

Are we better off? Nostalgia for the 1970s: Nostalgia for the 1970s

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The 1970s—that era of fuel shortages and economic “stagflation”—is not normally the subject of nostalgia (*That ’70s Show!* notwithstanding), but perhaps it should be. According to researchers at Fordham University, the U.S. enjoyed a high rate of “social health” from 1970 to 1976.

Fordham’s Institute for Innovation in Social Policy has evaluated the nation’s well-being over the past 30 years according to 16 different indicators—including the rates of infant mortality, child abuse and child poverty; youth suicide, youth drug abuse and high school dropouts; poverty among the elderly; unemployment, homicides, housing opportunities, wage scales and the gap between rich and poor. What stands out about the ’70s, in contrast with our own time, is that child poverty rates were low, there was easier access to affordable housing, and the gap between rich and poor was much narrower. Social health, by these measures, dropped sharply in the late ’70s and has stayed at that low level, with occasional small bumps up or down.

Not that the past 30 years have seen no social progress. High school dropout rates have declined, as have infant deaths and the number of elderly in poverty. But in other key areas, such as the number of children in poverty, the number of people with health insurance, the affordability of housing, the buying power of the average paycheck, and especially disparities of income, the national report card has gotten worse. And the just-released data for 2001, the last year for which the institute has figures, show declines in nine of the 16 categories—one of the worst showings in several years.

The institute’s set of statistical snapshots is only one way of assessing national well-being, of course. (It doesn’t count the advances made by women and minorities, for example.) But the social health index does make one thing clear: prosperity is not to be identified with economic growth. Since 1970 the gross domestic product has grown steadily—by over 150 percent—but crucial aspects of American life have

eroded.

A recent presidential candidate asked voters, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” The question was designed to make people examine their bank accounts and register their discontent. The Fordham index suggests that rather than ask, Are *you* better off?, politicians should ask, Are *we* better off? Specifically: Are poor children better off? Do more people have health insurance? Are the elderly well cared for? Are those in need of food stamps getting them? Can more people afford to own their own home? Is the gap between rich and poor narrowing? Are fewer young people turning to drugs? These questions help us identify our true social challenges—and achievements. It would be good to see this year’s presidential candidates pay attention to them.