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## welcome

to *Forum Focus*, a regular publication of the Forum for Youth Investment. *Forum Focus* is published five times a year as an insert in *Youth Today*. The Forum for Youth Investment is dedicated to changing the odds for children, youth and their families by sparking and supporting action to improve the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement in neighborhoods and across the nation.

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## Indicators of Positive Youth Development

As Kristin Moore, president of Child Trends says, "What gets measured, gets done." And these days, when people think of child and youth measures, they think of KIDS COUNT, thanks to the long-standing support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). Fifteen years ago, AECF helped bring data into policy and the public conscience by investing in the development and dissemination of a uniform set of indicators that could be tracked across time and across states. With the birth of the KIDS COUNT Data Book, advocates could tap into the power of both trend data and ranking data which are validated by researchers, accepted if not generated by public sources, and funded by a prominent national foundation.

Thanks to the KIDS COUNT project, there is a structured, rigorous process for taking stock of how well kids are doing nationally and within their states and counties on a variety of validated indicators. These indicators of child well-being are predominantly measures of the absence of family poverty, child neglect, child abuse and limiting youth behaviors (such as suicide, teen births and

substance abuse). While this is the data that is consistently available across time and across states, it is also lopsided, focusing on *negative* indicators, and revealing little about the development of *positive* competencies and attributes necessary for successful adulthood.

**"As a society we measure what we value and we value what we measure."**

— Bill O'Hare  
AECF

This problem has not gone unnoticed by AECF and others. But major breakthroughs are few and far between, and with good reason. In order to use the indicators to identify trends and monitor progress, changes and additions need to be made with caution. The ongoing challenge, however, is that the need to protect the integrity of existing indicators must be balanced with the need to incorporate a broader and more positive set of indicators, or the ultimate utility of the work may be undermined.

Demand for a more balanced picture is growing among advocates, researchers, practitioners and citizens. The fruits of the results-based accountability movement are paying off. Many states and communities, having gone through public processes to define a shared set of desired outcomes for children and youth, are now turning to their own devices to find and measure positive indicators for as many outcomes as possible.

A number of states have begun adding positive measures into statewide surveys, often adapting the Center for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Some have sponsored alternative surveys, such as those conducted by Search Institute or Communities That Care, to collect asset-based or protective factor data. While these surveys yield important new data, they are often disconnected from comprehensive statewide accountability, planning and assessment efforts.

Increasingly, however, states are trying to connect the dots — to define positive outcomes, identify a full range of indicators, and establish measures that provide cross-department and cross-sector accountability. Maine Marks was created in 1998 as a Children's Cabinet initiative to monitor the well-being of all Maine's citizens. The project's twelve outcome areas contain more than two dozen positive indicators, from multiple data sources including a unique household youth telephone survey. Colorado's legislatively-mandated 2001 state plan for children and youth (spanning five departments) includes three positive indicators. The state's inter-disciplinary prevention leadership council is currently developing its 2005 plan with additional positive measures of child and adolescent well-being. New York is undergoing an extensive, collaborative process to create youth development indicators to augment their Touchstones/KIDS COUNT Data Book. Their new interactive Web site presents the goals, objectives and indicators for each of six life areas, in addition to providing indicator definitions, community profiles and special reports. Iowa's Youth Development Results Framework builds on a successful early childhood initiative, and identifies four broad result areas that can be used across state departments

(and at the local level) to guide youth policy, organize planning activities and monitor youth development outcomes.

This issue of *Forum Focus* scans a number of important efforts gaining momentum over the past several years to develop and use positive indicators of child and youth well-being. In **research update**, we offer a scan of current research efforts to develop and measure new indicators, highlighting important work currently being led by Child Trends, Chapin Hall Center for Children and others.

**"First, it's a question of science ... Second, it's a question of vision ... And third, ... there is a question of public perceptions."**

— Kristin Moore  
Child Trends

In **on the ground**, we feature efforts in Vermont to embed positive outcomes and indicators into data tracking, policy and practice across systems and agencies. In **voices from the fields**, we talk with Kristin Moore from Child Trends and Bill O'Hare from the Annie E. Casey Foundation about the natural tensions between research and policy in developing and promoting positive social indicators.

## DEFINITIONS

To clarify the differences among accountability measures, the following definitions are adapted from the Fiscal Policies Studies Institute.

**Outcomes** (goals or results) are conditions of well-being for whole populations (children, adults, families or communities.) Examples: healthy children, children ready for school, children succeeding in school, strong families. They are not about programs or agency services, since no single action by any one agency can create the improved results we want and need.

**Indicators** (or benchmarks) are measures which help quantify the achievement of the outcome or result. Examples: third grade reading scores help quantify whether children are succeeding in school, percent of youth volunteering helps quantify youth choosing healthy behaviors.

**Performance Measures** are measures of how well programs and agencies are working. They report whether the clients or customers of the service are better off. These measures are sometimes referred to as *client or customer results* (versus *community population results*). They typically answer: How much did we do, how well did we do it, is anyone better off?

Outcomes and indicators are about the ends; strategies and performance measures are about the means to get there. Processes that fail to make these crucial distinctions often mix up ends and means.

Source: Fiscal Policy Studies Institute [www.resultsaccountability.com](http://www.resultsaccountability.com)

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core operating division of impact strategies, inc.

**Publishers:** Karen Pittman, Executive Director  
Merita Irby, Managing Director

**Contributing Writers:**  
Becky Judd, Senior Fellow  
Thaddeus Ferber, Program Director

**Fulfillment:** Janis Lee Rodriguez, Communications Associate

# research update THE PROGRESSION OF POSITIVE INDICATORS

The development of positive indicators of child well-being is ongoing and emerging — but not new. As far back as the 1950s, researchers such as Werner (Kauai) and Rutter (London and Isle of Wright) began longitudinal studies of resilience and of risk and protective factors impacting adolescent and young adult outcomes.

The demand for positive indicators, however, is definitely growing. States, localities and some national organizations are increasingly using positive language to define overarching outcomes or goals (e.g., all children will be ready for school, all youth will be prepared for adulthood) and looking for ways to track progress beyond the typical deficit indicators. A scan of the field reveals both great progress and great gaps. One could look at the Search Institute survey of 40 Developmental Assets and declare victory, or one could look at KIDS COUNT's indicator list (which is still primarily deficit-oriented) and declare failure. What is going on?

In an effort to provide comparable, reliable data, KIDS COUNT data books only include measures which are collected identically in all 50 states on an annual basis. These indicators contain administrative and service utilization data, and are pegged to other national studies. While these features make the KIDS COUNT indicators robust, they also are restrictive. The barriers to creating positive indicators and incorporating them into data samples that meet KIDS COUNT's criteria are important but daunting.

Not surprisingly, it has been easier to incorporate positive indicators into

data sources that do not require representative samples and consistent participation from every state. Without this restriction, Search Institute and Communities that Care have conducted surveys collecting positive indicators in thousands of communities across the nation.

So where does that leave people who want the scientific rigor, national trend data, and state and county data sets provided by KIDS COUNT but also want the positive indicators reported by Search Institute and others? As this Research Update reports, significant progress is being made to bridge the gap.

### DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING POSITIVE INDICATORS

As state and local entities advocated for positive population-based indicators, survey instruments and program measures, national organizations and federal agencies began taking note, led in large part by Child Trends, Chapin Hall Center for Children (Chapin Hall) and the federal Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). (Technical assistance efforts provided to state indicator initiatives were previously described in November 2003 *Forum Focus*.)

In 2001, Child Trends released the *Youth Development Outcomes Compendium*, which organized existing indicators within broad developmental domains (educational achievement and cognitive attainment, health and safety, social and emotional development, self-sufficiency). To increase the rigor of the indicators, ASPE, Chapin Hall and Child Trends hosted

a technical assistance workshop in April 2002 on youth indicators that brought researchers and state policy makers together to assess the state of the field and to support states in furthering their efforts. The following year, Child Trends organized the Indicators of Positive Development Conference, bringing together researchers from across the country as part of a long-term effort to conceptualize, develop and refine positive measures for future surveys at the national, state or local level.

Taken together, these efforts have breathed new life into the work, yielding an informal network of committed individuals as well as increased use of positive measures in a number of parallel efforts, including national surveys and reports, national health initiatives and emergent work in the areas of school connectedness and positive psychology.

### NATIONAL SURVEYS AND REPORTS

As illustrated in the box below, numerous national reports, longitudinal studies and trend surveys have begun including positive indicators of well-being. While they are still primarily deficit-based, new strength-based thinking is evident in a small but increasing number of measures, such as extracurricular activities, caring relationships and academic achievement. This represents significant progress — an important achievement to sustain and an area ripe for further growth.

### HEALTH

The health field has typically measured adolescent health by indicators of problem behaviors and service utilization. However, some

leaders in the field are beginning to integrate strength-based measures. For example, 30 percent of states who participate in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) have adapted the survey to include positive questions related to caring relationships, parental involvement and participation in volunteering or extracurricular activities. Similarly, the National Initiative to Improve Adolescent Health by 2010 (anchored in Healthy People 2010) has incorporated positive youth development strategies as ways to increase health status among the 21 Critical Health Objectives for adolescents and young adults. Finally, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (Committee on Evaluation of Children's Health), is preparing to release *Children's Health, Nation's Wealth: Assessing and Improving Child Health*, which includes significant references to positive constructs such as capacities, potential and health influences.

### SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

The education realm is perhaps the only developmental domain for which there are a solid set of positive indicators which have stood the test of time (e.g., graduation rates, reading, math and science scores). Recent work has broadened traditional academic-focused outcomes to include social-emotional outcomes and concepts such as school bonding or connectedness. Strong scientific evidence (from the Add-Health Survey and others, see the September issue of the *Journal of School Health*) demonstrates that school connectedness promotes educational motivation, classroom engagement, improved school attendance and

reduced incidents of fighting and bullying, which in turn lead to increased academic achievement.

### POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

A parallel effort has emerged in the field of psychology, where Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson and others have been working to develop "positive psychology," a branch of psychology devoted to building on people's strengths and helping them reach their full potential, rather than focusing solely on fixing problems and deficits. This work led to the release of *Values in Action — Character Strengths and Virtues: A Classification and Handbook* in March 2004. This 640 page research-based handbook includes a self-report inventory designed for youth on each of the 24 identified character strengths (e.g., hope, gratitude, curiosity, love, vitality).

## NATIONAL STUDIES, SURVEYS AND REPORTS USING POSITIVE INDICATORS

	NATIONAL STUDIES, SURVEYS AND REPORTS	SAMPLE POSITIVE INDICATOR AREAS
National Longitudinal Studies Studies following single cohort over time	<b>National Survey of Families &amp; Households</b> 1987 www.sc.wisc.edu/nsfh/home.htm	Family relationships, rules and interactions, out-of-school and religious activities, academic expectations
	<b>National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health</b> 1995 www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth	Family and peer relationships, school environments, out-of-school and religious activities
	<b>National Longitudinal Survey of Youth</b> 1997 www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy97.htm	Employment information, parent relationships and expectations, out-of-school activities
	<b>National Education Longitudinal Surveys (88&amp;02)</b> www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/nels88; www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/els2002	School effectiveness, structural and climate issues, expectations and achievement, parent involvement, school-to-work transition
	<b>4-H study of Positive Youth Development</b> 2002 www.ase.tufts.edu/4hstudy_pyd	Competence, confidence, character, connection, caring and contribution
National Trend Data Surveys Ongoing surveys (with representative data)	<b>Monitoring the Future</b> (1975-) www.monitoringthefuture.org	Citizenship, activism, academics, jobs, future goals, media use, out-of-school activities, parental involvement, religious involvement
	<b>US Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation</b> (1994-) www.sipp.census.gov/sipp	Family rules and interactions, out-of-school activities, academic expectations and achievement
	<b>National Household Education Surveys</b> (1996-) http://nces.ed.gov/nhes	Civic involvement, family involvement
National Reports Summaries of studies and surveys	<b>National Survey of Children's Health</b> (2003-) www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/slaits/nsch.htm	Emotional health, family rules and interactions, out-of-school activities, media use, perceptions of neighborhood
	<b>Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth</b> (2003) www.aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/03trends/ <b>A Child's Day: 2000</b> www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p70-89.pdf	Life goals, religious involvement, voting behaviors, parental involvement, academic proficiency Family interactions, support and expectations, out-of-school activities

## on the ground VERMONT'S INDICATOR EVOLUTION

Vermont is a good example of a state that sharpened its focus on child and youth outcomes by developing, disseminating and using data on positive indicators. Vermont's Framework for Collaboration was created in 1994 by the Vermont Agency of Human Services and the Department of Education to coordinate efforts to improve the well-being of children and families throughout the state. A primary component of this effort was collecting and disseminating information about indicators of child and family well-being. A public/private partnership, the State Team for Children, Families and Individuals, formed to identify "common ground" outcomes of well-being for Vermont communities. With input from more than 5,000 Vermonters, a series of outcome statements spanning the age spectrum were agreed to in 1996 (slight revisions have been made since then). During this time, significant technical assistance in results-based accountability was provided to the state and its community partners by Mark Friedman, director of the Fiscal Policy Studies Institute. This now well-established framework includes outcomes of well-being, positive social indicators, a variety of measurement tools, legislation, community-based data, Web-based tracking systems and resources to help communities improve in the desired areas.

While the initial outcomes identified by the State Team were stated in positive terms (see box), the indicators at that time focused predominantly on traditional measures (e.g., young child poverty, child abuse and neglect, suicide, teen births and substance abuse). In the mid-to-late 1990s, many Vermont communities became interested in the resiliency work of Nan Henderson and Search Institute's Developmental Asset

framework as ways to reframe efforts to improve youth well-being. Local communities were hungry for positive measures. In 1997 and 1999, the state funded two-thirds of all communities to participate in Search Institute's survey (it was offered to all communities). In time, the need for a cost effective, consistent and reliable vehicle to track strength-based indicators led to Vermont's modification of its Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). In 2001, four asset-based questions were added to the survey (a fifth will be added in 2005).

The accountability efforts were further institutionalized through the passage of a bill in 1998 by the Vermont General Assembly (placed into statute in 2001) to improve outcomes through state and community partnerships. Two-year funding from the U.S. Department of Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in 1998 inspired additional innovations in positive indicator development and implementation. Communities expressed the need for guidance on how best to impact the chosen outcomes. In response, the *What Works* series was developed by the Vermont Agency of Human Services to provide a brief overview of the programs and practices that research has shown to be effective in several outcome areas.

An annual data book, *The Social Well-Being of Vermonters*, serves as the barometer of well-being at the state level. Trends in more than 60 indicators of well-being in ten outcome categories are included, with comparisons to the nation, other states and other countries. County and community data are further summarized in annual *Community Profiles* to assist local entities as they engage in strategic planning,

regional planning and grant application processes. Additionally, Vermont Children's Forum (Vermont's KIDS COUNT grantee) has enhanced their efforts through supplemental reports such as *YOUTH COUNT: The Vermont Youth Report* (2002) that incorporates positive measures of well-being.

### RESPONSE AND IMPACT

The positively-framed outcomes and indicators have led to significant, concrete actions across the state. For example, the outcome area, "Families, youth and individuals are engaged in their community's decisions and activities" has led to a variety of state and local efforts that have engaged large numbers of youth. In one community, the students pointed out the discrepancy between the high

portion of youth who report volunteering and the low number of youth who feel valued by the community. This discussion, in time, led to local press providing more coverage of the contributions youth were making to their community.

Equally impressive is Vermont's commitment to engaging youth in decision-making roles, including youth membership on the state and local boards of education, and the leadership role youth play in the 12 regional youth councils in the administration of the state's Safe and Drug-Free Schools funding.

While there is always more to do, the positive measures in Vermont have already played an important role in engaging new voices in local planning efforts and framing this work in positive and constructive ways.

VERMONT OUTCOMES OF WELL-BEING	SAMPLE OF POSITIVE SOCIAL INDICATORS USED
Families, youth and individuals are engaged in their community's decisions and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent of youth who report parent involvement in schooling</li> <li>Percent of youth who report they help decide what goes on in their school</li> <li>Percent of youth who report they are given useful roles in their community</li> </ul>
Pregnant women and young children thrive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent receiving prenatal care</li> </ul>
Children are ready for school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent of kindergarteners fully immunized</li> </ul>
Children succeed in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English/language arts and math scores</li> </ul>
Youth choose healthy behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent of students volunteering</li> </ul>
Children live in stable, supported families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent of youth who report high levels of love and support from family (discontinued)</li> </ul>
Youth successfully transition to adulthood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent of high school seniors with plans for education, vocational training or employment</li> </ul>
Adults lead healthy and productive lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Average median family income</li> </ul>
Elders and people with disabilities live with dignity and independence in settings they prefer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent of successful job placements among consumers of Vocational Rehabilitation Services</li> </ul>
Communities provide safety and support to families and individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percent of youth who feel valued by their community</li> </ul>
Most indicators are measured using administrative data, supplemented by Search Institute's <i>Profile of Student: Attitudes and Behaviors</i> survey and a modified Youth Risk Behavior Survey (including four asset-based questions).	

## voices from the fields

### AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTIN MOORE AND BILL O'HARE

Child Trends and KIDS COUNT each celebrate anniversaries this year. Both organizations have provided the field with research, data and analysis on the condition of young people living in the United States for 25 and 15 years, respectively. In an effort to understand the past, present and future of this work and how advocates can better use social indicators to evoke youth-centered community change, *Forum Focus* interviewed Kristin Moore, president and senior scholar of Child Trends, and Bill O'Hare, KIDS COUNT coordinator for the Casey Foundation.

#### Why is tracking positive indicators important for the youth development field?

**Moore:** If you look at the information that is out there, most of the things that we know about young people center on the negative, the things that should be prevented. While we do want to prevent harm from coming to our children, we also need a vision of what is possible. That is where positive indicators come in. First, it's a question of sci-

ence. Simply studying negative outcomes is incomplete from a scientific point of view. Second, it's a question of vision. We need to have a vision of not just what we want to avoid, but what we want for children and youth. And third, and this is more speculative, there is a question of public perceptions. The public holds quite negative views about children, efforts to assist children and trends in children's lives. I sus-

**voices from the fields**

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pect that this has something to do with the fact that most of our indicators currently monitor the bad things. Typically, we measure progress as “the reduction of something bad.” If we have a capacity to talk about things that are good and examine positive trends, it might help to change the dialogue around children and youth issues.

**How are positive indicators currently being used by policy makers and youth advocates?**

**O’Hare:** Advocates typically use data on problems as the primary focus of their public appeal — for example, “there are too many kids dropping out of high school.” Whatever the measure is, advocates want to draw attention to it so that people with resources will address the problem. One of the dilemmas of such an approach is that it reinforces the negative image — which the general public already holds — that nothing works. Survey evidence that Child Trends and the Casey Foundation collected a couple of years ago suggests that people don’t understand that the actual percentages of teen childbearing, welfare caseloads and youth as the victims of crimes are all going down. Part of that may relate to the approach child advocates have used over the last 15 years.

**How does this connect with the push that we have been seeing of the need to have more positive indicators? Where do you think that is coming from?**

**Moore:** I see the push for positive indicators coming from communities — from programs, from parents, and also from children and adolescents themselves. They’re not really interested in programs that are just going to squelch their problems. They want people to invest in them and they see their community as a positive place (or at least they would like to), and so they want people to invest in their community. The push for positive indicators did not come from the research community, by and large. There certainly has been work on normal and positive development by some scholars for a long time, but most research has been focused on preventing the negative. However, responding to the demand — from communities and from community programs — for assessing and tracking what is right for their communities is a more positive way to approach community change.

**How do you think the research community and the advocacy community are catching up with or responding to that push? What are the kinds of things that you’re seeing?**

**Moore:** I certainly am seeing a lot more interest in research on positive

indicators, but there is considerable skepticism among statisticians that these numbers are soft. So we are really struggling hard to develop solid measures. Our national conference in March 2003 [summarized in the forthcoming book: *What Do Children Need to Flourish?*] brought together people from all over the country who presented some pretty compelling research that will allow us to better measure things that are positive and that are really important to children’s development. But there is real skepticism. Funding streams still mostly support research on the negative, so it’s taking a long time.

**Where do you hope this work will move over the next 15 years?**

**O’Hare:** I hope that now a groundswell and an infrastructure exist that will sustain public interest in measuring and reporting child well-being that we have not seen in the past, so sustaining that and expanding that are my hope and my aspiration. Our ability to inform the public will take a different road and, with the internet and the ability to customize data, the delivery of some of that data will be different in the future.

**What role do you envision for your organizations as this work moves forward?**

**O’Hare:** Our national [KIDS COUNT] Data Book is more about

the delivery of data and supporting a network of state advocates. I think it will continue to grow in reputation and credibility and will continue to inject an empirical rigor into discussions on children’s issues that will benefit children and taxpayers in the long run. Twenty years ago, hardly anyone considered the Data Book as part of the context for forming public policies around children. Now I believe the appreciation for it as a resource is much higher and will continue to grow.

**Moore:** Over the next 15 years, Child Trends plans to develop a stronger knowledge base, allowing us to establish that some of these positive indicators really are important while others may fall by the wayside. And we’ll develop the strong evidence we need to prove that these indicators are measurable and important. What I would like to see is an integrated system of indicators on an international level, as well as the national, state and local levels, so that these different levels of government could speak to one another. It would make governing much more cooperative. There is an interest in positive indicators internationally, and this could really lead to continuity of measurements across geography, as well as over time.

**key resources** WHAT GETS MEASURED, GETS DONE

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