



Impressive material progress

By [Donald J. Boudreaux](#)

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You're one of the luckiest human beings ever to live.

I know this to be true because you're alive in the 21st century and likely living in the United States or some other advanced economy. You enjoy a standard of living that would have been inconceivable to any of our ancestors just nine or 10 generations ago — and, in many ways, jaw-droppingly impressive to our forebears of just two or three generations ago.

We today simply cannot conceive how miserable were the lives of nearly everyone, millennia upon millennia, until just 200 or 300 years ago.

But a wonderful new interactive website from the Cato Institute, humanprogress.org, helps us to see how much material progress we've made in recent years.

For example, on the page “Hours worked per worker,” we learn that in 1950, the typical American worker toiled 1,909 hours annually at his paid job. By 1975, this number had fallen to 1,755 hours. Today (2011), the typical American worker works even fewer hours annually — 1,705.

The typical American worker today puts in 204 fewer hours annually than did his grandfather 60 years ago — a decrease of 11 percent. Therefore, we Americans enjoy, on average, four more hours of leisure each week than our grandparents enjoyed in 1950. (The increase in leisure time is actually much larger, given the abundance today of labor-saving household appliances such as automatic dishwashers and microwave ovens.)

And what's true for Americans is true also for workers in most other countries. For example, the typical British worker in 1950 spent 2,201 hours annually on the job; that worker's grandchild today spends, on average, only 1,643 hours annually at work.

Or consider infant mortality. In 1960, 26 of every 1,000 children born in the U.S. died before their first birthday. Today, only six of every 1,000 American infants die. This fact means that American parents today are 77 percent less likely than they were just a half-century ago to suffer the tragedy of having to bury an infant child.

This happy trend isn't confined to rich countries. It's widespread. In Kenya, for instance, infant mortality fell from 119 per 1,000 live births in 1960 to 48 today.

Pollution is also on the decline. Carbon dioxide emissions in the U.S. in 1960 were 1.17 kilograms for every \$2,000 of inflation-adjusted GDP. Today (2008), CO2 emissions are only 0.47 kilograms for every \$2,000 of GDP. That's a 60-percent increase in the cleanliness of carbon-emitting factories and vehicles. And it's important to note that this decline in CO2 emissions began before passage of the Clean Air Act in 1970. In 1969, CO2 emissions in the U.S. were 1.08 — 8 percent lower than in 1960.

Unlike with other positive trends, this one is confined mostly to the U.S. and other advanced countries. The reason, though, is one to applaud: Since 1960, many other countries have finally gotten on a path to steady industrialization and economic growth. There is every reason to expect that these countries will, like the U.S., eventually reduce their CO2 emissions as their wealth continues to grow.

Humanprogress.org has just been launched, so much of it remains under construction. Yet it is already a wonderful source of information.

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