

Variation in Generational Perceptions of Child Health and Well-being

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To assess adults' perceptions regarding the health and well-being of children today relative to their own health and well-being as youth and the potential for intergenerational differences in those perceptions.

METHODS: A cross-sectional, Internet-based survey of a nationally representative household sample was conducted using GfK Custom Research's Web-enabled KnowledgePanel, a probability-based panel representative of the US population. We assessed perceptions of children's health and well-being today compared to when respondents were growing up, including physical and mental health; and children's education, exercise, diet, health care, safety of communities, and emotional support from families, groups, and organizations.

RESULTS: Overall, 1330 (65%) of 2047 adult respondents completed the survey. Only 26% of respondents believed that the current physical health of children, and 14% that the current mental health of children, is better today than when they were

growing up. There was a significant trend among generations, with a greater proportion of older generations perceiving the physical health of children to be better today. Only 15% of respondents reported the chances for a child to grow up with good mental health in the future are "better" now than when they were growing up.

CONCLUSIONS: Adults across all generations in the United States today view children's health as unlikely to meet the goals of the American Dream of continuous improvement. Although demographic changes require continued focus on our aging population, we must equally recognize the importance of advancing a healthy future for our nation's children, who will assume the mantle of our future.

KEYWORDS: child health; generations; health policy; mental health; well-being

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WHAT'S NEW

In this cross-sectional, Internet-based survey that included 1330 adults, only 26% of respondents believed that the current physical health of children and 14% that the current mental health of children is better today than when they were growing up.

A BIG PART of the American Dream is that we both hope and expect that life, and whatever components thereof on which we choose to focus, will be better for our children than it is and was for current and prior generations.¹ This notion includes that important aspects of childhood itself also improve with each successive generation.² Much has been written recently regarding concerns that children born in past 2 decades may not achieve financially as much or more than their parents.^{3,4} Angst arising from the global financial crisis of 2008, growth in income inequality, and a potentially stagnant economy have become manifest in the popular press.^{5–7}

With regard to the health of children in America, the previous century saw remarkable gains in the prevention of communicable diseases through the development and implementation of immunization programs and the ubiquitous availability of clean water.⁸ For older Americans growing up in prior decades, there was every expectation that the health of children would be better than that of their parents and grandparents. However, the impressions of such prior health challenges fade quickly with time, and more contemporary generations may not have appreciated such dramatic positive changes in health for children.

Nonetheless, comparatively new challenges regarding children's health are more prominent today relative to years past; these include such issues as mental health, bullying, safety, and obesity.⁹ As such, it is unclear whether the concerns manifest regarding the future financial well-being of the next generation may also be prevalent in the realm of health. Although there may be cycles in any modern economy that can cause short- or even

medium-term societal angst, the same should not necessarily be the case for health status or noneconomic aspects of the quality of life.

In the United States, ever increasing attention is being focused on the aging of the population and ensuring that the health and well-being of seniors is a national priority.^{10–12} The imperative to make things better for future generations is still embedded in our national identity. Yet recent research has shown that an increasing focus on meeting the needs of seniors is not occurring in the larger context of intergenerational health equity, with the resulting imbalance having a potentially negative impact on children if specific cautions are not exercised.^{13,14}

To assess adults' perceptions regarding the health and well-being of children today relative to their own health and well-being as youth in years past, and to assess the potential for intergenerational differences in those perceptions, we studied a national household sample of adults in the United States. We hypothesized that there may be differences among generations regarding both their own health during childhood and their beliefs regarding the mental and physical health of the current generation of children in the United States. Understanding the range of public perceptions on the current state of, and future potential for, the health and well-being of children may inform policy priorities that affect the future of the nation.

METHODS

STUDY DESIGN

We conducted a cross-sectional, Internet-based survey of a nationally representative household sample of the US population regarding perceptions of child health today versus when respondents were growing up. This survey was conducted as part of the C. S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health (NPCH), a recurring online survey of parents and nonparents for over 10 years.¹⁵ The NPCH data collection method has served as the data source for several national peer-reviewed publications about health-related issues.^{16–19}

Funding for the NPCH is provided by the University of Michigan Health System. The University of Michigan institutional review board formally reviewed this study,

and a waiver was given. This study was declared exempt from human subjects review because it was a study of deidentified respondents.

STUDY POPULATION

The NPCH is conducted using GfK Custom Research's Web-enabled KnowledgePanel, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US population.²⁰ Potential participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of residential addresses and then invited by mail to participate in the KnowledgePanel. If individuals agree to participate but do not have Internet access, GfK provides a laptop and Internet connection at no cost. Panelists receive unique login information for accessing surveys online, and they are sent e-mails throughout each month inviting them to participate in research.

SURVEY ITEMS

The study team developed 13 questions regarding perceptions of children's health and well-being today compared to when respondents were growing up. Eight were related to perceptions of physical and mental health for children and for the respondents themselves. Five other questions were related to perceptions of children's education, exercise, diet, health care, safety of communities, and emotional support from families, groups, and organizations. Questions used in the analyses included the following: "Compared to the time when you were growing up, how would you describe the physical health of children <18 years old?" and "Compared to the time when you were growing up, how would you describe the mental health of children <18 years old?" (Fig. 1); "Compared to the time when you were growing up, what are the chances that a child in the United States today will grow up to have good physical health in the future?" and "Compared to the time when you were growing up, what are the chances that a child in the United States today will grow up to have good mental health in the future?" (Fig. 2); and "Compared to the time when you were growing up, how would you describe the situation for children in the United States today regarding: safety of their communities; quality of diet, exercise, and fitness; emotional support from their families; quality of education; and quality

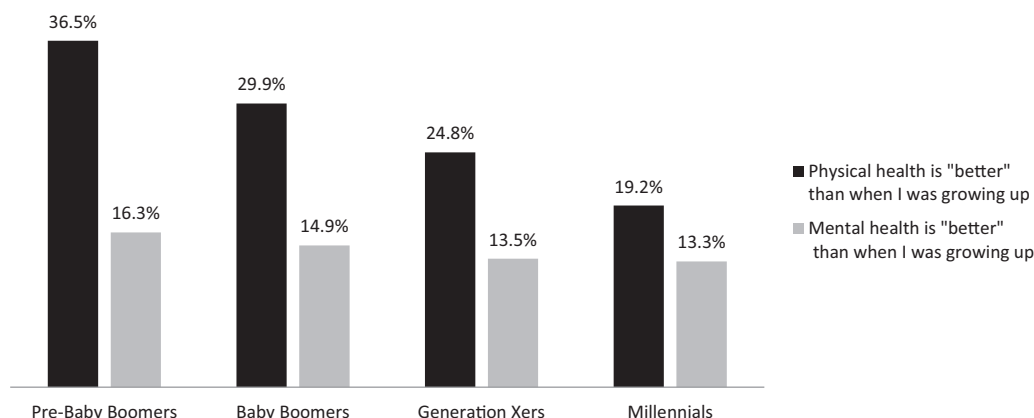


Figure 1. "Compared to the time when you were growing up, how would you describe the physical/mental health of children?" ($P < .0001$ for comparison of generations across all response options for physical health).

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