



# Data Trends

Summaries of research on mental health services for children and adolescents and their families

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Achenbach, T. M., Dumenci, L., & Rescorla, L. A. (2002). Ten-year comparisons of problems and competencies for national samples of youth: Self, parent, and teacher reports. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 10*(4), 194-203.

Achenbach, T. M., Dumenci, L., & Rescorla, L. A. (2003). Are American children's problems still getting worse? A 23-year comparison. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 31*(1), 1-11.

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It is a commonly held belief that the emotional or behavioral problems of children are getting more severe. Two recent studies examined nationally representative samples of children to research this perception. Results indicate that levels of problems increased from 1976 to 1989 and then decreased from 1989 to 1999. Levels of competence decreased from 1976 to 1989 and increased from 1989 to 1999. Levels of problems and competence were at their worst in 1989 and although both levels improved in 1999, problem scores were still at a much higher level than they were in 1976.

In one study, (Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescorla, 2003) three nationally representative samples were collected in 1976, 1989, and 1999. To maximize comparability across the 23 years from 1976 to 1999, the authors selected 670 (aged 7 –16) participants from each sample. Participants from the three samples were restricted to White and African American youth and were matched for gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES).

Analyses of modified Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) scores indicate increasing problems and decreasing competencies among youth from 1976 to 1989. However, these trends reversed from 1989 to 1999, with improvements shown in competencies and problems for the 1999 sample when compared with results from a decade earlier (see Figure 1). The 1989 sample obtained the lowest competence scores and the highest problem scores on the majority of scales of the three instruments when compared to scores from 1976 and 1999.

Approximately 20% of the 1999 national sample had CBCL Total Problem scores in the borderline or clinical range, which is similar to prevalence rates found in other studies. Significant demographic differences found across years included the following: a) males scored higher than females on several problem subscales, b) youth with upper SES had higher competence scores and lower problem scores than youth with lower SES, and c) White youth had higher competence scores than African American youth.

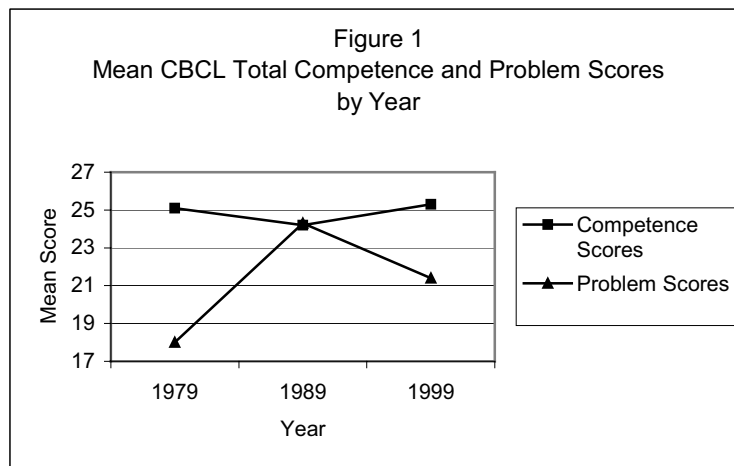
Mental health service use data were compared for the 1989 and 1999 samples. No significant differences in one-year prevalence rates for mental health services use were found between the two samples for either the entire national samples (13.2% in 1989 and 12.8% in 1999) or for children with deviant CBCL Total Problem scores (30.5% in 1989 and 26.6% in 1999). Importantly, only one-quarter of youth scoring in the borderline or clinical range of the CBCL received any mental health services in 1999.

In another study (Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescorla, 2002), two nationally representative samples collected in 1989 and 1999 were compared. The youth in these two samples were from the same samples in the article previously discussed, but they represented a different subsection of youth. In this case, youth aged 11 to 18 were assessed via the Youth Self-Report (YSR), the Teacher's Report Form (TRF), and parent reports on the CBCL. For most of the analyses, the 1989 sample included 902 youth and the 1999 sample included 687 youth. All participants had complete CBCL, YRF, and TRF scores.

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The comparisons of 1989 to 1999 scores on all three instruments indicate small increases in competencies and adaptive functioning, accompanied by small decreases in problem scores. The declines in problem scores were parallel on all three forms. Youth reported the most problems, while teachers reported the fewest problems. In addition, the authors conducted a separate analysis on the scores of youth completed in the three months before and after the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 and found no differences in scores on any of the three instruments.

The authors suggest that the findings of these studies contradict public perception that behavior problems and functioning among young people are on the rise. Although parents, youth, and teachers identified fewer problems in 1999 than ten years previously, the authors point out that many youth in 1999 had high scores on the YSR, indicating numerous problems perceived by the youth themselves. The authors suggest that these improvements over time may be the result of enhanced childrearing conditions due to “better economic conditions, lower unemployment, and less crime during the 1990s than the 1980s” (p. 10). Future studies should continue to track these changes over time to determine the stability of the encouraging improvements seen over the last decade.



Note: Lower Competency scores indicate more problems, and higher Problem scores indicate more problems.