

standard of living shorts

LIFE FOR MOST AMERICANS IS MEASURABLY LONGER, LESS PHYSICALLY DEMANDING, AND MORE COMFORTABLE THAN IT USED TO BE. AND IF THERE ARE DAYS WHEN YOU HAVE YOUR DOUBTS — DAYS WHEN THE PAST SEEMS MORE APPEALING THAN THE PRESENT — HERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO REMEMBER.

Longer Lives

Average life expectancy for an American born in 1900: 47.3 years.

Average life expectancy for an American born in 2000: 76.9 years.

SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS

Less Drudgery

“[In the early 20th century] the urban working-class family tended to live in cramped, dark apartments; ate large amounts of bread

with little jam or butter; wore remade and mended clothing; stayed mostly within walking distance of home except perhaps for going to work; attended church or temple as their main social activity; and had little money to spend on treats or gifts. Severe economizing was required to attain even this austere life-style. Any economic mistakes, such as buying uncomfortable shoes or a cut of spoiled meat, meant temporary deprivation for the family since their budgets could not accommodate the replacement of these items. The bleakness of everyday material life provided little relief from the difficult physical labor of husbands and the exhausting housework of wives.”

SOURCE: *AMERICAN STANDARDS OF LIVING 1918-1988*, CLAIR BROWN, BLACKWELL PUBLISHERS, 1994

Greater Comfort

In 1890, 24 percent of U.S. households had running water, and 13 percent had flush toilets. And “without running water, housewives had to haul 10,000 gallons a year into the kitchen, laundry, or bath.”

In 1900, 3 percent of U.S. households had electric lighting.

In 1920, 8 percent of U.S. households had a washing machine. One percent had a mechanical refrigerator; 48 percent had an icebox.

SOURCE: *PURSuing HAPPINESS*, STANLEY LEBERGOTT, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1993

“By comparison with the conveniences and comforts widely available in developed economies at the end of the 20th century, everyday life two centuries ago was most akin to what we know today as ‘camping out.’”

SOURCE: “THE WORLDWIDE STANDARD OF LIVING SINCE 1800” *JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES*, WINTER 2000, RICHARD A. EASTERLIN





More Variety

“Of 30,000 new products introduced in grocery stores after 1960, some 25,000 did not survive to 1980. Of 84,933 introduced between 1980 and 1990, 86 percent did not survive to 1990.”

SOURCE: *PURSUING HAPPINESS*, STANLEY LEBERGOTT
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1993

The Smell Test

At the start of the 20th century, New York City had close to 150,000 horses, each of which produced 20-25 pounds of manure a day.

SOURCE: *THE GOOD OLD DAYS — THEY WERE TERRIBLE*, OTTO BETTMANN,
RANDOM HOUSE, 1974

The world's first underarm antiperspirant, Mum, hit the market in 1888. The term “B.O.” (short for “body odor”) first appeared in a 1919 advertisement for Odo-Ro-No, an underarm deodorant cream for women.

SOURCE: *JANE & MICHAEL STERN'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF POP CULTURE*, JANE AND
MICHAEL STERN, HARPER COLLINS, 1992