press, 1995); and K. Short, T. Garner, D. Johnson, and P. Doyle, *Experimental Poverty Measures: 1990–1997* (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Short, and others, *Experimental Poverty Measures*, 1999. The experimental poverty measure used in this article uses income net of taxes and transfers and subtracts work-related and healthcare expenditures. This measure is labeled DES-DCM2 and appears in table B8e in Short and others.

<sup>13</sup> The Healthy Eating Index is a summary measure of diet quality consisting of 10 components, each representing different aspects of a healthy diet. A score above 80 implies a good diet. See S. A. Bowman, M. Lino, S. A. Gerrior, and P. P. Basiotis, *The Healthy Eating Index: 1994–96* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition and Policy Promotion, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> All adult age groups have shown a decrease in smoking activity.

<sup>15</sup> *Health United States, 1998* (Hyattsville, Maryland, National Center for Health Statistics, 1998).