

“Measure of America” report documents social decay of the United States

US ranks 42nd in life expectancy

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A new study released Wednesday, entitled “The Measure of America,” provides a wealth of data demonstrating the profound and deepening social decay of the United States. Commissioned by the Oxfam charity and several foundations, and published by Columbia University Press, the report documents, using government figures, the dramatic decline of American society relative to other advanced industrialized countries and the mounting social disparities within the US.

The study takes the methodology employed by the United Nations Development Report, widely recognized for its insights into the social conditions of less developed countries, and applies it for the first time to the study of an advanced country. The result is a portrait of America that shows much of the country’s population living in conditions that are closer to the “Third World” than to the “American Dream.”

The report analyzes figures provided by the US Bureau of the Census in its 2005 census of economic and social conditions. It thus lags significantly behind the actual deterioration in conditions of life, since the census was taken before the collapse of the sub-prime housing market and the ensuing plunge of the US economy into recession. A report based on today’s conditions would be even bleaker.

The three social scientists who prepared the study constructed an American Human Development Index which includes both median income figures and data relating to health, life expectancy and “access to knowledge” (school enrollment and the proportion of the population with college and professional degrees.) The result is a broader picture of social conditions than would be provided by a purely economic analysis.

In terms of the human development index, the United States has fallen from second place in 1990 (behind Canada) to 12th place. This decline continued through both the Clinton and Bush administrations, with the US falling to sixth in 1995, ninth in 2000, and 12th in 2005.

In certain respects, the decline is even worse. The US is 34th in infant mortality—with a level comparable to Croatia, Estonia, Poland and Cuba. US school children perform significantly below their counterparts in countries like Canada, France, Germany and Japan, and 14 percent of the population, some 40 million people, lack basic literacy and number skills.

Of the world’s 30 richest nations, which comprise the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States has the highest proportion of children living in poverty, 15 percent, and the most people in prison, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the whole population. With five percent of the world’s population, the US has 24 percent of the world’s prisoners.

The report notes: “Social mobility is now less fluid in the United States than in other affluent nations. Indeed, a poor child born in Germany, France, Canada or one of the Nordic countries has a better chance to join the middle class in adulthood than an American child born into similar circumstances.”

In overall life expectancy, the United States ranks an astonishing 42nd, behind not only Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and all the countries of Western Europe, but also Israel, Greece, Singapore, Costa Rica and South Korea. The US spends twice as much money per capita on health care as any of these countries, but its citizens live shorter lives.

Two principal contributing factors were identified in the report—the epidemic of obesity, a disease primarily of poverty and miseducation, and the lack of health insurance for 47 million Americans. The report also noted that homicide and suicide are among the 15 leading causes of death in America.

The health crisis in the United States was underscored by a second report, issued Thursday by the Commonwealth Fund, a nonprofit research group based in New York. This study found that 75 million people are either uninsured or under-insured, one quarter of the population. Karen Davis, president of the Commonwealth Fund, focused on the rising cost and diminishing availability of health care. “The central finding is that access has deteriorated,” she said.

A major factor is the immense administrative costs incurred by private insurance companies which spend billions of dollars to avoid paying claims. Much insurance company profit gouging is masked as “administrative” expenses as well. Administrative costs take 7.5 percent of US health care spending, compared to 5 percent in Germany and Switzerland, which also have private health insurers, and 1 percent or less in countries like Canada and Britain that have government-run insurance systems.

Assessing 37 separate healthcare indices, the Commonwealth study found that even in those areas where there was some improvement in absolute terms, other countries had improved by a

far greater amount, pushing the US further down the table. For example, the US reduced the number of preventable deaths for people under 75 from 115 to 110 per 100,000 over the past five years. However, other countries, led by France, Japan and Australia, did much better. The US is now last among developed countries in this measure, having just slipped below Ireland and Portugal.

The Measure of America report also documents the widening social gulf within the United States, particularly in geographical terms, as it breaks down the census statistics to provide a table ranking all 50 states and all 438 congressional districts. The report greatly understates the degree of income inequality since the US economic census counts only wage and salary income, leaving out dividends, interest, capital gains and business profit, the principal forms of income for the upper class. But even with these limitations, the findings are devastating.

The executive summary of the report notes that “the average income of the top fifth of US households in 2006 was almost 15 times that of those in the lowest fifth—or \$168,170 versus \$11,352.” The top one percent of households possesses at least one third of the national wealth, while the bottom 60 percent possess just 4 percent of the total.

The authors observe: “Growing inequality in income distribution and wealth raises a profound question for Americans: Can the uniquely middle-class nation that emerged in the twentieth century survive into the twenty-first century? Or is it fracturing into a land of great extremes?” While not drawing any conclusion, they admit, “the answers to these questions will determine ... the future of America.”

There are staggering disparities in income, health care and educational opportunities from state to state, between urban and rural areas, and between relatively well-off areas like the Northeast and Pacific Coast and impoverished areas like much of the South and the Appalachian region.

The top ten states in terms of median income lie along the Eastern seaboard from Virginia to New Hampshire. The bottom five states include West Virginia and four states of the Deep South: Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas. It is worth emphasizing that the 2005 census figures were compiled before Hurricane Katrina devastated three of those states.

There are even greater disparities within states and regions. The poorest congressional district in the United States is not in the South, but in the central valley of California, around the cities of Fresno and Bakersfield, where tens of thousands of agricultural laborers toil under conditions not much improved from the time John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In the 20th district of California, only 6.5 percent of adults have graduated from college, and the median household income is \$16,767, below the US poverty line. Meanwhile, ten of the 20 richest congressional districts are also in California, including the Silicon Valley and the upscale suburbs of Los Angeles and San Diego.

The richest congressional district is New York’s 14th, encompassing Manhattan’s east side: 62.6 percent of the adult population have a college degree and median family income is \$51,139 a year (counting only wages, not the income from capital).

A short subway ride away in the Bronx is the 16th congressional district, one of the five poorest in the US, where only 8.6 percent of adults have a college degree and the median annual income is \$19,113.

Summing up the findings of the report, co-author Sarah Burd-Sharps writes, “Some Americans are living anywhere from 30 to 50 years behind others when it comes to issues we all care about: health, education and standard of living.” While the US remains one of the richest nations in the world, it is “woefully behind when it comes to providing opportunity and choices to all Americans to build a better life.”

Just as revealing as the figures provided by the Measure of America report is the response to it on the part of the American media and political establishment. The report was published by Columbia University, one of the most prestigious American colleges, and its co-authors held a press conference on Capitol Hill to announce their findings. But not a single major daily newspaper carried an account, nor was the study mentioned on any of the evening television newscasts.

The regional press in California reported the dismal last-place ranking for the 20th congressional district, but not the wider findings. And Talk Radio News Service, a web site serving the largely ultra-right talk radio industry, posted an item that turned the findings upside down, under the bizarre headline, “Report: Most Americans doing better than fifty years ago.”

The silence of the media was matched by the silence of the Democratic and Republican candidates for president. Neither Obama nor McCain made mention of the findings, although both have made photo-op appearances in poverty-stricken areas like eastern Kentucky, New Orleans and inner city Detroit.

In that context, it is worth pointing out that Obama’s campaign is making little effort in the five most impoverished states, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama and West Virginia. The last four have been virtually conceded to the Republicans. The Obama campaign hopes for a heavy turnout among Mississippi’s large black population to vote for the first major party African-American candidate.

In fact, neither party is able to advance any policy to address the vast decay of American society. The Measure of America and Commonwealth Fund reports are the latest in a series of studies that depict a society—ravaged by poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, ill health and inequality—that is going backward. The sclerotic two-party system cannot provide any answer to the social disaster because it is a corrupt instrument of the financial aristocracy that is plundering the country to pile up ever-greater wealth for itself.



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