

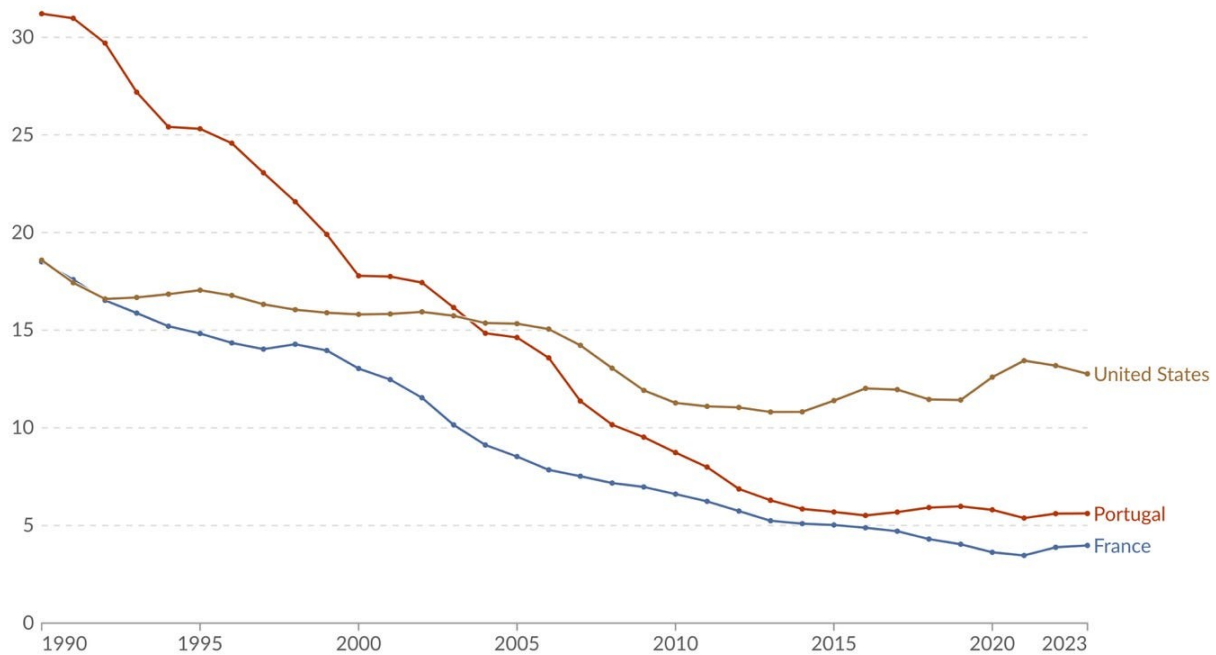
What Happens When Americans Realize How Miserable We Are?

di Paul Krugman

Death rate from road injuries, 1990 to 2023



Annual number of deaths from road injuries per 100,000 people. Deaths include those from drivers and passengers, motorcyclists, cyclists, and pedestrians.



Data source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2025)

OurWorldinData.org/causes-of-death | CC BY

Note: To allow for comparisons between countries and over time, this metric is age-standardized¹.

1. Age standardization Age standardization is an adjustment that makes it possible to compare populations with different age structures, by standardizing them to a common reference population.

Read more: [How does age standardization make health metrics comparable?](#)

The title of today's post is a riff on a recent headline in the [Wall Street Journal](#): "What happens when Europeans find out how poor they are?" The Journal's management evidently liked that article, which revolved around the assertion that European

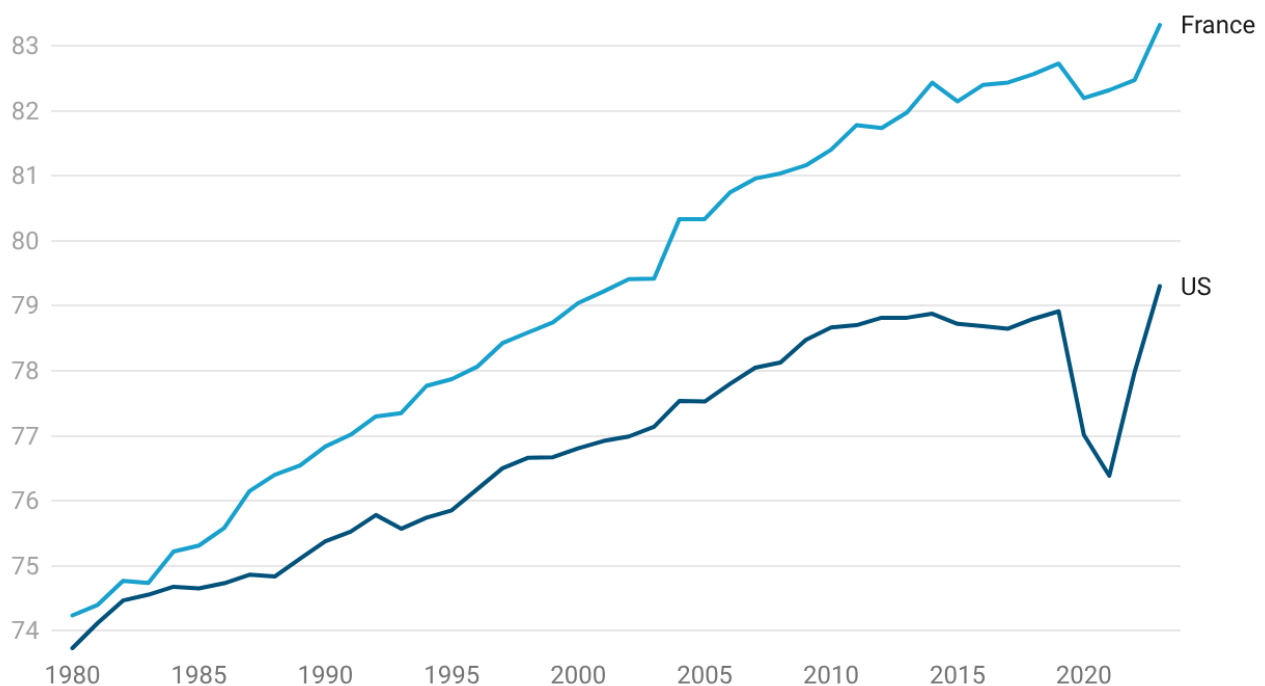
economies are lagging far behind the U.S. A few days ago they published a [video](#) enlarging on the claim.

As I [explained](#) the other day, however, perceptions of European decline are largely based on a statistical misunderstanding. European incomes relative to American incomes have *not* declined, because GDP growth as conventionally measured doesn't mean what many people think it means. For the extremely wonkish, I've posted a little [mathematical model](#) to explain what's going on in the data.

But let me not stop there, and pose a challenge in the opposite direction: What will happen when Americans realize how miserable we are? Not in all respects, of course. But my guess is that relatively few Americans realize how much we are falling behind other nations on basic aspects of a civilized life, like health and safety.

Take the issue of life expectancy, which surely matters as much as GDP. After all, one important contributor to the quality of life is not being dead. Judging from reader reactions to earlier posts, many generally well-informed Americans are still startled to learn how badly U.S. life expectancy has lagged behind other advanced nations:

Life expectancy (years)



Source: Our World in Data • Created with Datawrapper

This life expectancy gap will surely grow in the years ahead, thanks to the Trump administration's attacks on both health coverage and modern medicine, including but not limited to the widening [assault on vaccines](#).

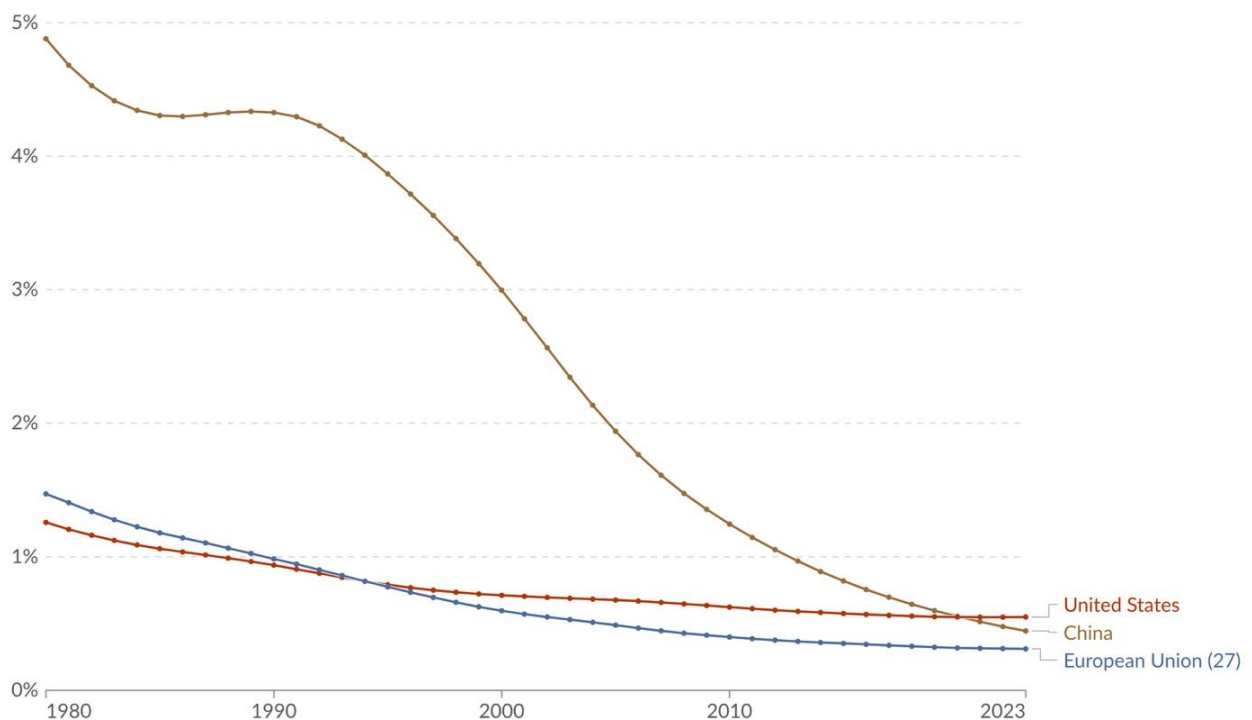
The US lag in preventing deaths gets even more startling when one begins to delve into the details. I myself only learned recently that the United States, which used to lead the world in traffic safety, now has much more dangerous roads than other wealthy nations. I included Portugal in the chart at the top of this post because of personal history: I worked in Lisbon for three months in 1976, and driving there back then was terrifying. Now Portugal has much safer roads than we do.

Or consider infant mortality, where the United States not only does much worse than other rich nations but now does worse than some much poorer countries:

Infant mortality rate

Our World
in Data

Estimated share of newborns who die before they are one year old.

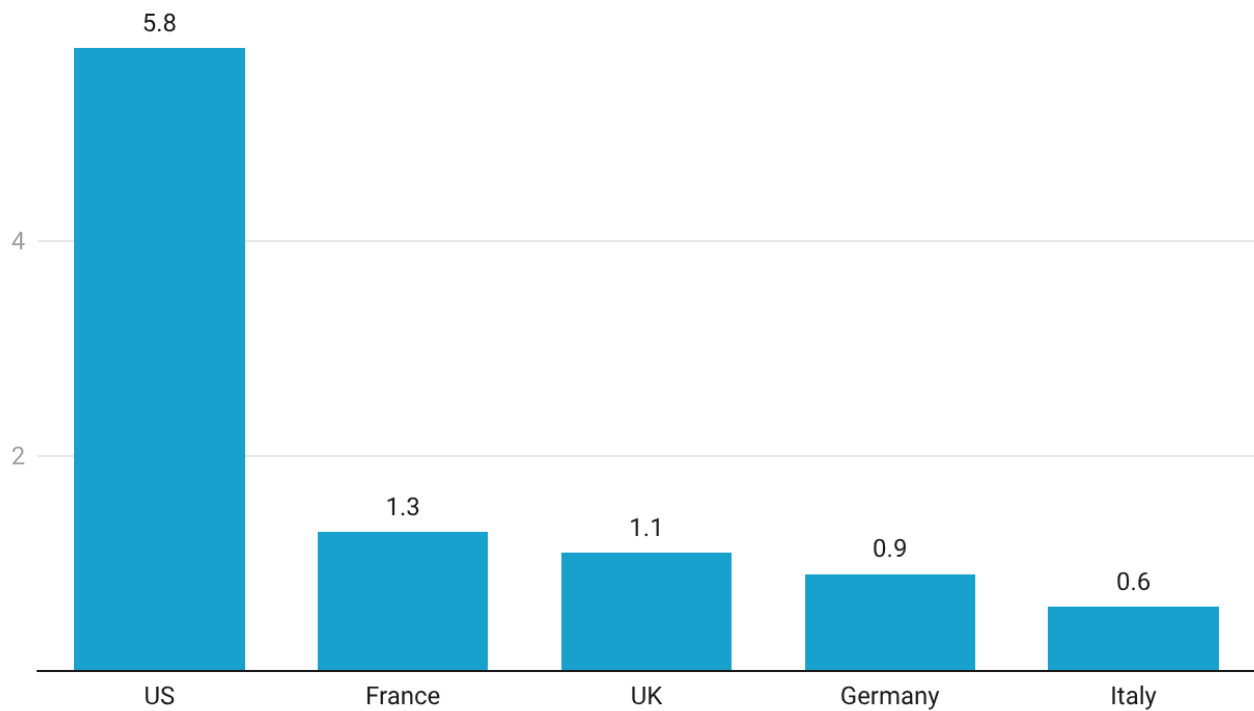


Data source: United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (2025)

OurWorldinData.org/child-mortality | CC BY

Then there's deaths by violence. Donald Trump and right-wingers in general often portray European cities as [dangerous places](#), overrun by criminal immigrants. The reality is that while U.S. crime has [plunged](#) from its peak around 1990 — you wouldn't know it listening to the right, but New York City in particular is incredibly safe by historical standards — murder rates are still far higher in the U.S. than in Europe:

Homicides per 100,000 people



Source: Our World In Data • Created with Datawrapper

Mortality is a useful point of comparison because it's easily quantifiable. So, to a lesser extent, is work-life balance. As I noted in Sunday's [primer](#), the Germans and the French are roughly as productive per hour as Americans. They have lower GDP per capita than we do because they have more leisure time. Most German employees, for example, receive [25-28 days of paid leave](#) every year. The average US private-sector worker receives only [10 days of paid vacation](#) and 6 paid holidays annually.

And the US is, of course, the only advanced nation that doesn't guarantee healthcare to all its citizens.

Other problems with the US way of life — like our lack of walkable cities, access to public transportation, and feasibility of living without a car — are harder to summarize with simple numbers. But they are real failings.

I don't mean to suggest that everything is worse in the U.S. We do, in fact, have substantially higher GDP per capita than European nations, and this is reflected in our material standard of living. For example, we live in bigger houses, which is nothing to sneer at, and drive bigger cars. And as people who have lived on both sides of the Atlantic can attest, “getting stuff done” — everything from finding a place to live to finding a plumber on a weekend — is often much easier in America.

But there are many ways in which America's quality of life is much worse than one would expect given the nation's wealth. And we should always remember that economic growth is supposed to be the foundation of a better life. A nation that has high GDP per capita but whose citizens live worse than their counterparts in other countries is not a success story.

And many Americans would, I believe, be angry if they realized how much worse our lives are in many ways than those of our counterparts abroad.

Why are American lives so often nastier, more brutish, and shorter than those of citizens of other advanced nations? That's a complicated story, but much of it comes down to the fact that US politics has for decades been dominated by a party that is fiercely opposed to any concept of shared responsibility, of caring for our fellow citizens, and that foments a deep level of distrust that makes it ever harder to operate as a society.

As a result, we don't guarantee healthcare. We underfund public services. We promote private consumption — including driving — while neglecting the provision of public goods. We don't assure basic health and safety, including for children, which in the long run will make us poorer. It's not an accident that America began to fall behind other rich countries in many ways around 1980, that is, around the time the election of Ronald Reagan marked a sharp rightward turn in U.S. politics and policy.

You shouldn't read this post as an exercise in America-bashing. As a nation, we have many strengths and virtues. But we also have weaknesses and failings. And American

triumphalism, which often involves bashing Europe, gets in the way of recognizing what we get wrong.