



FOUNDATION *for*  
CHILD DEVELOPMENT

**Racial-Ethnic  
Inequality in  
Child Well-Being  
from 1985-2004:  
Gaps Narrowing,  
but Persist**

Donald J. Hernandez  
Suzanne E. Macartney  
University at Albany, SUNY

FCD POLICY BRIEF  
*Child Well-Being Index (CWI)*

NO. NINE  
JANUARY 2008



## Introduction

The United States is rapidly becoming a more racially and ethnically diverse society. Less than 25 years from now, no single racial or ethnic group will constitute a majority of children and youth. But those race-ethnic groups that are furthest behind will, taken together, become a majority. What does this mean for the country?

To avoid social fragmentation and assure that we continue to be a unified people based on enduring democratic principles, it is critical that we pursue the twin social goals of equality of opportunity and equality in life conditions among all groups.

For the past four years, the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) has released a Child Well-Being Index (CWI) comprised of 28 statistical indicators organized into seven domains of child well-being: safety/behavioral concerns, family economic well-being, health, community connectedness, educational attainment, social relationships, and emotional/spiritual well-being.<sup>1</sup>

This report is the first effort to analyze child well-being trends through the lens of race and ethnicity to better understand how differences between White and Black children and between White and Hispanic children have changed on key indicators and domains over the decades and what these changes could signal for the efforts by policymakers and others to reduce race-ethnic disparities and to lift the status of all children in this country.<sup>2</sup>

\* Author Note: This research brief was prepared for the Foundation for Child Development. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers, or trustees of the Foundation for Child Development.

DONALD J. HERNANDEZ is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

SUZANNE E. MACARTNEY is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

---

## **To what extent has the United States been moving toward (or away from) equality for different groups of children?**

Historically, Black and Hispanic children have lagged behind Whites along many dimensions of well-being. Since 1985, the gaps in overall well-being between White and Black children and between White and Hispanic children have narrowed. The narrowing of race-ethnic gaps in the CWI from 1985 to 2004 is accounted for by reductions in Black and Hispanic disadvantages in four specific domains, but the greatest changes occurred in two domains: safety-behavioral concerns (which includes involvement in violent crime, drug and alcohol use, and teen childbearing) and family economic well-being (which covers family income, poverty rate, and health insurance coverage).

Between 1985 and 2004, all children experienced overall improvements in quality of life. Because improvements were greater for Black and Hispanic children than for White children during this time span, the race-ethnic gap with Whites narrowed. The Black-White difference in overall well-being narrowed by one-fourth between 1985 and 2004. During the same period, the difference in well-being between Hispanic children and White children narrowed by one-third. Nonetheless, race-ethnic differences continued to be large in 2004.

---

## **Given current trends, how long might it take to close the gaps for different groups of children?**

Based on past trends, eliminating the gaps in well-being that separate White children from Black and Hispanic children will take at least a generation. Assuming Black and Hispanic children continue to make the advances they made from 1993 or 1994 to 2004, Black children would reach parity with Whites in 18 years, while this would require 14 years for Hispanics. Based on longer-term trends (1985-2004), convergence would require more than five decades for Blacks (54 years) and more than four decades for Hispanics (43 years).

Insofar as the narrowing of these gaps is the result of expanded or new public policies and programs since 1985, additional reductions in race-ethnic disparities may require that effective public efforts be pursued in the future with expanded resources and renewed vigor.

---

## **Achieving a higher quality of well-being for all children.**

Child well-being will be improved greatly if the goals of equality of opportunity and equality of life conditions across groups are achieved, but further progress is both desirable and possible. Two best practice summary indexes have been developed using national and international indicator values as a yardstick.<sup>3</sup> The national best practice index uses as the standard the best value for each well-being indicator ever recorded historically in the United States. The international best practice index uses as the standard the best value observed internationally in any country for which there are comparable indicators.

Using the CWI value of 100 in 1985 as the baseline, the numerical value for the national best practice index is 129, while the numerical value for the international best practice index is 144. These index values are substantially higher than the value of 115 for whites in 2004. Thus, even if Black children and Hispanic children reach parity with the current level of well-being among White children, the overall level of well-being of all three groups would have a considerable distance to go to meet the best practice level reflecting the historical experience of U.S. children, and even more so the international best practice level.

---

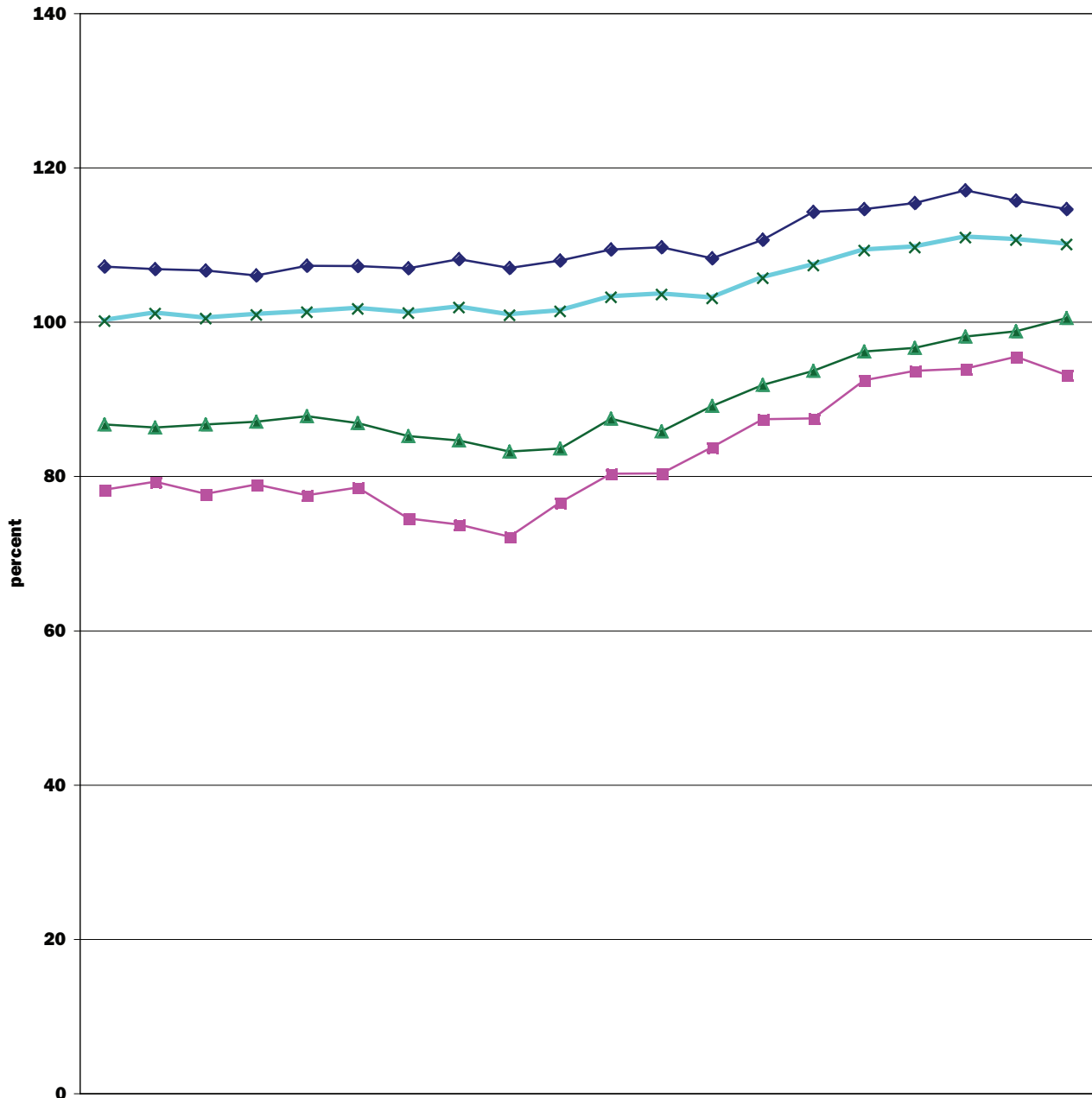
## **Black and Hispanic children are doing better, but gaps with White children persist.**

Figure 1 presents the CWI for the total population of children and, separately, for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. The CWI is set at a standard value of 100 for children as a whole in 1985. The value of the CWI for all children improved by 10% between 1985 and 2004, with the index value rising from 100 to 110. Nearly all of the increase occurred after 1993.

Disparities in 1985 were, however, substantial and to the disadvantage of Black children and Hispanic children. The well-being of White children exceeded that of children as a whole by 7% in 1985. For Black children and Hispanic children, the index of well-being was below the overall index value of 100 by 22% for Black children and 13% for Hispanic children. Thus, the gap in well-being separating Hispanic children and White children in 1985 was 20 points, while the Black-White gap was about half again larger at 29 points. These disparities expanded further between 1985 and 1993, as the value of the CWI fell by 4 points for Hispanic children and 6 points for Black children, while the value for White Children declined by one point.

Beginning in 1993, the well-being of Hispanic children and Black children increased more rapidly than for Whites. From 1993-2004, the gaps separating both Hispanic children and Black children from White children narrowed by about 40%. Measured over the longer 19 years from 1985 to 2004, the Hispanic-White gap narrowed by about one-third, and the Black-White gap narrowed by about one-fourth.

**Figure 1:**  
 Overall Domains – Domain Weights\*\*



	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
<b>White</b>	107	107	107	106	107	107	107	108	107	108	109	110	108	111	114	115	115	117	116	115
<b>Black</b>	78.1	79.2	77.6	78.8	77.4	78.4	74.4	73.6	72.1	76.5	80.2	80.3	83.7	87.3	87.4	92.3	93.6	93.8	95.4	93
<b>Hispanic</b>	86.6	86.2	86.6	87	87.7	86.8	85.1	84.5	83.1	83.5	87.3	85.7	89	91.7	93.6	96.1	96.5	98	98.7	100
<b>US</b>	100	101	100	101	101	102	101	102	101	101	103	103	103	106	107	109	110	111	110	110

\*\*The following indicators are replicates of the most recent year for which data are available: Children’s Health Insurance Rate 1985-86, Obesity Rate 1976-1977, 1979-1989, 1991-1998, and 2000-2002, Emotional Well-Being Domain for Hispanics 2004, Violent Crime Offending Rates for 1985-91, Violent Crime Victimization Rates for 1985-91, Pre-School Enrollment and High School Completion Rates for 1985-1989, Residential Mobility 1985-87, and for Hispanics Religious Attendance and Religious Importance for 2004.



As noted above, the narrowing of race-ethnic gaps in the CWI from 1985 to 2004 is accounted for by reductions in Black and Hispanic disadvantages in four specific domains, but the greatest changes occurred in two domains: safety-behavioral concerns and family economic well-being.

In the safety-behavioral concerns domain from 1985-2004, Black children and Hispanic children experienced reductions, compared to White children, in teen births, while the disadvantages also narrowed for Black children regarding violent crime offenses and for Hispanic children regarding violent crime victimization. Combined with the advantages of Black children and Hispanic children compared to White children with regard to smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and using illicit drugs, including their expanding advantage in drug use and cigarette smoking, the overall disadvantages in the safety-behavioral concerns domain as of 1985 for Black children and Hispanic children had been reversed to become slight advantages compared to White children by 2004.

Black children and Hispanic children also were advantaged, compared to White children, from 1985-2004 in the emotional/spiritual domain, not only because they usually were more likely to attend religious services weekly and report religion as being very important, but also because of their lower suicide rates.

In the family economic well-being domain, the Black-White and Hispanic-White disadvantages narrowed by about three-tenths, because the gaps in poverty narrowed by about two-fifths from 1985 to 2004, and the gaps in secure parental employment narrowed as well, while the Hispanic-White gap in health insurance coverage also narrowed by one-third.

Trends in indicators reflecting educational success in two other domains were, however, more mixed. The Black and Hispanic disadvantages in reading and math test scores changed little from 1985-2004, and for Hispanics, the gap in completing a Bachelor's degree by ages 25-29 expanded by one-half. However, the disadvantage in preschool enrollment narrowed by one-third for Hispanics and was eliminated for Blacks.

Overall, despite a narrowing of many Black-White and Hispanic-White disparities, large differences remain. As of 2004, the Black-White gap in the CWI was three-fourths as large as in 1985, and the Hispanic-White gap was two-thirds as large as in 1985.

## **B L A C K - W H I T E   G A P S**

### **Black-White gaps narrow in safety, family economic well-being, community connectedness, and health.**

The Black-White disparity in child well-being narrowed by one-fourth between 1985-2004, from 29 to 21 points. Four domains account for most of this 8 point reduction. The four domains with substantial improvement for Blacks compared to Whites were the safety/behavioral concerns domain, the family economic well-being domain, the community connectedness domain, and the health domain (Figure 2).

#### *Safety/Behavioral Concerns – Black Children Make Big Progress*

Overall the Black disadvantage of 31 points in the safety/behavioral domain had shifted to a 5 point advantage by 2004 (Figure 2). Underlying improvement for Blacks were two important trends. The disparity in Black youth ages 12-17 committing violent crimes nearly disappeared, as the -150 point gap shrank to -10 points. About one-half of the Black disadvantage in the teen birth rate also disappeared, as the gap narrowed from a value of -152 to -82 points.

The narrowing of both gaps occurred because improvements were greater for Blacks than for Whites. Blacks also do better than Whites for three other indicators in the safety/behavioral concerns domain – alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, and drug use. The Black disadvantage in crime victimization was essentially the same in 2004 as it had been in the late 1980s.

#### *Family Economic Well-Being – Poverty Down and Parental Employment Up*

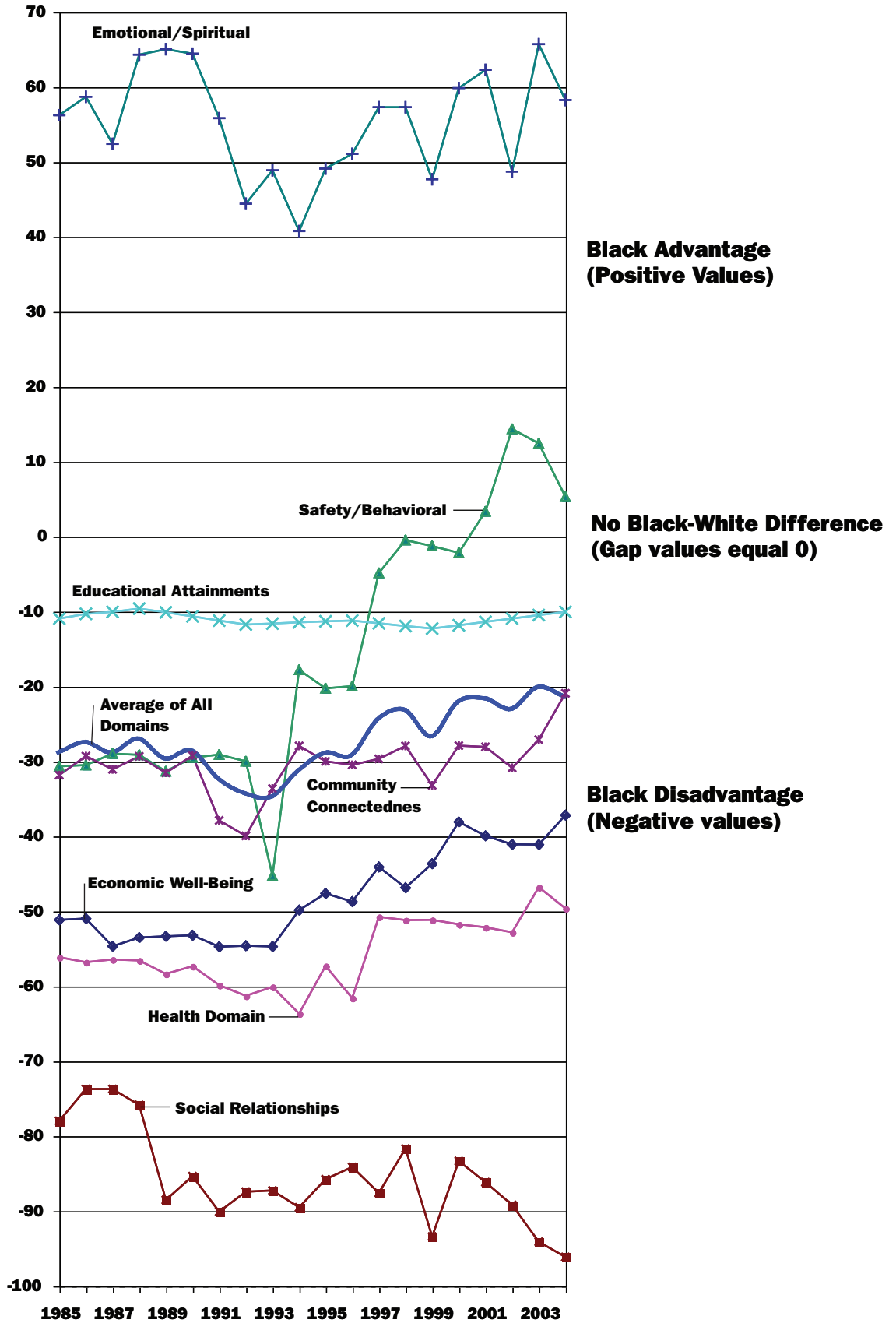
Black children historically lag behind White children in the family economic well-being domain, but the Black-White gap narrowed by about one-fourth between 1985 and 2004 (Figure 2). Two of the four indicators in this domain account for the entire disparity reduction, the poverty indicator and the secure parental employment indicator. Despite improvements of about one-tenth in both of these indicators for Whites between 1985 and 2004, even greater improvements for Blacks led to substantial reductions in the Black-White gaps. The Black-White poverty disparity narrowed by about four-tenths and the gap in secure parental employment narrowed by about three-tenths between 1985 and 2004. The reductions in these gaps occurred after 1993.

#### *Community Connectedness – More Black Children and Youth Attend School and Vote*

Community connectedness (the participation in school, the workforce, or in political institutions) is a third domain with a Black-White gap that narrowed between 1985 and 2007. The reduction of one-third in the Black disadvantage is accounted for mainly by two indicators.

The gap in the indicator reflecting the proportion of 16-19-year-olds who are not working and not in school narrowed by one-half across these 19 years. But, about one-half of this change occurred in the single year from 2003 to 2004, and preliminary data indicate that much of this apparent one-year change was not sustained in 2005. The 18 point

**Figure 2:**  
 Black-White Gaps in Each Domain and Overall, 1985-2004





disadvantage for Blacks in pre-school enrollment at ages 3-4 in 1985 had disappeared by 2004. The expansion of Head Start or other public Prekindergarten programs may have been instrumental in closing the gap for young Black children.

The narrowing gaps for both indicators occurred because the improvements were greater for Blacks than for Whites. In addition, in 2004 Black youth ages 18-20 were slightly more likely to vote than White youth. This represents a 20-point improvement since 1992, when the voting gap was widest.

### *Health – Black Infant Mortality and Low Birth Weight Keep Gaps with White Children Large*

The gap between Black children and White children in the health domain was nearly as large as the one for the family economic well-being domain, but the narrowing of the black disadvantage was much smaller, with a reduction of only about one-ninth, instead of one-fourth. Blacks narrowed the gap in several areas - child mortality by 40%, infant mortality by about 20%, low birth weight by about 10%, and subjective health status by about 20%.

Counterbalancing these trends, the activity limitations disparity often fluctuated enormously from year to year but appears to have expanded by about 90% between 1985 and 2004. Despite improvements for Black children compared to White children in infant mortality and low birth weight, the gaps remain larger than for the other indicators in the health domain.

### *Social Relationships – Gap Widens as Black Children More Likely to Move*

The social relationships domain (the prevalence of children in single parent families and in families that change residence) did not see a narrowing gap; instead the gap between Black children and White children increased by one-fourth. The gap between Black children and White children in the indicator for living in a single parent home changed little. Thus, most of the increasing disparity in social relationships is accounted for by the 14-fold increase in the value of the residential mobility indicator from 1985-2004.

### *Educational Achievement – Persistent Gap Remains Unchanged*

In one of the two domains where little or no change occurred in the Black-White gap, educational achievement, changes in the gaps for reading and math indicators were small to negligible.

### *Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being – An Advantage for Black Children*

Black children ranked higher on indicators of emotional and spiritual well-being than White children every year from 1985-2004. For every year since 1985, Black children were more likely than White children to say that religion was important and to attend religious services. Black youth were also less likely to commit suicide than White youth.

---

## H I S P A N I C - W H I T E G A P S

### **Hispanic-White gaps narrow in safety, family economic well-being, health, and social relationships.**

The gap in overall well-being between Hispanic and White children narrowed by about one-third from 1985 to 2004. This 6 point reduction is slightly less than the 8 point reduction experienced by Black children. Four domains account for the bulk of this change (Figure 3). Three of these domains are the same for both Hispanics and Blacks: safety/behavioral concerns, family economic well-being, and health. The narrowing disparity in community connectedness for Blacks is replaced by a narrowing disparity in social relationships for Hispanics.

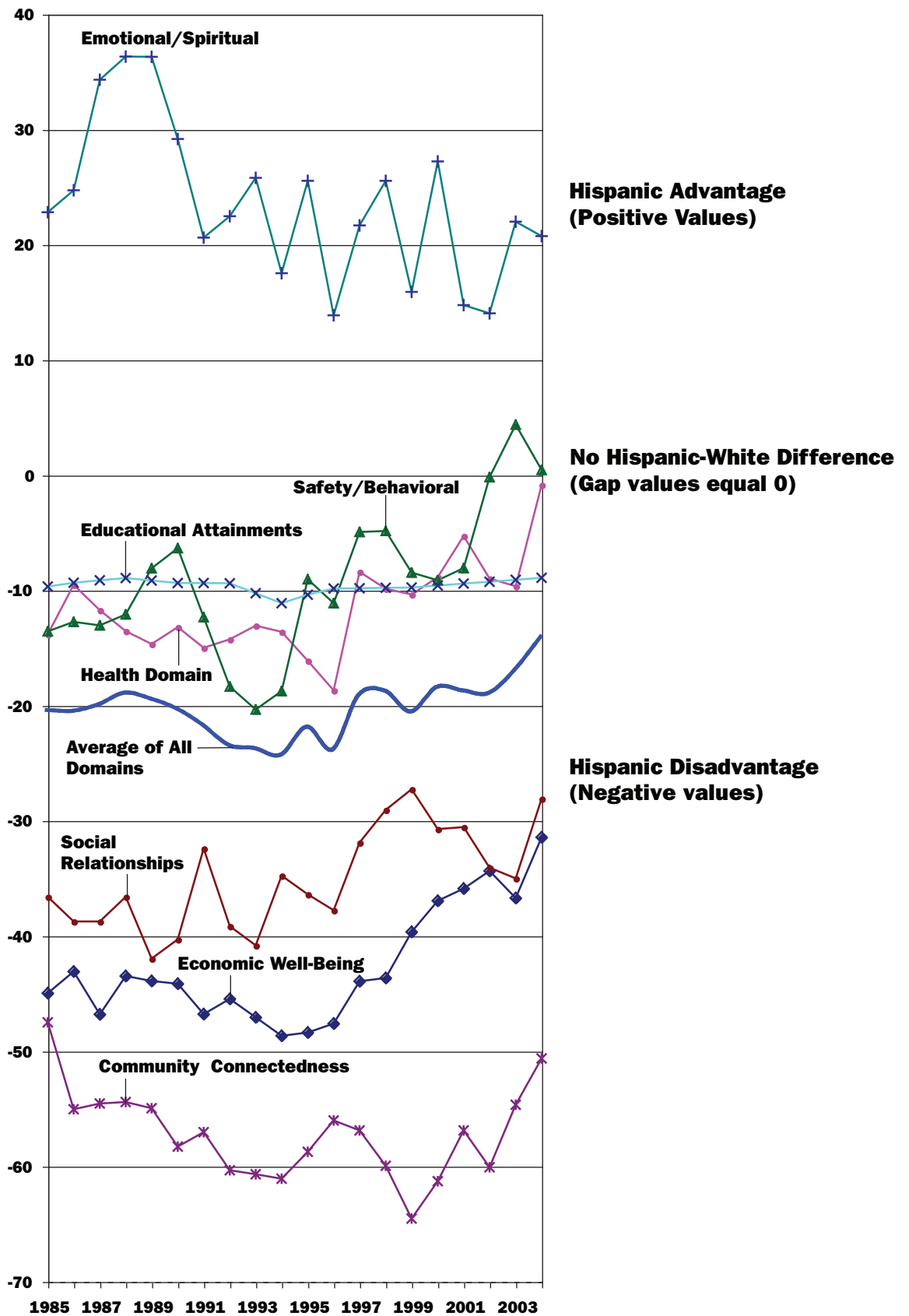
#### *Safety/Behavioral Concerns – Reductions in Teen Births and Crime Victimization Narrow the Gap*

The disadvantage of Hispanic children compared to White children in the safety/behavioral domain was eliminated between 1985 and 2004, as was true for Blacks. As is also true for Blacks, Hispanic children are less likely than White children to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use illicit drugs.

Two indicators account for most of the reduction in the Hispanic-White disparity in the safety/behavioral concerns domain, the teen birth rate and the crime victimization rate. In 1985 Hispanics were more likely than Whites to experience crime victimization, with a gap of 47 points, but by 2004 Hispanics were less likely to be victims of crime than Whites, with gap of 18 points.

The second indicator in which Hispanic children made significant improvement is the teen birth rate. The Hispanic disadvantage in the teen birth rate narrowed by about one-tenth, or 14 points. The narrowing gaps for both crime victimization and teen births occurred because the improvements for Hispanic children were greater than the improvements for White children.

**Figure 3:**  
 Hispanic-White Gaps in Each Domain and Overall, 1985-2004



### *Family Economic Well-Being– Gaps in Poverty, Parental Employment, and Health Insurance Coverage Decline*

The Hispanic-White gap in family economic well-being narrowed by nearly one-third from 1985 to 2004. Reductions of one-third in the health insurance disparity, two-fifths in the poverty disparity, and three-fifths in the secure parental employment indicator gap account for this convergence.

The narrowing gaps for poverty and secure parental employment occurred because the improvements for Hispanic children were greater than the improvements for White children. The narrowing gap for health insurance coverage occurred because Hispanic children experienced improvement while White children experienced deterioration.

The gap in family economic well-being failed to decline by a larger amount because Hispanic-White disparities in median income grew by one-fourth.

### *Health – Gap with White Children Eliminated (but Decline among White Children is the Primary Cause)*

The Hispanic disadvantage of 13 points in the health domain in 1985 was essentially eliminated by 2004 (less than one point separates Hispanic children and White children). The indicator contributing most to this improvement was the rate at which parents report that their children have activity limitations. The Hispanic advantage in this area increased nine-fold, from 6 points in 1985 to 55 points in 2004, because the indicator deteriorated for White children much more than for Hispanic children.

Two other factors contributed to the elimination of the Hispanic-White gap in the health arena. First, Hispanic children narrowed the obesity disparity with White children by one-fourth. Second, a 9 point disadvantage in the proportion of Hispanic babies with low birth weight turned to a 6 point advantage. However, both of these changes occurred because the deterioration in the indicators was greater for White children than for Hispanic children.

### *Social Relationships – Gap Narrows by One-Fourth*

The Hispanic disadvantage in the social relationships domain narrowed by about one-fourth (9 points). Contributing to this improvement were a narrowing by one-fourth of the disparity in the proportion of children living with a single parent, and a corresponding narrowing of one-fifth in the disparity in residential mobility.

### *Community Connectedness – Despite Improvement in Access to Prekindergarten, Gap in Attainment of College Degrees between Hispanic and White Youth Expands*

The disparity between Hispanics and Whites in the community connectedness domain expanded slightly (by 3 points) from 1985 to 2004, compared to the narrowing of one-third (11 points) for Blacks. From 1985 to 2004 Prekindergarten enrollment rates increased for both Hispanics and Whites, but the increases were larger for Hispanics than Whites, leading to a reduction of more than one-third in the Prekindergarten enrollment gap.

Most of the narrowing in the gap occurred, however, between 2002 and 2004, as enrollment for Hispanics continued to rise while enrollment for Whites declined. Thus, this reduced disparity may not be sustained. Moreover, despite the narrowing of the Hispanic-White gap, the Hispanic disadvantage in the Prekindergarten indicator remained large at 30 points, while the Black disparity compared to Whites had been eliminated.

The reduction in the Hispanic-White Prekindergarten enrollment gap was, however, smaller than the expansion in the Hispanic disadvantage regarding completion of a Bachelor's Degree at ages 25-29. The Hispanic-White gap for this indicator expanded by one-half, as large improvement for Whites overshadowed slight improvement for Hispanics. Thus, the overall Hispanic-White gap in community connectedness expanded slightly between 1985-2004.

### *Educational Achievement – Gap Persists Amid Little Change for All Children*

Hispanic children, like Black children, experienced little change in the gap in educational achievement with White children, as reflected in reading and math test scores.

### *Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being – An Advantage for Hispanic Children*

Hispanic children, like Black children, ranked higher on emotional and spiritual well-being than White children from 1985-2004, and the magnitude of the advantage changed little. For Hispanics, the disparity in religious attendance shifted from a 6 point disadvantage to a 5 point advantage. The Hispanic advantage in the religious importance indicator expanded by nine-tenths (17 points). But a small deterioration in the suicide indicator for Hispanics and an improvement for Whites led to a narrowing, by nearly one-half of the Hispanic advantage in this indicator. Thus, little change occurred, overall, in the Hispanic-White gap in emotional and spiritual well-being.

---

## Conclusions

This report, using the FCD Child Well-Being Index (CWI) and its component domains and indicators, presents a new and surprising picture of change in the lives of Black children and Hispanic children, compared to White children. Black children and Hispanic children are in some ways advantaged compared to Whites, and in no domains for Hispanic children and only one domain for Black children is disadvantage expanding.

In a few domains the gaps separating the groups changed little between 1985 and 2004, but in a majority of domains of well-being the gaps have been narrowing or, in the case of safety/behavioral concerns, the gaps have essentially disappeared.

Despite improvements in these domains and in the overall CWI, even if the best performance over the past 19 years were duplicated, it will take at least a generation to close the gaps in well-being that separate Black children and Hispanic children from White children. In addition, even if Black children and Hispanic children reach parity with White children, the overall level of well-being of all three groups would be substantially below the best practice level reflecting the historical experience of U.S. children and the corresponding international best practice level.

<sup>1</sup> See Kenneth C. Land, Vicki Lamb, Sara Kahler Mustillo (2001) "Child and Youth Well-Being in the United States, 1975-1998: Some Findings from a New Index" *Social Indicators Research* 56: 241-320; Kenneth C. Land (2005) "The Foundation for Child Development Index of Child Well-Being (CWI), 1975-2003 with Projections for 2004" *2005 Report*, New York: Foundation for Child Development, downloaded June 2007, from [http://www.fcd-us.org/usr\\_doc/Cwi\\_report\\_2005.pdf](http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/Cwi_report_2005.pdf); Kenneth C. Land, (2005) "The 2005 Index of Child Well-Being (CWI): Implications for Policy Makers" *FCD Policy Brief*, Series No. 2 (March 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Results in this report are drawn from a longer paper, Donald J. Hernandez, Suzanne E. Macartney (2008) "Measuring Social Disparities: A Modified Approach to the Index of Child Well-Being (CWI) for Race-Ethnic, Immigrant-Generation, and Socioeconomic Groups with New Results for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics" [http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=648676](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=648676). The methods used to obtain results presented here can be found in the longer report.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth C. Land, Vicki Lamb, Sara Kahler Mustillo (2001) "Child and Youth Well-Being in the United States, 1975-1998: Some Findings from a New Index" *Social Indicators Research* 56: 241-320. Results are adjusted here from 1975 baseline to 1985 baseline.



## **Acknowledgements**

The authors are grateful to Kenneth C. Land, Vicki Lamb, and Sara Kahler Mustillo for sharing the race-ethnic data which they compiled to assess race-ethnic disparities, to Callie Rennison for providing new estimates of violent crime offender and violent criminal victimization from the National Crime Victimization Survey, to Harold Leibovitz for extensive editorial assistance, and to the Foundation for Child Development for supporting this research. The authors bear sole responsibility for the content and interpretations presented in this paper.

## **What Is the CWI?**

FCD Child Well-Being Index (CWI) is an evidence-based composite measure of trends over time in the quality of life of America's children and youth. The CWI is comprised of 28 indicators organized into seven domains. They are family economic well-being, health, safety/behavioral concerns, educational attainment, community connectedness, social relationships, and emotional/spiritual well-being. (See the extended version of this report for a discussion of the Methods of Index Construction and the seven domains of the CWI as well as the 28 Key Indicators that comprise them.)

These seven quality-of-life domains have been found in numerous social science studies to be related to an overall sense of subjective well-being or satisfaction with life. The CWI tracks the well-being of children annually, and has been doing so since 1975.

This paper analyzes changes in well-being between Black, Hispanic, and White children. The percent difference between each specific group and the total population is calculated for each year. In the baseline year, a value of 100 is assigned to each domain. Thus, if the value for Black children on a domain were 5 percent higher than for the population as a whole, Blacks would be assigned a value of 105 for the baseline year. Similarly, if the value for White children on that same domain were 20 percent lower than for the population as a whole, Whites would be assigned a value of 80 for the baseline year. Black children would hold a 25-point advantage over White children on that domain. By doing a similar analysis each year, changes in the gap can be measured over time.

The underlying data used to calculate modified CWIs in this paper for specific race-ethnic groups using this new methodology are the same as the data used for the current methodology (see extended version of this report) with two exceptions, the indicators for violent offending and violent crime victimization. For this report, data for these two indicators were obtained from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).