

American health care reformers have long advocated a national health care system as the solution to the nation's medical care problems. According to them our system is too expensive, produces poor results and leaves too many people without care at all. All "civilized" countries have a universal medical care system that costs less and provides quality care for all.

Since we are on the cusp of national health care's full implementation, still enjoying the glow of full membership in civilization, it should be instructive to review the actual state of Americans' health. The National Research Council has just published an extensive study entitled [U.S. Health in International Perspective](#). The Council gathered a panel of top American scholars concerned with health; these include statisticians, economists, demographers, health scientists and physicians. They measured various indicia of American health against those of sixteen peer countries, all high income and industrialized. Their report is pretty depressing.

America has the highest age adjusted death rate and the lowest male life expectancy. American women have the second lowest life expectancy. Americans die at an age adjusted annual rate of 505 per 100,000 population while the Japanese have the lowest rate at 349, and the problem continues from birth to late middle age. America has the highest rate of infant mortality; at 6.7 per 1000 babies the rate is nearly



twice as high as the average among the sixteen peers. It is a similar story for youth from age 1 to 19. For most advanced countries the death rate is 15 to 25 per 100,000 children, in the United States it is almost 33. We are the most likely to die before age 50. An American male baby at birth has a 91% chance of surviving to age 50 while the highest among comparison countries is 96%. For women the corresponding figures are 95% and 98%. 19% of American men between the ages of 50-54 have a greater than 20% chance of a cardiovascular "event", fatal or not, within the next five years. Only 8% of Swedish men have the same likelihood. Sometime after age 50 a certain Darwinian effect takes hold. Towards age 70 the American survival rate goes to 16<sup>th</sup> lowest among the 17 countries, at ages 70-74 it advances to 15<sup>th</sup> place, by age 98 an American is more likely than any other to survive to a later age.

Americans have a higher average

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death rate for just about every cause except cancer. Only the Finns and Germans have a higher rate for the major killer, cardiovascular disease. Deaths from diabetes are half again as high in the United States when compared with the peer group.

Not surprisingly, the conditions which precede these deaths are much worse in America.

35% of American kids ages 5-19 are judged overweight by international standards. This compares with an average 22% for the other countries. The average American in the age range 20-34 is overweight, and from ages 35 to 54 the average is borderline obese. A separate survey of the 40 OECD countries found an average 17% of adults are obese, meaning at least 30 lbs. over an ideal weight, while in the United States the share is 34%. America ranks 17<sup>th</sup> of 17 in the actual presence of diabetes among adults.

Comparative information on diet and exercise is difficult to find but at least we have considerable information on the American diet. Since 1950 the average caloric intake has risen by about one-quarter and the composition of that increase has not been healthy.

More than 55% of the increase has been in additive fats, sugar and oil. Cheese consumption has risen nearly three times in the same period. The intake of high fructose corn syrup was zero in 1950, today the average American consumes more than 85 lbs per year. Restaurant food uses lots of fats, oil and syrup just because they improve taste,

## **Americans have a higher average death rate for just about every cause except cancer.**

hence sell more, and can act as preservatives. So it is significant that in 1977 about 18% of American caloric intake was from restaurants while twenty years later that number was 32%.

Information on physical activity is much harder to come by but scholars who compare spatial organization across societies always remark on what should be obvious—Americans don't walk much. We are a car based society. There is a lot of space separating us. We don't walk to work or to shops or to school. There is one cross national survey that asked people to self report on their exercise. Although most Americans claim some level of 'moderate to vigorous' activity during a week they are also the most likely to report no activity at all. Americans watch lots of TV, devoting a greater amount of time to it than citizens of any other country. Half of American children watch more than three hours of television daily.

It is not hard to connect the dots between diet and exercise and substandard health outcomes, and it is important to note that these connections are widely known. In other words Americans choose to ignore the warnings. And it is not

just an issue of class or ethnicity. Correcting for those factors does not change America's relative health standing.

But what is truly astounding is the American record on injuries, communicable disease and other maladies due to negligence, ignorance and poverty. When compared with the average of its sixteen peers the United States scores very badly. Infectious and parasitic disease deaths, which include HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, tuberculosis, hepatitis B and C and some other exotic communicable maladies, are twice as high in the U.S. Maternity death is four times higher in the U.S. and even nutrition related deaths, though rare, are higher in America. Americans are nearly twice as likely to die from accidents and half again as likely to die from intentional injuries.

'Unintentional injuries' are generally due to negligence. These include drunk driving, driving without a seatbelt, no fire alarm at home, and failure to secure medications from children's access. The category also includes death due to failure to wear a motorcycle helmet. U.S. reported helmet use is 58%, in spite of laws which mandate wearing a helmet. The next lowest comparison country has a 92% usage.

## **An American is more than six times as likely to be murdered.**

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'Intentional injuries' generally means suicide in other countries. Over 90% of those deaths are self-inflicted. But in the United States an intentional injury more often means homicide. An American is more than six times as likely to be murdered.

Social reformers will find plenty of ammunition in the Council's report. If negligence and ignorance are fundamental to our health problems then 'society', read government, should educate, even coerce, people into healthier lifestyles. If poverty is the problem certainly one of the fondest hopes for universal healthcare is that it will give poor people better access to the medical system. But the true effects of government power are a rather larger question than we can deal with here. The report's most important take away is that our basic health problems are not going to be resolved by any healthcare system. The adolescent, cowboy qualities of recklessness, self-indulgence, laziness and rejection of authority are the downside of America's peculiar strength—personal freedom. That last should be grounds for hope. Americans have certainly gotten the message on smoking. The adult smokers' rate is the lowest of the seventeen peers. Alcohol consumption is below average and anyone who lives in California knows that at least a very large part of the population has gotten the message on diet and exercise.

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## **Americans have gotten the message on diet and exercise.**



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