

50 Ways The World is Getting Better

"I am not an optimist. I am a very serious possibilist." - Hans Rosling

You don't have to look too far to find negativity these days.

Just watch the news, go on social media, or even have conversations with friends, family members, or co-workers.

You'll likely hear or read about political instability, natural disasters, murder, disease, or an endless list of bad news you can find 24/7 because of the free flow of information. Every year people label the current year the worst year ever but these people have obviously never read a history book.

The combination the negativity and availability bias make it easy to assume the world is getting worse on a daily basis. It feels as if we're now taking one step forward and two steps back.

In reality, this is the greatest time in history to be alive. The world has seen an unbelievable amount of progress over almost any time horizon you look at. It's just that bad news is an event or headline while good news is a process or statistic. Bad news makes for a better story and stories are what stick with us, not statistics.

I've read four books over the past few months that make it clear just how much progress the world has experienced to get to this point (all four books were excellent):

- [The Rise and Fall of American Growth by Robert Gordon](#)
- [The Better Angels of Our Nature by Steven Pinker](#)
- [Factfulness by Hans Rosling](#)
- [Enlightenment Now by Steven Pinker](#)

Each of these books methodically goes through the data to show how human ingenuity and innovation have created massive progress around the globe. There is still a lot of work to be done and the world is certainly far from perfect.

But sometimes it's good to have a reminder that progress is there even when it doesn't feel like it. What follows are 50 amazing facts I found in these books that prove this out:

1. Over the last 20 years, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has almost been cut in half.
2. Just 200 years ago, 85% of the world population lived in extreme poverty. 20 years ago it was

29%. Today only 9% live in extreme poverty while the majority of people (75%) around the globe live in middle-income countries.

3. In 1997, 42% of the population of both India and China were living in extreme poverty. By 2017 that share had dropped to 12% and less than 1% for India and China, respectively. That means almost three-quarters of a billion fewer people are living in extreme poverty in these two countries than there were just 20 years earlier.

4. In 1800, among all babies who were ever born, roughly half died during their childhood. Life expectancy was just 30 years and no country had a life expectancy above 40. Life expectancy at birth was only 45 years in 1870. The average life expectancy around the world today is 72.

5. The violent crime rate has been on a downward trend since 1990 in the U.S. Just under 14.5 million crimes were reported in 1990. By 2016 that figure was well under 9.5 million.

6. The number of deaths from natural disasters is 25% of what it was 100 years ago.

7. Flying has gotten 2,100 times safer over the past 70 years. 2016 was the second safest year in aviation history. The odds of being fatally injured in a plane crash are just 0.000025%.

8. The real price of plane travel in the U.S. has fallen by more than half since the late 1970s.

9. Between the late Middle Ages and the 20th century, European countries saw a 10-fold-to-50-fold decline in their rates of homicide.

10. The share of homes that had electricity in 1870 was exactly zero. Today the proportion of people with electricity is 85%.

11. In 1905, a Vermont doctor and his chauffeur were the first to successfully drive a car across country from San Francisco to New York. It took them 63 days. Today you can fly cross country in a matter of hours while using wireless Internet.

12. There was no entertainment available to the average family in 1870, except for a few traveling musicians or circus performers or in-home board or card games. Today our entertainment options are almost unlimited.

13. Close to 20% of males born in the U.S. died before their first birthday in the year 1900. Today the mortality rate doesn't reach that high until you get to age 62.

14. More than 37% of deaths in 1900 were caused by infectious diseases. That number dropped to less than 5% by 1955 and just 2% by 2009.

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15. Retirement is still is a relatively new concept. In the past most people simply worked until they died. In the year 1870, for those who lived past age 65, the labor force participation ratio for males was close to 90%. Today it's less than 20%.

16. The average American now retires at age 62. One hundred years ago, the average American died at age 51.

17. The percentage of the population living past their 65th birthday was only 34% in 1870 but jumped to 56% by 1940 and 77% by 2000.

18. Up until the 1870s, people typically worked 11-12 hour days. By 1900, the typical worker put in 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. It wasn't until 1940 that it came down to the standard 40-hour, 5-day workweek. And these weren't office jobs sitting behind a desk. The conditions for most workers were terrible and hazardous to their health.

19. Time spent on laundry fell from 11.5 hours a week in 1920 to 1.5 hours in 2014 (although I have twins so my family brings up the average on this one).

20. By the late-1600s, one-third of the children born in the richest parts of the world died before their 5th birthday. Today, this sad fate befalls just 6% of the children in the poorest parts of the world.

21. The proportion of people killed annually in wars is less than a quarter of what it was in the 1980s, one-seventh of what it was in the early 1970s, one-eighteenth of what it was in the early 1950s, and a 0.5% of what it was during World War II.

22. Early in the 19th century, 12% of the world could read and write. Today it's 83%.

23. Americans are half as likely to be murdered as they were two dozen years ago.

24. The world's nuclear stockpiles have been reduced by 85% since the Cold War.

25. Over the course of the 20th century, Americans became 96% less likely to be killed in a car accident and 95% less likely to be killed on the job.

26. The world has gotten richer (as measured by Gross World Product) in 51 of the last 55 years.

27. In 1929 Americans spent more than 60% of their disposable income on necessities; by 2016 that had fallen to a third.

28. Since 1960, the fraction of a person's life taken up by work has fallen by 25% through a combination of shorter workweeks, more paid time off, and longer retirements.

29. The high school graduation rate was just 9% in 1910. It jumped to 52% by 1940 and 83% today.
30. Every single country in the world today has a lower infant or child mortality rate than it had in 1950.
31. A British baby who had survived their first year of life would have lived to 47 in 1845, 57 in 1905, 72 in 1955, and 81 in 2011. A 30-year-old could look forward to another 33 years of life in 1845, another 36 in 1905, another 43 in 1955, and another 52 in 2011.
32. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of deaths from malaria (which in the past killed half the people who had ever lived) fell by 60%.
33. The control of infectious disease since 1990 has saved the lives of more than a 100 million children.
34. Between 1961 and 2009 the amount of land used to grow food increased by 12%, but the amount of food that was grown increased by 300%.
35. 1,000 years after Jesus walked the earth the world was barely any richer. It took 500 years for income to double from there. Then between 1820 and 1900, the world's income tripled. It tripled again in a little more than 50 years. It took only 25 years for it to triple again, and another 33 years to triple yet again.
36. Since 1995, 30 of the world's 109 developing countries have seen economic growth rates that amount to a doubling of income every 18 years. Another 40 countries have had rates that would double income every 35 years, which is comparable to the historical growth rate of the U.S.
37. The number of people in extreme poverty has fallen by an average of 137k people every day for the past 25 years.
38. Two centuries ago the life expectancy in The Netherlands, the richest country in the world at the time, was just 40, and in no country was it above 45. Today, life expectancy in the poorest country in the world is 54. There are no countries where life expectancy is below 45.
39. When poverty is defined in terms of what people consume rather than what they earn, the American poverty rate has declined by 90% since 1960, from 30% of the population to just 3%.
40. There are 180,000 people walking around today who would have been murdered just in the last year if the global homicide rate had remained at the same level from a dozen years ago.
41. Between 1950 and 2009, the rate of death in traffic accidents fell six-fold.

42. In 1970 the chance that an airline passenger would die in a plane crash was less than 5 in a million; by 2015 that small risk had fallen a hundredfold.

43. In the 1990s, the U.S. saw its homicide rate plunge by half in just 9 years. In New York City, it dropped 75% in the same time.

44. There has been a 37-fold decline since the turn of the 20th century in the chance that an American will be killed by a bolt of lightning.

45. Roughly half of the adults in the world own a smartphone.

46. Just 7% of the world's population lived in a free or relatively free society in 1850. Today that number is closer to two-thirds.

47. The literacy rate from the 17th to 19th century was just one-eighth of the global population. From that point on the world's literacy rate doubled in the next century and quadrupled in the century after that, so now 83% of the world is literate.

48. In 1820, more than 80% of the world was unschooled. It's estimated that by the end of the century this number will be close to zero.

49. In 1920, just 28% of American teenagers ages 14-17 were in high school. The latest stats show over 80% graduated high school, of whom 70% went on to college.

50. In 1940, less than 5% of Americans held a bachelor's degree. By 2015, it was up to one-third.

Sources:

[The Better Angels of Our Nature](#)

[Factfulness](#)

[The Rise and Fall of American Growth](#)

[Enlightenment Now](#)