

More Questions and Answers about Health in United States of America

Questions

1. Is USA the healthiest country in the world in terms of life expectancy (average length of life)?
 - Is it in the top ten countries? Twenty countries?
2. What percent share of the world's health care budget is spent in USA?
3. What is the largest difference in life expectancy (average length of life) between populations in USA?
4. What is the largest difference in life expectancy among countries in the world?
5. Could you believe that the healthiest country in the world, as ranked by life expectancy (average length of life) is the rich country with the most smokers?
6. Suppose the United States could eradicate all deaths from heart disease, our number one killer, and keep the other disease death rates unchanged, would we be the healthiest country in the world?
7. If we spend so much money on health care and have such a technologically advanced health care system, why aren't we healthier?
8. Who lives longer after reaching age 35, the Harlem New York City man or the a man from Bangladesh (a country east of India)?
9. Which group was healthier -- the cave man (hunter gatherers), or farming populations after plants and animals were domesticated?
10. Is the chance of a teenager getting pregnant in the US related to the income gap where they live?
11. True or false: USA leads the OECD (30 richest countries in the world) in the rates of teenagers giving birth?
12. True or false: a boy growing up in a single-parent household in Sweden has a 50% greater chance of dying than a boy growing up in a 2-parent household there?
13. True or false: USA leads the world in the number of prisoners?
14. True or false: USA leads the OECD countries in the number of homicides per capita?
15. How many homeless children are estimated to live in USA, the richest and most powerful country in world history?
16. In this richest country, how much do we give in assistance as a percentage of our GROSS national product to other countries less fortunate than us? How much did we give 40 years ago? How do we compare to other rich countries? Who is the largest benefactor of our assistance?
17. What is the most significant factor affecting the health of a population?

Answers

1. No, it is not the healthiest, nor is in the top ten or twenty. In the United Nations *Human Development Report* published 2003, and revised annually, it ranked 26th, behind the rich countries and a few poor ones as well. It has been declining relative to other countries since the early 1950s. In 1960 it was 13th.
2. According to the World Health Organization, the United States of America spent 42% of the entire world's health care bill in 2000, yet it comprises only 4.6% of the world's population. Now it is close to 50%.
3. It is 41 years between American Indian men on Indian Reservations in South Dakota, and women of Asian descent in Bergen County, New Jersey. This is from a study, *US Patterns of Mortality by County and Race: 1965-1994*, by Chris Murray, of Harvard University, published in 1998.
4. It is 48 years between Japan, the world's healthiest country, and Zambia, the least healthy country, according to the United Nations 2003 *Human Development Report*.
5. Japan's life expectancy is 81.3 years (US is 4.4 years lower), and according to the American Cancer Society's *Tobacco Control Country Profiles 2000*, twice as many men smoke in Japan than the US, they have only had a 4% decline since 1970, whereas the US rate has halved during that time. No other rich country has as many smokers as Japan.
6. No we would not surpass Japan in health, but we would be in the top five countries. See John Lynch's paper in the *Journal of the American Public Health* (1998 volume 88, pages 1074-1080) to see how the calculation is done.
7. Health care as carried out today is not found to be a factor producing health outcomes in rich countries. Japan spends half as much per capita as we do, yet is much healthier. Surprisingly, harm due to medical care is a significant cause of death. See *Seattle Times* Op-Ed "Medical care may harm your health" Jan 10, 2000. Thomas Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* said, "If you can get them asking the wrong question, the answers don't matter." The right question is number 17.
8. The male from Bangladesh lives longer according to a study carried out by Colin McCord and published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1990 (Volume 322, pg 173-77).
9. Biological anthropologists have uniformly found that health declined with agriculture, so the cave man or hunter-gatherer was healthier. See Larsen's paper in the 1995 *Annual Review of Anthropology* (page 185-213).
10. Yes, a study by Rachel Gold found that birth rates of teenagers aged 15-17 varied with the income distribution in the counties they lived. Where the gap was bigger, whether it was in rich, middle income, or poor counties, there were more teenage births. See *Maternal and Child Health Journal* (2001) page 161-67.
11. True. See UNICEF's Innocenti Report Card No.3, July 2001. 'A league table of teenage births in rich nations' available at <http://www.unicef-icdc.org/>
12. True. See Weitoft, G. R., A. Hjern, et al. (2003). "Mortality, severe morbidity, and injury in children living with single parents in Sweden: a population-based study." *Lancet* 361: 289-95. The context in which we grow up has profound implications for our future welfare, even in a country with huge social supports.

13. True. America houses one quarter of the world's prisoners. See the *New York Times*, March 26, 2001.
14. True, according to the World Health Organization's *World Report on Violence and Health 2002*. See <http://web.hhs.se/personal/suzuki/> for tabulations of many indicators among the richest countries.
15. According to the *New York Times Magazine* March 24, 2002 article by Jennifer Egan, "between 900,000 and 1.4 million children in America are homeless for a time in a given year."
16. We give 0.1% of our GNP in aid to other countries. Forty years ago, it was six times as much, 0.6%. The largest share goes to Israel, which is healthier than we are. We give the least of all rich countries, measured as the proportion of our economy.
17. According to research done since 1979, the factor most responsible for the health of a population is a measure of the hierarchy in society. The income gap is the statistic usually looked at. We have studies showing this relationship among countries, and within countries, such as the United States. Other aspects that are influenced by the income gap include violence, and various behaviors. The factors usually considered as being important, such as not smoking, eating right, exercising, medical care, etc. are less significant, as evidenced by Japan's being the healthiest country, yet with the most smokers. Studies on this relationship are summarized on the Population Health Forum Web site at <http://depts.washington.edu/eqhlth/>. The best single source of information is the book *Unhealthy Societies, The Afflictions of Inequality*, by Richard Wilkinson, published by Routledge. Another is the recent *The Health of Nations*, by Ichiro Kawachi and Bruce Kennedy, published by the New Press.

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Find more information on issues raised by these questions and answers at the Population Health Forum Web site, <http://depts.washington.edu/eqhlth/paper.html>.