Abstract

The Robustness of Indices of Child Well-being

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Child Trends

As data on children’s well-being have become more available, users such as policy makers, funders, practitioners and citizens have sought summary indices that succinctly but accurately describe the well-being of children and the supportiveness of children’s environments. A number of indices have been produced; but there is a need for indices that are developmentally-informed and research-based. Also, there are conflicting needs for consistency versus the opportunity to improve and expand items over time. If a single-item indicator is changed, the time-series for the index can be undermined. However, given the large number of items used in most indices, changes in a minority of items may not be a problem for multi-item indices, especially if the integrity of the conceptual framework is maintained. This paper will assess the promise of using a carefully constructed framework to develop indices that can be modified slightly in response to social changes or methodological improvements.

The National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) was developed specifically to provide indicator data for U.S. children under age 18, for the nation and for each state. Although the primary focus is on children’s health, information is obtained for a range of child well-being constructs and about the contexts (home, school, neighborhood, etc.) in which children grow up. With these rich data on approximately 90,000 children from both 2003 and 2007, we developed theory-based and research-informed indices that summarize both children’s well-being and children’s contexts. Both positive and negative indices have been developed. Each index incorporates four domains, with four sub-domains in each domain. Indices have been created for children in two age groups: 6-11, and 12-17.

This paper will share findings from analyses of the 2007 NSCH, building on indices developed using the 2003 data (presented at the ISCI conference in Sydney). The paper will compare trends and patterns across the two years of NSCH data overall and for subgroups. The paper will briefly describe the modest changes made in the survey to improve item content and wording, and analyses will explore the robustness of the 2003 and 2007 findings to these changes in content. For example, are patterns found by age, gender, and family background using the 2003 NSCH replicated using data from the 2007 NSCH? While average levels may differ, since four years have intervened, successful replication of social and economic patterns would suggest that the indices overall are robust.