

Inquiring Minds topic – 4 December 2020

Jim Goodale, Moderator

‘We’re No. 28! And Dropping!’

A measure of social progress finds that the quality of life has dropped in America over the last decade, even as it has risen almost everywhere else.

By [Nicholas Kristof](#), Opinion Columnist - Sept. 9, 2020

This should be a wake-up call: New data suggest that the United States is one of just a few countries worldwide that is slipping backward.

The newest [Social Progress Index](#), shared with me before its official release Thursday morning, finds that out of 163 countries assessed worldwide, the United States, Brazil and Hungary are the only ones in which people are worse off than when the index began in 2011. And the declines in Brazil and Hungary were smaller than America’s.

“The data paint an alarming picture of the state of our nation, and we hope it will be a call to action,” Michael Porter, a Harvard Business School professor and the chair of the advisory panel for the Social Progress Index, told me. “It’s like we’re a developing country.”

The index, inspired by research of Nobel-winning economists, collects 50 metrics of well-being — nutrition, safety, freedom, the environment, health, education and more — to measure quality of life. Norway comes out on top in the 2020 edition, followed by Denmark, Finland and New Zealand. South Sudan is at the bottom, with Chad, Central African Republic and Eritrea just behind.

The United States, despite its immense wealth, military power and cultural influence, ranks 28th — having slipped from 19th in 2011. The index now puts the United States behind significantly poorer countries, including Estonia, Czech Republic, Cyprus and Greece.

“We are no longer the country we like to think we are,” said Porter.

The United States ranks No. 1 in the world in quality of universities, but No. 91 in access to quality basic education. The U.S. leads the world in medical technology, yet we are No. 97 in access to quality health care.

The Social Progress Index finds that Americans have health statistics similar to those of people in Chile, Jordan and Albania, while kids in the United States get an education roughly on par with what children get in Uzbekistan and Mongolia. A majority of countries

have lower homicide rates, and most other advanced countries have lower traffic fatality rates and better sanitation and internet access.

The United States has high levels of early marriage — [most states](#) still allow [child marriage](#) in some circumstances — and lags in sharing political power equally among all citizens. America ranks a shameful No. 100 in discrimination against minorities.

The data for the latest index predates Covid-19, which has had a disproportionate impact on the United States and seems likely to exacerbate the slide in America's standing. [One new study](#) suggests that in the United States, symptoms of depression have risen threefold since the pandemic began — and poor mental health is associated with other risk factors for well-being.

Michael Green, the C.E.O. of the group that puts out the Social Progress Index, notes that the coronavirus will affect health, longevity and education, with the impact particularly large in both the United States and Brazil. The equity and inclusiveness measured by the index seem to help protect societies from the virus, he said.

“Societies that are inclusive, tolerant and better educated are better able to manage the pandemic,” Green said.

The decline of the United States over the last decade in this index — more than any country in the world — is a reminder that we Americans face structural problems that predate President Trump and that festered under leaders of both parties. Trump is a symptom of this larger malaise, and also a cause of its acceleration.

David G. Blanchflower, a Dartmouth economist, has [new research](#) showing that the share of Americans reporting in effect that every day is a bad mental health day has doubled over 25 years. “Rising distress and despair are largely American phenomenon not observed in other advanced countries,” Blanchflower told me.

This decline is deeply personal for me: [As I've written](#), a quarter of the kids on my old No. 6 school bus in rural Oregon are now dead from drugs, alcohol and suicide — what are called “deaths of despair.” I lost [one friend](#) to a heroin overdose this spring and have had more friends incarcerated than I could possibly count; the problems are now self-replicating in the next generation because of the dysfunction in some homes.

You as taxpayers paid huge sums to imprison my old friends; the money would have been far better invested educating them, honing their job skills or treating their addictions.

That's why this is an election like that of 1932. That was the year American voters decisively rejected Herbert Hoover's passivity and gave Franklin Roosevelt an electoral mandate — including a flipped Senate — that laid the groundwork for the New Deal and the modern middle class. But first we need to acknowledge the reality that we are on the wrong track.

We Americans like to say, “We're No. 1.” But the new data suggest that we should be chanting, “We're No. 28! And dropping!”

Let's wake up, for we are no longer the country we think we are.

From 2020 Social Progress Index <https://www.socialprogress.org/>

Norway ranks first in Social Progress Index with a score of 93; ranks 7th in GDP PPP (purchasing power parity) per capita - \$63,633

The US ranks 28th in Social Progress Index with a score of 86; ranks 8th in GDP PPP per capita – \$62,683. Detailed US scores and ranks:

Major Criteria	Basic Human Needs: Score – 92; Rank - 34	Foundations of Wellbeing: Score -83; Rank - 37	Opportunity: Score 82; Rank - 14
Components of Each Criterion	Nutrition & Basic Medical Care: Score- 98; Rank - 29	Access to Basic Knowledge: Score- 92; Rank - 44	Personal Rights: Score - 91; rank - 36
	Water & Sanitation: 99; Rank 24	Access to Information & Communications: 93; 11	Personal Freedom & Choice: 85; 19
	Shelter: 98; 17	Health & Wellness: 72; 42	Inclusiveness 61; 35
	Personal Safety: 74; 57	Environmental Quality: 72; 119	Access to Advanced Education: 91; 1

Across the Board, Scores Drop in Math and Reading for U.S. Students

The latest results from the Nation’s Report Card show declines in student performance across demographics.

By [Lauren Camera](#), Senior Education Writer Oct. 30, 2019, U.S.News & World Report

U.S. students' reading scores have fallen in several age groups and achievement levels since 2017, a new report finds.

MATH AND READING SCORES for fourth- and eighth-graders in the United States dropped since 2017, and the decrease in reading achievement has government researchers particularly concerned.

"Over the past decade, there has been no progress in either mathematics or reading performance, and the lowest performing students are doing worse," Peggy Carr, associate commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, said during a press call Tuesday.

The [2019 National Assessment of Education Progress](#), also called NAEP or the Nation's Report Card, was administered to more than 600,000 students enrolled in public schools

and Catholic schools from every state and Washington, D.C., and also includes a break-out of student achievement in 27 large urban school districts.

Most notable were the score drops in reading, which occurred in 17 states with regard to fourth grade reading scores and in 31 states for eighth grade reading scores. On average, reading scores declined for fourth graders by 1 point and for eighth graders by 3 points compared to 2017.

"A 3-point decline for the country is substantial in as much as 31 states are driving it, large states, small states – and it's a very meaningful decline," Carr said.

The declines in reading at both grades were also seen at all levels of achievement, whether students were high- or low-achieving, with the exception of the highest achieving fourth graders.

"Over the long term in reading, the lowest performing students – those readers who struggle the most – have made no progress from the first NAEP administration almost 30 years ago," she said.

More importantly than the scores themselves, Carr underscored, is what happened among subgroups of students, including how the scores of high-performing students compared to low-performing students, how the scores of poor students compared to their wealthier peers and how students from different races scored.

Most concerning, she said, was that compared to 2017, the scores of lower performing students declined in three of the four grade-subject combinations and those drops are what accounted for the overall drop in average scores.

"The distributions are pulling apart, with the bottom dropping faster," Carr said. "It's not clear what's happening here, but it is clear and it's consistent."

"The fact that students who need to make the most academic progress are instead making no progress or are falling further behind is extremely troubling," Tonya Matthews, vice chairwoman of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees NAEP, said in a statement. "We need to see all students make progress."

Carr said the score drops cannot be traced to any one specific student subgroup, as almost all of them logged declines. For example, black, Hispanic, Native American and white students in fourth and eighth grades scored lower in reading in 2019 compared to 2017.

"They are generally all declining," she said. "So we can't say it's due to changes and shifts in the populations."

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the major causes of the recent decline in the quality of life in the United States? In math and reading scores?
2. What can be done to reverse these declines?