

Foreword

by Jeffrey D. Sachs

Bravo to the American Human Development team for another breakthrough volume. *The Measure of America 2010–2011* could not be more timely. As poverty is rising and high unemployment is causing searing pain across society, we need an accurate understanding of America’s diverse and complex conditions. No other publication comes close to this one in documenting and explaining America’s disparate socioeconomic realities, especially the vast differences across regions and social groups and the alarming shortfall of America’s performance compared with other high-income countries.

The United States today is a country of great and increasing socioeconomic inequality, with unimaginable wealth living side by side with entrenched poverty. The report’s rigorous and revealing maps, graphs, tables, and flowcharts open new and valuable perspectives on America’s fast-changing and crisis-ridden society. The insightful analysis in *The Measure of America 2010–2011* describes the key factors driving these changes.

Stunning data hit us between the eyes. Of America’s 435 congressional districts, the very richest and the very poorest are near neighbors in New York City: Manhattan’s East Side and the South Bronx, respectively. That kind of cheek-to-jowl inequality offers a metaphor for America as a whole—the paradox of a society of profound divisions struggling to find common ground and understanding.

For far too long, America coasted on an unexamined boast of being “number one,” with superlatives in every sphere of life. Only now, after the bursting of the financial bubble, are we waking up to a far more somber reality. Persistent inequalities of opportunity scar a country in which yawning gaps in income, educational attainment, and life expectancy far exceed those in any other high-income democracy, and insecurity is greater and more widespread. Moreover, most Americans are not fully aware of the interwoven social, political, and economic factors that tend to keep some groups and regions stuck in deep poverty, poor health, and low educational attainment.

The Measure of America opens our eyes and bids us to reconsider some basic realities. The report’s data powerfully depict the enormous differences in socioeconomic conditions across regions (including by states, congressional districts, and metropolitan areas), race and ethnicity, and gender. Asian Americans

are generally the highest earning, healthiest, and best educated of the racial and ethnic groups studied in the report, followed by whites—with Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans trailing far behind in terms of well-being and access to opportunity. In general, the South still lags the rest of the nation in key socioeconomic indicators, but the report describes the tremendous diversity found within every region.

Like previous studies of the American Human Development Project, the report holds America up to a revealing comparison with European and other high-income countries. The comparative findings are deeply troubling and should give all Americans pause about our priorities and policy assumptions. America lags our peer countries on crucial dimensions of well-being, ranking as the worst or near-worst with regard to life expectancy, child mortality, health-care costs, obesity, science and math literacy, child poverty, carbon emissions per person, violent crime, and voter participation.

The current report does not carry much happy news, but its powerful messages are all the more urgent. Our society is divided deeply; income, health, and educational outcomes are under dire threat, and roads to opportunity are littered with obstacles for far too many Americans.

The report's crucial positive news is that America remains highly productive and innovative, two characteristics that are vital for America's economic, social, and political recovery. America's challenge, the report strongly implies, is to find a new pathway to broad social cooperation, one that encourages us once again to think, act, and solve problems as a united society in common pursuit of a better future for all Americans.

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