

U.S., Britain fare poorly in children survey

UNICEF ranks the well-being of youngsters in 21 developed countries.

By Maggie Farley

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Analysis

This article really catches the eye: the U.S. and Britain - two of the most developed countries in the world, known for their educational systems, healthcare systems, etc. - rank at the bottom of 20 developed countries for the well-being of children. The Netherlands (one of the only countries with legalized drugs and prostitution) ranks at the top. This very subjective area is certainly open to manipulation, and it comes through clearly in this article.

Of course, the headline and top section of the article contain the strong statements, including the United Nations and UNICEF seals of approval. It is only at the end of the article that weaknesses in the study are acknowledged. Problems such as "lack of comparable data", "weak spots" for some of the assessment scales, and the acknowledgement that it is a weakly defined work-in-progress, are presented in a way so as not to detract from the results.

A closer look at the explanation of some of the inputs also helps to show how this surprising outcome could have occurred:

- When judging one of the 5 categories, "material well-being", the study "measured relative affluence by asking whether a family owned a vehicle, a computer, whether the children had their own bedroom, and how often the family traveled on holidays". There are many problems with this assessment, and the article acknowledges only the affect of public transport and real estate prices. There are numerous unaddressed variables that could affect the answers to these questions. One example of a hole in this logic is that it doesn't address number of siblings. A family that chooses to have many children can be very happy (have a high degree of well-being), but some, if not all, of those children would certainly share a room. They would also have less money to travel on holidays. This paradigm clearly favors families with one child, which opposes other factors in the study, such as asking a child if he or she is lonely.

- The results are based heavily on the answers to questions, which can be interpreted in numerous ways. For example, "Children in the Netherlands, Spain, and Greece said they were the happiest..." How can anyone put a definitive scale on 'happiness'? It seems that so much goes into the interpretation of that question that comparing the answer would be meaningless. The word 'happiness' may even imply different things in different languages. Similarly, "Those in Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands spent the most time with their families and friends." How does one define "spending time"? or "family and friends"? Those from one country may think of spending time with friends as time independent of school, team sports, or other structured activities, whereas those from somewhere else may think of it as any time they are not alone in a room.

The main critique I have for this article is that the whole premise is questionable. How can "the United States" be compared with a small country like the Czech Republic? Conditions across the United States are not homogeneous. The education system is not really one system at all, but is controlled at the state level, and there is wide variation within states, or even cities?

Does this study refer to schools in New York City or in an affluent suburb on Long Island? Can such disparate results be averaged? Does this take into account private schools in those areas, and if so, what data are they using? Does it only refer to standardized test results, and if so, it opens the huge debate on whether that is really a good measure of a complete education. Also, can standardized tests in America be compared to those in other countries? Similarly, the report acknowledged that “the average child in New York’s most affluent areas seem equal to one in a less-developed country because of the constraints of city living.” But what about comparing an affluent area in New York with an affluent area in New Mexico or Florida? Can an aggregate of “U.S.” statistics really provide any meaningful comparison with another country? The same questions exist regarding healthcare. There isn’t one healthcare system in America, so do we compare the system used by Hollywood stars or that used by inner-city Medicare recipients? Can the two be averaged in any meaningful way?

With so much subjectivity and so many unanswered questions regarding this study, it seems unreasonable for an organization such as the United Nations to put out such a definitive list. This is clearly a mis-use of statistics for some agenda of the UNICEF’s research center. The discussion as to the nature of that agenda would be purely speculative, so I’ll leave that as an exercise for the reader.