

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#518 - Social Health

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How are we doing as a nation? How can we really tell? Some say everything is hunky dory. We have previously described the "good news industry," which has created a buzz in recent years by repeating "all is well, all is well" and ridiculing anyone who says otherwise.

Julian Simon, a professor of business at University of Maryland, is the leading savant of the good news industry; his 694-page book, *THE STATE OF HUMANITY*, claims to show that everything is getting better all the time, worldwide, and he predicts that everything will continue to get better "indefinitely." (See REHW #485 and #503.) Simon accomplishes this by ignoring most of the world's serious environmental problems because, he says, they are all surrounded by "major scientific controversy." [1] (A similar claim can be made about any problem you want to name, because scientists can always be found who --for a fee -- will create a controversy. For example, today it is possible to enjoy a lucrative career claiming that cigarettes may not cause lung cancer, thus creating the appearance of controversy where none exists.) Simon says acid rain, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, and loss of species are all so controversial that they must be ignored because we just don't know who's right. By this means, Simon manages to conclude that all trends are positive throughout the world.

John Tierney, a "good news" writer for the *NEW YORK TIMES* who never allows his conclusions to be constrained by mere facts, promotes Julian Simon's views and simply dismisses anyone who suggests that perhaps not all trends are positive. ("We think the world is getting worse because our bodies are deteriorating," says Tierney --as if individual aging explained declining fish populations in the world's oceans, tattered safety nets for workers throughout the industrialized world, or rising teenage suicides worldwide.) Tierney ridicules anyone who is concerned about present trends. He says, for example, "As the rest of the world becomes as rich as America, people everywhere will have the luxury of fretting about the problems that consume us. As more of their babies survive, they'll focus on endangered species of beetles." [2]

A new book by Paul and Anne Ehrlich analyzes the good news industry and shows that it is undermining public confidence in science and reason. [3] We will review it at a later time, but our readers should know it exists now because the good news industry is hard at work deflecting attention away from environmental and social problems by claiming that such problems have been solved, or never existed in the first place. The Ehrlichs have provided a careful analysis of the good news industry (which they call "brownlash journalism") and have provided mainstream scientific critiques of its optimistic conclusions.

In *RACHEL'S #516*, we examined ways of measuring progress. The standard way of measuring it, called Gross Domestic Product or GDP, measures the total amount of money that changes hands for finished products during a year's time. GDP is constantly increasing, and most journalists and politicians treat GDP as a good measure of human welfare. Since GDP is constantly increasing, all of us must be better off each year (at least on average), or so the argument goes.

However, as we saw in #516 there are several good reasons for believing that GDP is NOT a sound measure of well being. An alternative measure, called the Genuine Progress Indicator, or GPI, modifies GDP by adding in money transactions that GDP treats as zero (the value of peoples' voluntary work for neighborhood associations, churches and other charities, for example). [4] GPI modifies GDP further by SUBTRACTING costs of crime, social dissolution (divorce, for example) and ecological damage, which GDP treats either as zero or as positive

values even though they clearly have a negative impact on human welfare.

GPI is not a perfect measure of human well being, but the values that it uses to modify GDP are more reasonable than the zero values that GDP uses; furthermore, treating the costs of crime and social breakdown as negative, instead of positive, is certainly reasonable. Figure 1 shows that per capita GDP has risen steadily since 1950. However, the figure also shows that GPI has steadily declined since about 1970. This figure reveals that there is something fundamentally wrong with the analysis provided by the good news industry. Julian Simon, John Tierney and their ilk pretend that all trends are upward, but GPI shows that this is not so. When reasonable measures of progress are taken, it becomes apparent why many people believe things are getting worse. By many measures, things ARE getting worse.

In addition to GPI, there is another national measure of well being. It is called the Index of Social Health, published each year by researchers at Fordham University's Graduate Center in Tarrytown, New York. For the past 11 years, Marc Miringoff and his colleagues at Fordham have been gathering data on 16 measures of well being. The data go back to 1970 and are current through 1993.

The Fordham index accounts for well being during different stages of life. For children, it reports infant mortality, child abuse, and poverty. For youth, it reports teenage suicides, drug use, and the high-school dropout rate. For adults, it reports unemployment, average weekly earnings, and health insurance coverage among those under age 65. For those 65 and over, it reports poverty, and out-of-pocket health-care costs. For people of all ages, it reports homicides; alcohol-related highway deaths; food stamp coverage; access to affordable housing; and the gap between rich and poor. [5]

These measures are not taken against some absolute standard, such as zero poverty or 100% health insurance coverage. They are taken against the best that the U.S. has achieved in each category since 1970. [6,pg.464] Taking the best that the U.S. has achieved in each category, a Model Year is created. Each year's performance is then expressed as a proportion of the Model Year. Finally, all 16 measures are combined into a single numerical index.

Figure 2 shows total GDP steadily rising and the Fordham Index of Social Health steadily declining. Since 1970, America's social health (represented by the 16 measures) has declined from 73.8 out of a possible 100 in 1970 to 40.6 in 1993, a fall of more than 45%. During this time, 11 measures declined and 5 rose. The gains were seen in infant mortality; drug abuse; high-school dropouts; poverty among those over 65; and food-stamp coverage. The social indicators that worsened over the same period were children in poverty; child abuse; teen suicide; unemployment; average weekly wages; health insurance coverage; out-of-pocket health costs for those over 65; homicide; alcohol-related highway deaths; housing; and the gap between rich and poor.

In 1993, the most recent year for which data are available, the Fordham Index declined 2 points from 1992, down to 40.6 out of a possible 100. In 1993, six of the indicators --children in poverty; child abuse; health insurance coverage; average weekly earnings; out-of-pocket health costs for those over 65; and the gap between rich and poor -- reached their worst recorded levels.

We believe it is very important to begin to measure progress and social health at the state and local levels. [7] If we use false measures, like GDP, or no measures at all, we can be duped and misled by the good news industry, which makes its living selling optimistic pap. If things are not going well, we need to know it so we can make efforts to improve. Whether we are discussing environment, economy, or the social fabric that holds communities together, we need to measure what's good and what's bad so that we can tell whether public policies are doing what we all need them to do. Measuring progress and social health -- particularly at the local level --will allow us to think constructively and spend our money wisely.

