

SOCIETY

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Economic Security of Older Women and Men in the United States

In a briefing paper published online in December 2007 by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, 90% of those 65 or older are said to receive Social Security benefits—for older women, Social Security averages half of their income. About a third of women receive pension income as compared with nearly half of all men who do. And those women who do receive pension income typically receive little more than half what a man receives. Fifty-seven percent of older women are currently not married; they are widowed, divorced, or never married. Of women who are not married, 55% are white, 74% are African American, 60% are Hispanic, and 52% are Asian American. Among the same age group, 13% of women and 22% of men work for pay, with men earning more than women by a 2–1 margin. The total number of such workers amounts to more than six million. (Access at <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/BPD480.pdf>).

American Teenagers and Drug Use

The Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan released a report on illicit drug use among American teens in 2007. The report, the 33rd national survey in the Monitoring the Future series conducted by UMISR, concludes that overall, illicit drug use by American teens continues a gradual decline. As an indication of the long-term nature of this decline, the proportion of 8th graders who reported using an illicit drug at least once in the 12 months prior to the survey was 24% in 1996 and 13% in 2007. The decline was less among 10th graders over roughly the same period (39% to 28%) and least among 12th graders (42% to 36%). The declines in specific drugs were greatest among amphetamines (including Ritalin, methamphetamine and crystal methamphetamine). The use of Ritalin outside of medical supervision was first measured in 2001 and has been falling since then.

Marijuana use peaked in the mid-1990s and has been declining ever since, though, it remains among all the illicit drugs the one most widely used. The use of other illicit drugs, including cocaine, crack cocaine, LSD, hallucinogens other than LSD, heroin, and many prescription-type psychoactive drugs (e.g., sedatives, tranquilizers, narcotics, in particular OxyContin and Vicodin) have also declined over time but show little change in 2007. The prescription drugs have in most recent years become a major focus for those addressing the nation's drug abuse problem. However, a gradual decline in their overall use continues.

According to the report, the only drug to show signs of increased use is MDMA (ecstasy). Its use plummeted in the early 2000s when publicity about its consequences grew, but the intensity of that publicity diminished and such concerns about its risks have declined as well, thus contributing to an increase in its use once again. Researchers refer to this as a “generational forgetting,” something similar to the historical patterns of narcotic use as documented in work, for example, by David F. Musto.

Abuse of such things as over-the-counter cough and cold medications continues, with the greatest decline in anabolic steroids that peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with a drop by an average of half among 8th, 10th, and 12th grade males by 2007. With widely reported public scandals in U.S. athletics, including track and field and baseball, the message about the dangers of anabolic steroids, in terms of both health and reputation, seems to be gaining recognition among youth. Also, the Anabolic Control Act of 2004, which placed 32 additional steroids into Schedule III and gave the Drug Enforcement Agency greater regulatory and enforcement authority over sale and possession of these substances, contributed to the perception that these types of drugs are no longer easily acquired. On balance, the impact of supply control efforts and educational programs have probably reduced the need to implement expensive testing of student athletes for anabolic steroid use.

The use of alcohol by teens continues to decline, with reported drinking among 8th graders, for example, falling

40% since its peak level in 1996. The report notes that this decline has not been as great among 10th and 12th graders and that the higher decline among 8th graders may be due to their perception about the availability of alcohol (in 1996, 75% thought they could get alcohol; in 2007, only 62% claimed they could). Those saying they got drunk in 8th grade also showed a decline, with 5.5% in 2007 as compared to 9.6% in 1996. Among high school seniors, 29% admitted drunkenness at some point in the previous 30 days, down only about one sixth from its peak rate in 1997. (Access at: <http://www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=6225>).

International Benchmarks in Math and Science

One of the greatest challenges facing quantitative and empirical social science today is how measures are constructed and how those measures serve in debates about public policy. Efforts to understand the relative position of nations in the education of students in math and science serves as a model for appreciating the challenges of measurement as well as the implications of such findings for public policy. In two reports released by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in November and December of 2007, new insight is provided about the performance of American students in math and science in an international context as well as within the context of progress from the 4th to 10th grades. In “Chance Favors the Prepared Mind: Mathematics and Science Indicators for Comparing States and Nations,” a chief scientist for AIR, Dr. Gary W. Phillips, points out that students in most U.S. states are performing as well or better than most students in foreign countries in math and science, but the highest achieving states are still significantly below the highest achieving countries. Phillips’ report provides the first comprehensive look at all 50 states in comparison to nations around the world. “The bad news is that even our best performing states are running far behind the highest performing countries.”

In mathematics, students in 49 states and the District of Columbia are behind their counterparts in Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. In both mathematics and science, the United States is generally comparable to other English-speaking nations and to European countries, while many African and Middle Eastern countries perform significantly below the U.S. The highest performing countries are the same ones that grant the largest proportion of college degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Phillips concludes that “More than a century ago Louis Pasteur revealed the secret to invention and innovation when he said ‘chance favors the prepared mind’. The take away message from this report is that the United States is losing the race to prepare the minds of the future

generation.” (Access at: <http://www.air.org/publications/documents/phillips.chance.favors.the.prepared.mind.pdf>).

Another AIR study, entitled “Lesson Learned from U.S. International Science Performance” and funded by the Department of Education, reassesses the persistent claim over the years that student performance in science drops off precipitously by the 10th grade when compared with other nations. Researchers found that rather than comparing U.S. performance to a larger pool of countries, when they compared this performance to just those industrial nations that represent U.S. economic competitors, the decline in science performance is steady and there is no sudden fall off at high school.

Among key findings that suggest why this decline throughout the school years may be occurring, three appear to have direct implications for educational and social policy. In Japan, schools focus before the 3rd grade on building a strong math foundation. In the U.S. the emphasis in math is not as great. One of the study’s authors, Steven Leinwand, observes that “as students progress, they need to employ more mathematics to understand and explain science concepts.” The absence of a solid math foundation has implications later on, with students continuing to perform well in such disciplines as biology and environmental science, but less well in chemistry and physics, the latter of which are more heavily influenced by math. Finally, when comparing science curricula among nations, it was found that instruction toward depth in a field may be more important than breadth of knowledge generally. (Access at: <http://www.air.org/news/documents/lessons.learned.in.science.pdf>).

Ready or Not? Public Health Preparedness

In a report issued in December 2007 by Trust for America’s Health (“a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority”) entitled *Ready or Not? Protecting the Public’s Health from Diseases, Disasters, and Bioterrorism*, more than half of the American public still believes that the country is not any safer than it was before the attacks of September 11, 2001, and nearly 60% do not believe their own community is prepared to respond effectively to a natural disaster. Since 2003, Trust for America’s Health, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has issued “Ready or Not?” reports on the relative improvements and continuing deficiencies in the nation’s preparedness for natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and bioterrorism.

Among the key findings of the 2007 report, a wide variation still persists among states’ readiness to distribute vaccines and to assess the threat of biohazards. For example, 12 states “do not have a disease surveillance

system that is compatible with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Electronic Disease Surveillance System (NEDSS)." Twenty-one states lack adequate statutes to protect healthcare volunteers from liability during emergencies. The report also provides a summary of major public health incidents during 2007, including reports of salmonella contamination in food; lead paint in toys; bird flu deaths among humans; *E. coli* contamination in frozen hamburger (prompting the third largest recall of hamburger in United States Department of Agriculture history); wildfires in California (resulting in the evacuation of 350,000 from their homes); and identification by the Centers for Disease Control of *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) as "a major public health problem primarily related to health care, but no longer confined to intensive care units, acute care hospitals or any health care institution."

The Report outlines 12 examples of major public health emergency threats, including *agroterrorism* (deliberate introduction of plant or animal disease); *bioterrorism* (deliberate introduction of germs, biotoxins or other biological agents in order to cause disease or death in people, animals, or plants); *blast injuries* (explosions causing multi-system, life threatening injuries among individuals and within crowds); *chemical terrorism* (deliberate use of chemical agents, including poisonous gases, arsenic or pesticides, intended to cause illness or death); *chemical incidents and accidents* (non-deliberate exposure of humans to chemical agents with similar outcomes to chemical terrorism); *foodborne diseases* (CDC estimates approximately 75 million cases of foodborne diseases annually, with 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths); *natural disasters* (causing major disruptions in provision of emergency services); *pandemic flu* (the greatest concern presently is a lethal strain of flu against which the vast majority of humans have no natural immunity); *radiological threats* (the use of the so-called "dirty bomb" containing and scattering radioactive materials); *vector-borne diseases* (insect spread diseases such as West Nile virus, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Lyme disease, and malaria); *waterborne diseases* (CDC estimates 1,000 people become ill from contaminated water and 2,500 are sickened from recreational water disease outbreaks in the U.S.); *zoonotic/animal-borne diseases* (examples include Avian flu, rabies, and SARS).

The 119 page report is the most comprehensive attempt to assess the relative state of preparedness for all of these public health emergency threats. In its recommendations, among the most pressing concerns for maintaining preparedness is diminishing federal support to states and localities for such activities. The report provides specific recommendations for funding as well as for how to strengthen oversight and accountability. (Access at: <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/bioterror07/BioTerrorReport2007.pdf>).

New Research on Aging: Neuroeconomics

Economists, psychologists, and neuroscientists have joined forces in the past two decades in order to formulate more clearly the various factors that determine how and why people make the decisions they do. In an elegant update of this kind of research, an e-newsletter (the 9th in a series funded by the University of Michigan Demography Center) examines "Why Do We Make Bad Decisions? Findings From a New Science." The newsletter highlights National Institute on Aging (NIA)-funded research that examines neuroeconomics—the integrated study of decision processes by economists, psychologists, and neuroscientists. Researchers ask, "Why do emotions dominate deliberative thinking in many people's working, purchasing, and saving decisions? Why do many people save less while they are working than they will obviously need after they retire? Why do people tend to overspend and undersave when using a credit card? Why do people's perceptions of fairness sometimes affect their decisions in ways that leave everyone involved worse off? What researchers have begun to claim is that earlier distinctions in economics between rational and irrational behavior no longer provide a firm basis for understanding and predicting behavior. The impact of the insights of evolutionary psychology are gaining a foothold in the ways in which psychologists and economists together design research studies now being supported by NIA. (Access at: <http://www.prb.org/pdf07/TodaysResearchAging9.pdf>).

Note on Blogs and Websites

In the interest of keeping readers of *Society* informed of continued developments online and in the blogosphere, we note the launch of a new website supported by the newly founded Miller-McCune Center for Research, Media and Public Policy in Santa Barbara, CA. The Center has launched a national magazine and website "that will promote results and solutions to current social issues found in academic research to a wider public." The center was founded by Sara Miller McCune, owner of Sage Publications. The magazine and website will invite "journalists to publish and distribute [its] magazine as a public benefit." (Access at <http://miller-mccune.com/>).

The Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), which is located in Washington, D.C., and whose Executive Director, Howard J. Silver, is a member of *Society's* Advisory Editorial Board, continues as the leading advocacy organization promoting attention to and federal support for the social and behavior sciences. COSSA publishes UPDATE 22 times a year, offering timely information about the interactions of the federal bureaucracies and the social sciences, in pursuit of the

interests of both. In years past, *Society* has published COSSA's account of the federal budget for over 50 agencies important to the production of social and behavioral research. Now that such information is more easily available online than ever before through COSSA, we want to call regular attention to this vital resource here. (Access at <http://www.cossa.org/index.shtml>).

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) has launched a new blog on secularism, religion, and the public sphere called "The Immanent Frame." In his announcement, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Program Officer and Research Fellow, reported that "The blog is opening with a series of posts on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, including recent contributions from Robert Bellah, Wendy Brown, Jose Casanova, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, and Colin Jager. Robert Bellah has called *A Secular Age* 'one of the most important

books to be written in my lifetime,' and there will be more to come on Taylor's major work in the weeks ahead, with posts by Rajeev Bhargava, Akeel Bilgrami, Hent de Vries, Amy Hollywood, Tomoko Masuzawa, Joan Scott, and others. Meanwhile, Charles Taylor himself has just made his own contribution to the already ongoing conversations." (Access at: http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/).

The Economists' Voice, edited by Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University, promotes itself as "a nonpartisan forum for economists to present innovative policy ideas and engaging commentary on the issues of the day. Columnists range over the political spectrum. Readers include professional economists, lawyers, policy analysts, policymakers, and students." (Access at: <http://www.bepress.com/ev>).

Readers are encouraged to send in information about other web sites to society@wellesley.edu.