

The SOCIAL HEALTH of the NATION

How America is Really Doing



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For Helen and Hy Miringoff
Who Together Could Always Gauge The Indicators

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The Social Health of the Nation

Foreword

A democratic society must continuously seek ways to understand its progress. Yet, the question of how to determine real progress is a difficult one. What is viewed by the economist as positive movement may not seem so to the poet. This book is about a new perspective, which we call social health.

We at the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy have been engaged in studying and reporting on the social health of America for more than a decade. We began in 1987, with the first annual publication of the Index of Social Health. Since that time, the Index has become a nationally recognized yearly barometer, reporting information and trends on family income, education, health, housing, child poverty, drug use, and other social indicators that reflect the conditions of our national life.

As the Index and instruments like it have developed, they have come to represent a compelling idea—that it is necessary to monitor our social health in the same way we monitor other aspects of our society, such as the economy, politics, or even weather and sports. It is both the advancement of this idea, and the ways that it can be publicly portrayed, that compose the subject of *The Social Health of the Nation*.

A vital source of assistance and inspiration for us has been the vision of the Ford Foundation. In the summer of 1996, Lance Lindblom, Program Officer at Ford, contacted us and requested that we plan a project. He inquired, “What is needed to advance the field of social indicators and deepen its impact?” The result was the formation of the Working Group on Social Indicators. This group, convened by the Fordham Institute, consisted of twenty-two members representing a variety of disciplines, including medicine, economics, education, law, sociology, psychology, demography, and public health. They had a diverse range of research interests, including children, women, minorities, the aging, poverty, and hunger. They came from universities, research institutes, foundations, the media, government, business, and local community organizations. Each was concerned with increasing the public awareness of social conditions.

At its first meeting, in the spring of 1997, the Working Group considered its charge: to create an agenda that would advance the language, tools, and impact of social indicators. Task groups were formed to examine a number of areas, including improving the current governmental system of social statistics, enhancing the impact of the community indicators movement now emerging across the nation, and enriching the ways in which the media cover social conditions. Further, the group agreed to consider the kinds of social conditions that might be included in a national social report for the United States, a yearly official document that could portray the nation's social health. One participant, Ralph Smith of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, summed up the ultimate goal, noting, "if, in future presidential campaigns, the nominees have three debates—one on the economy, one on foreign policy, and one on social health—we will have achieved something."

The process that unfolded over the next eighteen months stimulated a wide diversity of views. There were agreements, disagreements, discussions, and debates. Running through it all was the bond of common intent. By the time the group concluded its work, the ideas were sharper, the visions clearer, and the next steps more certain. Although responsibility for the content of this book lies solely with the authors, we are deeply indebted to the members of the Working Group for their time and their talent.

As the meetings of the Working Group on Social Indicators moved ahead in 1997 and 1998, another source of energy and support came forward. Joan Shigekawa, of The Rockefeller Foundation, called and asked us, "Do you think your concept of social health should incorporate the perspectives of the arts and the humanities?" The question resulted in the formation of the Working Group on the Arts and the Humanities. This Group's task was to develop a series of indicators that reflected how the arts and humanities contribute to social health. Artists, philosophers, and humanities scholars convened to consider this issue. Together, we are seeking a new view of indicators designed to complement and enrich the contributions of the social sciences. This group, too, has served to inform the ideas of this book.

The Social Health of the Nation is divided into three parts. In Part One we argue that the United States needs a fuller and more meaningful view of the nation's progress than is portrayed by traditional economic and business indicators. We show how this view would enhance the public discourse by bringing sustained attention to the daily concerns of the public. Finally, we describe how this perspective has been advanced by initiatives in the United States, in other countries, and through multinational organizations.

Part Two begins an exploration of the social health of the nation. It presents sixteen major social indicators that convey the conditions of children and youth, adults and families, the aging, and some that affect the society as a whole, expanding the discussion with related information that informs the larger picture. In addition, it provides

comparisons between the United States and other industrial countries. This section then frames this data in the context of social performance, showing how current performance can be judged and future performance anticipated, in order to provide a fuller understanding of the nation's progress.

In Part Three, we propose a set of initiatives that would further broaden and deepen the concept of social health and the ways it can be reported to the public. These initiatives include new concepts and tools for the field, more accessible means to report social data, and new ways for the media, both electronic and print, to portray the nation's social conditions.

It is our hope that this book will be of assistance to those in government, the academy, the media, the world of business, and most importantly the general public, who are interested in new ways to understand and to assess the state of the nation. If it can help to provide a deeper view of the everyday conditions that affect the daily lives of the people of this society, it will have achieved an important objective.

The Working Group on Social Indicators

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The Social Health of the Nation

Introduction

In the media and in the speeches of our national leaders, we are often presented with an official portrait of America's progress. This portrait typically includes the Gross Domestic Product, the stock market, the Index of Leading Economic Indicators, the balance of trade, the inflation rate, and other similar measures. The view created by these measures molds our perception of the state of the nation and supplies a well-defined, accessible, and timely answer to the question: "How are we doing?"

It is the central argument of this book that other elements need to be present in the portrait in order to give us a fuller and deeper view. These elements include the well-being of America's children and youth, the accessibility of health care, the quality of education, the adequacy of housing, the security and satisfaction of work, and the nation's sense of community, citizenship, and diversity. These conditions must be as sharply and clearly visible as is the rest of the picture.

A more complete view of the nation's progress would enable us to expand the public dialogue about who we are, where we are headed, and what issues we must address. A more informed public dialogue would make what is vague far more specific, what is diffuse more defined, and would enlarge our understanding of the fabric that joins us as a society.

Traditionally, when we think of strengthening the public dialogue, we envision more people voting in elections and primaries, greater attention to political events, and a more diverse range of people seeking elective office. But the public's involvement can be enhanced, not only by urging greater participation, but also by enlarging the variety of reasons that inspire it. To strengthen the public dialogue, we need to deepen our sense of connection to the public sphere by expanding the range, depth, and visibility of issues that are conducive to debate and resolution.

The path toward a fuller public discourse, more grounded in fact and information, is of course filled with obstacles. But the need is apparent. Today, it is widely acknowledged that the public is deeply discouraged about the content of public debate,

particularly at the national level. There is a growing sense, dangerous to a democracy, that government and politics rarely concern our daily lives. Public opinion data show an alarming, consistent, and long-term decline in the public's trust in both government and the media. This is not surprising when so much attention is focused on the machinations of the Beltway and the power ploys of Capitol Hill rather than on the bread-and-butter health and well-being issues that involve us each day.

The presidential campaigns of recent years illustrate this point. Media analysts observe that when professional journalists interview political candidates, they tend to ask "gaming" or "strategy-oriented" questions intended to catch candidates off guard, uncover motives and character flaws, and challenge their public persona. In contrast, when the public has the opportunity to question candidates, it asks "governing" or "problem-oriented" questions that are more closely tied to issues such as jobs, wages, safety, education, and health care.

It is these everyday concerns and the ways in which the public is informed about them, that compose the focus of this book. The book rests on the premise that the more clearly the social side of the nation's portrait can be drawn and the more accessibly its contents can be communicated, the deeper the discussion and debate it can stimulate and the stronger our democracy can become.

We need this social portrait not only because it would enlarge our view of our national life, but because there is strong evidence that it would provide a very different picture from what is conveyed by traditional business and economic barometers. Each year, the Council of Economic Advisors prepares the *Economic Report of the President*, the official overview of the state of the economy. In 1995, for example, the *Economic Report* noted:

By most standard macroeconomic indicators, the performance of the U.S. economy in 1994 was, in a word, outstanding. The economy has not enjoyed such a healthy expansion of strong growth and modest inflation in more than a generation. . . . Nineteen ninety-four was a very good year for the American economy. Indeed, robust growth, a dramatic decline in the unemployment rate, low inflation, and a much improved outlook for the Federal budget combined to yield the best overall economic performance in at least a generation.

And similarly in 1996—

Economic performance during the past 3 years has been exceptional.

And in 1997—

Economic growth has been strong and sustainable. The economic expansion has been marked by a healthy balance among the components of demand. . . . In-