

Perspective

Fabric of America is fraying

By David Wann

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By certain measurements, the U.S. economy has been quite successful in the last several decades, but the fundamental question remains: Successfully *what?*

We may lead the world in categories like gross domestic product, average house size, and ownership of color TVs, but we also "lead" the industrial nations in debt per capita, the child poverty rate, overall poverty rate, ratio of people in prison, rate of traffic fatalities, murder rate, carbon dioxide emissions per capita, and the per capita consumption of energy and water.

These are hardly distinctions we can be proud of. Clearly, we're not taking care of what really matters. On the upside, increased awareness of where we stand can guide a reordering of national and local priorities, resulting in a healthier and more satisfying American lifestyle.

Especially eye-opening is data compiled by John de Graaf, director of the non-profit Take Back Your Time (Timeday.org), which advocates legislative and lifestyle changes to provide more discretionary time.

The data compares the U.S. with 14 European Union countries in key quality-of-life indicators, demonstrating that many of our economic and cultural priorities are out of step with what humans actually need. Despite the familiar aspiration to be/appear optimistic, it's clear that health care, safety, personal security, equality, education, and leisure time are faltering in America.

For example, even a need as basic as nutrition is compromised when money is poorly allocated or spent. The average American slurps 53 gallons of soft drinks every year, and now spends more in restaurants (many of the fast-food variety) than in grocery stores. "Even wild monkeys have healthier diets than most Americans," says anthropologist Katharine Milton, partly because in our fast-paced world, the emphasis is on snackability, convenience and shelf life rather than human life.

Americans also rank near the bottom among industrial nations in health per unit of food, spending the least for food (as a percentage of income) but the most for health care. In spite of these expenditures, we've fallen to 42nd place in the world for longevity, ranking below Guam and just above Albania. We're also 42nd in infant mortality but No. 1 in obesity, pumping 1 billion extra gallons of gas each year to carry the excess weight — enough to fuel 1.7 million cars, according to a University of Illinois study.

Coincidentally, Americans are no longer the tallest population in the world; the Dutch are. (In fact, most European populations are, on average, taller than the average American). Researcher John Komlos of the University of Munich speculates that the EU's emphasis on social safety nets, especially in the critical childhood years, may be responsible. De Graaf, co-author of "Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic," agrees. "A

30-year trend of income tax cuts for the rich has decreased quality of life overall in the U.S.," he says. "In contrast, Western European countries invested in their social contracts. Strategic investments in health care, education, transportation, and common space reduced the need [and desire] of individuals to maximize their own incomes."

On the other hand, in America, the subsidized and culturally familiar quest for privacy and exclusivity often spins off unhealthy isolation. A 2007 National Science Foundation study reported that one-fourth of all Americans have no one they can confide in or celebrate with, and the inner circles of the rest have fallen from about three confidants to two. Our need to elevate social connections to a higher priority is literally a matter of life and death.

In one study reported by Dr. Dean Ornish in his book "Love and Survival," men and women who were about to have open-heart surgery were asked two questions: "Do you draw strength from your religious faith?" and "Are you a member of a group of people who get together on a regular basis?" Those who said "no" to both questions were dead within six months, compared to only 3 percent of those who said "yes" to both questions — a seven-fold difference in mortality.

Another primordial human need is connection with nature. When people view slides of nature, their blood pressure counts fall. Hospital patients with a view of trees go home sooner than those whose view is a brick wall. When people with ADHD spend time in nature, the results are often as effective as Ritalin. Yet Americans are increasingly creatures of the great indoors, or else we're stranded in sterilized, overly manicured landscapes. For example, some geometric, asphalted school playgrounds in America now display signs that say, "No running!" The design of playgrounds often excludes the rough, green edges of nature where kids love to play; instead the aim is to minimize liability, reduce maintenance, and improve surveillance.

How can we make political and cultural space for our most critical needs? To give a few examples, one Wisconsin school dramatically reduced vandalism and violence by simply taking out the pop machines and replacing cafeteria fast foods like pizza and burgers with salad bars, fruits and vegetables.

New ways of building and rebuilding neighborhoods are helping residents create social networks of trust and support, at the same time preserving habitat. And a new way of thinking about what we do with our time is resulting in more outdoor labs at schools, job-sharing opportunities, and bike lanes in our communities.

We're beginning to carefully examine the value we get for the huge amounts of money we spend, and owe. By changing a few key priorities and perspectives, we can take better care of our kids, the environment, and ourselves, rediscovering a mother lode of real wealth woven right into our everyday lives.

David Wann is the author of "Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic" (Berrett-Koehler, 2002) and the upcoming "Simple Prosperity: Finding Real Wealth in a Sustainable Lifestyle" (St. Martin's Press, 2008).