EXTENDED MEASURES OF WELL-BEING IN 1998

A variety of measures (health, housing, economics, education, or safety) can be used to gauge well-being. The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) asks questions about five subject areas to provide one of the most extensive measures of individual well-being found anywhere.[1] These subject areas include: the possession of appliances and other electronic goods, housing conditions, neighborhood conditions, the ability to meet basic needs, and the possibility of receiving assistance during times of need.

Possession of Appliances and Electronic Goods

Among high-income households (those in the top 20 percent), 99 percent had telephones in 1998. Among those with incomes in the bottom 20 percent, 90 percent had telephones. While income was important, other factors also influenced the possession of appliances and electronic goods. The lack of air conditioning, for instance, affected household comfort in the South more than in other regions. While 67 percent of Southerners without air conditioning were satisfied with the coolness of their homes in summer, 83 percent of Northeasterners without air conditioning felt this way.

Housing Conditions

In 1998, 92 percent of householders were at least somewhat satisfied with their homes' state of repair. Eighty-seven percent said their homes were free from rats, mice, roaches, or other household pests. Ninety-three percent said they did not have a leaking roof or ceiling.

Neighborhood Safety

When asked if they stayed home at certain times because they thought it might be unsafe to go out, 87 percent of respondents in 1998 said no. Ninety-four percent of high-income householders never stayed home because of fear of crime, compared with 77 percent of low-income householders.

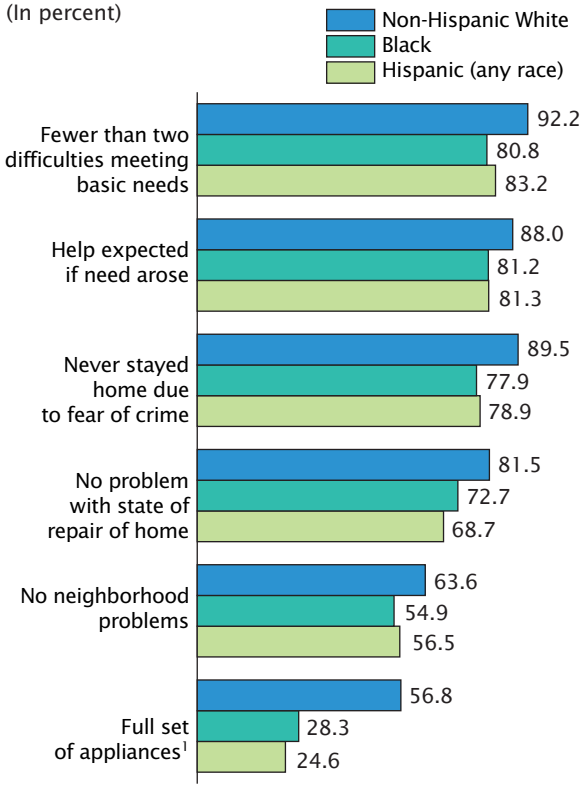
[1] The information in this chapter comes from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, 1996 Panel, Wave 8 Topical Module, which followed respondents through 1998. The estimates in this report (which may be shown in text, figures, and tables) are based on responses from a sample of the population and may differ from actual values because of sampling variability or other factors. As a result, apparent differences between the estimates for two or more groups may not be statistically significant. All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing and are significant at the 90-percent confidence level unless otherwise noted.

Householders who considered their neighborhoods safe were more likely to own a dog than those who did not (33 percent and 29 percent, respectively). In neighborhoods that householders reported to be unsafe, 52 percent of dog owners said safety was their reason for getting a dog, compared with 28 percent of those in self-defined safe neighborhoods.

Essential Expenses

The SIPP asked householders if there was any instance in the last 12 months when they did not "meet essential expenses." The difficulty most commonly mentioned was paying utility bills—cited by 9 percent of

Figure 1.
General Indicators of Household Well-Being by Race and Hispanic Origin of Householder: 1998
(In percent)



[1]A "full set of appliances" includes a stove, a refrigerator, a clothes washer, a clothes dryer, a dishwasher, and a telephone.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 1996 Panel, Wave 8.

householders. Next, householders said they were likely to skip dental or medical care (8 percent and 6 percent), followed by skipping mortgage or rent payments (5 percent). Few households got so far in arrears that their phone service or utility service was cut off. Less than 1 percent of households reported being evicted in the last 12 months because rent or mortgage payments were not made. In all, 21 percent of U.S. households had difficulty meeting at least one of the essential expenses over the year.

Even the highest-income households sometimes had problems meeting basic needs. Among this group, 8 percent had at least one difficulty, 3 percent did not pay a utility bill, and 2 percent needed to see a doctor but did not go. A high-income household might have had a budget shortfall if income and household composition fluctuated or people tried to extend their resources beyond their limits. In some cases, a household may have had a high income because it was made up of individuals, such as roommates or boarders, who lived on separate budgets, and one of them may have experienced difficulty meeting basic needs.

Differences by Race and Hispanic Origin

Compared with non-Hispanic White households, Hispanic and Black households had higher levels of difficulty meeting essential expenses, elevated fear of crime, and greater need for housing. They also had a lower expectation of obtaining help if it were needed (Figure 1).[2]

[2] The race or origin of the household is based on the race or origin of the householder, regardless of the race or origin of the other household members. Because Hispanics may be any race, data for Hispanics overlap slightly with data for the Black population. Based on data from Wave 8 of the 1996 Panel of the SIPP, 4 percent of Black households were also Hispanic. Data for Asians and Pacific Islanders and for American Indians and Alaska Natives are not shown in this report because of their small sample size in the 1998 Panel of the SIPP.

Support Providers (2002)

In 2002, the SIPP estimated that 7.8 million adults provided an aggregate of $40 billion in financial support to people outside their immediate household.[3] In 1997, there were 8 percent fewer providers (7.2 million) and the total aggregate support was 15 percent less ($34 billion).

About 60 percent of support paid in 2002 ($24 billion) was exclusively for children under 21 years old living outside the household. Another $13 billion was paid to other nonhousehold members who were at least 21. The remaining $3 billion of support was paid for children and other nonhousehold members.

The average amount of support in 2001 was $5,200 and in some cases assisted more than one recipient. In 2001, 5.7 million people paid an average of $4,200 to children under 21 who lived outside their household. Another 2.1 million people in 2002 paid an average of $6,100 to other people outside their household.

The relationship of the support recipient to the support payer was likely to be a parent (36 percent), a child over 21 years of age (27 percent), or another relative (23 percent).[4] Spouses or ex-spouses accounted for 11 percent of people receiving support payments.

[3] The information in this section comes from the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation, June–September 2002. All dollar amounts in this section have been inflation-adjusted to 2002 dollars.

[4] The proportion of support recipients who were children over 21 years old was not statistically different from the proportion of recipients who were another type of relative.

The Census Bureau Can Tell You More

For more detailed information, consult the following U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Reports: *Extended Measures of Well-Being: Living Conditions in the United States: 1998* (P70-87) by Kurt J. Bauman, and *Support Providers: 2002* (P70-99) by Timothy Grall.

Look for the complete report on the Census Bureau's Web site <www.census.gov>. Click on "W," select "Well-Being," and look under "Extended Measures of Well-Being."

For information on well-being, contact the Census Bureau's Education and Social Stratification Branch at 301-763-2464 or e-mail <pop@census.gov>.

For information on financial support networks, contact the Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division at 301-763-3242 or e-mail <hhes-info@census.gov>.