



Christopher Lane Ph.D.

Side Effects



# The U.S. Is Not Doing Well Socially

The latest surveys point to signs of an unhappy, divided country.

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Consider them report cards on the success of a nation's social policies. The latest in a string of surveys measuring the social foundations of [happiness](#) and well-being on a world scale appeared earlier this week, and for the third time the U.S. had tumbled out of the top ten, in the latest case into a “second tier.”



Source: World Happiness Report

In March, the [World Happiness Report](#) ranked the U.S. 14th overall across a range of tangible measurements, with Scandinavian countries taking the top three spots. Last year, the Organization for Economic [Cooperation](#) & Development (OECD) put the U.S. [19th out of 34 nations](#), having placed it third in a comparable study a decade earlier. Just this week, drawing on 50 well-calibrated metrics, the U.S.-based nonprofit [Social Progress Imperative](#) ranked the U.S. 18th, this time with Denmark, Finland, and 16 other countries outperforming the United States across a range of categories.

Skeptics abound about the value and accuracy of such indexes, treating them with the same degree of seriousness as university rankings, where even the slightest movement upward or downward is held as earth-shaking. But in the case of the U.S. these were not minor movements downward. And the indexes provide and collate invaluable data and an important window onto social concerns assessed at a global scale, whether as “healthy life expectancy at birth” and “strength of social support,” or factors that seem less tangible but no less crucial to social well-being, such as levels of social trust, trust in [government](#), perceptions of corruption, and freedom to make life choices. In all of these categories, the U.S. was seen as having deteriorated sharply.

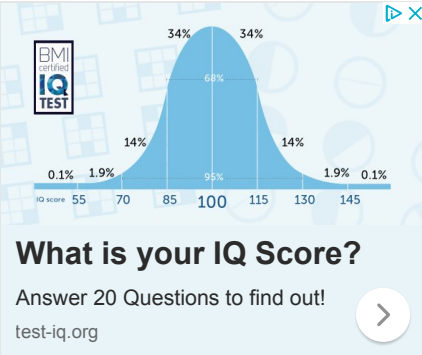
The *World Happiness Report* found in March that, even with higher GDP per capita than each of the Scandinavian nations, “[the Nordic countries far outpace the U.S. on personal freedom, social support, and lower corruption.](#)” Noting a well-documented decline in generalized trust among Americans, one of the report’s salient conclusions was that “[falling American happiness is due primarily to social rather than to economic causes.](#)” even as it noted the dire consequences of economic stagnation and decline, and fraying social ties from rising income inequality.

While in the U.S. “two of the explanatory variables moved in the direction of greater happiness (income and healthy life expectancy), the [report continued](#), “the four social variables all deteriorated—the United States showed less social support, less sense of personal freedom, lower donations, and more perceived corruption of government and business.”

In the latest *Social Progress Index*, from earlier this week, the U.S. had fallen into a second tier (six are provided overall). It continued to demonstrate “[high social progress](#)” on core infrastructure and [health](#) issues, including perhaps notably in [nutrition](#), water, and sanitation, given the public-health crises over water and lead piping in Flint, Michigan, as well as in larger cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago. The U.S. also led globally in the category “Access to advanced [education](#),” including with “number of globally ranked universities” and over “freedom of expression.”

But it had [dropped markedly in socially oriented categories](#) such as “tolerance and inclusion” (23rd overall) and “health and wellness” (34th), with “[discrimination](#) and violence against minorities” dragging the nation down to 39th in the first of these, and the U.S. plunging to 82nd over its national [suicide](#) rate, and still lower over “[religious](#) tolerance” (92nd). The U.S. also [scored poorly](#) for “environmental quality” (33rd), with a “biodiversity and habitat” ranking coming in at 73rd.

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Alluding to the tendency of lawmakers to dismiss such findings or give them hyper-partisan readings, *Bloomberg News* instead suggested they be seen as “[mounting evidence](#)” of a widespread social problem in the U.S. Michael Green, chief executive of SPI, told the news agency that the report indicated, among other things, that America “is

[failing to address basic human needs, equip citizens to improve their quality of life, protect the environment, and provide opportunity for everyone to make personal choices and reach their full potential.](#)”

In many respects, the conclusion echoes that of the latest *World Happiness Report* —“[America’s crisis is, in short, a social crisis](#)” yet one that “has [not translated into public policy](#).” For all the likely hand-wringing over second tiers and tumbling rankings, that last factor may turn out to be most decisive, including whether the deterioration in quality of life tapers or continues to worsen.

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## About the Author



**Christopher Lane, Ph.D.**, has won a Prescrire Prize for Medical Writing and teaches at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness*.

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