

MOTHERBOARD

BETA

By Meghan Neal on November 12, 2013

Human beings have a glass-half-empty problem. We spend a lot of time and energy lamenting all the problems in the world—which granted are plentiful and worth considering—because, for whatever reason, it's more fun to freak out about the future than look appreciatively back through history at the steady progress humanity has made. In fact, good on you for having even clicked on this relatively uplifting headline.

I'll take my share of the blame: The gap between public perception and actual facts is no doubt exacerbated by the news media—partly because fear sells and partly because it makes zero sense to report on every person that *wasn't* murdered today, or on every time someone dutifully recycles.

To that end, the [Cato Institute](#) has launched a website called humanprogress.org, to highlight all the good stuff that gets lost in the chaos as we fret about our dystopian present and the looming apocalypse.

Cato, a public policy think tank, compiled information from academia and global organizations that shows dramatic social improvements through history, particularly in recent decades and in developing nations. The whole [introductory article](#) is worth a read, especially if you're a history buff and/or enjoyed Steven Johnson's book on this very subject, [Future Perfect](#).

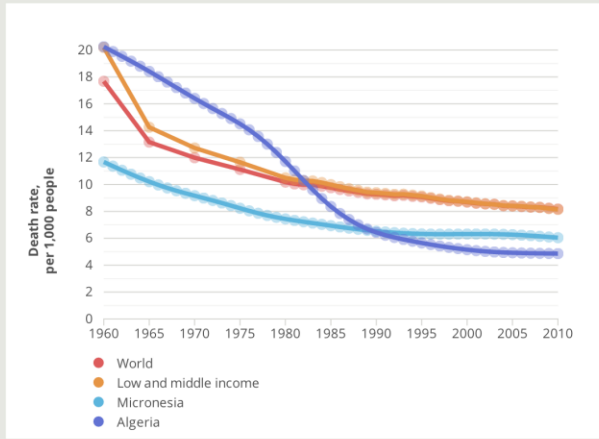
But let's leave aside what life was like for Neanderthals rubbing sticks together to stay warm, or medieval peasants during the bubonic plague, or wounded soldiers for whom amputation meant a knife and a slug of whiskey. Most of the site's data focuses on well-being and socioeconomics in modern-day society—throughout the 20th century and the past decade. The overall rate of social progress over time, the group explains, can be compared to the shape of a hockey stick: slow and steady, and then skyrocketing up.

The site uses charts and interactive data visualizations to depict changes across various areas of life: health, wealth, happiness, education, environment, human development, and so on. I went through and pulled out some examples. Hopefully they'll make you feel a little less depressed about the world.

Fewer people are dying:

Death rate across countries and regions

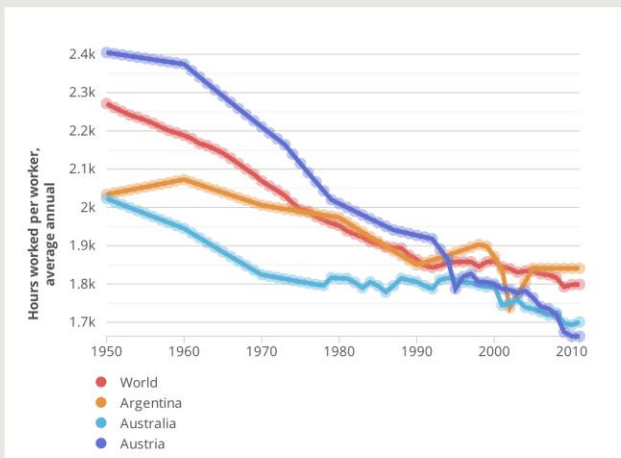
[Explore Data](#)



People are working fewer hours:

Hours worked per worker across countries and regions

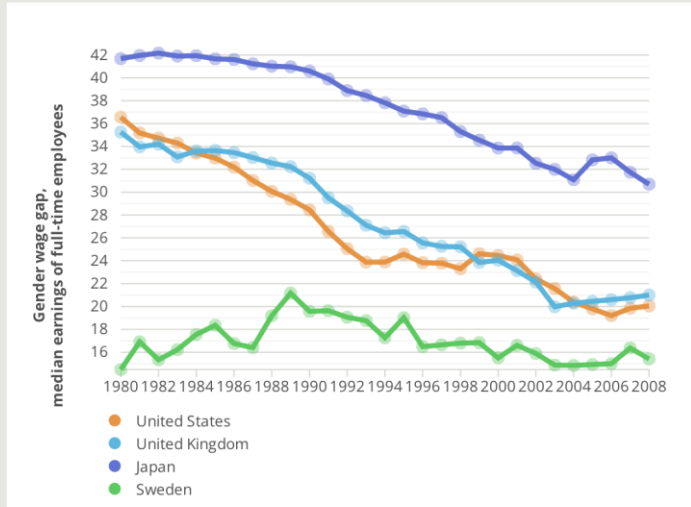
[Explore Data](#)



The gender wage gap is shrinking:

Gender wage gap, median earnings of full-time employees, OECD across countries and regions

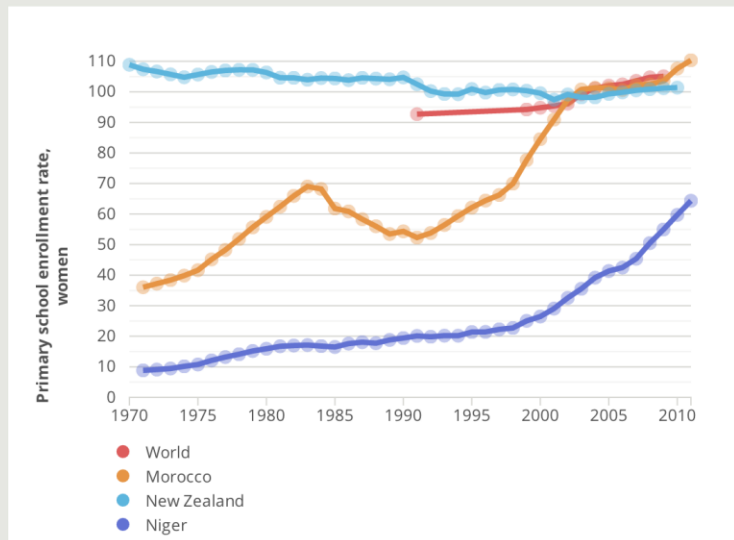
[Explore Data](#)



And more girls get to go to school:

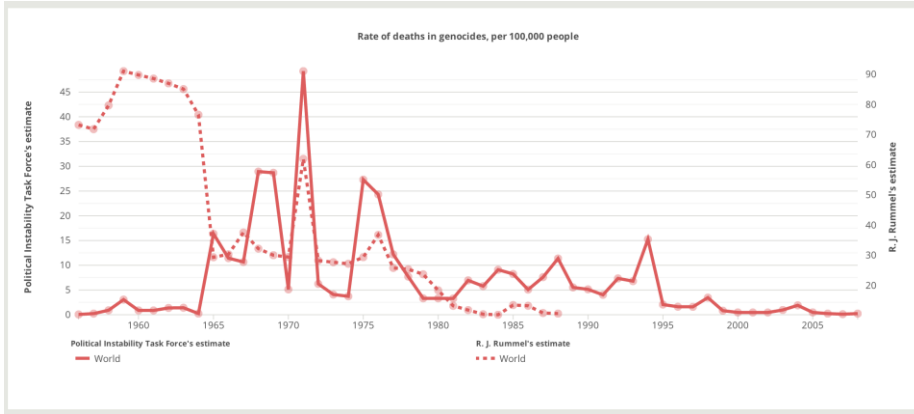
Primary school enrollment rate, women across countries and regions

[Explore Data](#)

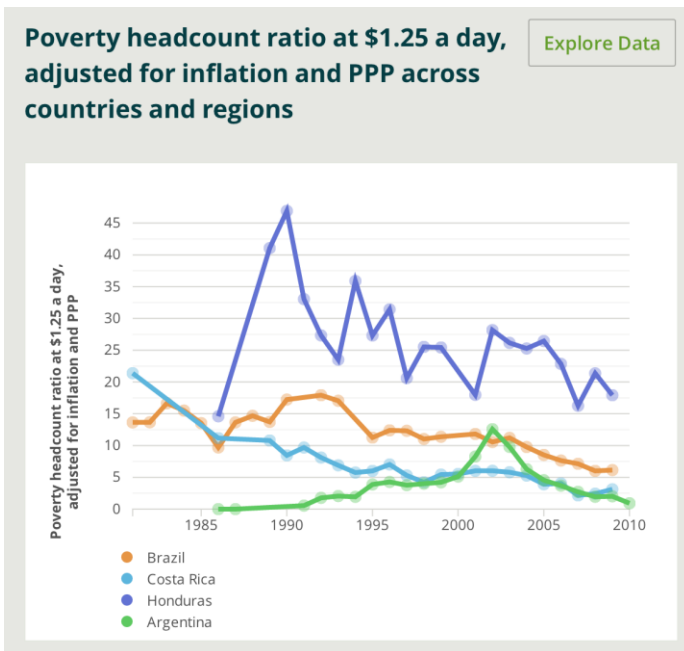


What gives, New Zealand?

People are killing each other less:



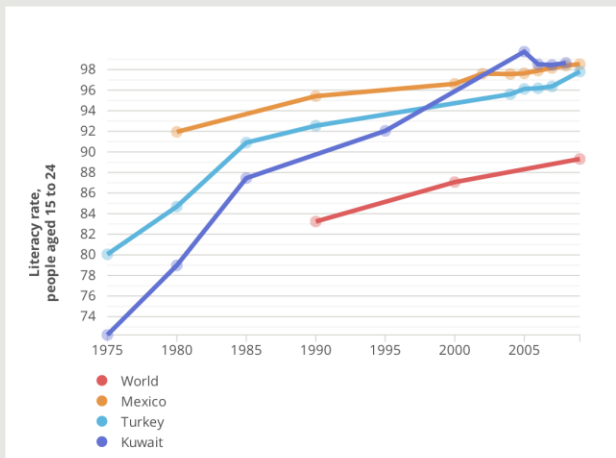
Global poverty is on the decline:



People are better educated:

Literacy rate, people aged 15 to 24 across countries and regions

[Explore Data](#)



I'm sure for every one of these encouraging charts you could find an equally discouraging depiction of the state of humanity. Statistics are fickle, social issues are nuanced, and the website's still a bit janky. But the goal is a sensible one: Conversations about the future should be smart, and rooted as much as possible in facts and not exaggeration, or else any progress going forward will move much more slowly.