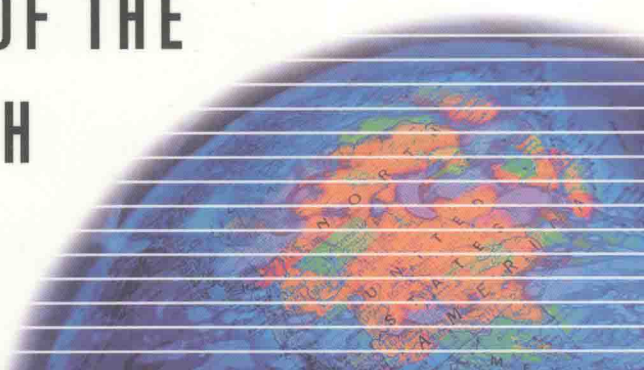


The Index *of* Leading Cultural Indicators

AMERICAN SOCIETY AT
THE END OF THE
TWENTIETH
CENTURY



UPDATED AND EXPANDED

WILLIAM J. BENNETT

THE INDEX OF LEADING CULTURAL INDICATORS

*American Society at the End
of the 20th Century*

Updated and Expanded

William J. Bennett

Editor of *The Book of Virtues*

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INTRODUCTION

A decade ago the Berlin Wall was reduced to rubble, marking the collapse of the Soviet empire and the culmination of an extraordinary historical epoch. Our “long, twilight struggle” against Soviet communism had ended in a stunning victory for America and the West. But the end of the Cold War also ushered in a period of intense self-examination in this country. With American ideals having prevailed abroad, the dominant question became: *how are we doing at home?*

At that time, despite unparalleled economic prosperity and military supremacy, there was a widespread sense that we were in the midst of a decades-long cultural decline. Was this in fact the case? If so, how serious was it? In which areas had we lost the most ground? Were there *any* areas that had seen improvement?

Much of the discussion of this issue, while thoughtful and instructive, was anecdotal, impressionistic, and speculative. Missing were objective measurements, the cultural equivalents of the Index of Leading Economic Indicators: that is, reliable data, compiled in an easily accessible manner, on the moral, social, and cultural condition of modern American society. Five years ago, in an attempt to respond to the need, I published *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*. My conclusion, on the basis of the long-term trends indicated by the

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data I had collected, was that, yes, we had indeed experienced substantial cultural decline. To be specific, virtually every important indicator not only got worse, it got much worse. I wrote then that unless these exploding social pathologies were reversed, they would lead to the decline—and perhaps even to the fall—of the American republic. The situation was that bad.

This book is an updated, expanded version of the original *Index*; it includes more charts and graphs, more tables, more facts and figures on more subjects than the original. To my knowledge, it is the most comprehensive statistical portrait available of social trends since the 1960s.

The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators: American Society at the End of the 20th Century offers chapters on crime, the family, youth behavior, education, popular culture and religion, and civic participation. It compares America with the rest of the world and, decade by decade, with itself; it ranks the fifty states and the District of Columbia. Each chapter provides an extensive factual presentation, including statistical and numerical breakdowns beginning in 1960 and ending (in most cases) in 1997.

What, briefly, can we learn from this exercise? Since the publication of the last *Index*, there have been many significant, positive developments. The decade of the nineties 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.

A closer look reveals some truly remarkable gains. Since 1994, for example, there has been a 46.5 percent decrease in welfare rolls. The murder rate is at its lowest point since 1967. Alcohol-related traffic fatalities are at their lowest level since the government began keeping such statistics. Since 1993, the reported number of AIDS cases has decreased by more than

50 percent. Near the end of the decade, there are 243,000 fewer abortions per year than at the beginning. There has been a 16-point increase in SAT scores and a 38 percent increase in charitable giving (in inflation-adjusted dollars).

But that is hardly the whole picture. During these same 1990s, we also experienced social regression in several important areas. The percentage of births to unwed mothers—already at the alarmingly high level of 28 percent at the beginning of the decade—is even higher today, at 32.4 percent. America still has the highest divorce rate among Western nations, and the highest incidence of single-parent families of any industrialized nation. Among men and women between their mid-twenties and mid-thirties, living together before marriage is far more common than not. Our rates of sexually transmitted disease far exceed those of every other developed country. In 1998, 5.6 percent of high school seniors reported using marijuana on a daily basis—a 180 percent increase since 1991. In math achievement, American twelfth graders rank nineteenth out of twenty-one nations.

The trends, then, are decidedly mixed, giving rise to opposing interpretations. One camp of observers is quite upbeat, even celebratory; in another camp, occupied mostly by social conservatives, the mood is one of resignation, even despair. In fact, some celebration is in order; authentic gains have been achieved. But the worrisome trends are deeply worrisome—afflicting in particular the American family—and we need to think about them afresh.

The first task is to see what we can learn from the decade's successes. Over the last few years, I have amended some of my own prior views about the efficacy of politics and public policy. It turns out that some social pathologies are less resistant to legislative action and political leadership than I once thought. Consider two examples: the extraordinary transfor-

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mation of New York City, which was once thought to be virtually ungovernable; and the enormous drop in the welfare caseload following the passage of reform legislation. In short, problems that were considered all but intractable have yielded to well-conceived and well-executed reforms.

Can these positive trends be sustained, or even extended to other areas? Certainly there is no ignoring the magnitude of the problem. In two generations, America has undergone dramatic and traumatic social change—the kind that one would normally associate with cataclysmic natural events like famine, revolution, or war. Civilizations stand on precious few pillars, and during the last three and a half decades, many of ours have fractured. Although we have learned to live with the situation, much as one might learn to live with a thorn deeply embedded in the flesh, it is important to remind ourselves periodically just how much ground we have lost.

Since 1960, our population has increased by 48 percent. But since 1960, even *taking into account* recent improvements, we have seen a 467 percent increase in violent crime; a 463 percent increase in the numbers of state and federal prisoners; a 461 percent increase in out-of-wedlock births; more than a 200 percent increase in the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than a doubling in the teenage suicide rate; a more than 150 percent increase in the number of Americans receiving welfare payments; an almost tenfold increase in the number of cohabiting couples; a doubling of the divorce rate; and a drop of almost 60 points on SAT scores. Since 1973, there have been more than 35 million abortions, increasing from 744,060 in 1973 to 1,365,700 in 1996.

These seismic social changes have had a profound impact on American politics, to the point that it has changed how politicians campaign and how our elected representatives

govern. Issues that were once peripheral to politics are now among the most important of all. The outcome of the 2000 presidential campaign could well depend on which candidate deals with cultural issues in the most responsible, serious-minded, careful, and convincing way. Social and cultural issues—symbolized by moments like the horrific school shooting in Littleton, Colorado—are the ones that most concentrate the American mind these days.

Even during a time of record prosperity, many Americans believe that something has gone wrong at the core.

During the last half of this American century, we have made extraordinary progress in medicine, science, and technology. We have advanced the cause of civil rights at home and human rights abroad. We have achieved unprecedented levels of wealth and affluence. The United States offers unparalleled opportunity and freedom. But we have lost something precious in the process.

The nation we live in today is more violent and vulgar, coarse and cynical, rude and remorseless, deviant and depressed, than the one we once inhabited. A popular culture that is often brutal, gruesome, and enamored with death robs many children of their innocence. People kill other people, and themselves, more easily. Men and women abandon each other, and their children, more readily. Marriage and the American family are weaker, more unstable, less normative.

These are social realities, and they pose an enormous challenge to us; it would be self-delusion, and self-defeating, to pretend otherwise. But surely the successes of the nineties do give us something upon which to build. Above all, they remind us that we do not have to sit passively by while our culture breaks apart. To those who believe our decline is inevitable because social trends are irreversible, our answer

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should be: no, it need not be so, and we will not allow it to happen.

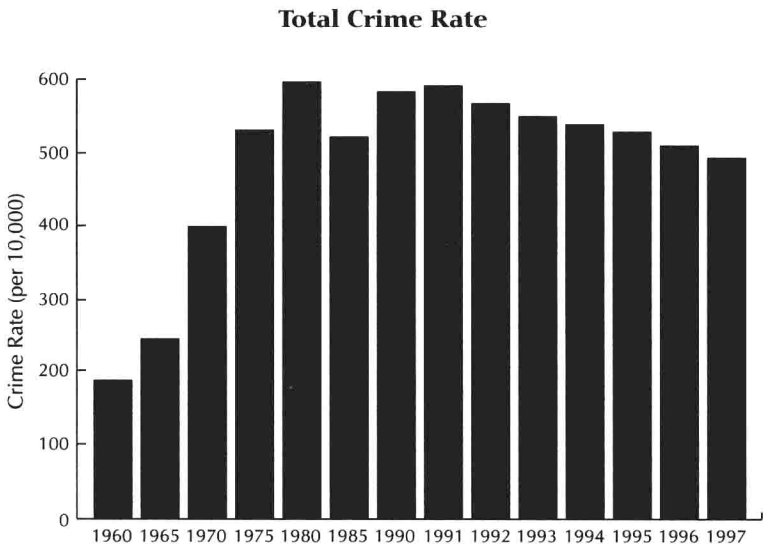
Restoring a civilization's social and moral order—making it more humane, civil, responsible, and just—is no simple task. But America remains what it has always been: an exceptional nation. Our capacity for self-renewal is rare, and real. We have relied on it in the past. For reasons you are about to see, we must call on it again.

CHAPTER ONE

Crime

TOTAL CRIMES

- ***Between 1990 and 1997, the total crime rate* fell 15.4 percent. But between 1960 and 1997, the total crime rate rose more than 160 percent.***



Source: FBI

* Total crimes are defined by the FBI as the violent crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and assault, and the property crimes of burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. For a discussion of how crimes are counted, please see the "Note to the Reader" in the back of the book.

Total Crime

Year	Total Crimes	Total Crime Rate (per 10,000)
1960	3,384,200	188.7
1965	4,739,400	244.9
1970	8,098,000	398.5
1975	11,292,400	529.9
1980	13,408,300	595.0
1985	12,431,400	520.7
1990	14,475,600	582.0
1991	14,872,900	589.8
1992	14,438,200	566.0
1993	14,144,800	548.4
1994	13,989,500	537.4
1995	13,862,700	527.6
1996	13,493,900	508.7
1997	13,175,070	492.3

Source: FBI

Factual Overview: Total Crime

- In 1997, there were slightly more than 13 million crimes reported in the United States. This is down from the 1991 peak, in which there were almost 15 million crimes.¹
- According to preliminary numbers from 1998, total crime was down 7 percent from 1997, making it the seventh year in a row crime declined.²
- The decline from 1992 to 1998 is the longest consecutive decline in crime since the 1950s.³
- Both males and females, whites and blacks, and people of all income levels experienced declines in the criminal victimization rate between 1993 and 1997.⁴

- In 1997, households with annual incomes of below \$7,500 were burglarized at a rate approximately double that of households with incomes above \$25,000 per year.⁵
- In 1997, the most common type of criminal offense was larceny-theft (58.6 percent), followed by burglary (18.7 percent) and motor vehicle theft (10.3 percent). Murder accounted for 0.1 percent and forcible rape for 0.7 percent.⁶
- In the early 1990s, the violent crimes committed in this country each year cost victims and society more than \$400 billion.⁷
- Estimates of the average number of crimes committed by prisoners in the year prior to their incarceration range from twelve to twenty-one.⁸
- The overall arrest rate in the United States in 1997 was 5,752.1 for every 100,000 inhabitants.⁹ Two-thirds of arrestees were white and 30 percent were black.^{*10}
- Persons aged 16 to 39 make up 36 percent of the population and account for almost three-quarters of all arrests.¹¹

The States: Crime Rates

- In 1997, the United States averaged 492.3 crimes per 10,000 residents. The District of Columbia[†] had the highest crime rate and West Virginia had the lowest crime rate.¹²

* The reason Hispanics do not appear in FBI statistics is that when the FBI collects data on the race of offenders and victims, it does not count Hispanics as a separate category. Rather, it defines Hispanics as an ethnicity and groups Hispanics under the appropriate racial category (sometimes grouped as blacks, and other times as whites). The Bureau of Justice Statistics, on the other hand, does count Hispanics as a separate category in some cases.

† In this book, the District of Columbia is included in state-by-state comparisons. For more information, see the "Note to the Reader" in the back of the book.

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Crime Rates by State, 1997

State	Total Crimes	Total Crime Rate (per 10,000)
District of Columbia	52,049	983.9
Florida	1,065,609	727.2
Arizona	327,734	719.5
New Mexico	119,483	690.7
Louisiana	280,671	644.9
Oregon	203,328	627.0
South Carolina	230,637	613.4
Nevada	101,702	606.5
Hawaii	71,492	602.3
Utah	123,447	599.6
Washington	332,466	592.6
Georgia	433,563	579.2
Maryland	287,969	565.3
Tennessee	295,873	551.2
Oklahoma	182,258	549.5
North Carolina	407,743	549.2
Texas	1,065,357	548.1
Alaska	32,110	527.3
Illinois	611,589	514.1
Delaware	37,612	513.8
United States	13,175,070	492.3
Michigan	480,579	491.7
Alabama	211,188	489.0
California	1,569,949	486.5
Missouri	260,081	481.5
Arkansas	119,052	471.9
Colorado	181,041	465.0
Mississippi	126,452	463.0
Kansas	118,422	456.4
Ohio	505,005	451.5

(continued next page)