



IMPROVING PROGRAMS THAT IMPACT FAMILIES

What Counts:

Measuring Indicators of Family Well-being



Executive Summary Report

by

THE COLORADO FOUNDATION FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Prepared for The Child and Family Policy Center

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Presentations on *What Counts* findings are currently being offered. For more information, please contact Judith Martinez 303/837-8466 ext. 105, email: JudyM@coloradofoundation.org.

Copies of this *Executive Summary* and the complete *What Counts Report* are available online at WWW.COLORADOFUNDATION.ORG.

What Counts: Measuring Indicators of Family Well-being Executive Summary

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The purpose of this study is to identify the primary indicators of family well-being that are attributed to strong and successful families. It was prompted by the lack of information on the American family. Most of what we know about American families primarily comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, which provides statistics on where families live, their income, their educational attainment, family size, marital status, number of dependent children and ages. What is lacking is information that captures the strength of family relationships, level of parenting involvement, understanding of how families spend their time together, quality of education, and the role of government in supporting families. We do not consistently collect data on “what counts” in family life. The information that is available seldom refers to families as a whole, but tends to focus on low-income families and deficits among individual family members.

Indicators of family well-being and success should be tracked to assess how families are thriving. This critical information is needed to inform local and national policies and guide programs designed to address challenges and strengthen families. To advance this work, The Child and Family Policy Center (Iowa) and The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children have partnered to identify and measure indicators of well-being for children, families, and community. This report represents the latest in a research series conducted by these two non-profit organizations. Earlier studies, *FamilyWise Focus Groups*, *What We Know About Americans’ Views on Family*, and *Family Polling: Results and Analysis* helped shape an outcomes framework to measure family well-being, and documented the need for polling information that is current and inclusive of all families. The *What Counts* study incorporates information from previous research to move toward measuring indicators of family well-being. Research findings were used to prioritize areas of family well-being to be addressed in a behavioral survey, as well as identify potential questions. Conducting a behavioral survey poll is the next step in measuring “what counts” in family life.

SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The study called for the collection, review, and analysis of 36 current reports and research studies on families. Descriptive information was extracted from these documents to establish the range of demographics and perspectives represented in the materials. Overall documents represented these family characteristics and demographics:

- 58% of 36 documents indicated family structure to include “families with children” households
- 53% of 17 documents referred to low-income families
- 50% of 32 documents were national in scope
- 39% of 14 documents specified representation of diverse cultural backgrounds, which included three or more ethnic/racial groups

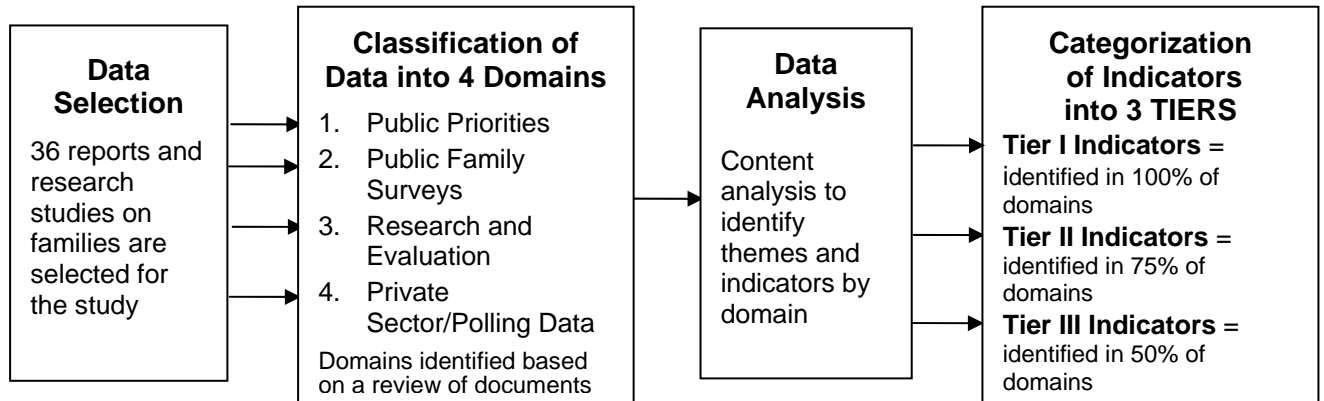
Defining Family Well-being

To provide context and clarity around indicators attributed to successful families, descriptors of family well-being were gleaned from 94% of the 36 reports and research studies included in the study. Most documents did not specifically define family well-being, but it was characterized based on outcomes,

indicators, values, and ideals. Family well-being was generally described in terms of health, economics, healthy family life, education, community life and community supports, and culture and diversity. A significant percentage (71%) defined family well-being in terms of health and wellness, and economic factors were mentioned in 68% of the documents.

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to identify primary indicators of family well-being based on analysis and synthesis of selected reports and research studies. The following model outlines the overall process.



The study design included:

1. Data Selection and Classification by Domain – Thirty-six reports and research studies on families were selected for the study. Based on a literature review of these documents four domains were identified. Documents were classified by these four domains:

- **Public Priorities** – Highlighted a specific interest in family life. Majority of documents (53%) were included in this domain.
- **Public Family Surveys** – Based on public surveys that included voters, adults, parents, youth, immigrants, and households. One-fourth of the documents (25%) were categorized in this domain.
- **Research and Evaluation** – Materials focused on research and evaluation related to family life. Featured technical studies and reports by researchers and advocacy organizations. Five documents (14%) were grouped in this domain.
- **Private Sector/Polling Data** – Represented comprehensive reviews of surveys and private polling data on families. Only three documents (8%) were placed in this domain, however, the information was substantial and representative of many national and local opinion polls.

2. Data Collection – An analysis report form was developed to conduct a structured review of each document and ensure consistency in the data collection process.

3. Data Analysis – Data collected from the structured reviews was examined using content analysis to identify key words, themes, and indicators attributed to family well-being. Using NVivo software (designed for qualitative research) themes and indicators were identified in each domain.

Themes and indicators represented across domains were categorized into three tiers. The goal of categorizing indicators by tiers was to identify and prioritize key indicators of family well-being for which there is consensus across public and private sectors, as well as to demonstrate evidence from research that shows these indicators to be strongly tied to family well-being. Listed below is a description of each tier:

- **Tier I** indicators represent 100% consensus across domains and were clearly attributed to strong and successful families.

- **Tier II** indicators are identified in 75% of domains (three of four), thus representing a common ground across domains. Further discussion is needed to strongly link these indicators to family well-being.
- **Tier III** indicators identify areas in which there is still a healthy public debate as these indicators were identified across only 50% (two) of the domains.

FINDINGS

Research findings identified indicators of family well-being that represent a **consensus** of public will, those that represent **common ground**, and those issues in which there is **difference of opinion**.

An Emerging Public Consensus On Family Well-Being

Tier I indicators appear to represent 100% *consensus* on family well-being because they were identified across all domains. Tier I indicators have been loosely grouped into the following categories: family life, community supports, early childhood, education, and health – *see table: Tier I*.

Tier I ~ 100% Consensus on Indicators 16 Family Well-being Indicators (listed by themes)	
Family Life ~	
1. Time together	4. Commitment to family
2. Discipline, structure, and monitoring of children	5. Religious beliefs
3. Positive communication	6. Social support
	7. Family dinners
Community Supports ~	
8. Safe community	10. Community supports youth
9. Neighbors who you know and who are willing to help	11. Cultural make-up of neighborhood
Early Childhood ~	
12. Access to quality early childhood care	
Education ~	
13. Parents are involved in children’s education	
Health ~	
14. Access to health care	16. Substance abuse prevention and treatment
15. Exercise	

The strongest overall area of consensus emerged around the importance of a **healthy family life** to family well-being.

Finding Common Ground on Family Well-Being

Tier II indicators represent a sense of common ground on family well-being since these indicators were identified in three of the four domains – *see table: Tier II*.

Tier II ~ Indicators identified in 75% of Domains Family Well-being Indicators (listed by themes)	
Family Life ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love • Protection of Children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental stress/positive parenting • Access to childcare
Community Supports ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family friendly employers • Neighborhood Watch groups • Church/Places of worship • Families engaged in communities • Schools support families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing (affordable, housing stock/value) • Families and youth volunteering in community • Quality childcare available
Early Childhood ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School readiness 	
Education ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student achievement • Student attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to college
Health ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preventing teen pregnancy • Mental health (stress reduction) • Prevention of injury 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence prevention • Proper nutrition
Economics~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers with family supportive policies • Number of working poor families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to pay bills/provide basic needs of family
Role of Government ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tax policies that support raising families • Access to quality early childhood education • Access to basic services (roads, police, fire, libraries) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to education to support parents in raising their children • Support the working poor • Sense of safety (crime prevention) • Reform welfare to encourage work and self-sufficiency

Differences Emerge on Family Well-Being

Tier III indicators represent a sense of healthy debate and differences of opinion on family well-being. These indicators were identified across only half of the domains. *Tier III* indicators represent areas in which there is a genuine difference of opinion and still much room for public debate – see table: *Tier I*.

Tier III ~ Indicators identified in 50% of Domains Family Well-being Indicators (listed by themes)	
Family Life ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of cultural and ethnic identity • Marriage/two parent home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmentally appropriate parenting • Home is free of domestic violence
Community Supports ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to parks and recreation
Early Childhood ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children in poverty • Children at risk for developmental delays 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child health (immunizations, early screenings) • Parents spend time helping children learn
Education ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student attachment • School safety • Quality education • Schools open after school • Adult education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally competent teachers • High school graduation • School readiness • Early childhood education • Learning opportunities in the home
Health ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children born healthy • Environmental hazards • Suicide prevention • STD prevention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child abuse prevention • Getting enough sleep • Tobacco use prevention
Economics~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children (families) living in poverty • Employment (parental, availability) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two parent incomes/households
Role of Government ~	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to basic health care for families and children • Livable minimum wage • Income supports for low-income families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for adoption • Support for marriage (welfare reform, reform no-fault divorce) • Child protection/ ensure child safety

IMPLICATIONS

The identification of 16 indicators of family well-being for which there appears to be 100% consensus across sectors is encouraging for those who are working to support families (*see Tier I Indicators table on page 3*). These indicators can provide additional guidance in directing resources toward those areas for which there is strong support and strong evidence of positive outcomes. These indicators may also serve to guide family support services, which seek to strengthen families toward new and innovative strategies and affirm much of the work that is already being done.

However, while there are areas of strong consensus, this study also shows there are also differences in emphasis and even priorities between the general public, including families themselves, the government, and advocacy agencies that are serving them. Two priorities that showed up strongly among families and not as much among public agencies were transportation and substance abuse prevention and treatment. Two top priorities identified by public agencies that were not strongly identified by families were child welfare and child protection services, and preventing teen pregnancy. In addition to priorities, there appear to be several key differences in emphasis: positive vs. deficit focus, formal vs. informal supports, and the role of government as a safety net vs. a proactive interventions in positive family development. Finally, the role of culture and having a strong cultural identity and ties to one's cultural community was highlighted both in public opinion and in the research, but not mentioned in public agency priorities. These differences may offer an opportunity for government and advocacy agencies to begin to think differently about how services are funded, designed, and delivered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conduct more research into the comprehensive role of government in impacting family well-being

- Current data on the impact of government on family well-being is siloed in individual agency databases and focuses on individuals within families rather than the family as a whole.
- Support agencies in gathering data on the well-being of the family unit in addition to the individuals within the program.
- Support state governments in sharing and compiling existing information across agencies to develop a current picture of how existing services are impacting overall well-being.

2. Develop new methods, such as polling, for gathering and tracking critical missing data on family life and community supports

- Currently much of the critical data on family life and community supports is not gathered by traditional data gathering sources.
- Select Tier I and Tier II indicators that have the power to positively impact overall family well-being and can be easily communicated to the public, and develop questions for a family well-being poll.
- Conduct annual family well-being polls in states and communities and track family well-being indicators over time.
- Develop a family well-being index, similar to Kids Count, to communicate the status of families to policy makers, service providers, and the general public.

3. Utilize areas of consensus to begin to create a national conversation on family well-being

- Currently public conversation around family well-being focuses on areas of political difference rather than consensus and therefore does not engage broad sectors of society.
- Select specific Tier I indicators using Friedman's three criteria for effective public indicators:
 - Proxy power (ability to positively affect other aspects of well-being)
 - Communicates a strong and easily understood message to the general public
 - Data is available
- Highlight these indicators in public awareness campaigns such as the "Week of the Family."
- Emphasize these indicators in research and policy briefs.

4. Build on areas of common ground to engage different sectors in forging consensus for key issues affecting family well-being

- Develop tax policies that can garner bi-partisan support and public will to support family well-being including increasing the child tax credit amount allowed, increasing day care tax credits,

- increasing tax breaks for education, and increasing the earned income tax credit.
- Engage the business sector in developing model family-friendly policies that are affordable and doable such as job sharing, flexible scheduling, and pre-tax accounts for family medical and child care expenses.

QUESTIONS FOR A BEHAVIORAL SURVEY

The Child and Family Policy Center (Iowa) and The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, have concluded that the next step in measuring indicators of family well-being is to conduct a behavioral survey poll of families. This is based on their research that indicates there is a lack of information on families that is accessible and inclusive of family life and community supports.

The proposed survey would incorporate the primary themes and indicators of family well-being that have been validated through research. Here are sample questions for a behavioral survey that were taken from reports and research studies included in the *What Counts* report:

1. If you had an emotional problem or personal relationship problem, who would you first turn to for help? (*National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997*)
2. What benefits do you receive or get from your job? Include: health and dental insurance, retirement, paid leave...(*Making Connections/Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002*)
3. How do you, as a parent, help your child succeed in school (volunteer at school, help child with homework, teach children to behave themselves in class, choose curriculum...)? (*Public Agenda Foundation, 1998*)
4. In the past 12 months, about how many hours per week have you worked in the average week? Count everything, including extra jobs or paid work you do at home. (*Making Connections/ Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002*)
5. In a typical week how often from 0 to 7 do you do something religious as a family such as go to church or read the scriptures together? (*National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997*)
6. How often in the past month have you or any family member taken the child(ren) on any kind of outing, such as the park, grocery store, a church, or a playground? (*National Survey of American Families, 1999*)
7. What do you do when your oldest child does something wrong or makes you upset or angry (take away privileges, yell, time-out, send child to his/her room, spank, hit, slap)? (*The Reader's Digest Family Index, 2003*)

CONCLUSION

We often hear that families are the backbone of our society with political and social rhetoric extolling the virtues and concerns about families. However, we know very little about families in America today. *What Counts* is a first step toward defining family well-being by using indicators generated and validated by families, as well as traditional research methods. It is an important step down a road that is fraught with strong values, myths and opinions. By design, this report has a bias toward understanding the role of government and public policy in the lives of families. The next step is to use this information to survey families using polling procedures and find out how families are doing, what they need, and then to repeat the survey over time to look for trends.

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The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children was founded in 1991 as a private non-profit partner to state government. The role and mission of CFFC is to improve the effectiveness of organizations and individuals who serve children, youth and their families in educational, health or human service settings.

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