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Children Are Getting Fatter, U.S. Finds

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An annual government report that assesses the well-being of American children is warning for the first time that excess weight in childhood poses a major public health problem.

The report, released last week by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, chronicles major changes in weight patterns. From 1976 to 1980, it said, 6 percent of children ages 6 to 18 were overweight. From 1999 to 2000, 15 percent were.

"The thing that's kind of alarming here is the amount of change in a relatively short time," Dr. Duane Alexander, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development director, said in an interview. Government officials cited lack of exercise and poor diet as likely causes of the problem.

Although the broad-ranging report has been issued for seven years, this is the first time that it included statistics about weight. Until now, officials said, annual data were insufficient to assess the issue. The report also draws on a wide swath of health, education, housing and other statistics.

In general, the report gave an upbeat assessment about the well-being of American children. Infant mortality, for example, continued to decrease from its high of 10.9 deaths per thousand births in 1993, although the percentage of babies with low birth weights increased slightly, to 7.7. In 2000, the infant mortality rate was 6.9 deaths per 1,000 births. Deaths in childhood, from causes like car crashes and violent crime, also declined.

Births among adolescents also continued to go down, with the greatest reduction among black teenagers. The birthrate among 15- to 17-year-olds in 2001 was 25 per 1,000, the lowest ever recorded, the report said.

Smoking among teenagers also declined to the lowest levels since officials began collecting data in 1975. Among eighth graders, 5 percent reported smoking daily. The figures were 10 percent for 10th graders and 17 percent for 12th graders.

Dr. Alexander said the findings contradicted a widespread perception that children in the United States were doing worse.

Some critics, however, including the Children's Defense Fund, described the report as too upbeat. Toby Chaudhuri, a spokesman for the group, argued that the government was losing sight of the big picture.

And even Dr. Alexander acknowledged that the data in the report did not reflect the economic downturn of the last few years. "Whether these improvements that we're seeing will hold in harder economic times, people are worried, frankly," he said.