

# Quantifying America's Decline

By WILLIAM J. BENNETT

Is our culture declining? I have tried to quantify the answer to this question with the creation of the Index of Leading Cultural Indicators.

In the early 1960s, the Census Bureau began publishing the Index of Leading Economic Indicators. These 11 measurements, taken together, represent the best means we now have of interpreting current business developments and predicting future economic trends.

The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators, a compilation of the Heritage Foundation and Empower America, attempts to bring a similar kind of data-based analysis to cultural issues. It is a statistical portrait (from 1960 to the present) of the moral, social and behavioral conditions of modern American society—matters that, in our time, often travel under the banner of "values."

Perhaps no one will be surprised to learn that, according to the index, America's cultural condition is far from healthy. What is shocking is just how precipitously American life has declined in the past 30 years, despite the enormous governmental effort to improve it.

Since 1960, the U.S. population has increased 41%; the gross domestic product has nearly tripled; and total social spending by all levels of government (measured in constant 1990 dollars) has risen from \$143.73 billion to \$787 billion—more than a fivefold increase. Inflation-adjusted spending on welfare has increased by 630%, spending on education by 225%.

But during the same 30-year period there has been a 560% increase in violent crime; a 419% increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling in divorce rates; a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than a 200% increase in the teenage suicide rate; and a drop of almost 80 points in SAT scores.

Clearly many modern-day social pathologies have gotten worse. More important, they seem impervious to government's attempts to cure them. Although the Great Society and its many social programs have had some good effects, there is a vast body of evidence suggesting that these "remedies" have reached the limits of their success.

Perhaps more than anything else, America's cultural decline is evidence of a shift in the public's attitudes and beliefs. Social scientist James Q. Wilson writes that "the powers exercised by the institutions of social control have been constrained and people, especially young people, have embraced an ethos that values

self-expression over self-control." The findings of pollster Daniel Yankelovich seem to confirm this diagnosis. Our society now places less value than before on what we owe to others as a matter of moral obligation; less value on sacrifice as a moral good; less value on social conformity and respectability; and less value on correctness and restraint in matters of physical pleasure and sexuality.

Some writers have spoken eloquently on these matters. When the late Walker Percy

was asked what concerned him most about America's future, he answered: "Probably the fear of seeing America, with all its great strength and beauty and freedom... gradually subside into decay through default and be defeated, not by the Communist movement, demonstrably a bankrupt system, but from within by weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed and in the end helplessness before its great problems." Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in a speech earlier this year, put it this way: "The West ...

has been undergoing an erosion and obscuring of high moral and ethical ideals. The spiritual axis of life has grown dim." John Updike has written: "The fact that compared to the inhabitants of Africa and Russia, we still live well cannot ease the pain of feeling we no longer live nobly."

Treatises have been written on why this decline has happened. The hard truth is that in a free society the ultimate responsibility rests with the people themselves. The good news is that what has been self-inflicted can be self-corrected.

There are a number of things we can do to encourage cultural renewal. First, government should heed the old injunction, "Do no harm." Over the years it has often done unintended harm to many of the people it was trying to help. The destructive incentives of the welfare system are perhaps the most glaring example of this.

Second, political leaders can help shape social attitudes through public discourse and through morally defensible social legislation. A thoughtful social agenda today would perhaps include: a more tough-minded criminal justice system, including more prisons; a radical reform of education through national standards and school choice; a system of child-support collection, whereby fathers would be made to take responsibility for their children; a rescinding of no-fault divorce laws for parents with children; and radical reform of the welfare system.

But even if these and other worthwhile efforts are made, we should temper our expectations of what government can do. A greater hope lies elsewhere.

Our social and civic institutions—families, churches, schools, neighborhoods and civic associations—have traditionally taken on the responsibility of providing our children with love, order and discipline—of teaching self-control, compassion, tolerance, civility, honesty and respect for authority. Government, even at its best, can never be more than an auxiliary in the development of character.

The social regression of the past 30 years is due in large part to the enfeebled state of our social institutions and their failure to carry out their critical and time-honored tasks. We desperately need to recover a sense of the fundamental purpose of education, which is to engage in the architecture of souls. When a self-governing society ignores this responsibility, it does so at its peril.

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## Eight Cultural Indicators

AVERAGE DAILY VIEWING		SAT SCORES	
1960	5:06 hours	1960	975
1965	5:29 hours	1965	969
1970	5:56 hours	1970	948
1975	6:07 hours	1975	910
1980	6:36 hours	1980	890
1985	7:07 hours	1985	906
1990	6:55 hours	1990	900
1992	7:04 hours	1992	999

Source: Nielsen Media Research

Source: The College Board

% OF ILLEGITIMATE BIRTHS		CHILDREN WITH SINGLE MOTHERS	
1960	5.3%	1960	8%
1970	10.7%	1970	11%
1980	18.4%	1980	18%
1990	26.2%	1990	24%

Source: National Center for Health Statistics

Sources: Bureau of the Census; Donald Hernandez, *The American Child: Resources from Family, Government and the Economy*

CHILDREN ON WELFARE		TEEN SUICIDE RATE	
1960	3.5%	1960	3.6%
1965	4.5%	1965	4.0%
1970	8.5%	1970	5.9%
1975	11.8%	1975	7.6%
1980	11.5%	1980	8.5%
1985	11.2%	1985	10.0%
1990	11.9%	1990	11.4%

Source: Bureau of the Census; U.S. House of Representatives

Source: National Center for Health Statistics

VIOLENT CRIME RATE (per 100,000)		MEDIAN PRISON SENTENCE	
1960	16.1	1954	22.5 days
1965	20.0	1964	12.1 days
1970	36.4	1974	5.5 days
1975	48.8	1984	7.7 days
1980	59.7	1988	8.5 days
1985	53.3	1990	11.4 days
1990	73.2		

Source: F.B.I.

\*Serious Crime: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny/theft and motor vehicle theft.

Source: National Center for Policy Analysis