

Everyday Life: How Are We Doing?

By Everett C. Ladd

We reviewed in the last issue of *Public Perspective* an array of changes that have occurred in Americans' lives over the century now ending. Our attention was then on the lighter side of daily experience: e.g., what we partake of in sports, food, and travel; where we live and would like to live; and how new technologies have impacted on us. In this issue, we look at some of the weightier aspects of the century's journey. Our basic question is whether, "deep down," we're a better society today than in 1900.

On virtually every account economically, the answer is, of course, yes. We have better nutrition, housing, and health care, and as a result, longer spans of life when productive activity is possible; more leisure time and recreational opportunities; greater chances to extend our education. Poverty is still all too present in everyday life—especially in one-parent, female-headed households (p. 5)—but income has risen sharply for a large majority of the populace. Since 1965, for example, real disposable personal income has doubled (p. 4).

It's a remarkable commentary on twentieth century experience that so many Americans say they're satisfied with their economic positions and confident in their futures (p. 6). There was a time in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the numbers of people doubting that their children would do better economically than they had done was on the rise, but that's been reversed. Many more now expect their kids to do better, just as they themselves are better off than their parents had been (p. 7). In a wonderful experiment that Gallup researchers have conducted from time to time over the last 35 years, respondents are presented a ten-rung "ladder of life" and asked to locate themselves on it: where they were in the past, are today, and expect to be in the future. Every time out the response is, decisively, better now than yesterday, better tomorrow than today (p. 8). Even more important is the widespread sense that the system is broadly fair—that it extends real opportunity and rewards effort (pp. 9-11).

In other areas, too, we see this century as one of progress. A large majority of women say that society treats men better than

women, especially in wages, but even here about two-thirds think their current pay is about the same as it would be were they men (p. 30). In 1946, when asked "if you could be born over again, would you rather be a man or a woman?," only 3% of male respondents said "a woman," while an extraordinary 26% of female respondents said "a man." This differential presumably reflected a fairly widespread sense among women of being discriminated against. By the 1990s, it had disappeared almost entirely (p. 31).

Questions on race relations asked over the last half-century or so also show a widespread sense among blacks and whites alike that progress has been made—though the former are, understandably, more inclined to emphasize continuing discrimination. We don't have space here to repeat these questions, but readers may find a broad sampling of them in an earlier issue of *Public Perspective* (February/March 1996, pp. 19-42). These data are also available at the Roper Center web site (<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu>). A society that, in the eyes of its citizens, extends prosperity, expands opportunity, and reduces inequalities, is doing much that's right. It's a report card on everyday life that Americans should be proud of.

There's one critically important area, however, where we don't give our performance high marks. It involves what I'll call, for want of a more precise term, the moral dimension. Tragedies such as the killings in Littleton, Colorado, add to unease about our social health. But polls have long picked up the tension between our sense of unparalleled material success—and disturbing shortcomings on the spiritual side of things. While both have dropped somewhat in recent years, rates of crime and of divorce remain at levels that dwarf those of the first two-thirds of the century. The proportion of children being reared in one-parent families was 15% in 1970, 32% in 1997. Levels of violence portrayed in the mass media, and a general coarseness permeating contemporary popular culture, add to the reluctance of many Americans to describe twentieth century experience simply in terms of progress. The tension in the public's verdict is well illustrated by responses to a pair of questions asked by Market Strategies in July 1998:

Questions: Thinking specifically about... [the state of the country's economy/the state of the country's morals and values], do you feel things are generally going in the right direction, or do you feel things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?

	Right Direction	Wrong Track
The country's economy	67%	28%
The country's morals and values	19%	77%

Though there are disagreements on how the numbers should be interpreted, the country's economic health is easily charted. Its moral or spiritual health is more complex, much harder to read—and leaves many of us anxious as the century ends.

