

CENSUS BRIEF



America's Children at Risk

MOST ADOLESCENTS NAVIGATE the perilous course from childhood to adulthood without serious mishap. But some stumble. The more obstacles they have had to overcome as children, the more likely they are to stumble as adolescents.

Although risk factors may lead to an unfavorable outcome, many people who grow up in poverty nonetheless achieve success later in life.

MANY CHILDREN MUST OVERCOME OBSTACLES—RISK FACTORS

Social research has identified many indicators that put children at risk of problems ranging from hyperactivity to dropping out of school to becoming involved in crime. This *Brief* reports findings from the March 1996 Current Population Survey on how American children are doing in relation to six of these risk factors: poverty, welfare dependence, absent parents, one-parent families, unwed mothers and parents who did not graduate from high school.

CHANGES FROM 1970 TO 1996

Risk Factor 1: Poverty. During 1995, 21 percent of American children under age 18 lived in families with incomes below the poverty level. This is significantly more than in 1970 when only 15 percent were in poor families.

Risk Factor 2: Welfare Dependence. During 1995, 15 percent of the nation's children were in households receiving cash assistance or food stamps. The percentage of children whose families participate in these programs has increased as the percentage of children in poverty has risen.

Risk Factor 3: Both Parents Absent. Children are slightly more likely to live in a home with neither parent. In March 1996, 4 percent of children lived with neither parent, up from 3 percent in 1970. Some lived with grandparents or other relatives; others lived with nonrelatives, for example, as foster children. The number of children living with grandparents, with neither parent present, jumped from less than 1 million in 1990 to more than 1.4 million in 1996.

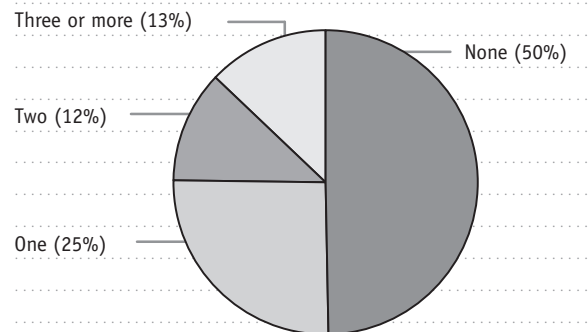
Risk Factor 4: One-Parent Families. In March 1996, 28 percent of children lived in one-parent families. This is significantly more than in 1970 when only 12 percent were in such families.

Risk Factor 5: Unwed Mothers. In March 1996, 9 percent of children lived with a never-married mother, compared with fewer than 1 percent in 1970.

Risk Factor 6: Parent Who Has Not Graduated From High School. In March 1996, 19 percent of children lived with a parent or guardian who had not

HALF OF 16- AND 17-YEAR-OLDS ARE AT RISK

(percent with number of risk factors)



graduated from high school. Nonetheless, things have improved substantially from 1970 when 38 percent of children had a nongraduate parent or guardian.

**SOME ADOLESCENTS STUMBLE—
OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH RISKS**

The March 1996 Current Population Survey also identified two adverse outcomes that can occur for 16- and 17-year-old children: dropping out of high school and not working, and (for girls) giving birth to and living with a child. Since the risk factors and outcomes were measured at nearly the same point in time—during 1995 and in March 1996—it would be incorrect to infer that one caused the other. Causes precede effects. However, the findings do suggest that those exposed to risk factors are more likely to experience adverse outcomes.

Outcome 1: Not in School and Not Working. In March 1996, 5 percent of all adolescents age 16 and 17 were not enrolled in school and were not working. Hispanic children were more likely than others to experience this condition: 9 percent, compared with 6 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks and 4 percent of non-Hispanic Whites. (The percentages for non-Hispanic Blacks and Whites are not significantly different from each other.)

Outcome 2: Teenage Mothers. In March 1996, 3 percent of all 16- and 17-year-old girls had given birth to and were living with one or more children.¹ Nine percent of non-Hispanic Black, 6 percent of Hispanic, and

¹ If a 16- or 17-year old mother maintains a mother-child family household—few of these young mothers do—she is considered to have had an adverse outcome and to be exposed to a risk factor: living in a one-parent family.

1 percent of non-Hispanic White girls had given birth to and were living with one or more children. (The percentages for non-Hispanic Blacks and Hispanics are not significantly different.)

The figure below shows that teenagers experiencing some of the six risk factors are more likely than those without them to experience these outcomes. And, those with more risk factors are more likely than those with fewer to have these adverse outcomes.

Some of the six risk factors are more associated with adverse outcomes than others. Living with a nongraduate parent or guardian is more strongly related to being out of school and not working than is living in a one-parent family. It also may be the case that particular combinations of risk factors are especially likely to produce these outcomes.

Public policy often seeks to improve the well-being of children by reducing the proportion of those who are at risk. For example, recently enacted welfare reform legislation seeks, among other things, to—

- End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits.
- Prevent out-of-wedlock pregnancies.
- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

The *Work Opportunity and Personal Responsibility Reconciliation Action of 1996* directs the Census Bureau to monitor the impacts of welfare reform on the well-being of children. We will be watching and reporting on the future course of these and other risk factors and outcomes.

CENSUS BRIEF

CONTACTS:

America's Children at Risk

Ken Bryson
301-457-2465
<kbryson@census.gov>

Census Briefs:
Public Information Office
301-457-2822
<cenbrf@census.gov>

This *Brief* is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. All statistics are subject to sampling variability, as well as survey design flaws, respondent classification and reporting errors, and data processing mistakes. The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors, and analytical statements have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources.

THE MORE RISK FACTORS, THE MORE LIKELY ADVERSE OUTCOMES

(percent of 16- and 17-year-olds with adverse outcomes)

