

America's Social Health: Putting Social Issues Back on the Public Agenda

Marque-Luisa Miringoff and Sandra Opdycke, M.E. Sharpe. Armonk, New York and London, England. October 2007. 255 pp. \$24.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-7656-1674-6

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In "*America's Social Health: Putting Social Issues Back on the Public Agenda*" (2007) Miringoff and Opdycke look at America's social health problems and concerns. The authors clearly organize these issues into 16 "key indicators" which fall under five "stages of life". The five stages of life are: *Social Indicators for Children*, *Social Indicators for Youth*, *Social Indicators for Adults*, *Social Indicators for the Elderly*, and *Social Indicators for All Ages*. The 255 page book is organized into nine chapters, which are subsequently broken down into two parts, the conclusion, tables, graphs and appendixes. Miringoff and Opdycke have not only written a well organized book on the topic of America's Social Health, but have also managed to offer a prognosis, diagnosis and hope for a cure regarding ongoing health issues in our country.

This book would make an excellent reference for sociologists or sociology students studying trends in society or public administrators and their students who wish to monitor the government's response to social issues. For the reasonable price of \$24.95, both students and practitioners will have a better view of the social health crisis in America.

Under *Social Indicators for Children*, the authors examine infant mortality, child poverty and child abuse. *Social Indicators for Youth* include teenage suicide, teenage drug abuse and high school dropouts, *Social Indicators for Adults* examines unemployment, wages and health insurance coverage, while *Social Indicators for the Elderly* analyzes poverty and out of pocket health costs in adults 65 years of age and older. Finally, the authors observe trends related to homicides, alcohol related traffic fatalities, food stamp coverage, affordable housing and income inequality in all age groups.

In their introduction, the authors state that it is their "hope that this book will help readers envision a more secure future richer in social well-being and animated by a clearer sense of how to assess national progress" (p. 13). Furthermore, the authors claim that it is

[their] “intent in this book is to identify gaps in how our nation currently presents and publishes social information...” (p. 11). The authors have managed to accomplish what their book promises by clearly identifying and breaking down the country’s population, and predominant social problems.

The authors begin their introduction with a brief history of the last time America examined its social health in a comprehensive, relatively all-inclusive report. Readers will be surprised to learn that not since William Cohen, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Lyndon Johnson, has the American government tried to implement indicators or examine the nations progress in the area of social health. Cohen’s report, entitled *Toward a Social Report*, was, according to the authors, “the last time the United States government seriously considered establishing a comprehensive framework to monitor and report on the social conditions of the nation.” (p. 9).

The authors raise several points about not only the need to establish indicators regarding the nation’s social health, but ways that the government can accurately monitor and measure these indicators. The authors draw attention to areas that we take for granted every day as accurate measures and indicators as to success or failure. For example, there are indicators that clearly tell society how we are doing in the areas of unemployment, inflation, and the stock market. Statistics tell us how politicians are doing in the polls and how baseball players are doing on the field. All of this information is available on a daily, up-to-the-minute basis via the media. Yet, as the authors mention, social indicators, studies, data and reports on society’s problems are often three years old before their findings are released.

The authors propose to monitor and report social problems, issues and patterns in a way that resembles how America monitors economic trends. The authors discuss that one way to accomplish these goals are “by providing better media coverage, by producing regular social reports, and by developing more innovative tools for assessing social health” (p. 23). The authors explain that the media could be used as tools to help society not only understand that certain social problems exist, but to question the government and hold the government accountable to these issues. It is the author’s hopes that “over time, the ups and downs of these indicators, much like economic indicators, could become an accepted part of the national news scene, requiring regular explanation and analysis.” (p. 23).

The authors have not only successfully described their findings, provided significant data, they have also provided the reader with charts and graphs dating back to 1970. The charts also describe areas which the authors have targeted as improving since 1970 (alcohol-related traffic fatalities, high school drop out rates, homicide rates, infant mortality, poverty in the elderly and teenage drug abuse) and areas that have before worse over the past three decades (affordable housing, child abuse, poverty among children, food stamp coverage, health insurance coverage, income inequality, health costs for the elderly, teenage suicide, and unemployment rates). The graphs provide the reader with a clear visual as to the problems faced in America and other countries.

In addition to charts and graphs, the authors have provided data as to America’s world standing as compared to several other countries. Using the CIA’s World Factbook, the authors have compared America’s ratings in areas such as infant mortality, high school graduation rates, poverty levels, homicides, and housing shortages, identifying what they

describe as the “five main phases in the country’s social performance since 1970” as 1970-1976 as being a record high, 1976-1983 as having a sharp decline, 1983-1993 and 2000-2005 as being a stagnated period and 1993-2000 as being the only area of progress. By understanding these periods, and studying the factors that have influenced these ups and downs in social performance, perhaps public administrators, sociologists, and others in the field can have a better understanding of not only social problems, but predictors, indicators and solutions.

While the authors have provided a well researched analysis of America’s social health problems there needs to be more research conducted in the areas of finding practical solutions from examining and accurately recording data, to getting the information out to the public in a timely fashion. There also has to be a common world-recognized and accepted practices and standards regarding monitoring the areas of social health. As the authors have described, having the data is necessary but getting this information out to the public is imperative if we are going to hold the government accountable to making changes.

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