



Memorandum

June 15, 2007

TO: Representative Chaka Fattah
Attention: Elizabeth King

FROM: Melinda Gish
Specialist in Social Legislation
Domestic Social Policy Division

SUBJECT: H.R. 2477 and Child Well-Being Indicators

This memorandum responds to your request for an overview of federal data that are currently collected and interpreted as indicators of child well-being, and outlines how provisions in the State Child Well-Being Research Act of 2007 (H.R. 2477) aim to expand those collection efforts.

As we have previously discussed, many federal agencies collect statistical data on children and families, and each year (since 1997) the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (The Forum) has published a report, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*. The annual report, integrating work from 20 federal agencies, provides a compendium of indicators across a range of topics: population and family characteristics; economic security; health; behavior and social environment; and education. The indicators are presented on a national level, but not on a state-by-state basis. This should not be taken to mean that all the surveys from which these national indicators are derived lack state-representativeness. To the contrary, much of the data currently collected by the survey that H.R. 2477 proposes to enhance are statistically representative at the state level.

H.R. 2477 includes provisions aiming to *expand* the ability to measure children's well-being on a state-by-state basis. H.R. 2477 proposes to develop additional comprehensive indicators for assessing child well-being; to expand the federal collection of data that are statistically representative at the state level; to increase the frequency of such data collection; to over-sample low-income children and families to enable greater subgroup estimates (by both income and age); and to improve the currency of data. Based on the views expressed in the Forum's annual reports, there is room for such expansion of data collection. Even for presenting indicators at the national level, the Forum's annual reports make a point of identifying "critical gaps in the data available on children and youth." Included in each year's report is a description of child well-being data and measures that the authors advocate are in need of development. H.R. 2477 targets a single government survey, the National Survey of Children's Health, for expansion, as a means of furthering the goal of collecting additional data that shed light on child well-being across the states.

The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) is a national survey conducted for the first time during 2003-2004. The survey was supported and developed by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The purpose of the survey is to estimate national and state-level prevalence for various physical, emotional, and behavioral child health indicators in combination with information on family context and neighborhood environment. A total of over 100,000 surveys were completed nationally for children between the ages of 0-17 years, with a minimum of 1,483 surveys collected per state (and 25 states collecting over 2,000 surveys each).

Major findings of the NSCH are presented in a chartbook, *The Health and Well-Being of Children: A Portrait of States and the Nation*, published by HHS in 2005.¹ As noted in the publication's appendix, "The precision of the survey estimates is based on the sample size and the measure of interest. Estimates at the national level will be more precise than estimates at the state level. Estimates for all children will be more precise than estimates for subgroups of children... For the state-level indicators for all children, the maximum margin of error is 3.0 percent." As described below, H.R. 2477 intends to build upon the existing survey with the intention of bolstering the reliability of state-level estimates, particularly for lesser-populated states. It also intends to expand the ability to do greater subgroup analyses.

Section 3 of H.R. 2477 calls for the Director of the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration to expand the NSCH. Indicators developed as part of the expansion are to "include measures related to education; social and emotional development; physical and mental health and safety; and family well-being, such as family structure, income, employment, child care arrangements, and family relationships." The bill does not provide specifics, beyond requiring that the data collected with respect to the newly developed indicators be: 1) statistically representative at the state and national level; 2) consistent across states; 3) collected on an annual basis for at least the 5 years following the first year of collection; 4) measured with reliability; 5) current; 6) over-sampled with respect to low-income children and families, to enable subgroup estimates; and 7) made publically available.

In developing the new indicators described in H.R. 2477, the Director would be required to consult with a subcommittee of the aforementioned Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. Consultation would include a discussion of the availability of data through other federal data collection efforts. The subcommittee would include representatives with expertise in the domains related to the child well-being measures. Representatives of the Forum would advise the Director in establishing an advisory panel of experts who would make recommendations regarding measures, methods, and statistical tools necessary for assessing child well-being at the state level.

As mentioned, annual Forum reports have presented what the authors deem to be "needed indicators" with respect to assessing child well-being. Although the development of specific indicators are not included in the proposed bill (H.R. 2477), such indicators could potentially emerge from consultation between the Director and representatives from the Forum. Just a few examples from the 2005 report include:

¹ A link to the chartbook is available through <http://www.mchb.hrsa.gov/thechild/welcome.htm>

- *Homelessness*: “At present, there are no regularly collected data on the number of homeless children in the United States, although there have been occasional studies aimed at estimating this number.”
- *Youth violence*: “The indicator of serious violent crime offending by youth does not provide critical information on the experiences of youth in the criminal justice system, including the characteristics of youthful offenders and the number of characteristics of youth arrestees and detainees, those prosecuted in juvenile and adult courts, and those incarcerated in the Nation’s juvenile facilities, jails, and prisons.”
- *Early childhood development*: “A regular source of data is needed to monitor specific social, intellectual, and emotional skills of preschoolers over time.”

Although H.R. 2477 would use the National Survey of Children’s Health as the vehicle for collecting new data for developing additional child well-being indicators, the recommendations of the Forum, with respect to creating additional indicators may lead to changes to other surveys’ data collection efforts, which could contribute to the legislation’s goal of increasing the ability to assess child well-being in all states to a greater degree.

Concise descriptions of the data sources used by the Forum to assemble their most recent detailed national indicators report are included in Appendix B of *America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well Being 2005*, which I have attached. (The 2007 detailed report is anticipated in July 2007.) The full report is available at http://www.childstats.gov/amchildren05/pdf/ac2005/ac_05.pdf

I hope this provides a useful overview of the status of the federal government’s role in developing child well-being indicators and the context into which H.R. 2477 has been introduced. If any of this information prompts you to have questions that require looking into the many federal surveys and/or child well-being indicators in greater detail, please do not hesitate to call me (7-4618).