America's Schoolchildren:
Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

To provide a context for the articles in this journal issue, which focus on programs for children in elementary and middle school, this article depicts the cohort of children who were between 5 and 14 years old in the 1990s and compares them with their counterparts earlier in the century. It reports their numbers, overall and by racial and ethnic heritage; the makeup, employment, and economic status of their parents; and the time they spend in school. The article examines changes in these demographics and characteristics of school-age children with an eye to the effect that these trends may have on public attitudes toward children and youths, and on support for government funding to keep young people safe and to promote their development.

The twentieth century has redrawn the portrait of American children, as well as their families, neighborhoods, and daily lives. Some of the changes are demographic: The number of children living in the United States has grown, but the proportion of children to adults has decreased, which may undercut political support for government spending on children. Other changes are structural: Families have grown smaller and their lives seem more hectic, with increasing commitments by all family members to jobs, school, and activities. Because few adults are home or at least close by after school lets out, concerns have escalated about children’s well-being during the afternoon hours. Changes like these influence decisions about the role society should take in helping to keep school-age children both “safe and smart.”

This journal issue focuses on programs that serve children during the elementary and middle-school years. As a context for the later articles, this article characterizes the cohort of children who were between 5 and 14 years old in the 1990s (when data on 5- to 14-year-olds is unavailable, the term “children” is used to span the period from birth to 18 years old). Historical comparisons highlight a number of ways that daily life has changed for children in this age range. The article concludes with an overview of attitudinal shifts in adult perceptions about children and youths, their families, and the
Child Demographics
Despite the media attention paid to the rapid brain development of infants and the risky behavior of adolescents (ages 15 and up), most of childhood falls quietly between those high-profile periods. In 1998, there were 39 million children ages 5 to 14 living in the United States. That is more than twice the number living here in 1900, as Figure 1 shows. Nevertheless, children now make up a smaller percentage of the citizenry, for a range of reasons: Families are having fewer children, elders are living longer, and a growing number of adults are remaining childless. Only 34% of U.S. households included any children under age 18 in 1996. That year, one in seven Americans were between the ages of 5 and 14, compared with one in five in 1960.

The race and ethnicity of the nation’s children have also changed from earlier in the twentieth century. As the flow of immigration from Europe slowed, and immigration from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East expanded, the population of American children has grown more diverse. As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of American 5- to 14-year-olds who are not Caucasian has increased from one-fourth in 1980 to about one-third in 1998. It is expected to approach one-half by the year 2020. Today, one American child in five is either foreign-born or born to immigrant parents.

These changes in the composition of the U.S. population—the shrinking proportion who are children and the growing diversity of those children’s backgrounds—may have important political implications. If few voters are parents, or if voting adults do not feel a kinship with children whose skin color, native language, or family culture differs from theirs, the changes described above could weaken public support for programs benefitting children, youths, and families.

Family and Community Context
School-age children are firmly intertwined within both their families and neighborhoods. They are still young enough to spend much of their time with their parents, yet they are old enough to begin to explore the neighborhood, often accompanied by friends who live nearby. Thus the dual impact of the family and community contexts during children’s middle years can be powerful. Changes that the past several decades have wrought in family structure, parental employment, income, and neighborhood residence mean that children today grow up surrounded by experiences and influences that differ sharply from those that operated earlier in the century.

Family Structure and Employment
Traditional families made up of a husband, a wife, and one or more children are far less prominent today than they once were. Less than 30 years ago, 40% of American households matched that description, compared with only one quarter of households in the 1990s. Taking the child’s perspective, Figure 3 shows the declining prevalence of two-parent households. In 1960, nearly 9 of 10 children lived in two-parent families (including both biological and stepfamilies), but in 1996 fewer than 7 of 10 children did so. As unmarried births and divorces have made two-parent families less common, single-parent families headed by women have taken their place. Today, more than half of all children are expected to live at least part of their childhood separated from one or both of their parents.

Along with changes in family structure have come changing roles for parents. Regardless of their marital status, mothers are more likely to work outside the home today than they were previously. As Figure 4 shows, the proportion of school-age children with a working mother rose by about 10% each decade until it leveled off in 1990. The change is greatest for married women: In 1996, some 77% of married mothers with school-age children worked outside the home, while slightly more than 40% were employed in 1960. Moreover, the employed mothers of school-agers most often work full time. Because the typical
school day lasts less than six hours, compared to an adult workday of more than eight hours, it is not surprising that more and more parents are calling for reliable community programs where their youngsters can spend time outside school with adults, enjoy their peers, and pursue their interests.

**Family Income**

Even with the additional salaries of working mothers, poverty rates among families with children have remained high. In 1995, some 19% of children ages 6 to 17 lived in families whose income fell beneath the federal poverty line (which was then $15,569 for a family of four).\(^{18}\) Poverty rates are highest among Native American, African-American, and Hispanic children; among children living in single-parent, female-headed households; and among central-city residents. That said, however, the majority of poor children are white and non-Hispanic, live outside the largest urban areas, and have at least one parent who works.\(^{12}\)

All poverty is not equal: Some children live in families with household incomes just below the poverty line, and others live in extremely poor families; some experience poverty for only a few months or a year, and others spend their entire childhood poor.\(^{19}\) African-American children are more likely than others to suffer both extreme and long-term poverty. In many instances, the impact of poverty on children is compounded because families with limited incomes tend to live in neighborhoods with high unemployment, high crime, and few monetary resources. Census data reveal that 1 school-age child in 5 lives in a poor neighborhood, and 1 in 20 lives in a neighborhood considered extremely poor because at least 40% of the households have incomes below the poverty level.\(^{20}\) Youngsters growing up in those situations are likely to

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*S Projected

**Figure 1**

**Number of 5- to 14-Year-Olds in the United States, 1900 to 1998**

inherit a bleak view of what adulthood has to offer them.

Trends in the economy and changes in family composition have combined to widen the gaps between poor, middle-class, and wealthy families.21 From a child’s perspective, income disparities translate into sharp differences between the available options when it comes to out-of-school experiences. A 1990 national survey of child care arrangements found that school-age children in poor families were one-third as likely as those in middle-class families to attend after-school centers. Poor children were less than half as likely to spend their afternoons in lessons designed to expand their academic, athletic, cultural, or creative skills.22 These differences are not surprising, because the cost of lessons and after-school programs is borne almost entirely by parents. Nevertheless, these disparities serve as a reminder that the children facing the steepest personal challenges, in the most threatening surroundings, are often left out of the programs that could support their development.

Community Surroundings
As the previous discussion suggested, the daily lives of families and children are shaped not only by economic resources and family structure but also by where they live. Residential mobility among American
families has been widespread during this century: Nearly one-fifth (17%) of American children move in any given year. Families have left rural areas for the cities, moved from cities to suburbs, and crisscrossed the nation in search of economic opportunity and new lifestyles. In 1920, the country’s urban population first outnumbered the rural population, and 70 years later, three-fourths of all Americans lived in cities.

The growth of the suburbs, which began in earnest after World War II, significantly changed the lives of many children in the middle-class families who predominated in the suburbs. Though they gained space and privacy, the children had to depend on their parents for transportation to school and activities. They were surrounded by other children from similar backgrounds, but relatively isolated from family friends and kinfolk. By contrast, in those inner-city neighborhoods where poverty became increasingly concentrated, life took on a more threatening character for many children and families. There, the flight of middle-class residents, businesses, and employment opportunities left behind deteriorating institutions, crime, and social problems.

To varying extents, communities provide organized programs, activities, and places designed to keep young people safe and busy while they are not in school or with

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**Figure 3**

Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years of Age in the United States, 1960, 1980, and 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Two Parents</th>
<th>Mother Only</th>
<th>Father Only</th>
<th>No Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

family members. National data shows that nearly half of the schools in suburban areas and in central cities offer extended-day programs to fourth graders, while just over one-fourth of rural schools do so. The programs that exist also differ in character from neighborhood to neighborhood. An in-depth study of two Chicago neighborhoods revealed that the suburban community offered three times as many different activities as did the inner-city neighborhood. The suburban activity array included arts classes, clubs, sports, and civic groups; in the urban neighborhood, tutoring and prevention programs predominated. Dramatic differences separate children’s needs and the choices available to them, depending on where they live.

Public Concern About Out-of-School Time

The transformation of American childhood coincides with an escalating concern on the part of adults about children’s development, especially that of children ages 5 to 14. A national poll taken in 1996 by Public Agenda found that a majority of Americans believe youths are failing to learn moral values; public schools are not providing a high-quality, safe education; and today’s children are exposed to negative influences (such as crime, gangs, drugs) at higher rates than previous generations. When asked to explain these problems, nearly one-half of the adults who responded to the survey report that it is “very common” for teens to get into trouble because they have too much free time. Indeed, statistics collected by police and other authorities indicate that risky behaviors such as sexual activity, alcohol and drug use, and juvenile crime increase significantly from 3:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M.

Figure 4

Percentage of Mothers with Children Ages 6 to 17 Who Were Employed, 1960 to 1996


Concern about children’s use of free time raises new policy issues for a society that has long considered school to be the primary program that youngsters require. More of America’s youngsters (ages 5 to 19) are enrolled in school now than ever before. School enrollment rates among that age...
group have risen from 51% at the turn of the century to 93% in 1990. Moreover, the number of days of school attended by the average student nearly doubled from 99 days per year in 1900 to 161 days per year in 1980, the last year for which such statistics are published. Even so, a great deal of free time remains for today's young people, who are less likely to be burdened with work or household chores than were children early in the century. Children attend school only six hours a day, five days a week, for approximately 180 days a year. School is closed for one reason or another (teacher planning days, vacations, holidays, or weekends) fully 185 days each year. A recent national survey found that, in a given week, 12-year-olds averaged between 5 and 6 hours studying or reading for pleasure, compared with 15 hours spent watching television. Not surprisingly, more time spent reading is associated with higher test scores, while more time watching television is accompanied by modestly lower scores. Against this backdrop, education experts argue that more of children's time should be devoted to learning.

The challenge of managing children's out-of-school time is also a practical concern for parents, as a number of recent surveys and polls have indicated. For instance, 72% of the parents in a national poll taken in 1996 commented that they would like schools to be kept open longer for classes, supervised homework, or extracurricular activities. A 1995 poll of 600 parents in Minneapolis highlighted their desire to have more safe and stimulating places for young people to go when they are not in school, where they can engage in meaningful activities and where they can spend time with caring adults. Parents and youths in Minneapolis noted that children's participation in out-of-school programs is limited by barriers, such as transportation problems, lack of time, poor quality and choice of programs, and unaffordable fees. Two 1998 surveys, one of more than 1,000 California adults and one of a national sample of 800 voters, found that close to 80% of those surveyed said they were willing to pay more taxes to support after-school mentoring, educational, and prevention programs for youths. This willingness reflects the widespread belief on the part of the public that after-school programs and activities may be an effective way to help young people stay on the right track.

Conclusion

The demographic and societal trends described above combine to change the contexts in which school-age children live their lives. These trends contribute to growing concern on the part of parents and the public at large about the development of 5- to 14-year-olds and about negative influences that arise during the many daytime hours those children spend outside school. As a result, interest in programs and activities for children and youths in this age range is at a historic high. The remainder of this journal issue is devoted to a more in-
depth look at the developmental issues these youngsters are facing and a careful examination of the programs that parents and community leaders rely on to keep children and youths safe, learning, and growing in positive ways.


15. See note no. 13, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, Table 9-1, p. 661.


17. See note no. 1, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, p. 82.


21. See note no. 4, Hernandez, p. 245.


23. See note no. 1, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, p. 35.


32. See note no. 31, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, p. 34.


