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## Examining the Well-Being of America's Children

In this issue of *FoodReview*, demographers, economists, and nutritionists from USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) take a look at America's most precious resource—its children. Their well-being—their family experiences, their educational opportunities, their access to medical care, and their nutritional health—is critical to our country's future.

Recent trends in social and economic well-being for children and their families have been mixed. Trends such as higher levels of parental education, later marriages, and smaller families are generally positive for children. Poverty among children has declined greatly since the early 1960s when 27.3 percent of children were poor. In 1999, 16.2 percent of U.S. children—11.5 million kids under 18—were poor. However, many children today can expect to live in a single-parent family at some point in their lives. Children living in mother-only families have a greater chance of being poor than children living with two parents.

One way our country tries to enhance the well-being of poor children is through food assistance programs. Benefits from USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and free and reduced-price lunches from the National School Lunch Program go to low-income families (or expecting families), as do about 80 percent of food stamp benefits. ERS looked at how participation in these programs and the major cash assistance program changed during the second half of the 1990s. We found that participation by low-income households with children in the Food Stamp Program and cash assistance declined, and these families relied more heavily on free lunches and WIC.

For some children, too many calories or the wrong mix of nutrients puts them at risk of obesity and other health problems. ERS used data from the 1994-96 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals and its companion survey, the Diet and Health Knowledge Survey, to explore how parental nutrition knowledge and attitudes are related to a child's probability of being overweight. We found that parents with greater knowledge about and interest in nutrition are less likely to have overweight children. A parent's own weight status, and his or her perception of that status, can also factor into a child's weight condition.

Two recent medical studies suggest breastfeeding reduces the risk of children becoming overweight. Other benefits of breastfeeding include its role in reducing the incidence of several diseases that afflict infants and young children. ERS examined the incidence rates of three of these diseases and found that raising the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding from current to recommended levels would save a minimum of \$3.6 billion in medical costs, wages lost by parents caring for an ill child, and premature deaths.

ERS also examined incidence data for five foodborne illnesses. Children have a relatively higher risk of foodborne illnesses than other age groups because their immune systems are not fully developed. Also, a child's lower weight means that it takes a smaller amount of pathogens to make a child sick than it would a healthy adult. ERS estimates that children under 10 years old account for \$2.3 billion in medical costs, lost productivity, and premature deaths—about one-third of the total annual U.S. costs—resulting from the five illnesses.

In other research, ERS analyzed food consumption surveys that span 20 years and found that many children's diets are too high in fat and sodium and low in calcium and fiber. We found that overall dietary quality tends to decline as children get older. Teenage girls, despite having the greatest need for iron and calcium, obtain the least amount of these nutrients in their diets. Teenage boys are the most likely group to have excessive intakes of cholesterol and sodium. An increase in eating out may be to blame for the age-related decline in diet quality. We must all safeguard our children's health and help them make wiser food choices, especially when eating out.

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