For children in the United States as a whole, single-parent families became less common and parental aggravation increased slightly.

Among higher-income children, measures of parental aggravation and reading to young children worsened.

A large gap continues to exist between low-income and other children, with low-income children experiencing disadvantages in every indicator of family well-being. Children in single-parent families are also consistently disadvantaged.

Why might the quality of children's family environments appear static—or even worsen—given the booming economy and declining rates of poverty and single parenthood? Several possibilities exist: It may take more than two years for changes in the family environment measures examined here to register; the measures may be sensitive only to larger changes in income, family structure, or other societal forces; and improvements in children's family environments in one subgroup of children may offset declines among another. An examination using more detailed background characteristics may be needed to fully understand these patterns.
This Snapshot summarizes findings from the 1999 NSAF on measures of children’s family environments (as reported by their parents) for 13 states and for the United States as a whole. It compares the family environments of low-income children (those living below 200 percent of poverty in 1998) with those of higher-income children (those living above 200 percent of poverty). It also compares the family environments of children in single-parent versus two-parent families. Finally, changes that have taken place since 1997 are identified. The measures include:

- family structure (for children ages 0 to 17),
- the frequency with which parents read or tell stories to their young children (for children ages 1 to 5),
- the frequency with which parents take their young children on outings (for children ages 0 to 5),
- parental involvement in volunteering (for children ages 0 to 5),
- parental attendance at religious services (for children ages 0 to 17),
- level of parental aggravation (for children ages 0 to 17), and
- symptoms of poor parental mental health (for children ages 0 to 17).

Family Environments in the United States

**Family Structure.** Single mothers are disproportionately likely to be poor, and poverty is associated with a host of negative outcomes among children (McLoyd 1998). By the same token, children living with two biological parents are much more likely than children in single-parent families to experience a variety of positive outcomes (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). In the United States overall, 64 percent of children under age 18 lived with two biological or adoptive parents in 1999, while 8 percent lived in a blended family (i.e., with one biological or adoptive parent and one step-parent; table 1 on page 6). Twenty-five percent of children lived with a single biological or adoptive parent, and the remaining 4 percent lived with other adults or without any parent figures. Forty-seven percent of children in low-income families lived with two biological or adoptive parents, compared with 75 percent of children in families with higher incomes (figure 1). Similarly, about three times as many low-income children (41 percent) lived with a single parent as did higher-income children (14 percent).

For American children in general, the distribution of family living arrangements changed slightly between 1997 and 1999 (figure 2). The percentage of children in single-parent families decreased from 27 to 25 percent, while the percentage living with two parents increased by more than one percentage point.

Among low-income children, NSAF data indicate that single-parent families became less common (dropping from 44 percent in 1997 to 41 percent in 1999), and living without a biological or adoptive parent became slightly more common (5 percent in 1997 and 6 percent in 1999). The distribution of family arrangements did not change among higher-income children.

**Reading or Telling Stories to Young Children.** Reading and telling stories to young children can help them develop their linguistic, cognitive, and literacy skills (National Center for Education Statistics 1998). Throughout the United States in 1999, 18 percent of children ages 1 through 5—about the same percentage as in 1997—lived with parents who read or told stories to them on fewer than three days per week. This proportion was nearly twice as high for lower-income as for other children: 24 versus 13 percent (figure 3). The percentage for low-income children stayed the same in both years, but among higher-income children it worsened by about 2 percentage points.
Children living with a single parent were more likely than children living with two parents to be read to infrequently: 24 and 15 percent, respectively—about the same percentages as in 1997 (table 1 on page 6).

**Taking Young Children on Outings.** Taking young children on outings is important because it can stimulate their cognitive development (Bradley and Caldwell 1980; Bradley et al. 1988). In 1999, as in 1997, 16 percent of all American children age 5 and younger were infrequently (two or three times a month or fewer) taken on outings such as to the park, the grocery store, a church, or a playground. Twenty-two percent of low-income children were taken on outings infrequently, compared with 12 percent of higher-income children (figure 3). The figures are 20 percent for children living with one parent and 15 percent for those living with two parents. There were no changes in this measure at the national level between 1997 and 1999; nor were there any changes by income or type of family structure.

**Parent Volunteering.** By volunteering, parents are positive role models for their children. Nationwide, 38 percent of children under age 18 lived with a parent who volunteered at least a few times a month, the same percentage as in 1997. Among children in single-parent families, 27 percent had a parent who volunteered regularly, compared with 42 percent of those in two-parent families. The gap between income groups is similar: 30 percent of low-income children had a parent who volunteered regularly, compared with 43 percent of higher-income children (figure 3). There was no change between 1997 and 1999 on this measure at the national level across either income or family structure groups.

**Parental Participation in Religious Activities.** Parental religiosity has been associated with many positive child outcomes (Brody et al. 1996; Gunnoe et al. 1999; Miller et al. 1997; Sherkat and Ellison 1999), including cognitive and social competence, avoidance of early sexual activity, adolescent social responsibility, and a reduced incidence of depression. One way to measure parental religiosity is to determine how frequently parents participate in religious activities. Fifty-nine percent of all children under age 18 lived with a parent who attended religious activities at least a few times a month in 1999. Forty-nine percent of children in single-parent families had a parent who attended religious activities regularly, compared with 62 percent for children in two-parent families. The percentages are 54 percent among low-income children and 62 percent among higher-income children (figure 3). There was no change between 1997 and 1999 on this measure at the national level across either income or family structure groups.

**High Parental Aggravation.** A parent who reports frequently feeling frustrated and stressed by the experience of caring for his or her child is defined as having a high level of parental aggravation. Children of highly aggravated parents are disproportionately likely to have cognitive and socioemotional difficulties (McGroder 2000). In 1999, nationwide, 10 percent of children under age 18 lived with a parent who felt highly aggravated. Children living with a single parent were more than twice as likely to have a highly aggravated parent as children living with two parents (16 versus 7 percent). Similarly, low-income children were twice as likely as other children to live with a highly aggravated parent (14 versus 7 percent; figure 3).
Since 1997, the proportion of U.S. children with highly aggravated parents has increased slightly but significantly (figure 4). This increase is concentrated among children living with two parents (6 percent in 1997 to 7 percent in 1999) and particularly among higher-income children with two parents (5 percent in 1997 to 6 percent in 1999; not shown).

**Parents with Symptoms of Poor Mental Health.** Children who have clinically depressed parents or parents reporting symptoms of depression are at risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including health, cognitive, and socioemotional problems (Downey and Coyne 1990). The NSAF includes a mental health scale based on parents’ responses to questions about their feelings in the past month. Sixteen percent of children under 18 had a parent who reported symptoms of poor mental health in 1999. Children living with single parents were more than twice as likely to have a parent reporting symptoms of poor mental health (27 percent) as children living with two parents (11 percent). Ten percent of children in families with incomes over 200 percent of poverty had a parent reporting symptoms of poor mental health, compared with 25 percent of low-income children (figure 3 on page 3). There was no change between 1997 and 1999 on this measure at the national level across family structure or income groups.

**Family Environments in 13 States in 1999**

The NSAF revealed substantial variation in children’s environments across the 13 states studied. When data for children are examined without regard to family structure or income levels, children in several states seem to be doing better on the measures examined here than children in the United States as a whole (table 1 on page 6). For example, children in Minnesota have a relative advantage on five measures: being read to or told stories, parental volunteering, parental religious attendance, parental aggravation, and parental mental health symptoms. In Wisconsin, children had an advantage in reading and outings, and these children’s parents were more likely than others nationwide to participate in religious activities regularly. Children in Colorado and Washington were advantaged on outings, reading, parental volunteering, and parental mental health (though their parents were relatively less likely to attend religious activities regularly).

Compared with the rest of the nation, children in California, New Jersey, and Texas had relatively disadvantaged family environments. Children in California and New Jersey were less likely than children nationwide to have parents who volunteered or attended religious services or activities regularly in 1999. In addition, children in New Jersey were more likely than other American children to have highly aggravated parents, and children in California were less likely than other American children to be read to regularly.

In Texas, children were relatively disadvantaged on five measures: being read to or told stories, being taken on outings, and having parents who volunteer regularly, feel highly aggravated, and report symptoms of poor mental health.

As was true for the United States as a whole, few states underwent significant changes between 1997 and 1999 in more than one indicator. One exception was Minnesota, where children’s family environments improved on measures of parental mental health and parental volunteering but worsened on parental aggravation.
Discussion

NSAF findings suggest that, while the proportion of children living in low-income or single-parent families has diminished slightly, there have been few other significant changes in children’s environments between 1997 and 1999, with only the measure of parental aggravation increasing slightly nationwide. Despite some worsening in the environments of children in families with incomes above 200 percent of the poverty level, these higher-income children continue to be far better off on average than low-income children. Indeed, low-income children fare worse on every measure examined in this Snapshot.

Findings from the NSAF also suggest a strong link between family structure and other aspects of children’s environments that may affect their well-being. On average, the environments of children in two-parent families are more positive than those of children in single-parent families on every measure examined here. This does not preclude the possibility that factors other than family structure or income level underlie the less-than-ideal family environments often experienced by children with single or low-income parents.

Research indicates that family environments and parents exert an important influence on the development of children (Collins et al. 2000). Continued tracking and research will determine whether the income and family structure changes reported ultimately change family environments and child outcomes.
## TABLE 1 | Indicators of Children's Family Environment, by State

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### Family Structure of Children (% Age 0 to 17, by Family Income, 1997–1999)

#### Below 200 percent of poverty level
- Two-parent: 31.8, 32.2, 52.0, 51.0, 50.7, 49.6, 37.4, 36.4, 37.5, 39.9, 37.9, 42.4, 50.0, 50.4
- Blended: 7.5, 10.7, 4.2, 5.3, 6.4, 6.2, 6.2, 6.2, 4.1, 4.7, 6.1, 7.0, 5.2, 5.5
- Single-parent: 52.7, 48.1, 41.0, 37.0, 39.3, 39.1, 49.4, 49.9, 52.1, 51.7, 52.3, 45.2, 42.7, 39.5
- No-parent: 8.0, 9.0, 2.8, 6.6, 3.6, 5.0, 6.9, 7.5, 6.4, 3.8, 3.7, 5.3, 2.2, 4.6

#### Above 200 percent of poverty level
- Two-parent: 73.7, 67.0, 74.6, 71.4, 70.6, 73.1, 81.8, 80.8, 77.1, 74.6, 82.2, 80.6
- Blended: 11.8, 15.4, 6.7, 8.5, 10.3, 10.8, 9.9, 10.6, 4.5, 4.9, 9.6, 10.5, 6.9, 7.3
- No-parent: 2.2, 2.5, 2.5, 2.7, 2.3, 2.6, 3.3, 2.9, 1.7, 2.0, 1.8, 1.7, 1.3, 1.3

### All incomes
- Two-parent: 53.5, 50.2, 63.0, 63.2, 66.3, 66.1, 54.5, 56.7, 68.2, 69.2, 63.7, 63.5, 72.7, 72.0
- Blended: 9.8, 13.2, 5.4, 7.2, 8.9, 9.3, 8.1, 8.6, 4.4, 4.8, 8.4, 9.3, 6.4, 6.8
- No-parent: 5.0, 5.6, 2.7, 4.4, 2.9, 3.4, 5.1, 5.0, 3.2, 2.5, 2.4, 2.9, 1.5, 2.2

### Children (%) Age 1 to 5 Who Are Taken on Outings Two or Three Times a Month or Fewer, by Family Income and Family Structure

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### Children (%) Age 0 to 15 who is highly aggravated, by family income and family structure

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### Children (%) Age 0 to 17 with a Parent Who Volunteers at Least a Few Times per Month, by Family Income and Family Structure

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### Note
- Figures in color represent values that are statistically significantly different from the 1999 national average at the 0.10 confidence level.
- The symbols "^" and "_" represent statistically significant increases and decreases, respectively, between 1997 and 1999 at the 0.10 confidence level.
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| 70.5 | 57.3 | 43.3 | 31.5 | 28.2 | 19.8 | 14.5 |
| 17.3 | 13.3 | 10.7 | 7.4 | 6.9 | 5.7 | 4.6 |

### Structure, 1999–2003

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### and Family Structure, 1997–1999

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Source: Child Trends and Urban Institute

**Snapshots II: Findings from the National Survey of America's Families**

7
Children’s Family Environment

References

Acknowledgements
The authors wish to thank Brett Brown and Juliet Hatcher for reviewing this text, and Tamara Black and Nancy Geyelin Margie for assisting with data production.

Endnotes
1 Throughout the text, children who live with two biological or adoptive parents or who live in a step-family are referred to as living with two parents. Children who live with one biological or adoptive parent are referred to as living in single-parent families. Children living without either biological or adoptive parent are excluded from two-parent versus single-parent comparisons.
2 Some research has found a threshold effect for the frequency of parents’ reading to preschoolers: Reading to young children fewer than four times a week is associated with lower achievement in adolescence (Adams, Treiman, and Pressley 1998).
3 Parental aggravation was ascertained in the NSAF by parents’ reports of how frequently they felt that their child was particularly hard to care for, that they gave up more of their lives to meet their child’s needs than they had expected, that their child bothered them a lot, and that they were angry with their child (Ehrle and Moore 1999).
4 The questions included in the mental health scale asked parents how much of the time in the past month they had been very nervous, felt calm and peaceful, felt downhearted and blue, been happy, and felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer them up (Ehrle and Moore 1999).