

Jeffrey D. Sachs: U.S. a pitiful 26 out of 29 on child well-being ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Children are every country's most vital resource. This is true not just morally, but also economically. Investing in the health, education, and skills of children offers the highest economic returns to a country. A new study by the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) shows which high-income countries are doing well when it comes to making these investments - and which are doing poorly.

The report, "Child Well-Being in Rich Countries," takes a holistic view of the conditions of children in the United States, Canada, and Europe - 29 countries in all. The top-ranked countries, where children are best off, are the social democracies of Western Europe. The Netherlands heads the list, followed by Norway, Iceland, Finland, Sweden and Germany.

At the bottom one finds a major surprise: the U.S., the richest large economy in the world, is in 26th place, followed by three much poorer countries: Lithuania, Latvia and Romania. France and the United Kingdom are ranked in the middle.

The study assesses children's well-being in terms of material conditions (related to household income levels); health and safety; education; risky behavior (such as excessive alcohol consumption); and physical environment, including housing conditions.

The gaps between the northern European countries and the U.S. are the most telling. Northern European countries generally provide cash support to families to ensure that all children are raised in decent conditions, and they undertake ambitious social programs to provide high-quality day care, preschool, and primary and secondary education. Moreover, all children are well covered by effective health care systems.

The U.S., with its individualist, free-market ideology, is very different. There is little cash support for families. Government programs supposedly provide a social safety net, but politicians are, in fact, largely indifferent to the well-being of the poor, because poor voters turn out in lower numbers and do not finance America's expensive election campaigns. Indeed, the evidence strongly suggests that U.S. politicians tend to respond only to their richer constituents.

The differences between the social democracies and the U.S. show up in category after category. In the social democracies, less than 10 percent of children grow up in relative poverty (meaning households with less than half of the country's median income). In the U.S., the rate of relative poverty exceeds 20 percent.

American children suffer far more from low birth weight (a major danger signal for later life) and being overweight at ages 11, 13 and 15. There are around 35 births for every 1,000 girls aged 15-19, compared to fewer than 10 per thousand in the northern European countries.

Likewise, U.S. children face considerably more violence in society than children in other high-income countries do. That may not be surprising, but it is deeply troubling, because children's exposure to violence is a major threat to their physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Homicide rates in the U.S. are roughly five times higher than in northern Europe.

One fascinating aspect of the UNICEF study is its use of what is now called "subjective well-being." This means asking a person directly about his or her life satisfaction.

Here, the evidence suggests that northern Europe's children generally appreciate their remarkable advantages. The children were asked to rate their "life satisfaction" on an 11-step ladder. In the Netherlands, 95 percent of children set their rating at six or higher. In the U.S., the proportion is around 84 percent. These subjective rankings also correlate highly with the children's reported quality of interactions with their peers and parents. Some 80 percent of Dutch children report their classmates to be "kind and helpful," compared to just 56 percent of American children.

The costs to the U.S. of allowing so many of its children to grow up in poverty, poor health, poor schools, and poor housing are staggering. A shocking number end up serving time in prison. Even those fortunate not to fall into the trap of America's vast prison system often end up unemployed and even unemployable, without the skills needed to obtain and keep a decent job.

The UNICEF findings are powerful. High national incomes are not enough to ensure children's well-being. Societies that have a strong commitment to equal opportunity for all of their children end up with much better outcomes.

-reprinted from the Cap Times

Region: United States ^[2]

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