

New York Times, May 20, 2000

A Happiness Index With a Long Reach



By ALEXANDER STILLE

After eight years of record-breaking economic growth, many people assume that the presidential election will be determined by the stock market. But social scientists and communities from Jacksonville to Honolulu are beginning to say, "It's not just the economy, stupid."

They are looking beyond purely economic numbers -- at health and crime statistics, clear-air days and commuting time -- to gain a fuller measure of people's elusive sense of collective well-being, to create what is essentially a happiness index. In the process they are making some surprising discoveries.



On a national level, William J. Bennett, the conservative writer and political adviser, has begun producing an index of leading cultural indicators, while the environmentally oriented group Redefining Progress has created something called the genuine progress indicator, in which social costs like legal fees, medical bills, divorce and crime are subtracted from the gross national product to measure the state of the nation. At the same time, a recent proliferation of local monitoring groups like Sustainable Seattle, Livable Tucson, Minnesota Milestones and Oregon Benchmarks show a growing interest in measuring the quality of life and values like friendliness and vitality in their communities.

"What I think this shows is that there is something out there that all of us are trying to capture that is extremely important," Marc Miringoff, a professor of social sciences at Fordham University, said in an interview. His own social health index is one of the most systematic nationwide surveys.

Mr. Miringoff and others are pushing hard to promote the idea of a regular national social report card similar in nature to the index of leading economic indicators.

"If the country knows that interest rates are up by one-quarter of a percent, people need to know that we have a child poverty indicator that is the worst in the industrial world," Mr. Miringoff said. "When that hits a new low, bells ought to go off the way it does when Alan Greenspan decides to slam the breaks on inflation. That should be reported on CNN and be part of the political discourse."

In the last 20 years every other major industrialized country from Britain and Norway to Turkey and Japan has begun to publish an annual social report, even though the idea originated in the United States. In 1929 President Herbert Hoover sponsored a comprehensive social report that was published five years later. And in 1967, Senator Walter F. Mondale, the future vice president, proposed creating a permanent Council of Social Advisers, like the Council of Economic Advisers, to produce regular reports on

social issues. The idea was shelved after the Democrats lost the presidential election of 1968.

It's back, the sociologist Ron Inglehart speculates, because now that many people's immediate material needs have been met, some Americans are developing post-materialist values.

And what these latest indices show is that whoever is doing the measuring -- left-of-center groups concerned with social justice or conservatives worried about moral values - - the overall trend has been downward over the last 30 years despite the growing prosperity.

Mr. Miringoff's social health index -- which combines 16 social indicators, including child poverty, infant mortality, crime, access to health care and affordable housing -- plummeted from a rating of 77 out of a possible 100 in 1973 to 38 in 1993. And although Mr. Bennett placed a greater emphasis on cultural issues like out-of-wedlock births, divorce, community participation and levels of trust or distrust in government, he arrived at similar results.

True, in the last few years Mr. Miringoff's index showed that the country has made a small but appreciable jump, from 38 to 46 from 1993 to 1997. It is a trend that Mr. Bennett has reported as well. "The decade of the 90's has seen progress in some key social indicators: reductions in welfare, violent crime, abortion, AIDS, divorce and suicide; upswings in SAT scores and charitable giving." Even so, according to the various measurements of social well-being Americans are, on the whole, richer but unhappier than they were three decades ago.

Some people are wondering whether these findings might help explain the mysterious X-factor in American political life: why there are so many disenchanting voters in a period of unprecedented prosperity? "The decline in the index coincides with the decline of trust in government," according to surveys, Mr. Miringoff said. Could it also account for such diverse phenomena as the popularity of Ross Perot, Jesse Ventura and the Reform Party; Pat Buchanan's and Ralph Nader's presidential bids; and the recent protests against globalization in Seattle and Washington?

"No one is saying this is a perfect science," Mr. Miringoff said. "But the fact that Bennett, who is looking at moral and cultural things, and I, who take a more social and economic approach, come to similar conclusions says something interesting."

Not everyone has confidence in these measures, however. "The problem I have with some of these indices is that they start to take on a political connotation," Benjamin M. Friedman, a political economist at Harvard University, said in an interview. He criticizes Mr. Bennett's attempt to quantify moral values by looking at rates of divorce and participation in church groups as well as Mr. Miringoff's decision to include income inequality in his social health index. "I happen to think income inequality is very important, but some people don't consider it a problem," Mr. Friedman said.

Mr. Friedman favors simple bare-bones indices like the United Nations human development index, which has three sets of statistics: per capita income, life expectancy and educational enrollment. By this measure, the United States ranks No. 3 in the world, after Canada and Norway. "Everyone agrees that life expectancy is a good thing," Mr. Friedman says. At the same time the United Nations international poverty index ranks the United States No. 17, at the bottom among industrialized nations.

But Mr. Miringoff argues that while there is a subjective and political element to any survey, many of the categories he includes in his social index -- alcohol-related traffic deaths, youth suicide, teenage drug use, infant mortality, low-weight birth, unemployment, real wages and child poverty -- involve hard data on matters of obvious importance.

The reason for exploring the messier world of social health, he explains, is that in the post-industrial economy, per capita income and gross national product don't reveal as much as they once did. Until about 30 years ago social indicators like crime, infant mortality, drug and alcohol abuse moved up and down with the G.N.P. Now they no longer do.

"It used to be that a rising tide lifted all boats, but at a certain point during the 1970's, social health and per capita income split apart," Mr. Miringoff said. "And this may be a result of the new economy: the loss of steady, well-paid jobs with benefits for less skilled, blue collar workers."

The very element Mr. Friedman suggests eliminating -- income inequality -- may be the key indicator for understanding the phenomenon, Mr. Miringoff says. While per capita income rose on aggregate, average weekly wages went down from a high of \$315 in 1973 down to \$256 in 1996, measured in constant dollars. The income of the top fifth of the population went from \$86,000 to \$125,000, while that of the bottom fifth dropped from \$11,640 to \$11,388. The percentage of children living in poverty went from 14.2 percent in 1973 to 22 percent in the early 1990's and has only recently dipped below 20 percent. These economic factors, which affect access to affordable housing and health care and are reflected in both Mr. Miringoff's social index and the genuine progress indicator, may help account for some of the symptoms of moral decline noted by Mr. Bennett: increases in crime, alcohol-related deaths, drug use and out-of-wedlock births.

Meanwhile, a measure like the genuine progress indicator put out by Redefining Progress tries to include things like time spent taking care of children and doing household work, which are not counted in the G.N.P., and subtracts other items like legal and medical bills, commuting time and money spent on locks and house alarms.

While it may be difficult to reach a national consensus on what to measure, many states, cities and counties are creating their own scales.

In Connecticut, Gov. John G. Rowland, a Republican, has adopted Mr. Miringoff's social health index without controversy to measure social problems and formulate policies.

In Traverse City, Mich., which is at the center of five rural counties, a local group instituted a quality of life index by surveying 2,000 residents about what they considered important. "They put three things right at the top: environment, education and public health," said Mary Swaney, research coordinator for the project. "Out here -- we don't have too much money but a great environment -- we have an expression, 'A view of the bay is worth half the pay.'" The city's bay opens into northern Lake Michigan. Among the measures adopted to track the state of the environment is a count of the number of bird and frog species.

The Michigan group also measures things like shoplifting and litigation as signs of social trouble and the number of septic tanks as a way of tracking sprawl, something residents say they would like to avoid.

In Tucson, the city is gearing up to count pedestrians in different neighborhoods because many residents said they felt safer and happier seeing other people out on the streets. John Laswick, the manager of Tucson's Sustainable Communities Program, says the sudden concern for quality-of-life issues, even in affluent places like Tucson, is a symptom of rapid economic growth and sprawl. "Sprawl has become a big issue in the last couple of years," he said. "I think that with the last five minutes of commuting time, something snapped. I think that intuitively people sense that there is something wrong there. They are missing relationships, community, urban form and a connection with the environment -- things that are not measured in the G.N.P."

In many cities and states, like Jacksonville, Fla., the indices are used by local government to assess the performance of city agencies. Jacksonville, Tucson and other cities have not yet combined their numbers into a single index but are looking for ways to study the links between their various measures. "There are a set of connected relationships that define community health," said Mr. Laswick of Tucson. "People's perception of the safety of the schools affects whether parents let kids walk to school or drive them. If they insist on driving them, that means more oil dripping on the roads and into the streams. We are trying to show that there are these connections. People are looking for a more subtle and more meaningful way of measuring what's important to them."

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