



PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA'S  
CHILDREN:

THE ROLE OF THE PRINT MEDIA

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# Perceptions and Misperceptions of America's Children: The Role of the Print Media

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is closely linked to a recent report that identified several misperceptions Americans have about our children.<sup>1</sup> That report was based on a set of surveys designed to ascertain how well the American public understood some basic statistical facts about children today. Survey topics were selected to reflect relatively important social policy issues where responses could be compared to indisputable statistical data.

Five crucial misperceptions about American children and youth were identified in the surveys:

- 1) Less than one fifth (19 percent knew that the number of children on welfare had declined since 1996 (the number of children receiving welfare declined by 50 percent between 1996 and 2000).
- 2) Less than one-fifth (19 percent) of the public is aware that the percent of children living in single-parent families has remained fairly stable over the last five years and may be heading downward.
- 3) Less than a quarter (22 percent) of all adults knew that the teen birth rate declined over the past five years (the teen birth rate decreased by 16 percent between 1996 and 2001).
- 4) Only 38 percent of adults knew that about one-third of all births occurs to unmarried women.
- 5) Only one-third of all adults accurately estimated the percent of all children in the U.S. today who are immigrants or children of immigrants. The correct figure is 20 percent

Analysis of newspaper articles from five major newspapers over a 13-month period reveals that the five topics listed above are not covered very often and when they

are covered, the story usually did not include statistical data. Moreover, the topics that are covered the most tend to be least likely to include statistical data.

The *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, and the *Chicago Tribune* were scanned from September 1, 2001 to September 30, 2002 to locate stories linked to these five topics. This scan uncovered only 494 articles on these topics. Of the 494 articles reviewed, only 194 articles, or 39 percent, contained any statistical data. As a point of comparison, there were 5,258 articles that included information on unemployment and 6,732 that contained information on the stock market during the same period.

# **Perceptions and Misperception About America's Children: The Role of the Print Media**

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## Introduction

This paper is closely linked to a recent report that identified several misperceptions Americans have about children.<sup>2</sup> That report was based on three surveys, conducted in late 2002 and early 2003, designed to ascertain how well the American public understood some basic statistical facts about children today. Topics were selected to reflect relatively important social policy issues where responses could be compared to indisputable statistical data.

The surveys identified five crucial misperceptions about American children and youth:

- 1) Less than one-fifth (19 percent) knew that the number of children on welfare had declined since 1996 (the number of children receiving welfare declined by 50 percent between 1996 and 2000).
- 2) Less than one-fifth (19 percent) of the public is aware that the percent of children living in single-parent families has remained fairly stable over the last five years and may be heading downward.
- 3) Less than a quarter (22 percent) of all adults knew that the teen birth rate declined over the past five years (the teen birth rate decreased by 16 percent between 1996 and 2001).

- 4) A little more than one-third (38 percent) of adults knew that about one-third of all births occur to unmarried women.
- 5) Only one-third of all adults accurately estimated the percent of all children in the U.S. today who are immigrants or children of immigrants. . The correct figure is 20 percent

It is worth noting that respondents were offered only three possible responses to questions on these topics. With only three responses, a number of people could have easily guessed the correct answer, meaning the real level of misunderstanding may be higher than this survey reveals.

Assessing public understanding of social issues is critical because perceptions, and misperceptions, are what drive decision-making and policy decisions. The misperceptions identified here are disconcerting because, regardless of any scientific or statistical facts, people vote and make decisions on what they perceive to be the truth. Moreover, public officials typically respond to, or deal with, the public's misunderstandings; and public officials may have many of the same misperceptions.

This study examines one possible source of the public's misunderstanding, the print media, by analyzing a set of newspaper articles that appeared in five major papers from September 2002 to September 2003.

#### More Data Reports – Little Understanding

The misperceptions Americans have about some basic statistics on children are particularly troubling given the emergence of numerous statistical indicator reports on

children and families over the past decade. Clearly there are many more reports with data on children now than there were ten or fifteen years ago. Since we do not have comparable data about public perceptions from the early 1990s, it is unclear how public knowledge about children today compares to knowledge ten years ago. It is possible that public understanding has actually increased over the past decade, but it is clear that a large segment of the public is still unaware of conditions affecting children.

Over the past decade, a number of efforts have emerged to increase public awareness about the well-being of American children. A comprehensive review of indicator projects<sup>3</sup> completed in 2000 identified 93 indicator-driven projects at the national, state, and local levels.

Much of the increased interest in statistics on child well-being can be traced back to 1990 when the Annie E. Casey Foundation first began publishing its annual *KIDS COUNT DATA BOOK*. The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* was the first publication that made statistical data on children easily available to large numbers of people. The publication was widely disseminated, highly valued, and quickly became a model for other organizations. Analysis of the 2002 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* found that the media carried information from the report to more than 70 million readers, listeners, and viewers.<sup>4</sup>

The federal government provides a lot of statistical data on children. Each year since 1997, the federal government's Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics has published a book entitled, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-*

*Being*. In addition to the yearly Interagency Forum report, in 1996, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services began annual publication of a larger volume called Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth. Throughout the 1990s, agencies like the Census Bureau, the National Center for Educational Statistics, and the National Center on Health Statistics continued to produce statistical reports on children.

Many state initiatives have emerged during the 1990s that focus on statistical measures of well-being. The Oregon Benchmarks project, the Minnesota Milestone project, the New York Touchstones project, and the Maine Marks projects are four examples of these kinds of activities. Each of these projects has engaged in systematic collection and presentation of statistical data on well-being.

Some state governments have begun issuing regular reports on the well-being of children and families. For example, in 2000, The Maryland Partnership for Children, Youth and Families started publishing a yearly data-driven report to provide a comprehensive picture of the well-being of children in the state.<sup>5</sup> In February 2001, the state of Maine published "Maine Marks" which provides statistical indicators for children, families, and communities within the state.<sup>6</sup> The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, along with the Department of Education and Early Development, produces "Building Blocks" focusing on a series of outcome indicators.<sup>7</sup> The state of Georgia has been producing yearly reports over the past few years featuring statistical indicators of child well-being for each county in the state.<sup>8</sup>

Some social indicator reports focus on cities. In August 2001, Zero Population Growth released a report entitled, *Kid-Friendly Cities: Report Card 2001*,<sup>9</sup> which is the 8<sup>th</sup> in a series of biennial reports that rank cities based on a series of statistical indicators. In March 2002, the Knight Foundation published *Listening and Learning: Community Indicator Profiles Knight Foundation Communities and the Nation*, which provides statistical data on 26 communities.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers at Columbia University issued several reports since the mid-1990s using social indicators to highlight changes in the well-being of children and other demographic groups within New York City.<sup>11</sup> Similar indicator-based reports have been issued for Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Delaware, and other cities.<sup>12</sup>

### The Media

Despite the increasing number of data-driven reports, collectively, they still reach a very small share of the public. While publications are typically counted in the thousands, and website visits in the tens of thousands, major media exposure can reach millions.

Most people get information on children from a variety of other sources. Some information is gleaned through personal experience or through conversations with co-workers, family, and friends; but research shows that much of the information people get on public issues is obtained through the media. Respondents in the surveys linked to this



report indicated that, after personal experience, the news media was the most likely force to shape their perceptions.

To better understand how print media may have contributed to the misperceptions reflected in our survey, a sample of recent newspaper stories from five major papers was examined to assess how frequently five key topics are covered in the press and to see what kind of statistical information is routinely provided by the press on these topics. Since electronic media often use these major papers to identify key stories, the trends and patterns found here would probably be more pronounced if the electronic media were included in the analysis.

Newspaper stories from five large papers representing a range of geographic areas and perspectives were systematically examined to see if the misperceptions held by Americans are linked to the way key issues are portrayed in the press. The *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, and the *Chicago Tribune* were scanned from September 1, 2001 to September 30, 2002 to identify stories linked to these five topics. Ten key terms were identified based on the five misperceptions presented on page one of this report:

- Welfare/Welfare Reform
- Immigrant/Foreign-Born
- Single Parents/Single Mothers
- Teenage Mothers/Teen Births
- Unmarried/Out of Wedlock Births

Stories were generated for analysis by entering the ten terms above into a Lexus/Nexus search of five large papers. The articles that were examined were feature articles of at least 400 words.

Since these five newspapers are some of the largest papers in the country, I suspect these social issues may get more coverage in this sample than they would in a sample that included many smaller newspapers.

This approach turned up 494 newspaper articles for analysis.<sup>i</sup> These articles were analyzed in terms of which topics were covered and the extent to which they contained data.

Table 1 shows the distribution of articles by subject matter and whether or not they include data. Note that a few of the articles are counted more than once because they contained material on more than one subject. It is clear that some of the five topics received much more coverage than others, and the stories on some topics were much more likely to contain data.

The results of this analysis suggest a couple of reasons why the public may have misperceptions about children. First, there are relatively few articles on these topics. Looking at all five papers collectively for 13 months (September 1, 2001 through September 30, 2002), researchers found only 494 stories on these five topics. Some topics were hardly covered at all. For example, there were only 22 articles on unmarried/out-of-wedlock births.

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<sup>i</sup> Some articles that matched these key words were not relevant to this study. For example, stories on animal welfare were not included in the study even though they matched on one of the key words.

While 494 articles are not a trivial amount, these numbers pale in comparison with the number of articles on other topics. Looking at these same five papers over the same 13-month period, there were 5,258 articles that included information on unemployment and 6,732 that included information on the stock market. This differential may help explain why the public seems to be more cognizant of economic trends than trends in the well-being of children.

When articles did appear on one of the five topics, they typically did not employ statistical data. Of the 494 articles reviewed over the 13-month period, only 194 articles, or 39 percent, contained any statistical data.

The topic that received the most coverage was on immigrants and the foreign-born population, but only 40 percent of the 182 stories on immigration and foreign-born persons contained statistical data.

The topic that was covered the least was unmarried/out-of-wedlock births where there were only 22 stories in the 13-month period. While most of the articles on births to unmarried women or out-of-wedlock births contained statistical data, this amounts to less than five articles per paper over the year. Also, there were only 39 articles talking about teenage mothers/teen births. More than half of these articles (56 percent) contained statistical data, but this is less than eight articles per paper per year.

To the extent the public gets information on children's issues from the print media, it is easy to understand why people do not have a firm grasp of statistical facts

about children in these five areas. Some of the topics are rarely covered, and few articles for some of the topics contain statistical information.

It is important to recognize that much of the period studied here followed immediately on the heels of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. These events so dominated the news coverage that there was relatively little room for articles on domestic social issues. On the other hand, congressional debate on the re-authorization of welfare reform during 2002 may have stimulated additional articles on some of the topics examined here.

#### Why the Misperceptions?

Why do Americans have these misperceptions about children? Before I get to the role that the print media might play, it is worth discussing a number of possible reasons why Americans may harbor these misunderstandings.

Since many of the biggest misunderstandings were about trends over time, it is important to note that some of the trends that are now moving in a positive direction (such as those concerning trends in single-parent families and teen births) were negative for many years prior to the recent trends. Perhaps people have not yet realized the trends have shifted. Some of the negative trends such as a rising teen birth rate or an increase in single-parent families were so entrenched that they became “common knowledge.” It may take repeated exposure to evidence about the new trends before they are accepted.

It is interesting to note that the public's understanding of statistical data on children is unlike economics where changes such as the unemployment rate or stock market averages are widely reported and quickly accepted.

Another possible reason for some of the misperceptions is the extent to which people do not make a distinction between levels and trends. When a report indicates that some issue is a big problem because of a "high level," readers may assume that it is a "growing" problem. For example, if a report says a high level of births occurs to unmarried women, readers interpret this as meaning out-of-wedlock births are a growing problem. The general negative perception of teens may also taint readers' perceptions of material.<sup>13</sup>

Another hypothesis suggests that people assume that any social issue that gets attention in the press must be getting attention because it is a problem, perhaps a growing problem. When the five issues examined here are the focus of press attention, it is often because the issues are viewed as problems. The perception that these issues are all problems may cause readers to dismiss any positive trends even when the data showing those trends are provided.

The misperception about some of these trends may also be linked to the widespread notion that government programs don't work. If the public has heard about a major governmental effort like the welfare reform legislation that passed in 1996 which was designed to reduce the number of families on welfare, they may believe the number

of children on welfare is going up because they think government programs don't work.

The same is true for teen births.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the proliferation of data-driven reports on children during the 1990s, the public is still not cognizant of some fundamental facts. It is easy to see how print media stories could have contributed to the public misperceptions about the five topics examined here.

- There were not many stories on these topics – less than 500 in one year.
- Of stories on these topics, not many contained data (194 out of 494, or 39 percent).
- Stories on topics most likely to be covered are least likely to have data, and topics most likely to have data are least likely to be covered.
  - 36 percent of all stories were focused on Immigrant/Foreign-Born, but only 40 percent of these stories contained statistical information.
  - 73 percent of stories on Unmarried/Out of Wedlock Births contained statistical data, but only 4 percent of the stories were on this topic.

It is not clear why there are not more statistics used in the newspaper stories about children. It may be that the data reports cited earlier in this paper are not getting to reporters. It may be that statistical information doesn't fit into the stories being written about children. It may be that reporters don't feel comfortable using statistical data. It may be that reporters don't think their readers will be comfortable with statistical information. It is probably some combination of these factors and others.

To the extent that social scientists and organizations producing data on children want to increase use of their information, they need to do a better job of packaging their material for public consumption; and they need to work with reporters and editors to better understand how the print media like to access data. Producing the data is not enough. Organizations that produce statistical data on children need to be more resourceful and innovative in working with the media. More effort must be made to get basic statistical information to mainstream media channels.

Table 1. Newspaper articles on five selected topics in five major newspapers\* from September 2001 to September 2002.

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	<u>Total Stories</u>		<u>Stories with Data</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of Total Stories</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of Stories on Topic</u>
Immigrant/Foreign-born.....	182	36	72	40
Welfare/welfare Reform.....	147	29	58	39
Single parents/single mothers.....	111	22	26	23
Teenage mothers/ teen births.....	39	8	22	56
Unmarried/Out of wedlock births.....	<u>22</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>73</u>
TOTAL .....	501**		194	39

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Source: Communication Consortium Media Center (CCMC) analysis based on Lexus/Nexus search.

\*Papers include Washington Post, New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Atlanta Journal and Constitution, and the Chicago Tribune

\*\*Some stories were counted more than once because they contained information on more than one of our categories.

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