
We are living in the good old days

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People unquestionably accept some ideas that are just wrong. One of these erroneous ideas is that things are getting worse. Of course, there are a lot of criteria that you can use to evaluate how things have changed. Undoubtedly some things have gotten better and others have gotten worse. But it seems to me, humankind is making progress and we should not be pining for the good old days from long ago that never really existed.

Steven Pinker, in his book *Rationality*, mentions some ways in which people are more civilized now than they were a few centuries ago. Back then slavery was widespread; women bound their feet; women were second-class citizens; and if you go back far enough, human sacrifice was common. We have come a long way and all of these practices that were acceptable long ago are now condemned and considered to be ridiculous. With respect to these issues, civilization is becoming a better place.

In a research article, Max Roser

and Hannah Ritchie bring up another way in which civilization has gotten better over time: there is less killing. In 1450, homicides were much more common than they are today. The number of people killed in a year was at least 45 per 100,000 in what we would now call Italy, Scandinavia, Netherlands, and Germany. In the most recent year reported in their study, the homicide rate in these areas dropped below 1.3 per 100,000. These numbers suggest that people are becoming significantly less violent over time.

Economists have developed many statistics to measure the economy's performance; but for the purposes of this column, I will discuss just one. Data from the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests one way in which the economy's performance is improving over time. Between 1853 and World War I, the United States economy was in a recession about half of the time. The average recession lasted 23 months and the average economic expansion lasted 26 months. After World War II, the economic good times far outweighed the bad. The average recession now only lasts

10.3 months and the average expansion now lasts over five years.

People in the United States are better off now that recessions are infrequent. During a recession, one of two things happens: either firms can't sell all of their output or they can't access the resources to continue producing at their old levels. In either case, firms don't need as many workers to produce this reduced level of output. As a result, firms layoff workers, which increases the unemployment rate. More people than usual can't find jobs. These people suffer real hardships as they struggle to pay their bills or to keep up their lifestyles.

When people say that things are getting worse, they usually have in mind an atypically good year that is not representative of an era or they have in mind an imaginary golden age. Across several metrics, we may be living in "the best of times." We would all do well to remember this as electronic media bombards us with bad news. A little history and a few statistics can make us feel better and help us put the constant stream of bad news in perspective.