

THE CASE FOR A CROSS-AGENCY PRIORITY ON CHILD WELL-BEING



THE CHALLENGE

The American people expect government policy to advance the best interests of children¹. Yet, the data shows that U.S. policy lacks the high-level coordination, well-defined indicators, and evaluations mechanisms to advance children's safety, health, and development. According to a UNICEF report card of the world's wealthiest countries, the U.S. performs lower² than most similarly situated countries on various child well-being indicators, including poverty, healthcare accessibility, nutrition, and education. A recent report found that the COVID-19 pandemic undermined years of progress in child well-being globally³ and instead exacerbated child poverty, violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. Children, particularly in marginalized populations, suffer all these harms disproportionately due to systemic inequities and discrimination.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Cross agency priorities (CAPs) are long-term, outcome-oriented goals that cover a limited number of cross-cutting policy areas, which OMB defines as areas where increased collaboration across agencies would improve outcomes. Under the legislation that created CAPs, agencies must also develop strategic plans to describe how their goals and objectives contribute to the CAPs and how agencies will better coordinate to meet their priorities.

In November 2017, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a 67-page report⁴ recommending the creation of a cross agency priority (CAP) for child well-being, given research that it was an area of government that required increased coordination. The report, based on consultation with a wide array of experts, found that improving child well-being "requires attention to a multiplicity of interrelated factors that can contribute to child well-being and the role that families, communities, governmental and nongovernmental organizations play in caring for these children."

In a more recent report, GAO reiterated its recommendation to create a CAP goal to improve child well-being "to better address the needs of children in ways that take into account the interrelatedness of federal actions and policies that aim to improve child well-being." A CAP goal on improving child well-being would increase the efficacy of government policy for children through shared indicators, data, and evaluation mechanisms.

THE GOAL

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) should establish a mission-focused CAP goal on improving child well-being. Through this goal, the government can:

1 Lesley, Bruce. *Voters Have Spoken and They Support Children*, First Focus on Children, 11/23/22, <https://firstfocus.org/blog/voters-have-spoken-and-they-support-children>

2 Gromada, Annam ed. *Worlds of Influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries*, UNICEF, 2020 <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Report-Card-16-Worlds-of-Influence-child-wellbeing.pdf>

3 Mohsin, Nazzina. *COVID-19 'biggest global crisis for children in our 75-year history'*, UNICEF, 12/8/2021, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-biggest-global-crisis-children-our-75-year-history-unicef>

4 U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Child Well-Being: Key Considerations for Policymakers*, GAO, 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-18-41sp.pdf>

- » Identify and/or elevate a common set of program goals, metrics and outcomes for children and youth that could be applied across federal programs
- » Conduct a child well-being assessment of government policies, programs, and budgets based on these shared goals and metrics
- » Eliminate barriers to better alignment across federal programs that serve children, youth and their families
- » Issue guidance, provide Technical Assistance, disseminate best practices and implement waivers to federal awardees regarding how to legally share data across sectors and integrate funding from federal programs serving children, youth and their families
- » Design and implement modernized data reporting and analytics, including disaggregation of data by age, to generate useful information to help federal, state, and local decision-makers improve program policies and implementation
- » Create forums for engaging community leaders and other outside experts, including children and youth, to devise innovative, coordinated solutions to align efforts to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families

AGENCY COORDINATION

The Domestic Policy Council (DPC), National Security Council (NSC), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and other agencies can lead and synchronize activities through either a White House Office on Children and Youth, a Children’s Cabinet,³ or an interagency Task Force on Child Well-Being. The established entity should include high-level representatives from critical agencies, such as the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Labor, Justice, State, Transportation, and Treasury, as well as the Agency for International Development and the Council of Economic Advisors.

THE OUTCOME

A CAP goal on child well-being would ensure that all government policy maximizes its potential to improve all aspects of children’s lives. Through better coordination and clear indicators, a CAP goal would also advance equity in government policy by bringing children to the forefront and ensuring consideration for children who face additional barriers of systemic inequities and discrimination. Helping children thrive now and in the future will advance trust in the U.S. government, both at home and abroad.