

# THE ADVOCATE

## **Things are getting better. Really, they are.**

Marian L. Tupy

June 3, 2021

Polls show that most smart people tend to believe that the state of the world is getting worse rather than better.

Consider a 2016 survey by the global public opinion company YouGov that asked folks in 17 countries, “All things considered, do you think the world is getting better or worse, or neither getting better nor worse?” Fifty-eight percent of respondents thought that the world is getting worse, and 30% said that it is doing neither. Only 11% thought that things are getting better.

In the United States, 65% percent thought that the world is getting worse, and 23 % said neither. Only 6% of Americans responded that the world is getting better.

As my co-author Ronald Bailey and I demonstrate in our 2020 book "Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know: And Many Others You Will Find Interesting," this dark view of the prospects for humanity and the natural world is, in large part, badly mistaken.

Using uncontroversial data taken from official and scientific sources such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and World Bank, we show that, on most measures, the world is improving at an accelerated pace.

Globally, incomes are growing (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the median U.S. income was at an all-time high), and absolute poverty is declining. We live longer lives, with more mothers surviving pregnancy and more babies living into adulthood. Humanity has access to more food and education, cleaner water and safer sanitation. Homicide rates have fallen from their highs in most places, though that trend has been partly reversed recently. We fight fewer wars and wars that we do fight are shorter and cost fewer lives. The male-female gap in education and income is rapidly closing.

Other positive trends include the rise in global happiness, decline in global income inequality, falling share of the world’s population living in slums, political empowerment of women, rise in

IQ scores, decriminalization of same-sex relationships, continued rise in vaccinations against contagious diseases, falling cancer death rates, decline in the use of capital punishment, falling rates of military spending and conscription (again, partly reversed in recent years), the shrinkage of nuclear arsenals, a decline in working hours that leaves more time for leisure, falling rates of child labor and workplace accidents, increasing access to electricity, and internet-driven access to information.

Of course, not everything is getting better. That would be a miracle, not progress.

Yet many of the problems that we still face are being addressed or are on the cusp of being addressed. The forest coverage is growing in rich countries, species are being protected at record levels throughout the world, freshwater reserves are being replenished through desalination in the Middle East, soil erosion is being reduced through precision agriculture in Israel, and CO2 emissions have fallen in nuclear-friendly France and Sweden. In the future, genetically modified crops could lead to a decline in the use of nitrogen and phosphorus, and wild fish stocks could bounce back through greater use of aquaculture, which is rapidly expanding in China.

What's needed to address current and future problems is freedom and brainpower. People who are free to think, speak, read, publish and interact with others generate new ideas; new ideas lead to inventions and market-tested inventions lead to useful innovations that benefit all of us.

Human progress, in other words, depends on freedom of expression. We can't have the former without the latter. Let us, therefore, keep and protect both.

Remember that you can't fix what is wrong in the world if you don't know what's actually happening.

*Marian L. Tupy is the editor of [HumanProgress.org](http://HumanProgress.org), and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. His [June 9 virtual talk at Metairie Park Country Day School](#) is accessible via the school's website.*