

editor's note

Are we better off than we were?

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.”

—Richard A. Easterlin
“The Worldwide Standard of Living Since 1800”
Journal of Economic Perspectives, Winter 2000

Almost without fail, one generation’s indulgence becomes the next generation’s necessity. Thin buttons, window glass, rugs, fermented juice, the color purple, door handles, lace, enamel, candles, pillows, mirrors, combs, umbrellas.”

—James B. Twitchell
Quoted in “Burgher Deluxe,” by Sandra Tsing Loh
The Atlantic, December 2003

The good old days were “good” because we were all younger back then.

—Anonymous



Andersen Ross/Getty Images

Americans are healthier, wealthier, and wiser (or at least more educated) than ever.

Healthier

- An American born in 1900 could expect to live 47 years. An American born in 2000 could expect to live past 77.

Wealthier

- The U.S. homeownership rate hit a record high of 69 percent in 2004.
- Between 1900 and 2000, the number of motor vehicles registered in the United States went from 8,000 to more than 221 million, most of which are safer, cleaner, better-equipped, and more reliable than ever before.

And maybe wiser

- In 1910, only 13.5 percent of the U.S. population had graduated from high school, but by 2000 more than 84 percent were high school grads.

So, why do we sometimes wonder if we’re really better off or happier than our parents or grandparents were? With all the things we have, all the progress we’ve made, and all the comforts we enjoy, why should there be any doubt whatsoever?

And let’s not forget one of the oldest questions of all: Can we buy happiness?

These are not, strictly speaking, questions of pure economics. But they’re worth exploring because our response to them will influence how we choose to spend our time, money, and energy—not only in our personal lives but in a larger societal context as well.

One last thing before we begin: Although we’re raising these questions, we can’t answer them for you. Ultimately, we each need to find our own answers . . . and that can take a lifetime. ■