

THE MEASURE OF AMERICA

AMERICAN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2008-2009

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First Report on Human Development in the United States

“The Measure of America: American Human Development Report 2008-2009,” published by Columbia University Press and the Social Science Research Council, is the first-ever report on human development in the United States or any affluent, industrialized nation.

The human development approach, developed by Mahbub ul Haq and based on work by Nobel Laureate in economics Amartya Sen, emphasizes the everyday experience of ordinary people and the degree to which they have the freedom, access, and opportunity to live a decent life.

Human development is defined as a process of enlarging people’s freedoms and opportunities and improving their well-being. It was developed out of dissatisfaction with existing measures for gauging well-being. Gross Domestic Product, consumption and inflation figures, and other economic indicators offer only a partial view of how people are faring. The human development approach is a fuller way of judging progress, as it values such basic opportunities as access to education, security in illness and old age, good jobs, personal safety, a clean living environment, and a say in the decisions that affect one’s life.

The purpose of this report is to stimulate fact-based public debate about human development issues in the U.S. and to empower people to hold elected officials accountable for progress on three issues we all care about: health, education, and income.

First American Human Development Index

The report introduces a first-ever American Human Development (HD) Index. The index is based on the widely used international HD Index, which has been presented annually since 1990 in the global “Human Development Report.”

The HD Index is a rigorously constructed measure of three basic building blocks of a good life: health, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living. The American HD Index uses official data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Major Report Features

The report offers easy-to-compare snapshots of different segments of the population — major ethnic groups, men and women, the 50 states, and the 436 congressional districts, ranked by their index “score.” In addition, the report contains key social, economic, political, environmental, and military data distilled from a vast array of primary sources and not found together anywhere else.

The Report describes successful policies in America and other wealthy nations, allowing a range of actors to draw practical lessons for action locally and nationally.

How America Measures Up

Overall Results

The report shows remarkable human development progress since 1960:

- life expectancy in 1960 was less than 70 years; today, we are living more than eight additional years, on average;
- only 41.1 percent of adults had at least a high school diploma in 1960; more than 84 percent do today.

Yet despite the progress for Americans overall in the last 45 years, the report's data show that the basic ingredients required to live a life of choice and value are not available to everyone. It reveals for the first time that some groups of Americans are 10, 20, even 50 years behind others in health, education, and income.

To fulfill its historical promise and remain economically competitive in a fast-changing world, America needs to do a better job of developing and drawing on everyone's talents. A human development approach offers a new way to do just that.

American Human Development Index Rankings—Regions and States

The Northeast has the highest HD Index because people in this group of states have the highest average earnings, the highest levels of educational attainment and enrollment, and the second highest life expectancy of the four U.S. Census regions.

The South has the lowest HD Index because people living there, on average, have the shortest lives, have lower levels of educational attainment and enrollment, and earn less than do Americans in other parts of the country.

The top five states on the American HD Index are Connecticut (highest ranking), Massachusetts, New Jersey and Washington, DC (tied), and Maryland.

West Virginia, Louisiana, Arkansas and Alabama are among the bottom five states on the American HD Index, with Mississippi ranking at the bottom.

Racial and Ethnic Human Development Index Rankings

Broken down by race/ethnicity, the American HD Index shows gaps in human development among different groups: Asians rank the highest followed by whites, Latinos, Native Americans, and African Americans.

Asians have the highest HD Index, outperforming the other ethnic groups in all three human development dimensions. They earn slightly more than whites, the second ranked group, but have very large advantages in both health and education. Asians live, on average, four years longer than Latinos, eight years longer than whites and American Indians, and more than thirteen years longer than African Americans. Nearly half of Asians have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 30 percent of whites, 17 percent of African Americans, 14 percent of American Indians, and 12 percent of Latinos.

Latinos rank the lowest for education – more than 40 percent don't have a high school diploma – and income, but score well on health, resulting in the number three ranking.

African Americans have the lowest HD Index of all groups. African Americans rank third in income and education, but lag far behind in life expectancy. On average, African Americans live five fewer years than American Indians, the second lowest-ranking group on health, and more than thirteen fewer years than Asians. African Americans today have a lifespan shorter than the average American in the late 1970's, some forty years ago.

Human Development Differences by Gender

At the top of the scale, Asian and white men have an income advantage over their female counterparts that more than compensates for their relative disadvantages in health (Asians and whites) and education (whites only).

At the lower end of the spectrum, among African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos, men all have lower HD Indices than women in the same racial/ethnic group. While men's earnings are higher than those of women, the female advantages in education or longevity, or a combination of the two, outweigh superior earnings to yield an overall higher HD Index for women.

Report Recommendations

The report includes an eight-point human development agenda that touches on major areas in which action is needed to raise the American HD Index score in the coming years. These are:

1. Promote prevention and public health.
2. Make health care affordable for all Americans.
3. Modernize K-12 education.
4. Invest in at-risk children, the earlier the better.
5. Strengthen and support families to better balance work and family responsibilities.
6. Boost incomes and aid asset-building.
7. Launch a Marshall Plan for the Gulf.
8. Take responsibility for the most vulnerable.

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