

The American Reporter: Volume 17, No. 4,400-

On the Human Scale, is America a Lightweight?

By Randolph T. Holhut | February 17, 2012

DUMMERSTON, Vt. -- As Americans, we tend to think we are the greatest country on Earth. Few ever question whether this is really so. The American Human Development Project, a nonpartisan group, has been gathering information on health, education and income. The result of their work is "The Measure of America: American Human Development Report 2008-2009" The report was funded by Oxfam America, the Conrad Hilton Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation and is modeled on the United Nations Development Program's global Human Development Report, which has provided authoritative analysis and a ranked index for about 150 countries for nearly two decades. "The Measure of America" is the first time the human development yardstick has been applied to the United States.

Using indicators such as life expectancy, median earnings and school enrollment and educational attainment, the AHDP team put together a good snapshot of where we really stand. While the United States as a whole has advanced - people are living longer, earning more and completing more years of schooling - the disparities between rich and poor, healthy and sick, educated and uneducated are growing.

By how much? The AHDP's index found a 30 year gap in human development between Connecticut and Mississippi. An average Connecticut resident earns 60 percent more, lives six years longer, and is almost twice as likely to have a college degree as a typical Mississippi resident. Race and gender remain major factors in how well one does in America. If you're black, you're 2 1/2 times more likely to die before age 1 and four times more likely to drop out of high school. If you're Latino, you're twice as likely to drop out of high school. And American women, regardless of race, earn two-thirds of what white males earn. Asian males were found to have the highest human development index score and were expected to live 14 years longer than black males, who had the lowest human development index rating. Blacks have a shorter lifespan than the average American did in the late 1970s.

There is also a rural/urban divide. Of the 25 most rural Congressional districts in the United States, only Vermont (which is a statewide district) scored above average on the ADHP index. In the United Nations Development Program's human development rankings, the United States was ranked No. 1 in 1980. Our nation dropped to No. 2, behind Canada in 1985 and 1990. By 1995, the United States was ranked sixth behind Norway, Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands and Australia. We fell to ninth in the 2000 index and fell further to 12th in 2005. And each of the 11 countries that rank higher than the United States in human development has a lower per-capita income.

So how are we doing by the numbers?

- The United States ranked 42nd in the world for life expectancy despite spending more on health care per person - roughly \$5.2 billion every day - than any other country.
- Of all nations in the developed world, the United States has the most people in prison, both as a percentage and in absolute numbers. We are home to just 5 percent of the global population, but account for 24 percent of the world's prisoners.
- Twenty-five percent of 15-year-old students performed at or below the lowest level in an international math test - worse than Canada, France, Germany and Japan.
- If the U.S. infant mortality rate (ranked 34th) were equal to first-ranked Sweden, more than 20,000 babies would survive beyond their first year of life.
- The average income for the top fifth of U.S. households in 2006 was \$168,170, almost 15 times that of the lowest fifth, which averaged \$11,352.
- The United States has a higher percentage of children living in poverty than any of the world's richest countries, with 15 percent of American children - 10.7 million - living in families with incomes of less than \$1,500 per month.
- About 15 percent of the population - some 40 million Americans - lack the literacy skills to perform simple, everyday tasks such as understanding newspaper articles and instruction manuals.

Is this the kind of country we should be proud of?

The conclusion of "Measure of America" is blunt: the United States is "woefully behind when it comes to providing opportunity and choices to all Americans to build a better life."

Until it becomes a priority at every level of government to put human development ahead of handouts for the wealthy and corporations, economic inequality will remain the hallmark of life in these United States.