

Chapter 3

Has There Been Progress? The Modern World

...in the industrialized, electricity-driven, technology-based world, people live longer and healthier lives, have greater relief from drudgery and hard manual labor, enjoy a greater share of goods and services, have more mobility and enjoy more personal liberty than has ever before been experienced on Earth. Given an average life expectancy that exceeds 75 years, we must be doing something right — junk food, nuclear waste, and all.

Dixie Lee Ray

Although virtually all historians would agree that mankind has enjoyed genuine progress in the past, many conservatives would argue that the modern world is degenerating and debasing life for human beings. Critics point to a rise in crime rates, increases in pollution and environmental damage, the spread of illegal drugs, a rise in racism, the specter of nuclear holocaust, failing schools, the decline of the family, and a rise in illegitimacy and teenage pregnancy. This chapter will examine those charges — except for the possibility of nuclear war, which is taken up in Chapter 9 — and evaluate their significance for progress.

Modernization does change the world and the way in which people interact. Many of these changes, although deplored by some, have no obvious detrimental effects on human well-being. For example, renowned sociologist Alex Inkeles determined (1981) that the development of an industrial world breaks down the authority of parents and other family members over other individuals. Relatives no longer command or even take a major interest in the behavior of cousins, nephews and nieces, uncles or aunts, or more distant kin. Not only do parents have less control over their offspring — they no longer choose their mates, their professions, or their homes — but the relationship between husband and wife has become more egalitarian as women have moved into the workplace. The “man of the house” is no longer the “master of the house.”

A diminution in hierarchical relationships brings more autonomy and increases people’s choices. In rigid pre-industrial societies, few individuals enjoyed the luxury of selecting their life styles, mates, or friends. Often their parents’ position and their relatives’ wishes programmed their entire lives. Modernization has increased their freedom and, arguably, their well-being. Unequivocally it has brought huge gains in terms of life expectancy, curtailing disease and morbidity, as well as reducing infant

mortality. In addition, the modern world has improved and expanded education, broadened freedoms, spread democracy, and increased opulence.

A number of disturbing tendencies, however, have perturbed modern life; unfortunately, we lack data on long term trends for most of these phenomena. Crime rates, for example, show an increase in the post-war period for most Western countries; but we know little about murder, burglary, or assault rates for earlier centuries. Was the apparent increase in crime over the last thirty years simply a return to a more normal pattern of long duration or did it reflect a rise to a new level? No data exist to answer this question. It is always difficult if not impossible to judge the current world; we are too close to it to assess trends and their implications objectively. Nevertheless, I will examine what scholars know or *think they know* about modern tendencies.

Infant Mortality and Life Expectancy

Much of the preceding chapter's historical discussion focused on two of the most important indicators of progress: life expectancy and infant mortality. If society is becoming more polluted, more dangerous, more crime ridden, more addicted to drugs, the effects of those harmful practices should show up in shorter lives. Although statistical proof is lacking, anecdotal and anthropological evidence indicate that both measures have improved over the centuries. For modern times, the data are unambiguous — people live longer and healthier lives than their forefathers.

Existing Data

Except for English figures on life expectancy that date back to the sixteenth century, hard numbers for any tribe, nation or civilization are virtually nonexistent prior to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. The facts for the English, however, are enlightening. The average length of life in England climbed from around 34 years in 1541 to 41 in 1871, with all of the gain coming after 1740 — the start of the much maligned Industrial Revolution (Wrigley 1981: 230). In 1991, the comparable figure for the United Kingdom was 77, an addition of 36 years. In other words, during the two hundred years prior to the Industrial Revolution, life expectancy in England failed to improve; the next 130 years added seven years to life; the last 118 years have advanced English life spans by nearly five times as much.

The record is similar for Sweden — an accelerating improvement in length of life. In 1750 newly born males in that Scandinavian country could look forward to only 33.5 years of life on average, comparable to what the English expected at about the same time. Fifty years later, in 1800, life expectancy had risen three and a half years; by 1860 it had

reached 47, a further gain of ten years (Glass 1965: 21). The average male Swede in 1990 could expect to live to the age of 74, a gain of 27 years in 130 years.

These benefits, attributable to an expansion in knowledge, technology, and science are multidimensional. Not only do people enjoy living longer healthier lives, but they gain from having fewer of their children die. An extension of life brings with it an increase in the percentage of children that will grow up. A life expectancy of about 40, that of Swedish females in 1800, foreordains that roughly one of three newborns will die before the age of 20. With an average life span of 70 — somewhat lower than that typically found in developed countries today — about 95 percent of all babies will survive to adulthood, a striking rise.

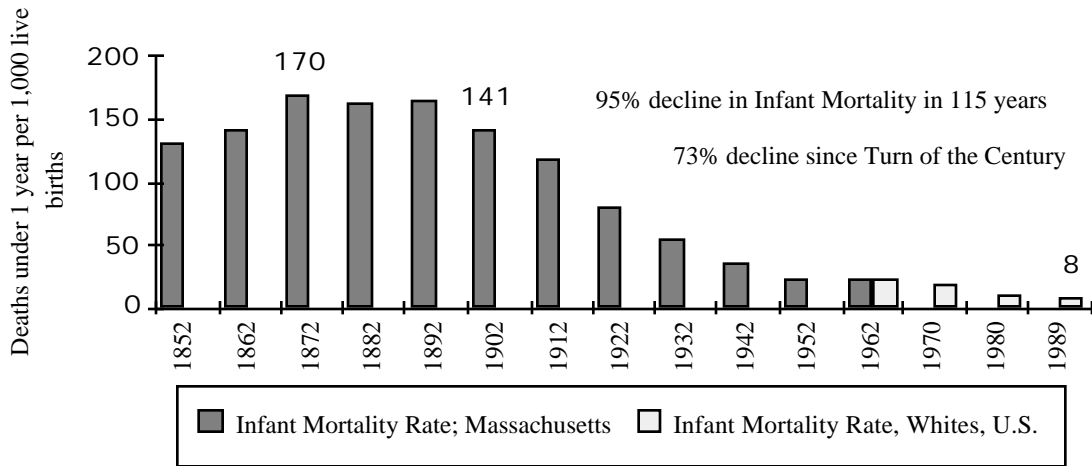
On the 93 birthday of my wife's father, the benefits of improved health and nutrition became very personal. My grandson, two years old and almost a century younger than his great-grandfather, although mangling the words wished him "happy birthday." Four generations spanned by 100 years would have been unheard of in previous centuries.

For the United States good figures on life expectancy and infant mortality date back only to the middle of the last century and then only for Massachusetts. Chart 3-1 depicts the reduction in infant mortality that has occurred in that state since the middle of the last century and for the country as a whole since the 1960s.* After the turn of the century, deaths among those under the age of one fell by nearly three-quarters. The horrendous infant mortality of 170 deaths per 1,000 live births experienced in Massachusetts in the first half of the 1870s exceeds that for virtually every country in the world by 1991. Thus the entire world has made progress in reducing infant mortality.

* To be more comparable to those for Massachusetts over the earlier decades, the U.S. data are confined to whites. Life expectancies for blacks, while lower than those for whites, indicate similar improvements since the early part of this century.

Chart 3-1

INFANT MORTALITY

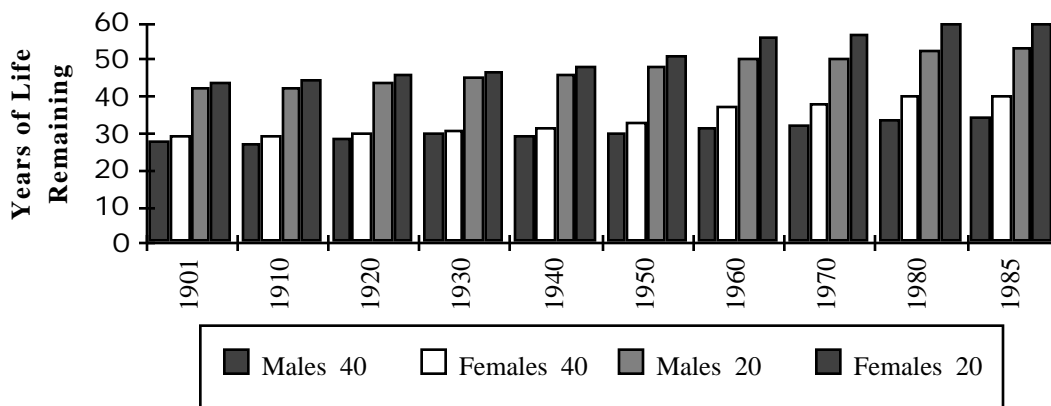


Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States and Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various years.

For the United States as a whole, data on life expectancy *after* the first year of life go back only to 1900. These figures, pictured in Chart 3-2, demonstrate an almost continuous lengthening of life for all ages. From 1900 to 1985, twenty-year-old women gained 16 years of life or extended their prospects by 37 percent. Men aged 40 gained 7 years for a 25 percent boost in their remaining years of life.

Chart 3-2

LIFE EXPECTANCY IN THE 20TH CENTURY



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States and Statistical Abstract*, various years.

Over the last two centuries, improved public and private sanitation, additional and more nutritious food, better medical techniques, and a greater understanding of disease

and factors contributing to good health have not only extended life expectancy and cut infant mortality significantly but eliminated or notably diminished many of the great scourges of history. Smallpox, which killed millions, disfigured even the well-off, and ravaged primitive tribes in the Americas, has vanished from the earth. If that is not progress, then nothing is. Tuberculosis now afflicts only a very small proportion of the population, mainly those with impaired immune systems. Polio, diphtheria, measles, and whooping cough no longer threatens those inoculated. On the other hand, AIDS is devastating a significant portion of the most skilled and talented people in the land. As terrible as AIDS is, however, it afflicts only a relatively small percentage of the population, albeit a young vigorous group at the height of their productivity.

Environmental Progress

Critics of the concept of progress assert that economic development is poisoning our environment. Viewed objectively technology now allows a greater number of people to live longer healthier lives with less damage to the environment than ever before in history. The global extension in life expectancy, which continues to this day, demonstrates that any environmental degradation attributable to modern society cannot on net harm human health. Within North America, Western Europe, and Japan, the environment has been improving. Figures for the United States show that in the nine years since 1978, the amount of carbon monoxide has been cut by one-third, while the amount of sulfur oxide has fallen nearly 40 percent. In the years since 1940, emissions of particulate matter have plunged 70 percent; from 1970 to 1989 lead released into the atmosphere plummeted 96 percent.

Moreover, the cleanup has yielded worldwide benefits. The United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported in the late 1970s that a smog-like haze had amassed over the Arctic. By burning fuels with high sulfur content, Western Europe and the Soviet Union were creating this mess. Since the mid-1980s, however, the skies over the Arctic have improved greatly as governments in Western Europe began to control sulfur emissions and Russia switched from dirty coal to natural gas, a much cleaner fuel. According to the new research, pollution over the Arctic has fallen to roughly half its earlier peak (Luoma 1993).

Comparisons of the advanced industrial countries either with the former communist states or with Third World economies prove that pollution and environmental degradation are much less in the developed world. A study conducted by two Princeton economists found that air pollution was most severe for countries with average incomes of \$4,000 to \$5,000, less grave for the poorer nations and for the richer ones as well (Bradsher 1991). Very poor countries with no industry exhibit little air pollution, but as

they become more industrialized, their atmosphere becomes dirtier. In the following phase, after a moderate amount of development, countries become rich enough to sacrifice some nominal income for a cleaner environment. Development and growth lead to increased sensitivity to the environment and more willingness and ability to pay for a cleaner habitat. Just as fighting discrimination requires that people are prosperous enough to be able to devote time and resources to such causes, so cleaning the environment necessitates an income high enough to allow the populace to concern themselves with aesthetics or harm to the ecological system.

In earlier decades, the environment in Europe and North America was more polluted than it is today. At Donora, Pennsylvania, in October 1948, a temperature inversion concentrated auto emissions with the effluents from a nearby steel mill, zinc facilities, and a coke plant into a deadly mixture that sickened several thousand, twenty fatally (Linsky 1970). During the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, London experienced horrendous fogs and what we now call smog, which shortened lives and made living both unhealthy and unattractive. As late as 1952, that city suffered from a four-day siege of air pollution that brought an estimated 4,000 excess deaths, plus an additional 8,000 in the next two months (Linsky 1970: Introduction). Four years later, another lethal London smog felled about 1,000 children and elderly people. Although London air does not remind one today of the wind-swept moors, killing inversions have vanished.

Data on water quality are poor and of recent vintage, but anecdotal evidence points toward a significant improvement over the last two decades. The Cuyahoga River, which passes through Cleveland and empties into Lake Erie, was once so polluted with oil and chemicals that in 1969 it actually caught fire. The river now supports fishing and is lined with restaurants, stores and walkways. Water quality, as measured by fish life, has improved markedly for many other waterways including the Connecticut River, the Chesapeake Bay, and the San Francisco Bay.

Total suspended solids (TSS) and biological oxygen demand (BOD), to which raw sewage and the runoff from livestock feedlots contribute significantly, are major determinants of the quality of water. An excess of BOD exhausts the supply of oxygen and effectively smothers the fish, making the pond, lake, or river unsuitable for recreational use. High levels of TSS hamper municipal and industrial use of water, accelerate pipe corrosion and make the water unattractive. Over the period 1973 to 1987, industrial discharges of TSS have fallen 96 percent while BOD is down 93 percent (Lis and Chilton 1992).

Although these measures do suggest progress in improving the environment, at least over the last few decades, a number of environmentalists have been predicting major catastrophes for the planet. Global warming and an erosion of the stratospheric ozone layer, they claim, could result in significant damage to humans, indeed to all life on this globe. These predictions of imminent disaster are overblown, a subject addressed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter.

The Breakdown of the Family

The modern world is also charged with the dissolution of the family, the mainstay of civilization, the most advantageous way of perpetuating the race, and the foundation of our economy. That indictment contains a kernel of truth. In this century changes to the traditional household have been more dramatic than most people realize. In 1915, half of the U.S. population lived in rural areas; most lived in their parents' homes until marriage and sometimes for a while afterwards. Typically they settled in the neighborhood in which they had grown. Widowed parents often lived with their married offspring. Most women married and barely one percent endured divorce. Only one-fifth of the households consisted of a single person (Wetzel 1990: 6). Large families were common. Illegitimacy was rare and a serious stigma for both the mother and the child.

At the start of this century, families headed by a single parent typically resulted from the death of a parent, which happened far more frequently than today. Whenever such a tragedy occurred, other family members generally rallied round to help support the remaining parent and his or her offspring. With the decline of the extended family and the increased mobility of the populace, this response is now much less common. Moreover, most single parent households today result either from divorce or single motherhood, not the loss of a parent through death. Neither divorce nor having a baby while unmarried elicits the sympathy and support created by the death of a mate.

The Transformation of Family Structure

Critics of contemporary society have pointed to a breakdown of the nuclear family and an increase in out-of-wedlock births. The number of families headed by a single parent of either sex has tripled since 1950, and of these the total governed by a woman alone has skyrocketed 214 percent. Over the last 41 years, as a percent of all families, those headed by a single parent has almost doubled, jumping from 12 to 21 percent (Wetzel 1990). The divorce rate has climbed at varying rates since 1915, apparently peaking around 1980 and remaining roughly constant or declining slightly since. The illegitimacy rate has exploded from 7 percent in 1940 per 1,000 unmarried women, aged 15 to 44, to 42 percent in 1989! The latest statistics reveal that the

proportion of single women having babies is still mounting. In summary, government statistics portray the current family situation as: both men and women are marrying later, procuring a divorce more often than their parents, procreating fewer children and more of these are out-of-wedlock; and an increasing proportion are living alone or with someone to whom they are unrelated either by marriage or birth.

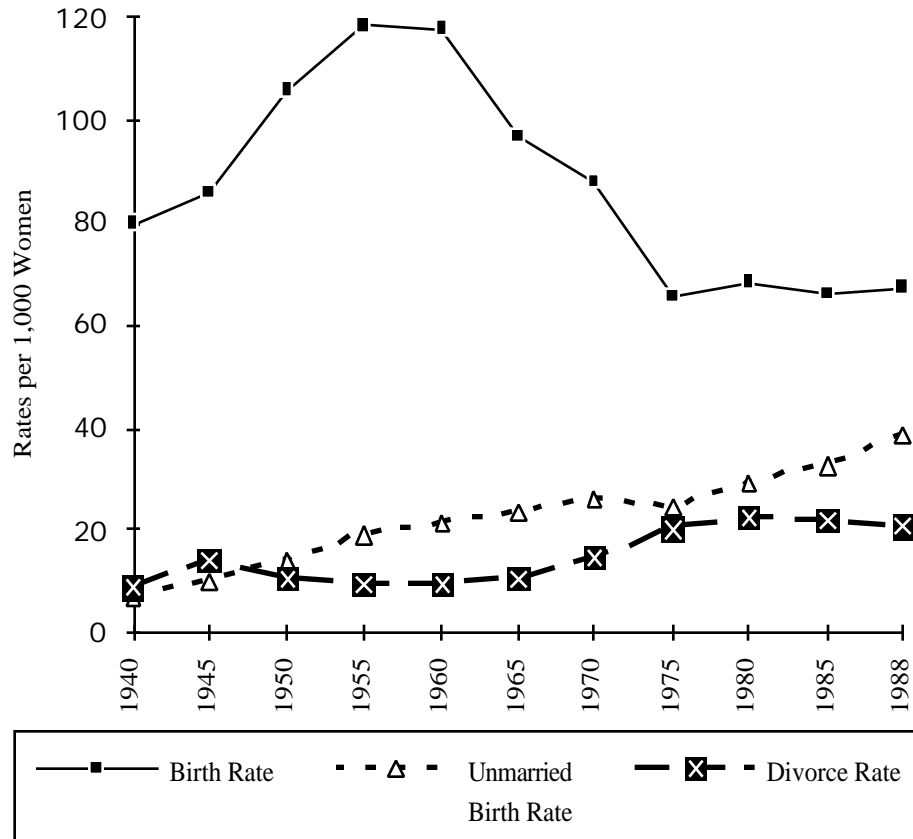
Nor is the United States alone. These trends are widespread in all the rich countries (Sorrentino 1990). With the partial exception of Japan, married-couple households in all of the advanced industrial economies are declining in importance; single-parent families are growing; cohabitation is becoming more common and accepted; the divorce rate is up; more people are living alone; more women are working; and, this time with the exception of the United States, the marriage rate is down. Scandinavian countries have led the way in cohabitation outside marriage and in illegitimacy. In Sweden and Denmark nearly half of all births in 1986 were to unmarried women (Sorrentino 1990: 45). In the same year, between one-fifth and one-quarter of all babies born in the United States, France, and the United Kingdom had no publicly known fathers. Yet, despite the high rate of out-of-wedlock births, the United States enjoyed one of the highest marriage rates and one of the lowest cohabitation rates: less than 5 percent of all households consisted of opposite sex couples living together without the benefit of marriage. In the Netherlands 19 percent of the households were cohabiting.

Very high rates of illegitimacy have been known in the past. Herbert Spencer writing in 1865 (19) about the prohibition on marriage in Bavaria for couples without capital reported that half of all babies born in Munich were to unmarried women.

On the other hand, America suffers from the highest divorce rate and the largest proportion of female-headed households. Japan, the most conservative of these countries, luxuriates in the lowest level of divorce and the lowest illegitimacy rate — 1 percent — as well as the smallest percentage of single-parent households. Japan, as well as all advanced countries, however, exhibit a sharp rise in the number of one-person households.

Chart 3-3

U.S. BIRTH AND DIVORCE RATES



Source:

Statistical Abstract of the United States, various years.

As Chart 3-3 attests, the divorce rate, which mushroomed from just before the Second World War to 1980, has subsequently leveled off. Currently about half of all marriages end in legal separation. Whether the reader considers this objectionable depends on whether one believes that it is better for people to remain together in an unhappy union whose tension may unsettle any offspring or to separate with concomitant distress to the youngsters. Several factors probably contribute to the upsurge in the divorce rate, but among the most important is the growing participation of females in the labor force, which diminishes women's financial dependence on males. Although women do suffer economically from divorce, rising earning opportunities have boosted their capacity to sever unhappy relationships without severe financial penalties. More generous welfare benefits may also have fostered marital instability and rising illegitimacy.

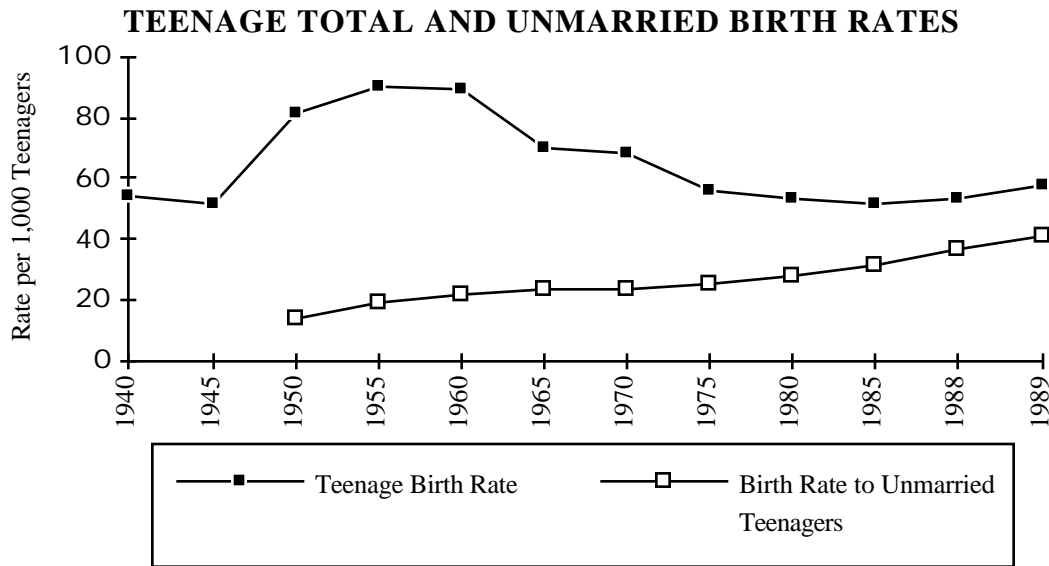
Not only have the improved earning possibilities for women and the substantial betterment of welfare benefits made divorce more common, but the disconnection of financial security from males has rendered it possible for women to support children without a husband (Moffitt 1992: 7; Posner 1992: 161-180). The continuing climb in the rate of illegitimate births has been one result (Chart 3-3). In 1989, over 27 percent of all American babies were born to unwed mothers; nearly two-thirds of black infants were illegitimate! Apparently Scandinavians have been even less concerned than Americans about the necessity of marriage: Richard Posner writing in *Sex and Reason* (57) reports that in 1983, “40 percent of all births in Sweden were illegitimate,” notwithstanding the availability of abortion at low cost.

At the same time that the number of babies born out-of-wedlock has been on the upswing in the United States, the total of newborns has been diminishing. The overall birth-rate in the United States, which climbed significantly during the early post-war period, fell sharply after 1960, reaching a plateau around 1975 (Chart 3-3). The rising rate of illegitimacy seems to reflect a shift from having children within marriage to giving birth outside a legal bond.

Since the early 1960s, as Chart 3–4 reveals, the birth rate for teenagers has also been declining while the illegitimacy rate has continued to climb. If it is undesirable for teenagers to become parents, then the story is positive; but if illegitimacy has pernicious consequences for the mother — economic or emotional — or for the newly-born, then it is negative. In sum, teenagers are having fewer babies, but those that are having them are having them outside of marriage.

Teenage marriages being notoriously unstable, the shift to unwed motherhood has perhaps been less harmful to the parents and their children than is generally claimed. I am not arguing that teenage pregnancies are advisable — in fact, adolescent motherhood has dropped — but that it may be no worse for children to have children outside marriage than within it; if marital discord is harmful for the young, as much of the literature indicates, it may even be preferable. As sociologists Beth Berkov and June Sklar substantiate, forcing pregnant teenagers into marriage is unlikely to induce a stable relationship and a warm atmosphere for a newborn. The effect of illegitimacy on the offspring is discussed in more detail below.

Chart 3-4



Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various years.

Even though the rate of teenage illegitimacy is still high, it is declining relative to all births by unwed mothers. In 1970 half of all mothers of babies born out-of-wedlock were under the age of 20; by 1989 less than one-third were that young. In other words, while unmarried teenage motherhood is still climbing, illegitimacy is growing faster for older women.

Despite the growth in divorce and illegitimacy, slightly more than seven out of ten children still grow up in intact families. In 1991, fewer than one in ten children under the age of 18 lived with their never-married mothers. Both these rates have worsened in the last two decades. In 1970, 85 percent of all children enjoyed two parents and only one out of a hundred resided with a single mother. The demise of the two-parent family is even more pronounced for blacks: in 1990 slightly more than one out of three African-American children lived with both a mother and a father, and three out of ten had mothers who were single.

Nevertheless marriage is still in style. The marriage rate in 1990 exceeded the rate in 1955, even though for some years in between it was even higher. People continue to find that living with a partner brings more satisfaction than living alone. Less than 10 percent of all women over the age of 40 have never married. For most people, marriage is necessary for the enjoyment of a family. The average marriage lasts longer today than it did in the early 1970s, and the number of children per divorce has fallen 27 percent. As sociologist Alex Inkeles puts it (1981: 49):

Rather than suffering a decline, the family either remains, or becomes, one of the most important social objects or institutions — often the most important — to most individuals. As a focus of personal loyalty, solidarity, and commitment in the modern world it seems equal to or greater in importance than one's extended kinship network, clan, country, job, caste or religious group.

Family ties are still very important to Americans. Several recent studies have examined the relationship between middle aged Americans and their parents (Kolata 1993). The evidence demonstrates that most Americans are close to their families, provide them with both emotional and financial support, visit and talk with them regularly. One of the researchers declared that, "Family values are alive and well."

The family is undoubtedly more important than marriage in itself, but in Western societies "family" usually connotes marriage. Couples that cohabit often marry when they are planning to have children. To a very wide extent even those who shunned such ties initially consider marriage as necessary to having a family. Therefore, it is baffling that one out of five births to white women is illegitimate and a horrendous 65 percent of all black births are to unmarried women.

Effects on Children

Divorce and illegitimacy have differing effects on children and on society. For the purposes of this study we can ignore the impact on adults of divorce or illegitimacy, since both generally stem from the conscious choices of grown individuals. Even though a large proportion of pregnancies are accidental, the easy availability of abortion indicates that an illegitimate child must result from election. If these unwanted social phenomena are to have pernicious effects, it must be on the children, who have little to say either about divorce or being born and brought up without the support of a father.

By severing an unsatisfactory marriage, divorce appears to benefit both former partners. Judith Wallerstein, Executive Director of the Center for the Family in Transition, and her co-researcher, Sandra Blakeslee, found that five years after a legal separation a majority of adults — half the men and two-thirds of the women — claimed to be better off as a result of their changed marital status. According to Wallerstein and Blakeslee (300), "Many adults, especially women, show striking growth in competence and self-esteem." Others, however, complained that they were more lonely and more troubled.

Family composition can take various structures: two natural parents, a single parent whose mate has died, an unmarried single parent, a divorced parent of either sex raising one or more children, and re-married couples raising his, hers, or their children. These various family forms have stimulated a good bit of sociological and psychological

research. Being unable to run experiments, this research of necessity depended on small samples of actual families, some of which have been followed for a period of years. Unfortunately studies of illegitimacy are few and what we know comes from a smattering of data.

As social conservatives are wont to point out, single-parent families — either from divorce or illegitimacy — offer a poorer environment for raising children. Virtually all studies of the dissolution of marriage in America have established that it cuts the income of women and their children significantly — mothers usually gain custody of any offspring. Typically babies born out-of-wedlock also face economic privation. In 1990, according to the Bureau of the Census, a female headed household with children could expect a median income of only \$13,000, about one-third of the median for all families. In that same year, half of the married couples with children enjoyed incomes greater than \$41,000. Moreover, it is clearly more difficult to hold down a paying job and at the same time raise children without the help of a mate.

The drop in economic position from divorce or the poor economic status of a single mother has a serious detrimental effect on the future prospects of the children. Both the rising levels of illegitimacy and the high levels of divorce have contributed to poverty for a growing portion of America's young. In 1970, 15 percent of young men and women under the age of 18 lived in families with incomes below the poverty level. By 1992, 22 percent of all such children and nearly half of black youngsters were so deprived. Notwithstanding the dismal status of many children, the percentage of families in poverty has fallen from 21 percent in 1959 — the first year for which we have data — to around 11 percent in 1990. Moreover, since the census in calculating these numbers ignores the growth in non-cash benefits such as food stamps, public housing, and Medicaid, these numbers understate the improve economic situation of the poor.

Divorce

Both the tensions involved in the parental breakup and the curtailed economic status that results from divorce adversely affect children. Sociologists Verna Keith and Barbara Finlay compiled data on more than 10,000 American families, comparing the educational attainment of the children to that of their mothers (1988: 801). They found that divorce shaved the average youngster's schooling by two-thirds of a year. The researchers took no account of the depressed financial situation of the families.

Other studies have found greater problems. Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee followed — for 10 and, in some cases, 15 years — sixty families in which husbands and wives legally separated. In *Second Chances: Men, Women & Children, A*

Decade After Divorce, they reported on the status and well-being of the participants, including the 131 children involved.

For the young as well as for the parents, Wallerstein and Blakeslee concluded (297), “the effects of divorce are often long-lasting.” Where violence had been common before the breakup of the marriage, children had suffered greatly; these youngsters often benefited from the separation. In many cases, however, their research demonstrated that offspring were better off and received more support prior to divorce than in subsequent years. They note (298):

[Although] many of the children emerged in young adulthood as compassionate, courageous, and competent people. ... almost half of the children entered adulthood as worried, underachieving, self-deprecating, and sometimes angry young men and women. ... [Nevertheless] many young people in the study eventually were able to move forward and to establish good relationships and good marriages ...

Finally Wallerstein and Blakeslee assert (297):

Divorce is not an event that stands alone in children’s or adults’ experience. It is a continuum that begins in the unhappy marriage and extends through the separation, the divorce, and any remarriages and second divorces. *Divorce is not the culprit*; it may be no more than one of the many experiences that occur in this broad continuum. [emphasis added]

Some of the best information on the effect of family structure on children originates from an in-depth British investigation of the well-being of 17,000 babies born in March of 1958 in England, Scotland, and Wales. In *Growing Up in a One-Parent Family*, Elsa Ferri details the psychological, emotional, educational and material status of these children when they were seven and again when they were eleven. About 8 percent of the seven year-olds and 11 percent of the eleven year-olds were not living with both natural parents — most of these had lost their fathers or had never known them. The investigators were particularly concerned with the relationship between family structure and the welfare of the children. Nine percent of those living with their mother only were illegitimate; the rest were split evenly between those whose father had died and those whose parents had separated. Ferri reported that a much smaller proportion of never married mothers took an active interest in their child’s education than the mothers in intact families.

The same report isolated statistical factors affecting the performance of these school children. The dominant measures related to performance were social class, family size, parental aspirations, and a crude measure of income. Children of divorced or

separated parents fared poorly. Illegitimacy or the death of a father appeared to have no significant effects *in themselves*, although they often correlated closely with low income and, in the case of illegitimacy, low social class and poor parental aspirations.

Several other researchers have concluded that children from broken homes do less well than those from intact families, although Elsa Ferri quoted one scholar as saying, “The differences in disfavor of the broken home children are rather small for most of the tests.” Apparently sociologists and psychologists find greater problems among children whose parents divorce than in the majority of those who lose a father through death or who perhaps have never known one. Ferri’s work provides a counterweight. She reports that children in unhappy marriages may be as distressed or even experience more problems than those whose parents have gone through a divorce.

Judith Wallerstein corroborates this view. Reporting on a variety of studies on the effects of divorce on children, she finds significant long term effects on the children (1991). To summarize her: “unhappy marriages are unhappy for many years before divorce:” children of unhappy marriages show behavioral difficulties prior to any actual divorce; effects of divorce are long lasting and children of broken marriages have an increased probability of divorce; and “intense parental conflict poses severe threats to the psychological health of children, whether the family is divorced or remains married.” Interestingly her work implies that children shared between former mates become more disturbed than if they remain under the exclusive oversight of one parent. As Wallerstein phrased it (356), “children who had not seen their fathers in 5 years appeared in many instances to be doing better ... than children who had seen their fathers more frequently or more recently.” In contrast, one study she cites found that adults who had had a parent die as a child showed no long-term effects.

All in all, the evidence strongly supports the proposition that divorce is unhealthy for children. On the other hand, it also substantiates that marital discord is emotionally harmful to the offspring. No studies have even seriously addressed the question of whether children would profit by remaining in an unhappy marriage situation, which must have been common in earlier periods, than being raised by one parent after a messy divorce. Since children brought up by only one parent, after adjusting for income, fail to exhibit the major difficulties shown by the offspring of dysfunctional or of dissolved unions, I would conclude that the family tensions cause the problems, rather than the divorce. Bolstering this conclusion is evidence indicating that children of parents who were violent are better off after a divorce.

Illegitimacy

Children born out-of-wedlock face several disabilities. As mentioned above, single mothers are likely to have lower incomes than intact families. Unmarried mothers are frequently poorly educated and come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Many suffer from poverty, drugs, and lack of confidence. The mothers may themselves have had mothers with poor parenting skills and consequently have no role models for taking care of their own children. In the past the stigma of illegitimacy handicapped seriously an individual, but in most circles of American society today it would have little influence. Illegitimate children seem to suffer relatively little from the absence of a father *per se*. Like children deprived of a father through death, it is the loss of his earnings that makes life more difficult for them.

Whether they result from divorce or from illegitimacy, most single parent households in the United States are poor. The Swedes have a generous welfare system that supports single mothers more lavishly than does the United States; and in Sweden, the repercussions on juveniles of being raised by a single mother appear to be limited. Studies of Swedish children — a country with the highest rate of single-parent households in the developed world — pinpoint only one ill effect, a high incidence of juvenile delinquency (Posner 1992: 190). This is, of course, noteworthy and may imply more deep rooted troubles.

A very few studies have examined the effect on babies of being born out-of-wedlock. In a 1976 paper, “Does Illegitimacy Make a Difference,” Beth Berkov and June Sklar cite a British investigation which found that on a wide variety of tests, such as general knowledge, oral ability, creativity, perceptual development, reading attainment and arithmetical skills, those born out-of-wedlock scored more poorly than others. In a study of California children, these two researchers determined (203-204) that “illegitimate children continued to face poorer life chances than legitimate children do.” They determined that the death rate for children of unwed mothers was 60 percent higher than the rate for those whose parents were married. For blacks, however, the death rate for children of unmarried mothers was only 14 percent higher and virtually all of that differential occurred in increased mortality between the ages of 28 days and one year. Berkov and Sklar concluded that the fatality rate for babies born to unwed mothers exceeded the rate for married women for any age or race group, except for black teenagers. This anomalous result for African-American young women may have been a statistical fluke. The bottom line is that (208), “illegitimate infants have a higher risk of dying than legitimate infants.”

Berkov and Sklar also examined the marital history of all the mothers, black and white, of these illegitimate children. Those that married within the three years following birth were more likely to have the union fail than comparable women who had borne children when married. Thus the majority of illegitimate children are likely to spend most of their childhoods with a single parent — their mothers. These scholars found that 61 percent of two-year old illegitimate children were living in a household without a man but that only 12 percent of children of the same age born to a married couple were living solely with their mothers (214).

Additional evidence supports the view that children who grow up in intact families are better adjusted and have fewer behavioral problems than those who suffer from their parents' divorce or from being illegitimate. One study reported by Elsa Ferri found that illegitimate children at the age of seven showed a higher incidence of maladjustment than legitimate children. She also reported (1976: 21) on another research project that concluded: "There is evidence that fatherless children have lower IQs, are retarded in school and complete fewer years of study than do children in complete families."

Most of these studies, however, neglect the importance of lower income on the child's development. Children of single mothers typically encounter a number of handicaps unrelated *per se* to illegitimacy or divorce. They are likely to be poor, live in crowded conditions, and lack attention, especially if the mother attempts to work to support her offspring. After adjusting for income, parental aspirations, family size, and social class, Ferri concludes that illegitimacy alone does not adversely affect a child's performance. Apparently divorce, probably because of its disruptive effect, does reduce somewhat the success of children's learning and getting along at school. However, she stresses, for children of single mothers (148):

wherever adverse 'effects' were found to be associated with the absence of a parent, the actual differences between the children concerned and those in two-parent families were quite small. In fact the influence of the family situation itself was much weaker than that of other factors such as low social class, large family size, and limited parental aspirations. One particularly striking finding to emerge ... was the importance of ... economic hardship ... in 'accounting for' the relatively poor performance of children from fatherless families.

Nevertheless, the life style of too many single mothers can harm their children. Not only do such women often take drugs, but they frequently are promiscuous — that is normally how they came with child initially. "Boy friends," who are not the natural father, often are physically and emotionally abusive of their mates children. The lack of

care and love for another's offspring is common among mammals. In nature, when a male lion displaces the dominant head of the pride, he kills all of the young in order to sire new cubs.

Children who have experienced the death of a parent, while naturally upset for awhile, apparently totally recover, that is, the absence of a father or even of a mother causes no long term detriment to the child. If these children can adjust to the loss of a parent, it should be even easier for children born out-of-wedlock to mature, if provided with adequate financial support. In other words, Dan Quayle was wrong: Murphy Brown, the well-paid fictional anchor woman, could afford to raise a child as a single mother with every expectation that the baby would grow into a healthy, loving, well adjusted adult.

Summary

The claim that progress has ceased because the divorce and illegitimacy rates have mounted over a relatively short period appears exaggerated. Although the trends are disturbing, a great deal of evidence supports the view that the measurable harm for children, while real, is relatively small, even in the case of children of divorce. The elevated or rising rates at which marriages break up and children are born to single mothers evidently reflect greater economic opportunities for women and improved income maintenance programs. Adults have been able to exercise greater freedom: they can more easily extricate themselves from unhappy or unsatisfactory relationships; if no suitable mate looms, women can still be mothers. From a traditionalist's point of view, these social changes are upsetting; but change is often disturbing, even though it may spell progress for some. Although the still rising and extraordinarily high illegitimacy rate has captured much attention, the Ferri work attests that it is not the absence of a father that threatens the children but the low income and poor background of the mother. Other research, however, demonstrates the pernicious effect on children of divorce above and beyond their diminished economic circumstances. Yet the trauma of the breakup of a union may be no worse than the torment of a violent, angry marriage. Society may, however, be trading gains for adults for losses for children — that would not be progress. As Barbara Whitehead points out, in an article entitled "Dan Quayle was Right," what adds to the adults' happiness may distress or even devastate children.

Violent Crime

Not only has the modern world encouraged divorce and illegitimacy but pundits have blamed it for an upsurge in lawlessness on our streets. For example, based on a variety of studies, Barbara Whitehead, author of an *Atlantic* article on the decline of the

family, has attributed the problem of crime and violence in our cities to the increase in single-parent households. She quotes one report (77) as claiming that “The relationship is so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime.”

These critiques underestimate the influence of poverty. Most people involved in street crime are poor: young men raised in poverty are more likely to commit burglaries, thefts, hold-ups, and to peddle drugs than those whose background is middle class. Teenagers and young adults who come from impoverished families all too frequently are badly educated. In choosing a career their options may be illegal activities with a remunerative return — until they are caught or killed — or a low-paying, low-skilled job with little prospect of advancement. The sharp upsurge in children raised in poverty, stemming from the growing numbers of babies born out-of-wedlock and the elevated divorce rate, almost certainly contributes to the record crime rate. According to Whitehead even holding income constant the absence of a father correlates with lawlessness. In addition, fatherless children are poorer than those in intact families and thus are more likely to break the law.

Many knowledgeable people believe that crime rates are escalating and that life is becoming more and more dangerous. Almost daily the media report some random killing, a serial murderer, or a bizarre rapist. People spend increasing amounts on locks, burglar alarms, and devices to prevent auto thefts.

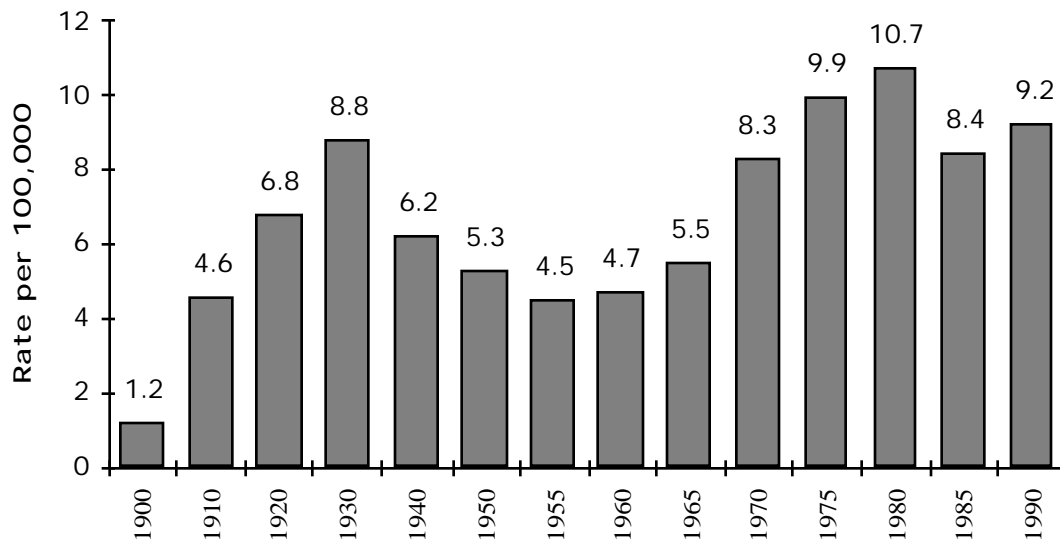
True, crime rates are up in the post-war period in virtually all Western countries, including the United States. Since 1980, however, the rates for most offenses committed in the United States have fallen. The major rise occurred between 1965 and 1980, when the murder rate in America doubled; in the next five years it fell by nearly one-quarter, before rebounding partially to 8 percent less than the peak of 10.2 per 100,000 reached in 1980. From 1981 to 1989, the percentage of households reporting that they had been victims of crimes dropped by one-fifth. The National Crime Survey has measured a one-third downswing from 1975 to 1990 in the rate of victimization by rape, robbery, and assault.

Although little data on crime rates exist for pre-World War II periods, homicide rates date back to the start of the century. They suggest, as Chart 3-5 shows, that life was very safe back when the turbulent twentieth century began. From 1900 to 1930, homicide became more and more of a problem, possibly as a consequence of Prohibition. In any case, after the Constitution was amended to legalize the sale and consumption of alcohol, homicides dropped. By 1957 the rate was down to 4.5 homicides per 100,000 people. It took until 1975, nearly twenty years, for the homicide rate to exceed the 1930 level; in

1980 it peaked at 10.7, some 22 percent higher than in 1930; subsequently it diminished until the middle of the decade and then bounced back partially.

Chart 3-5

Homicide Rate



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Bicentennial Edition, 1975* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various years.

I will leave an explanation of the pattern to criminologists. Milton Friedman (1991), however, has advanced a possible cause for the worst years. In arguing for drug legalization, he has pointed to prohibition as the reason for the escalation in killings during the 1920s, its repeal as the cause of the fall in the 30s and 40s, and the war on drugs as accounting for its sharp upsurge in the 1960s and 1970s. The stepped up the drug war in the latter half of the 1980s under the Reagan and Bush Administrations may explain the rise in the rate since 1985.

Part of the increase in the homicide figures through 1930 results from a change in reportage. The very low rate for 1900 reflects data from only 11 states, which included only one-quarter of the U.S. population. By 1933 all states were collecting information on cause of death. The effect of this increased coverage is dramatic: for example, those eleven states that had reported 'reasons for death' in 1900 had a homicide rate in 1940 of under 3 per 100,000; but in the same year all 48 states and the District of Columbia suffered from a rate over twice as high. For the years 1946 and 1947, the eleven states that had collected statistics since 1900 experienced only half the homicide rate of the

whole country. If we assume that, in 1930, the homicide rate for the entire country would have been twice the level of the rate for the states reporting in 1900, the level in 1930 would have been 10.1 per 100,000, rather than 8.8, the rate for the states reporting in that year. This is higher than for any year except 1980. Thus the decade of the 1980s hardly seem atypical.

Some may attribute the overall fall in crime rates in the 1980s to a movement toward harsher and more certain punishment for criminal behavior. The data fail to support that thesis: the average federal prisoner spent just under 20 months in prison in 1970 but less than 16 months in 1990. A Texas A&M University economist, Morgan Reynolds calculated (1992) that the expected time in prison — that is the probability of being caught, convicted, and sent to prison multiplied by the average length of sentence served — for committing a serious crime plummeted from 24 days in prison in 1950 to 12.1 days in 1964 to 8.5 days in 1988. For the State of Texas, probably typical around the country, he discovered (1993) that the expected punishment slid from 13 days in 1980 to 8.2 in 1988 and then rose to 10.5 for 1991. Thus even during the 1980s with many states and the federal government legislating mandatory sentences, the likelihood of being caught and spending time in prison failed to climb.

A more likely cause may be demographics. Young males exhibit most criminal behavior — about 80 percent of all arrests for serious crimes are males and over two-thirds arrested are under the age of 25. As the baby boomers have aged, there have been fewer youths to push crime rates higher. Unfortunately, the rate of offenses per young male rose throughout the period 1960 to 1990, even in the 1980s. In 1970, the number of violent crimes committed per 100,000 males 15 to 39 years old was approximately 2000; by 1980 this had escalated by 40 percent to over 2800; over the next decade the rate of violent crimes per 100,000 young men rose a further 26 percent to slightly more than 3600. If this trend continues, in about a decade, as the sons of the baby boomers come of age, the carnage on our streets will probably climb to record levels.

Patently American society has made little, if any, progress in reducing crime, at least in this century. Anecdotal evidence and the few numbers that exist, however, suggest that the 19th century experienced considerable violent and lawless behavior. Lloyd Morris, a historian of New York City, describes one area near Broadway that policemen entered only armed and in pairs (1951: 31). Criminal gangs made it their headquarters; murderers, thieves, and prostitutes were its inhabitants. In the late 1850s a brutal gang war broke out that at one time routed both the state and the city police. Rioting spread from the Bowery to Broadway as looting and fire bombing terrorized the citizenry. Not only did Manhattan suffer from periodic riots but they were common

throughout urban America. In 1834 and 1835, for example, fifty-three riots across the country killed sixty-one people (Browning and Gerassi 1980, 142).

James McCabe, Jr., who wrote *New York by Gaslight* in the early 1880s, depicted the city as relatively safe, except for certain sections. McCabe also maintained that crime was no worse in Manhattan than elsewhere in the nation. He reported that around 1880 the police arrested approximately 80,000 offenders each year, about 20,000 for intoxication. The city population consisted of 1.2 million souls, producing a crime rate, *excluding* those apprehended for drinking too much, of about 50 per 1,000 inhabitants. Again *excluding* drunkenness, this matches almost exactly a 1986 nationwide figure of 49 arrests per 1,000. Alcohol caused more difficulties in the last half of the nineteenth century than in the modern world. The arrest rate in New York City including those taken into custody for intoxication, was 66, considerably higher than the current total arrest rate in the United States of around 52 per 1,000.

Of course the similarity in the arrest rates one hundred years ago and today may be unrelated to the crime rates in the two periods. Nineteenth century police may have been more successful at arresting criminals, perhaps because of less respect for personal rights, than are the law enforcement officers today. In which case the crime rate could have been much lower than the contemporary one. On the other hand, if modern law enforcement is more efficient than it was then, the reverse might be true and the nineteenth century could have been more crime ridden than the modern world. Other tidbits of data on the last century point towards a great deal of criminal activity.

In his work *New York by Gaslight*, McCabe claimed that New York City with a population in 1840 of 400,000 and lacking a police force suffered from rampant crime (370): “Burglaries and murders were of almost nightly occurrence.” Adjusting for exaggeration, if we assume that in 1840 New York City experienced 180 homicides — half of the 365 McCabe implies — and the same number of burglaries, this would put the rate at 45 per 100,000 people, compared to a contemporary nationwide murder rate of fewer than 9 and a burglary rate of approximately 1,300. Undoubtedly without any police force most of the burglaries in 1840 went unreported, but contemporaries most likely kept better records on killings. In any case, the first half of the nineteenth century experienced considerable lawlessness.

In studying the diaries of pioneers, Richard Rieck, a geographer at Western Illinois University, found that murder was common on the wagon trains to California and Oregon. He reported that the murder rate in 1849 was 40 per 100,000 people, considerably higher than the national average has ever been and equivalent to that in cities such as Atlanta and Detroit today. Speaking to a meeting of American geographers,

Rieck told the group that in 1852, when migration on the trail was at its peak, homicides per capita exceeded the carnage today in New York or Los Angeles (Chui 1992). These numbers, the arrest and murder rates for New York City in the 1840s and 1880s challenge the belief that crime was a smaller headache in earlier centuries.

Writing in *The Colonies and Early Republic*, J. M. Beattie, found that in the English county of Surrey indictments for murder and manslaughter averaged around 5.3 to 6.1 per 100,000 population in the last half of the seventeenth century. The rates dropped sharply in the eighteenth century to less than 2. Since not all murders would result in an indictment, this suggests that the homicide rate in the sixteenth century may have been about the same as the level in the United States in the 1960 and somewhat higher than its was in the 1950s.

Notwithstanding the evidence that the nineteenth century was far from law-abiding, crime does appear high today by recent historical standards, although down a little from its zenith in 1980. This decline in rates may be simply a result of the demographic changes that have reduced the number of young males who are the chief perpetrators of illegal activity. As noted, however, when the children of the baby boom generation reach their late teens — around the middle of the 1990s — lawlessness may mount further.

Education

Many voices have deplored the state of American education. One recent newspaper story bemoaned the fact that slightly less than half the kids in urban schools scored above average in mathematics. This story tells more about the statistical understanding of the reporter than about the “failure” of the schools. In discussing the quality of instruction, it is often considered terrible if some schools are below average. The median, a measure of average, means by definition that *half* the institutions of learning score below that magic number. No matter how good, how excellent, how superb the educational system *half the students*, *half the teachers*, and *half the schools will be below average!*

Over most of this century and the last, education has become more widespread. Not only has a greater proportion of the population become literate; but more people are finishing high school, attending college, and earning graduate degrees. Before the Second World War, fewer than half of American teenagers graduated from high school and a very small percentage went on to college. In 1900, for example, only 4 percent of those who were 18 to 21 were attending institutions of higher education. By 1920 enrollment from this age group had doubled. Those that attended college, however, often went more for the social contacts than the education; most undergraduates considered only a

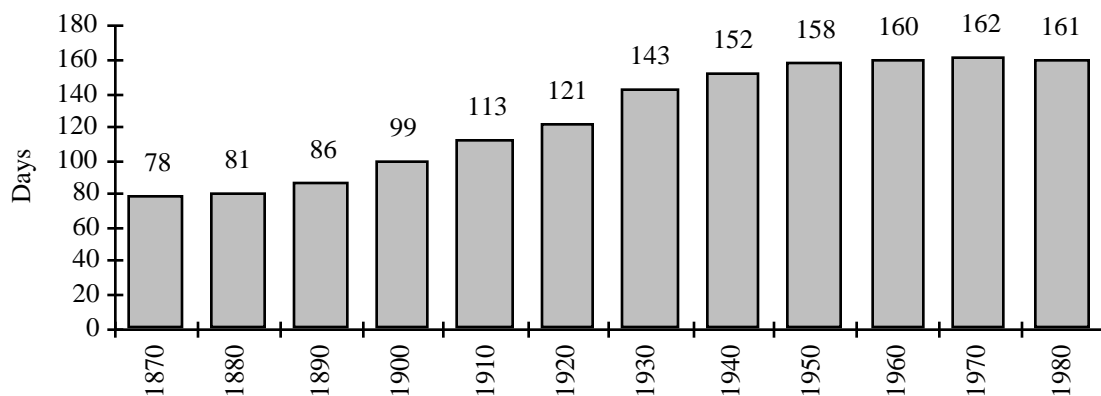
“Gentleman C” as proper. Today, while there are many undergraduates older than 18 to 21, the number of students in college equals half that total cohort. Moreover, the struggle for A’s and B’s even in elementary school has replaced for many the once acceptable “average.”

Recently a reporter for *The New York Times*, Felicia Lee, described a Newark, New Jersey, school that suffered from all the worst ills of inner city neighborhoods. Most of the freshmen pupils read at only a fifth-grade level. Many of the teenagers interviewed believed that the Malcolm X Shabazz High School offered them nothing and simply wanted out. A sizable number sold drugs and bragged about their earnings. Virtually all the students were black; four public housing projects send their children to that institution; parents of 70 percent of the teenagers had incomes low enough to qualify for free lunches. In spite of this terrible environment, 44 percent of those who graduated in 1992 went to college — a higher proportion than went to any college from any high school before 1940!

Chart 3-6 implies an improvement in schooling over the last 110 years. As the reader will observe children and teenagers are attending school for much more of the year now than in earlier decades. Moreover, they are also devoting more years to their education. Although days spent in the classroom may not betoken a better education, it is highly probable that so much extra time contributes much to learning.

Chart 3-6

AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS ATTENDED PER ENROLLED PUPIL



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States and Statistical Abstract* various years.

It is true, however, that in the last two decades the scores of high school students on general education tests have slipped; and the quality of modern education has increasingly concerned the public. Critics have compared the learning of American

school children unfavorably with that of foreign pupils. Many have complained that standards have slipped.

Early in the Reagan Administration, the Department of Education commissioned an extensive review of our educational system. In an influential report, *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education concluded that our schools were failing — the public schools were experiencing “a rising tide of mediocrity.” The 1983 report recommended tougher high school graduation requirements, increased study of English, math, science, and social studies, and, for the college bound, two years of a foreign language. The authors of the statement also called for colleges to adopt tougher admissions standards and higher performance requirements. They appealed for a longer school day and school year. They also urged better pay for teachers, recruiting outside specialists to teach science, math, and languages, and incentives to get more qualified people into the academic profession.

Since the publication of the report, many school systems have made progress. The Educational Testing Service reported that in the following decade 42 out of 50 states have boosted their requirements (Payne 1993: 26A). Starting salaries for teachers have climbed faster than for any other college major. Spending per pupil has ballooned at twice the rate of inflation. Standards for graduation have risen; in a large number of school districts, student athletes must meet minimum grade levels to be eligible to play. As a consequence the proportion of colleges finding it necessary to offer remedial courses fell from 82 percent to 74 percent over the seven-year period, 1983-84 to 1989-90. The percentage of minorities taking advanced placement examinations for college has skyrocketed — blacks were up 227 percent from 1985 to 1992; American Indians, up 262 percent; Hispanics, up 311 percent. From under one in twenty in 1984, the proportion of all high school graduates who received college credit on the basis of advanced placement exams more than doubled by 1991, to over one in ten (Watson 1991).

Much of the wringing of hands has been based on a decline in SAT scores, which peaked in 1963, fell sharply in the late 60s and in the 70s, and have since rebounded, although not to the earlier levels. Other data substantiate at least part of this picture. More comprehensive studies, those that cover all high school youngsters, not only those who aim for the most prestigious colleges, show a decline on achievement tests from the mid-1960s to about 1980, followed by a more than full recovery to levels exceeding the earlier peak. Having examined a variety of data, American Enterprise Institute Fellow Charles Murray and Harvard psychologist R. J. Herrnstein, writing in *The Public Interest*, conclude (40):

Conservatively, high school students *as a whole* [their emphasis] seem to be as well prepared in math and verbal skills as they were at the beginning of the 1960s. They may be better prepared than they have ever been.

Using the Iowa Test of Educational Development, taken by almost all the *Hawkeye State's* pupils in the eleventh and twelfth grades, John Bishop, a professor at Cornell's Industrial Labor Relations School, discovered (1991: 148) that those students made strong gains from 1942, the first year of the test, to 1966. Subsequently their scores fell until they bottomed out in 1979. From that point until the latest year for which he had data, 1989, the high schoolers did better; and, by the end of the decade, test results had returned to approximately the level of the 1960s.

According to Murray and Herrnstein the differing success the high schools experienced with their total population and that which was college bound is traceable to a lowering the quality of the curriculum. Writers made textbooks easier; educators contrived more egalitarian classrooms with all pupils moving at the pace of the slowest; school boards permitted college oriented teenagers more and possibly easier electives; teachers required less homework and gave more multiple choice examinations. These steps made education more accessible for those less academically inclined but hurt the preparation of those who aimed for more advanced training.

Professor Bishop explains the decline in scores as resulting from a fall in the premium that college graduates earned over those who went to work after high school. During the late 1960s and 1970s the increase in the number of students graduating from college outstripped the growth in demand, so starting salaries for the new baccalaureates failed to keep pace with those of high school graduates. During the 1980s, however, demand boomed for college graduates and their wages grew much more rapidly than the pay of their lesser educated contemporaries.

To complicate the picture, from the late 1960s through 1970s, colleges lowered their standards for admission. At the same time, institutions of higher education marked down their criteria for graduation. Indeed, this "dumbing down" of colleges showed up in lower scores on tests to attend graduate school or professional schools. The value of a college education apparently reached a low about 1972 — two years after four undergraduates were shot at Kent State. All of this reversed at the end of the 1970s, when the scores of students seeking to enter college and of those applying for post-graduate education started to climb, with the latter growing faster as colleges increased the rigor and quality of the schooling offered. Increases in starting salaries for new baccalaureates in the 1980s reflected the higher quality of college education, as well as the choice by a

larger proportion of undergraduates of the better paid technical and business fields over humanities and education.

Not only has the quality of a high school education returned to the level of the 1960s, but the proportion of young people who are finishing 12 years of education has been mounting steadily. The percentage of the population fourteen to twenty-four years old that has dropped out of high school has fallen from over 12 in 1970 to 10.5 in 1991. Even more encouraging, the percentage of black dropouts has plummeted from 22 percent to 11 percent. In other words, more young people are finishing twelve years of schooling and overall their education is as good as or better than ever before. On the other hand, the world is becoming increasingly technical, requiring more complex skills to succeed than ever before. What may have been good enough in 1960 may be inadequate today.

Indeed Murray and Herrnstein maintain that the schools are failing to educate properly the better young men and women, those going on to the top colleges. Pointing to the SAT scores and adjusting for ethnic composition and sex, they find a sharp drop in those measures in the 1970s and an incomplete recovery in the 1980s. They deplore that (47): “Neither race, class, parental education, nor gender can explain this decline of approximately 50 points on the verbal score and 25 points on the math for the *white* SAT-taking population” [emphasis added].

For the brightest of the bright students, the record is mixed but somewhat more encouraging. The proportion of pupils scoring over 700 on the College Board’s math examination (the maximum score is 800) was nearly one-quarter higher at the end of the 1980s than it was in the first year for which we have data, 1972. On the other hand, the proportion of test takers scoring over 700 in the verbal exam fell sharply from the late 60s to the mid-70s but has never fully recovered. These trends were true of the overall group of youngsters taking the exams as well as for white students only. Hence a rise in Asian school children, known for their mathematical achievements, fails to explain the improved math scores relative to the verbal ones.

Professor Donald Hayes of Cornell University contends that the drop in verbal scores stems from a simplification of text books. After World War II, educators in an effort to make learning more accessible lowered the difficulty of the reading required of students. Professor Hayes quantified the difficulty of students’ texts and found that “Honors high school texts are no more difficult than an 8th-grade reader was before World War II.” (*New York Times, Education* 11/3/93, p. B9)

American high schools and colleges have definitely improved since the 1970s, yet they may not be good enough for the modern world. Tests given to pupils in U.S. public

schools and, in schools abroad often show American youngsters doing comparatively poorly. Partly or even wholly, this results from the practice in most foreign school systems of separating their pupils early into an elite being groomed for the university and the remainder who will go to trade school. Typically the comparisons are made between all American students and those foreign pupils who are on the academic track. Comparisons between American pupils going to our more prestigious colleges and foreign students would paint a less dismal picture.

In a broader context and as a later chapter concludes, education is the key to vigorous economic growth. If America is going to continue to have a strong economy, the U.S. school system must continue to advance, turning out a work-force better educated and more skilled than ever before. Whether it is currently doing an adequate job is debatable, but what is not debatable is the need for the system to educate more of our young people to a higher level in the future.

Drug Use

Conservative observers of the American scene point to rampant drug use as a sign of decay. The data fail to support that proposition. Neighborhoods certainly exist in which drug use is common, but the over all figures fail to uphold the thesis that the United States is becoming addicted.

By all accounts marihuana, the most commonly used prohibited substance, is the least harmful — in many ways it is less destructive than alcohol and less injurious to health than nicotine, both of which are legal. Nevertheless, only 13 percent of the population 18 to 25 years old admit to being current users, down from over one-third in 1979. Older people take drugs even less often than young adults. Only two out of one hundred young men and women now partake of cocaine — the second most commonly consumed illegal drug — down from a *high* of 9 percent in 1979. Less than 2 percent of the population and less than 4 percent of young adults have ever tried crack cocaine. Although people who become addicted suffer greatly, unquestionably drugs are not ravaging our society.

On the other hand, nearly two out of three young adults drink alcohol and about one-third are smokers; the consumption of both has moderated from significantly higher usage earlier. As is well known, smoking undermines health and can kill. Excessive alcohol produces cirrhosis of the liver, contributes to violence in the home as well as in public, and leads to auto accidents. In 1989, slightly more people were being treated for alcoholism — fewer than 400,000 nationwide — than for abuse of all the illegal drugs combined. Cirrhosis of the liver, suicides, and accidents each kill more people than are murdered and many times more than those dying from drug overdoses.

Most of the major ills related to illegal substances come from the “Drug War.” This ill-conceived effort has raised the level of violence in our cities and in countries that supply our nation with cocaine and heroin. In the section on crime, I underlined the relationship between this police effort and homicide. Despite the cost and the violent side effects, government efforts to interdict these drugs has done little to reduce the supply. Instead of rising, by all reports the price for these substances on the street has fallen.

Overall, illegal drug use, together with smoking and drinking, has declined. These better habits probably stem more from an improved understanding of the harms of consumption than from the paramilitary action involved in the “drug war.” In the 1960s and 1970s, many believed that cocaine, for example, was not addictive and had few long term side effects. As public knowledge grew, especially following the well publicized drug related deaths of major celebrities, and as emphasis on a healthy life style spread, people cut back. The consumption of these substances harms only the individuals involved, and the government has no role in policing such *victimless crimes*.

Racism

Relationships among racial and ethnic groups continue to trouble American society. The United States is far from alone in its difficulties with making divergent groups work and live together in harmony. In many parts of the world, people are killing each other in the name of “ethnic cleansing.” The Second World War was fought, at least in part, over the concept of racial purity and superiority. The bloodiest war that Americans ever fought — the Civil War — turned on whether “this government [can] endure permanently half slave and half free.”

Virtually all would agree that relations between blacks and whites in the United States are better now than they were in the middle of the last century when slavery flourished. The demise of officially approved segregation after the Second World War must be considered progress. Over the last half century, the economic status of blacks has definitely improved. Unfortunately, in some cases the civil rights legislation that has furthered black rights since the 1950s has engendered a backlash. The rioting in Los Angeles in 1992 after the decision in the first Rodney King trial and a rising level of racial incidents on college campuses all point to continued tension and difficulties.

Despite the problems, surveys show that Americans believe that race relations are improving. In January 1992, for example, an Opinion Research Corporation telephone poll of over one thousand adults found that 39 percent thought that race relations were better than they had been a decade earlier while only 21 percent thought they were worse. Over a decade earlier, a 1980 Gallup Poll reported that 71 percent of the public and 45 percent of non-whites thought that the quality of life for blacks had improved in the

previous ten years. In 1970 a Louis Harris survey of public opinion found 64 percent of the black population felt that “things for most black people” were getting better. Even though these polls asked different questions, each survey established that the population believed race relations were better or getting better. A Gallup Poll, published in April of 1992, unearthed additional evidence of continuing progress. It reported that in 1969, nearly one-quarter of a century earlier, 43 percent of all blacks believed that white people wanted “to keep blacks down;” but by 1992 only 20 percent of African-Americans professed such a conviction.

It seems fair to conclude that African-Americans are better off today than they were fifty years ago when the law often mandated segregation. In increasing numbers, non-whites have moved into better paying fields and occupations. More than ever before are educators, managers, and professionals.

On the other hand, economic progress has been meager since 1970. Although black per capita income as a percentage of white income has edged up over the last two decades, median family income of African-Americans has failed to keep up with white income over the same period. The percentage of blacks in poverty dropped sharply from more than one in two in 1959 to fewer than one in three in 1975. Since the mid-1970s, however, the percentage of African-Americans counted as poor has remained roughly constant — at a level considerably higher than that for Americans of European extraction. This lack of economic gain for African-Americans has no doubt contributed to increased tensions in cities, colleges, and schools.

Researchers and pundits have offered various explanations for the failure of black incomes to continue to converge on white earnings. One hypothesis is that the breakdown of the black family, discussed previously, may have contributed to a lack of growth in education. The data, however, fail to support this theory: dropout rates have continued to decline; the proportion of black high school graduates under 24 who are enrolled in college has climbed; while the percentage of college students who are black has gone up over the last two decades.

The poor economic performance of blacks since the end of the 1970s may simply reflect a growing dispersion of wages for all Americans between those highly schooled and those with less education. In the 1980s, for a variety of reasons, earnings of college graduates rose relative to those with only a high school degree or less. Since a smaller proportion of African-Americans than whites had baccalaureate degrees, the growth in pay for those who were highly trained augmented income inequality in society generally but especially between the races. Unfortunately, the educational disparity continues.

Support for this view comes from economists Chinhui Juhn, Kevin Murphy, and Brooks Pierce who examined the slowdown in the convergence of black with white wages in the 1980s. They concluded that, since the 1940s, the wages of African-Americans had closed on Americans of European stock, but that this convergence ceased at the end of the 1970s. According to this study, the difference in education and training of the two groups — measured by years in school — could explain about half of the failure of convergence to continue. If the schooling of blacks were inferior to that of whites — that is if a year in a black school provided an inferior education to that in a primarily white institution — then they could attribute the entire slowdown to the increased demand for those highly educated, which left the less well trained at a disadvantage.

Even decades after the end of official segregation, blacks by and large attend different schools from most whites. Many of these schools, located in poor neighborhoods and faced with many problem children from broken families or raised by single mothers, may offer a less valuable education than do typical white suburban institutions. A high school degree from a ghetto school may correspond to less learning than one from a better environment. Studies have found that black education lags that of white schooling. According to a 1987 report done for the Department of Education, the average African-American college graduate possessed reading and comprehension skills equivalent to whites who earned only a high school degree. Black high school graduates did no better on the tests than white eighth grade dropouts (Gottfredson 1993). Employers, recognizing that graduates of inner city schools know less, have long offered such pupils lower starting salaries. This may appear to be discrimination, but if black applicants truly possess an inferior education, it reflects a normal market reaction.

Whatever the reasons for the slowdown in convergence, whether it is attributable to market forces or to a rise in discrimination, the lack of progress in ridding society of racism and racial animosity is distressing. Objectively African-Americans have made significant progress over the last 50 to 100 years, but to many the perception of continued discrimination is galling. As America has made progress in achieving a more just society, the demands to overcome the remaining prejudices and perceived discrimination have become more insistent.

Normal cautionary behavior may foster an image of racial intolerance. A casually dressed, educated black man strolling through a suburban mall, for example, may find that jewelers lock their doors and store clerks follow him around. From experience, merchants know that young black males are the ethnic group most likely to rob and steal. Unable to distinguish between educated black shoppers and black would-be robbers, they

treat all African-American men with equal caution. Naturally the middle class African-American resents this stereotyping and views it as racial prejudice. Thus an understandable, if unfortunate, defensive action by many storekeepers contributes to the impression that whites are intolerant of minorities.

Racial antagonism and intolerance have haunted American society since the earliest colonial days. The objective evidence and public rhetoric support the view that most Americans want to create a society free of racial discrimination and one that offers justice for all. This is neither the place nor the time to offer solutions — they will be difficult — but if Americans make the same progress on this very tough issue in the next 50 years as they have in the last, we will be well on the way to a solution.

Conclusions

Like many contemporary topics, progress in the modern world is a good news, bad news story. Most of the basic measures of progress have improved greatly in modern times, especially in the twentieth century. Life expectancy has ballooned; infant mortality has plummeted; literacy has spread; and education has advanced for virtually all in the Western world. The world is freer and more democratic than it has ever been. Over the last twenty to thirty years, the environment in the leading industrialized countries has become cleaner.

The bad news is that the family as an institution has been weakened and that this has detrimental effects on children. Perhaps as a result, crime is up almost everywhere, although the escalation apparently came to a stop in 1980. Nevertheless, the forces leading to a more crime-ridden society are still strong. With the next baby boom coming of age we can expect an increase in homicides, violent crimes, and the taking of property.

Americans are the most highly educated population in history. A larger proportion of them than of any other people have graduated from college. Over this century, the length of the school year has shot up and the percentage of the population that are truly illiterate has fallen to insignificant levels. Almost all now complete twelve years of schooling. For the last twenty years, however, this improvement in education seems to have stalled. Scores for high school graduates have stopped climbing. Even though schools apparently watered down their curriculum in the 1960s and 1970s, they have reversed this trend in the last decade.

Racial relations are a major problem everywhere in the world. The civil war in Bosnia and its ugly ethnic cleansing are only the most vivid examples. Many Cambodians are attempting to kill Vietnamese or at least to “ethnically cleanse” their country of them. Tensions are high in parts of the former Soviet Union as various ethnic groups attempt to secure dominion. In Africa, tribes are warring on tribes; clans are murdering clans; ethnic

and religious hatred are splitting up countries. Americans have made progress in this area, but much remains to be done. We must continue trying to improve relations among the various ethnic groups that make up the United States, in the hope that greater harmony will result.

Progress must be measured over long periods of time. We are too close to the modern world to calibrate human advancement in all its ramifications. Several objective measures are positive but disturbing trends exist. The next chapters will explore two other aspects of progress, both positive, that have been particularly evident in the twentieth century — the growth of freedom and the spread of democracy.