KENNETH C. LAND, VICKI L. LAMB and SARAH KAHLER MUSTILLO

CHILD AND YOUTH WELL-BEING IN THE UNITED STATES, 1975–1998: SOME FINDINGS FROM A NEW INDEX

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the following questions: Overall, on average, how did child and youth well-being in the United States of America change in the last quarter of the 20th century? Did it improve or deteriorate? By how much? In which domains or areas of social life? For specific age groups? For particular race/ethnic groups? And did race/ethnic groups disparities increase or decrease? To address these questions, some 28 national-level time series of social indicators in seven quality-of-life domains – material well-being, social relationships (with family and peers), health, safety/behavioral concerns, productive activity (educational attainments), place in community (participation in schooling or work institutions), and emotional/spiritual well-being – are reviewed. Twenty-five of these time series date back to 1975 or earlier, while three are based on indicators that commenced in the 1980s. The 25 time series that date back to 1975 are indexed by percentage change from the base year 1975 – that is, subsequent annual observations are computed as percentages of the base year values. Similarly, all 28 time series that are available by 1985 also are indexed separately with 1985 as the base year. This is followed by the construction of seven domain-specific summary well-being indices in which each of the component time series in each of seven well-being domains are equally weighted. The seven component indices then are combined into two equally-weighted summary indices of child and youth well-being – the first of which is based on the 25 social indicator time series that date back to 1975 and the second of which is based on the 28 time series that date back to 1985. We also examine the impact of averaging the well-being indicators across the individual time series rather than across the seven quality of life domains. For this, we calculate corresponding base year 1975 and 1985 summary well-being indices that average equally across the individual component series. Basic findings about trends in child and youth well-being in the United States in the last quarter of the 20th century are shown to depend on both the base year and the formula by which the summary indices are calculated. Findings about child and youth well-being also are dependent upon the specific indicators and domains used in the composition of the summary indices. Using our general indices as metrics by which to measure change, we reach several conclusions. First, using 1975 as a base year – overall conditions of life for children and youths in the United States deteriorated fairly steadily for a number of years in the 1980s and reached low points in the early-1990s. From 1993, they then began an upturn that continued
through 1998 towards, but still slightly below, 1975 levels. In other words, while some domains and conditions of life for children/youths improved by 1998 as compared to 1975, others deteriorated. Averaging across all of the domains of life and conditions included in our summary indices, the basic finding is that the overall quality of life of children/youths in the United States was not better in 1998 than in 1975. Using 1985 as a base year, the trend in overall well-being for children/youths shows a similar pattern of decline through the early-1990s followed by an improvement through 1998 to levels slightly above those of the 1985 base year. In other words, compared to 1985 base levels, average conditions of well-being for children/youths in the United States had slightly improved by the late-1990s. Additional findings are discussed pertaining to trends over time in each of the seven domains of well-being, trends within infancy, childhood, and adolescence/teenage age groupings, and trends in race/ethnic-group-specific comparisons and disparities.

Every generation of adults is concerned about the conditions of its children and youths (Moore, 1999). From the stagflation and socially turbulent days of the 1970s through the decline of the rust belt industries and transition to the information age in the 1980s to the relatively prosperous e-economy and multicultural years of the late-1990s, Americans have fretted over the material circumstances of the nation’s children, their health and safety, their educational progress, and their moral development. Are their fears and concerns warranted? How do we know whether circumstances of life for children in the United States are bad and getting worse, or good and improving? On what basis can the public and its leaders form opinions and draw conclusions?

Since the 1960s, researchers in social indicators/quality-of-life measurement have argued that well-measured and consistently collected social indicators provide a way to monitor the condition of groups in society, including children and families, today and over time (Land, 2000). The information thus provided can be strategic in forming the ways we think about important issues in our personal lives and the life of the nation. Indicators of child and youth well-being, in particular, are used by child advocacy groups, policy makers, researchers, the media, and service providers to serve a number of purposes. In three instances:

- to describe the condition of children,
- to monitor or track child outcomes, and
- to set goals,