COMMENTS?

We invite you to fill out the comment form at http://tinyurl.com/Jan-FebCRSurvey. Thank you.

—The Editors
Economists, politicians, journalists, and ordinary citizens have many ways to track how America is doing. Monitoring the stock market, watching real estate prices, keeping an eye on interest rates—to follow these figures is to see how the country is progressing in one way or another. But we all have a harder time when trying to look at the big picture: on the whole, are things getting better or worse, and for whom? To answer these questions and to gauge how they stack up compared to their neighbors, countries worldwide have embraced an idea that captures key dimensions of national well-being in one framework: human development.

It has been eighteen years since the United Nations Development Programme published the first Human Development Report. In the nearly two decades since then, journalists, policymakers, governments, and the global development community have made important use of these studies—more than five hundred in all—on nations and regions around the world. What is new, however, and perhaps somewhat unexpected, is a Human Development Report on the United States.

Yet, as the American Human Development Report itself confirms, the human development concept is as relevant and applicable to the home of the world’s largest economy as it is to the home of the smallest. The indicators most frequently deployed in evaluating public welfare in the United States—GDP (gross domestic product), the Dow Jones industrial average, and NASDAQ (National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations), consumer spending, and the like—address only one
aspect of the American experience. The human development model emphasizes the broader, everyday experience of ordinary people, including the economic, social, legal, psychological, cultural, environmental, and political processes that shape the range of options available to us. This approach has gained support around the world as a valuable tool in analyzing the well-being of large population groups.

The report and its American Human Development Index contain a host of useful data on economic, social, political, military, and environmental issues. However, both the report and the index emphasize three core areas of well-being: living a long and healthy life, having access to knowledge, and enjoying a decent standard of living. All data come from official U.S. government sources. (The most recent year for which all data needed to calculate the index are available is 2005.)

The American Human Development Index provides a single measure of well-being for all Americans, disaggregated by state and congressional district, as well as by gender, race, and ethnicity. Overall, for example, Connecticut ranks first among states on the index, and Mississippi ranks last. The American Human Development Index registers a thirty-year gap in human development between the two states. Among the nation’s 436 congressional districts, New York’s fourteenth district, in New York City, ranks first, and California’s twentieth district, around Fresno, ranks last. The average resident of New York’s fourteenth district earns over three times as much as the average resident of California’s twentieth district, lives four and a half years longer, and is ten times as likely to have a college degree. By gender and ethnicity, Asian males have the highest human development score; African American males the lowest. The human development gap between the two groups is a staggering fifty years. In other meaningful ways, as well, the American Human Development Index shows great variation among states and congressional districts, among racial/ethnic groups, and between women and men.

Based on the data in the American Human Development Index and the information and analysis in the American Human Development Report, a steady, broad-based advance of human development in the United States will require attention to several priorities:

- For Americans to live longer, healthier lives, it is obvious from the report that progress depends in large part on a comprehensive resolution of the problem of health insurance. Today some forty-seven million Americans lack health insurance, risking negative health outcomes and shorter life spans. The nation appears unlikely to make significant strides in health until every American has adequate health coverage. In addition, Americans are at risk from a wide range of preventable causes of death and disease, including obesity and violence. In a reflection of how complex social problems are linked, researchers have found that poor parents, living in neighborhoods they perceive to be dangerous, are often reluctant to allow their children to play outside. Lack of exercise contributes to childhood obesity, which lowers health scores. Restricted space to play can also have a negative impact on school performance, lowering education scores.

- In order to improve access to knowledge, research suggests that intensive intervention in early childhood is necessary to break the pattern by which parents with limited education raise children with limited education—thereby short-circuiting their ability to command decent opportunities and wages in a high-tech, information-intensive, globalized economy. Superior preschool programs and intensive elementary schooling can offer students from poor families a chance to fulfill their potential, seize opportunities, and lead lives they value. The ideal of American opportunity, grounded in equal access to public education, is threatened by the lopsided educational realities of American schools. We are asking our schools to solve society’s most intractable problems—social exclusion, chronic unemployment, dan-
For Americans to sustain, or obtain, a decent standard of living, the wages and opportunities of millions of Americans must improve. Growing inequality in income distribution and wealth raises a profound question for Americans: Can the uniquely middle-class nation that emerged in the twentieth century survive into the twenty-first century? Or is it fracturing into a land of great extremes?

The answers to these questions will determine not only the future of America but also the future of the idea of America—that of a land of opportunity where those who work hard and live honestly can prosper in freedom and security. The American Dream has drifted beyond the reach of many, while fading from view from others. To reinvigorate it, to make it real for millions of middle-class and poor Americans, the stagnation and decline of middle and low incomes must be reversed, and opportunity must once again reach down to the lowest rungs of society. It may well be too late to help the generation of Americans who have just come of age. But a debate is long overdue on just how many generations America is willing to waste. We hope this American Human Development Report and American Human Development Index will help prod and inform that important discussion.

The website http://measureofamerica.org features an interactive map program that enables you to create and print maps of over sixty indicators by U.S. state or congressional district—a “Well-O-Meter” to calculate your personal Human Development Index and more.

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