

**AMERICA'S  
CHILDREN:  
CHALLENGES  
FOR THE  
21ST CENTURY**

**February 2000**

**T**he last century has brought tremendous gains for children: killer childhood diseases like polio and whooping cough have been virtually wiped out, dramatically higher percentages of children now complete high school, and more parents live to see their children and grandchildren grow up.

While this progress has been remarkable, challenges persist and new ones emerge as we enter the 21st century.

For example, even with tremendous gains in medicine and public health, more than eleven million children still have no health insurance, the surest ticket to proper health care.

While more children than ever attend school, millions of low-income children do not have access to the educational and economic opportunities of digital technology.

And, nearly a quarter of children under age six live in poverty.

Last century's reformers set their sights high. Today's challenges are at least as daunting.

But, with social leadership and collective action, we believe today's Americans are poised to do their part to advance the interests of children in the 21st century.

This briefing presents a data snapshot of some of these challenges along with a picture of the changing demographics affecting children and the nation over the next decade.

We hope it will serve as a valuable information tool as efforts are made to address the unique needs of children and families in the years ahead.



**A Publication of  
The Children's Partnership**

**With support from the  
David and Lucile Packard Foundation**

# CHILDREN AT THE 21ST CENTURY

## Challenge

## Where Children Stand Today

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### **TO ASSURE CHILDREN THE BASICS TO SUCCEED**

- 39% of fourth grade students do not read or write at grade level.<sup>1</sup>
  - 50% of children never complete a single year of college.<sup>2</sup>
  - 63% of Hispanics and 81% of blacks complete high school compared to 90% of whites.<sup>3</sup>
  - 3,000 children are added to the ranks of the uninsured each day.<sup>4</sup>
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### **TO STRENGTHEN THE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF FAMILIES**

- Full-time work at a minimum wage job does not lift a parent with two children out of poverty.<sup>5</sup>
  - Children who are poor are three times more likely to die in infancy, four times more likely to become pregnant as teenagers, and are more likely to drop out of school than are their more affluent counterparts.<sup>6</sup>
  - Children have replaced the elderly as the poorest age group, with poverty rates for children under age 6 twice as high as for adults and the elderly.<sup>7</sup>
  - Almost one third of children live in a one-parent family, an increase from 11% in 1970. Children raised by a single parent have less financial and educational advantages than those with two parents.<sup>8</sup>
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### **TO STRENGTHEN CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT & LEADERSHIP**

- 40% of parents do not feel good about their children's future.<sup>9</sup>
- Parents with non-adult children are less likely to vote than other members of the electorate.<sup>10</sup>
- The percentage of voters most likely to be sympathetic to children's issues (adults in the child-rearing ages) is expected to decline this decade.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, *1999 Kids Count Data Online, Social and Economic Characteristics*, www.aecf.org.

<sup>2</sup> Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children Yearbook 1999*, Washington, D.C., 1999, p. xi, and *Will America Grow Up Before It Grows Old?* by Peter Peterson, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, US Dept of Education, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1998, 1999*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey*, March 1997, Calculations by the Children's Defense Fund.

<sup>5</sup> L. Mishel, J. Bernstein and J. Schmitt, *State of Working America, 1998-99*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 189-192.

<sup>6</sup> Children Now, *The State of Our Children: Where We Stand and Where We Go From Here*, CA, 1989, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> National Center for Children In Poverty, *Young Children in Poverty*, Washington, D.C., June 1999, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Household & Family Characteristics, March 1998*, December 1998.

<sup>9</sup> "I Feel Good!" survey by Louis Harris and Associates, May 14-19, 1999, published in Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, *Public Perspective*, Volume 10, No. 4, June/July 1999, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Communication with Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, derived from analysis of census data, August 27, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Communication with John Fairbank, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates, a public opinion research and consulting firm, January 26, 1999.

## **Challenge**

## **Where Children Stand Today**

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### **TO REINFORCE POSITIVE VALUES IN A CHANGING CULTURE**

- Children spend an average of 38 hours a week -- nearly 5 hours a day -- consuming media (TV, video games, listening to music and surfing the Internet) outside of school.<sup>12</sup>
  - Nearly 7 in 10 kids (69%) have a computer at home and 45% have Internet access from home.<sup>13</sup>
  - Children influence purchasing power of an estimated \$241 billion, making them a prime marketing target.<sup>14</sup>
  - Over one third of American students smoke by the time they leave high school.<sup>15</sup>
  - 12% of 8th graders, 22% of 10th graders and 26% of 12 graders use illicit drugs.<sup>16</sup>
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### **TO DEAL WITH THE EPIDEMIC OF VIOLENCE**

- Children between the ages of 12 and 17 are nearly three times more likely than adults to be victims of violent crimes.<sup>17</sup>
- The firearm injury epidemic is ten times larger than the polio epidemic was in the first half of this century.<sup>18</sup>
- Children witness more than 100,000 acts of violence of TV by the time they complete elementary school and 200,000 acts of violence by the time they graduate from high school.<sup>19</sup>
- Almost five children die each day as a result of abuse or neglect.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, *Kids & Media @ the New Millennium*, November 1999, [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Center for Media Education, *The Deceiving Web of Online Advertising*, Washington, D.C., 1997, p. 2. Reflects \$14 billion spent by children under 12, \$67 billion spent by teenagers and the two groups influence of \$160 billion of their parents' spending.

<sup>15</sup> University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, *Monitoring the Future*, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services, *America's Children: Key Indicators of Well-Being, 1999*, 1999. Reflects students' use of illicit drugs in the previous 30 days.

<sup>17</sup> Children's Defense Fund, op. cit., p 109.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Kaufer Christoffel, "Handguns and the Environments of Children," *Children's Environments*, 12(1), 1995. p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> Center for Media Education, "Children and Television: Frequently Asked Questions," data obtained online, [www.cme.org](http://www.cme.org).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, *A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States*, Washington, D.C., 1995.

# TOMORROW'S YOUTH: A CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC

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By 2030, the number of children in America will increase by 18% (from 78.5 million to 93 million).<sup>21</sup>

By 2010, Latinos will become the nation's largest ethnic minority. Over one-third will be under 18 and over half will be under 25.<sup>22</sup>

In 2010, children of color will represent the majority of young people in California, Florida, New York, and Texas -- states that will account for a third of the nation's youth.<sup>23</sup>

The average household size will be 2.5 persons in 2010 (compared to 5 in 1900). Household size for Asian Pacific Islander households will be 3.5 and Hispanic households 3.4 persons.<sup>24</sup>

By 2010, the number of families with no children will increase by 28% (from 36 million in 1995 to 46 million) -- but the numbers of those with children will remain about the same.<sup>25</sup>

Between 1995 and 2015, the black youth population ages 15 to 17 will increase 19%; American Indian 17%, Asian/Pacific Islanders 74%; and Hispanics 59% -- compared to 3% of white youth.<sup>26</sup>

There will be a 15% increase in the number of births to women ages 15-19 by the year 2005.<sup>27</sup>

High school graduates will increase to 3.1 million by 2007-08, a 20% increase from 1995-96.<sup>28</sup>

Higher education enrollment is projected to increase to 16.1 million by the year 2008, up 12% from 1996 levels.<sup>29</sup>

The number of bachelor's degrees is expected to increase to 1.27 million by 2007-8, an increase of 9% from 1995-96.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Resident Population Estimates*, December 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Louv, *Childhood's Future*, 1990.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Projections of the Number of Household and Families in the United States: 1995 to 2010*, April 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Howard Snyder and Melissa Sickmund, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*, National Center for Juvenile Justice, US Department of Justice, September 1999, pp. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, *When Teens Have Sex: Issues and Trends*, www.aecf.org.

<sup>28</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2008*, nces.ed.gov

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



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