

# Executive Summary

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California is home to 9.9 million children, the largest child population of any state. To policymakers, this presents both challenges and opportunities. Among them is the opportunity to set standards for the health and well-being of children, and to maintain those standards during periods of economic decline.

Over the past few years, the well-being of many children in California has been at risk due in large part to the state's protracted economic downturn. In fact, the proportion of California's children living in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold—about \$22,000 for a family of four—rose from 17.3<sup>1</sup> percent in 2007 to 19.9<sup>2</sup> percent in 2009. Due to long-term effects of the Great Recession, child poverty is projected to remain high for at least the next several years.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the state's budget crisis has placed enormous pressure on programs that protect and promote the well-being of children and families. The condition of California's children has long-term consequences not only for the overall health of the state's population, but also for its long-term productivity and prosperity.

The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health commissioned the 2010 California Parent Survey to assess the current status of the state's child population from parents' perspectives. The survey is designed to provide timely information about how children are faring, and to bring attention to, and compel action on, key issues related to the well-being of California children.

The survey gathered information on the demographic characteristics of California children and their families including, among others, race/ethnicity, income, parental age and marital status, and the primary language spoken at home. It also asked parents about a wide range of issues, including children's physical and emotional health, medical and dental coverage, education, special health care needs, family time, and child care. For example, questions were asked about children's stress, risk-taking behaviors, child and parental depression, the quality and safety of children's schools, the level of parental involvement in school, the adequacy of household income, how children spend their free time, whether families eat and read together, access and barriers to child care, neighborhood safety, experiences with racism, and the effects of the media.

Based on a random-digit-dial phone survey (including cell phones),<sup>i</sup> with a sample size of 1,685 children, the survey is representative of the state's child population. It was conducted in five languages depending on respondent's preference.<sup>ii</sup> Results include representative samples for Los Angeles County and the San Francisco Bay Area—home to more than 40 percent of the state's children.<sup>4,iii</sup> All differences cited in the report are statistically significant at the  $p \leq 0.05$  level, unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> The survey used list-assisted random-digit-dialing (RDD) methods and wireless RDD.

<sup>ii</sup> Languages included English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, or Vietnamese.

<sup>iii</sup> For the purposes of this report, the San Francisco Bay Area includes the following counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara.

## Key Findings

### *Persistent Disparities*

Overall, parents indicate that the majority of children are doing relatively well on most measures of health and well-being. However, the survey findings show that certain groups of children repeatedly fare worse than their peers across multiple measures. These groups include children of color, and children of families with the following characteristics: low-income, single parents, foreign-born parents, parents who did not go to college, and those with a primary language other than English. Some examples of what parents reported:

- About 42 percent of the state’s children live in households with annual incomes of less than \$50,000, and these children are more likely to be in very poor, poor, or fair health (9-13 percent), compared to children from households with incomes higher than \$75,000 (2-4 percent).
- Children from single-parent families are almost twice as likely to be in very poor, poor or fair emotional health (15 percent) as children in two-parent families (8 percent).
- Approximately 12 percent of children are unsafe in their neighborhood or surroundings, according to their parents; among these, Latino/Hispanic children, those with household incomes below \$25,000, and children of foreign-born parents are most likely to have parents who are concerned about their safety.
- Children with annual household incomes under \$25,000 are less likely to have had a routine health check-up (69 percent) than children from higher income groups (78-86 percent).

Parents responded to questions about their children in four broad areas: physical health; emotional and behavioral health; social, educational, and home environments; and special health care needs, where applicable.

### *Physical Health*

According to parents, most children in California are in good or excellent health (93 percent). The majority have annual medical and dental visits (79 and 83 percent, respectively), health insurance (95 percent), and good or excellent health care (90 percent). However, results show inequities for some groups. For example:

- Children of native-born parents are more likely to have visited the doctor in the past year (85 percent) than children of foreign-born parents (72 percent), according to the survey.
- Children whose primary home language is English are more likely to receive good or excellent health care (95 percent), according to parents, than children with primary home languages other than English (72-86 percent).

- Parent ratings of children’s dental care quality are higher for White children (94 percent rated as good or excellent) than for Black (88 percent), Latino/Hispanic (84 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islander (75 percent) children.

Disparities also were found when looking at a variety of other health measures, such as rates of asthma, breastfeeding, and receipt of prenatal care.

### *Emotional and Behavioral Health*

About 86 percent of California children are in good or excellent overall emotional health, according to their parents. However, a significant minority of children experience emotional difficulties. For example:

- As children enter their preteen and teen years, they are more likely to be in very poor, poor, or fair emotional health (13 percent for both age groups 9-13 and 14-17) and experience very high or high levels of stress (16 percent for both ages 9-13 and 14-17) than younger children (in the 5-7 percent range for both).
- According to parents, about 6 percent of all children suffer from depression or are likely depressed.
- About one in four children (24 percent) have parents who are concerned about their child’s stress level.
- Children from single-parent families are almost twice as likely to experience very high or high levels of stress (17 percent) compared to children from two-parent families (9 percent), according to the survey.

The survey also asked parents whether they think their children are engaging in risk-taking behaviors, such as substance use and sexual activity. According to results, the vast majority believe that their children are not engaging in high-risk behavior. Among youth ages 9-17, 4 percent are consuming alcohol, 3 percent are smoking cigarettes, and 3 percent are using marijuana, according to their parents.

Parents are less likely to discuss sexual activity (43 percent) with their children than they are to discuss smoking cigarettes (67 percent), alcohol (64 percent), marijuana (54 percent), and other drug use (56 percent). These conversations are more likely to occur with adolescents ages 14-17 than younger children, and among single-parent families than two-parent families, according to the survey.

Given research showing that children with depressed parents are at a higher risk of substance abuse, depression, and aggression, the survey examined parental depression.<sup>5,6,7</sup> About a quarter (26 percent) of children in California have a parent who believes that he or she has needed help for depression since becoming a parent, and 16 percent have parents who have been clinically diagnosed with depression. Children whose parents have needed help with depression are more likely to be in very poor, poor, or fair overall emotional health and have high stress levels compared to children whose parents don’t suffer from depression.

## *Social, Educational, and Home Environments*

### **Out-of-School Time Programs and Extracurricular Activities**

Research on after-school programs has shown that participation in quality programs can benefit all youth, not just those with working parents, and that participation in quality after-school programs is associated with improvements in academic performance and emotional and behavioral health.<sup>8,9,10</sup> The survey found that California children are fairly active outside of school; 59 percent of children participate in out-of-school time programs and/or individual extracurricular activities at least three days per week.

Despite the fact that many children are regularly involved in out-of-school activities, a relatively small percentage of parents are concerned that their children are overscheduled. Across California, 15 percent of children have parents who are concerned that their children do not have enough unscheduled time, while 23 percent believe their children have more than enough free time. Roughly half of children have the right amount of free time, according to parents.

### **Child Care**

According to the survey, family members are the most widely used providers of child care for children ages 0-12 (38 percent), followed by licensed child care centers (12 percent).

Approximately 16 percent of children have parents who say they do not have affordable child care options available to them. Those most likely to lack affordable options include children with Spanish as a primary language (28 percent), with parents without a high school diploma (27 percent), and with annual household incomes under \$25,000 (24 percent). Children whose parents don't have a high school diploma and with annual household incomes below \$25,000 also were among those least likely to have parents who are satisfied with the quality of their child care arrangements.

In addition, the survey asked parents what types of problems, if any, they had enrolling their children in child care. About half of children were enrolled in child care without any reported problems. Among those who did have challenges, the cost of care was the most common problem cited.

Also, among children whose parents reported difficulties finding high-quality and affordable child care, 36 percent had parents who reported these challenges have made it hard for them to find and retain employment.

### **School**

Most children in California have good or excellent schools (82 percent) and teachers (84 percent), according to parents. Relatively few children have schools that are considered unsafe by their parents (3 percent). However, parents of Black children and those with household incomes below \$50,000 are most likely to be concerned about school safety.

On average, children spend about eight hours per week doing homework, with Asian/Pacific Islander children spending the most time (10 hours). Parents indicate that the majority of children have “about the right amount” of homework (71 percent), while 14 percent have too much homework.

Overall, parents are fairly involved in their children’s schools. Parents of 91 percent of children have talked with teachers about their child’s academic progress at least once in the last six months, and 58 percent of children have parents who volunteered at school in the last six months.

## Home and Community Experiences

The survey asked a wide range of questions about children’s home environments, including how families spend time together; smoking in the household; adequacy of income to meet basic needs; effects of media on children; and neighborhood safety and experiences with racism. Key findings include:

- About a quarter of children (26 percent) have parents who say their household income is inadequate to meet their child’s basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter.
- According to parents, roughly one-quarter of children in California have experienced racism at least once in their lives. Black children, youth ages 14-17, and children in single-parent families were the most likely to experience racism.
- About one out of four children have parents who think that media (television, movies, music) has a negative impact on their children, while 57 percent have parents who believe media has a positive influence.
- The vast majority of children (85 percent) in California live in smoke-free homes, according to parents. White children, higher-income children, and children whose parents have at least a college diploma are most likely to live in smoke-free households.
- In terms of family time together, the survey found that 76 percent of children eat dinner with their families at least five times per week, and most children have parents who are satisfied with the amount of family time they have together (71 percent). However, 18 percent of children have parents who believe they do not have enough family time.
- More than two-thirds (69 percent) of children ages 0-5 read or look at books with family members at least 5-6 times per week, according to parents; among all children ages 0-17, nearly half (46 percent) read books with family this frequently.
- As noted previously, approximately 12 percent of children are unsafe in their neighborhood or surroundings, according to their parents, and among these, Latino/Hispanic children, those with household incomes below \$25,000, and children of foreign-born parents are most likely to have parents who are concerned about their safety.

## *Key Findings on Children with Special Health Care Needs*

Children with special health care needs (CSHCN) comprise approximately 14 percent of U.S. children,<sup>11</sup> and account for an estimated 80 percent of annual medical expenditures on children.<sup>12</sup> Their requirements for health services make them particularly vulnerable to access, cost, and quality weaknesses in the health care system.<sup>13</sup> Caring for a child with a chronic health condition can place a significant strain on families, financially, physically, and mentally.<sup>14, 15</sup>

This survey asked a variety of questions about CSHCN, in an effort to gather current information and augment other sources of data for this population. In terms of overall physical health, not surprisingly, parents of CSHCN are much more likely to report that their children are in very poor, poor, or fair health (nearly one-third) than children without special needs (5 percent). Consistent with other studies,<sup>16, 17</sup> the survey shows that children with special health care needs are more likely to be overweight, and more likely to have asthma, than children without special needs.

Among CSHCN in California, results indicate that roughly one-third are in very poor, poor, or fair overall emotional health compared to 7 percent of other children; similarly, about one in three CSHCN need or receive psychological services compared to 3 percent of other children. Almost one in five CSHCN are struggling with depression, according to their parents, compared to 5 percent for children without special needs.

## **Conclusion**

On the whole, the survey's findings are encouraging, with the majority of California's children experiencing positive health and well-being within nurturing family environments. Yet it is clear that a significant percentage of the state's children are affected by persistent disparities that research has shown can have long-lasting effects on their futures<sup>18</sup> and, consequently, on the future of California. The causes of these disparities are longstanding and complex, and in some cases they are worsening. The 2010 California Parent Survey is intended to document the most pressing issues and inspire further attention to them. Progress in resolving these issues can be made only through a long-term commitment by a broad spectrum of stakeholders and decision-makers.

## References for the Executive Summary

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