

06 Is the State of the Human Condition an Issue?

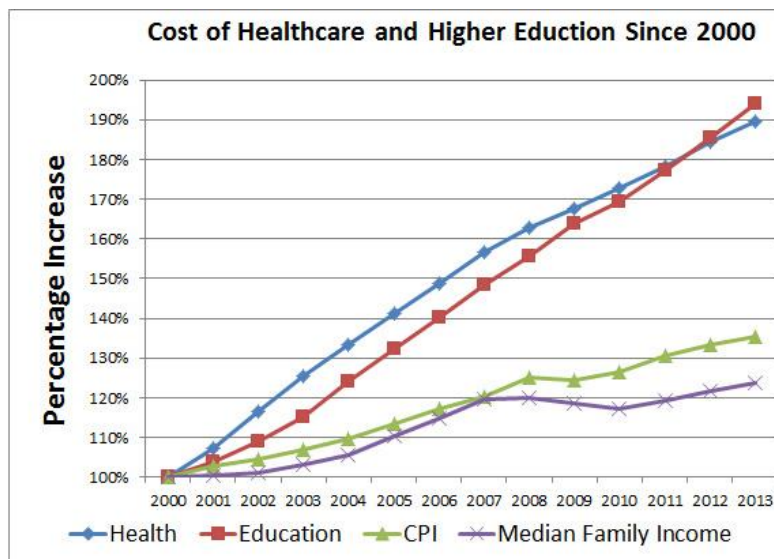
For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow." For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."

The central tenant of the American Dream -- that all children, regardless of their family and social background, should have a decent chance to improve their lot in life -- is no longer "self-evident."

Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: the American Dream in Crisis*

The essential elements of human progress, such as the level of health and higher education, are becoming less affordable. For the first time in our history the economic and social well-being of our children will be lower than that of their parents.

The costs of health care and a college education are increasing faster than the general rate of inflation (CPI), while the median household income lags well behind. These trends started in 1982 and have been growing steeper ever since.



Sources: The National Health Expenditure Accounts (NHEA), National Center for Educational Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics (CPI) and US Census Bureau

Science and technology have given us rationale methods for collecting and interpreting such facts, and for making logical decisions about them. The promise of the American Dream is that anyone, regardless of his or her origins, can have a fair start in life. If we work hard, we can get a good education, live a healthy life and achieve success.

Access to a college education and healthcare and are perhaps the two most important social indicators used by the social sciences for describing the state of the human condition. Their

cost is an issue because the rates of increase are unsustainable, yet they are both essential for personal well-being and for the nation remaining competitive in a global economy.

Government financing of higher education has been reduced. Structurally, colleges and universities have made-up the short-fall by raising tuition and fees. Students have responded by increasing student debt through student loans which are no longer worth their cost in terms of future earnings; yet, if the nation is going to be economically competitive in a global economy it must become increasingly more educated. Higher education has to adopt the new digital technologies to provide wider access while reducing costs.

The United States has a lower level of over-all health than any other developed nation, but yet spends more money on healthcare than any other nation. If a market economy provides the best product at the lowest price, what went wrong? There are two factors at play: The first is structural. There are no effective mechanisms for cost control. The second is conceptual. Health care is treated as a commodity.

In the past, economic growth absorbed the cost by increasing faster than prices. But, now the gains in productivity have disproportionately gone to the already wealthy and median household income has not, and is not likely to keep pace, let alone make up for the lost ground.

The alternative assumption is that higher education and healthcare can no longer remain within the same structures and concepts that have produced an unsustainable situation. Access to higher education must be determined by intellectual ability and motivation, not by the capacity to pay nor willingness to absorb personal debt. Health care must be seen as a national social responsibility, as it is in nearly every other country in the world.

If we choose to address this issue, what are the ways to do so?

Clearly there is no single ideological approach – an economic, political or social one – to make the necessary adjustments. All three must be brought into play simultaneously. But, unlike facts and knowledge, our beliefs and values are negotiable. Reasonable people can recognize that the necessity for change is non-negotiable, thus requiring respect for the perspective of others on the wide range of potential partial solutions, none of which alone will be sufficient.

Choices to take action are based on facts, solutions on compromise.

"It's the American dream: get a good education, work hard, buy a house, and achieve prosperity and success. This is the America we believe in—a nation of opportunity, constrained only by ability and effort. But during the last twenty-five years we have seen a disturbing "opportunity gap" emerge. ... Now, this central tenet of the American dream seems no longer true..."

Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, 2015.