

Weekly Progress Roundup

Nuclear policy wins, world-first treatments, clever deregulation, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

MAY 26, 2025

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Economics & Development:

- According to a new household survey, **the number of Ugandans living under the national absolute poverty line**—set to roughly one US dollar per day in 2016/2017 prices—**fell to 16.1 percent in 2024**, down from 20.3 percent in 2020 and over 50 percent in the early 1990s.
- The number of schools in Kenya grew by nearly 39 percent in 2024**, alongside a 5.2 percent increase in secondary school enrollment.
- A new law in Colorado permits the construction of smaller apartment buildings with a single staircase**—a design previously restricted by building codes—in any city with a population greater than 100,000. The change promises to reduce housing costs and increase the availability of multi-bedroom units.

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity

- A glass-clad conference center in Chicago once killed up to 1,000 birds a day during the peak of migration season. **After adding a simple, unobtrusive pattern to the window panes, bird deaths fell 95 percent.**
- After decades of decline, **Cape vulture populations have stabilized in Southern Africa.**
- Scientists have mapped the genome of the northern white rhinoceros**, a critically endangered species with only two surviving females and no natural means of reproduction. The genomic blueprint will help researchers evaluate lab-grown stem cells as a potential source for creating new rhino reproductive cells.

Energy production

- Privately owned solar panels are taking over from the dysfunctional state utility in Niger**, offering relief from frequent power shortages.
- Over the last few weeks, there's been a **massive nuclear policy shift in Europe and North America**:
 - Belgium **voted** to abandon its nuclear phase-out plan.
 - Germany signaled it will **no longer oppose** classifying nuclear power alongside renewables in EU law.
 - Sweden **plans to build** an additional 5 GW of nuclear capacity by 2035.
 - The Danish parliament **repealed** a 40-year-old ban on nuclear reactors.
 - President Trump signed **four executive orders** intended to expedite nuclear reactor approval, boost domestic fuel supply, authorize reactor construction on federal land, and dramatically expand US nuclear energy production.
 - The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission **determined** that California's Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant can run safely for at least 20 more years.
 - Lawmakers in **Massachusetts** and **Illinois** are considering lifting their states' nuclear moratoria.

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Health & Demographics

- Harvard researchers have discovered drugs that can kill malaria parasites inside mosquitoes**—a potentially useful malaria control method in regions where mosquitoes have developed resistance to insecticides.
- Papua New Guinea and Mauritania have eliminated trachoma as a public health problem**, meaning trachoma prevalence is now below 0.2 percent in adults. Trachoma is an infectious eye disease that can cause blindness if left untreated.
- New legislation in Montana allows any adult to access drugs that have completed Phase I clinical trials** but lack FDA approval, broadening access to experimental treatments.
- Surgeons at UCLA have completed the world's first bladder transplant**, offering a new treatment option for patients with severe bladder damage. The procedure, done alongside a kidney transplant, successfully restored urinary function in a patient who had been on dialysis for years.
- Prime Medicine, a Cambridge-based biotechnology company, used **a gene-editing method called prime editing to treat a teenager with a rare immune disorder**—the first time the technique has ever been used in a human. One month after treatment, the patient showed improved immune function and no serious side effects, though it may take up to a year to determine whether the therapy was fully successful.

Science & Technology

- The Maryland-based startup InventWood will soon begin commercial production of "**Superwood**," an **engineered timber material that has 50 percent greater tensile strength than steel** and a strength-to-weight ratio ten times higher.
- MIT and Harvard researchers have **developed an AI tool that predicts where proteins are located inside human cells**. The system could accelerate disease research and drug discovery by pinpointing protein locations without the need for time-consuming lab work.
- Spaced repetition systems are powerful learning tools** that help users retain information by scheduling content review at increasing intervals, countering the natural tendency to forget. **A new machine learning algorithm called FSRS enhances this technique** by tailoring the review schedule to each individual learner.

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Selected essays

Daniel Waldenström reassesses the history of wealth inequality in the West.

The Inequality Myth

Western Societies Are Growing More Equal, Not Less

DANIEL WALDENSTROM

May 19, 2025

Clay Routledge presents new polling data on how Americans feel about progress.

Amid Division, Let's Unite Around Human Progress

COMMENTARY

By **Clay Routledge**

Chelsea Follett explains how societies might sustain innovation beyond a fleeting “golden age.”

Cardwell's Cage and How to Break Free

Chelsea Follett

Donald Cardwell, a British historian of science and technology, famously observed that “no nation has been very creative for more than an historically short period.” Known as Cardwell's Law, this dictum haunts many people concerned about the future of innovation. Can the United States, or any other country, break free of the cage of Cardwell's Law and create an environment that fosters **innovation** indefinitely?

Open Societies and Closed Minds

Marian Tupy speaks with Matt Johnson about historicism, progress, and how tribalism and the “desire for recognition” are testing the foundations of open societies.

HUMAN PROGRESS
MAY 24, 2025

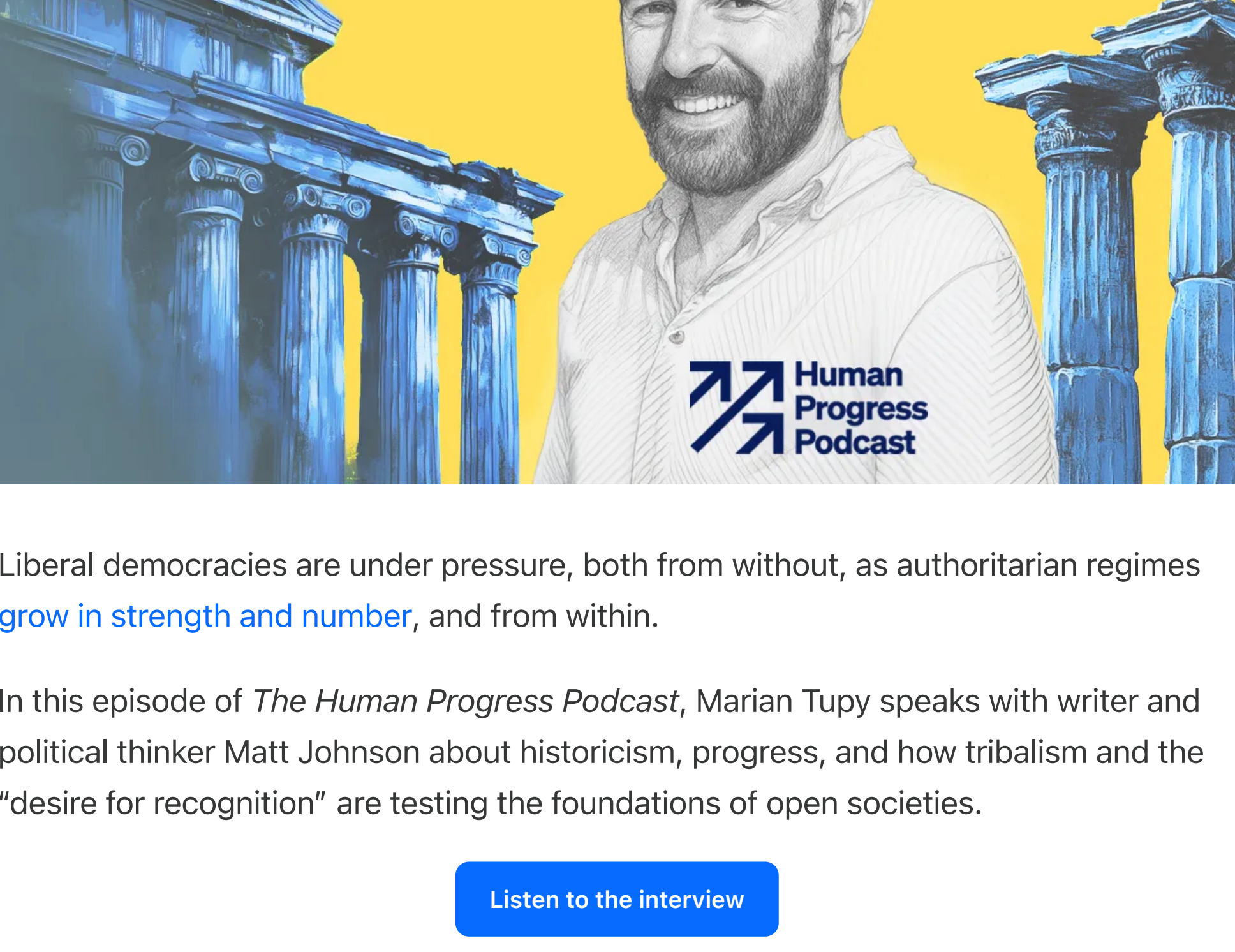
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Liberal democracies are under pressure, both from without, as authoritarian regimes [grow in strength and number](#), and from within.

In this episode of *The Human Progress Podcast*, Marian Tupy speaks with writer and political thinker Matt Johnson about historicism, progress, and how tribalism and the “desire for recognition” are testing the foundations of open societies.

[Listen to the interview](#)

Below is an edited and abridged transcript featuring some highlights from the interview.

Today, I’m very lucky to speak to Matt Johnson, who recently had a fascinating essay in *Quillette* titled “The Open Society and Its New Enemies: What Karl Popper’s classic can teach us about the threats facing democracies today.”

So Matt, could you tell us who Karl Popper was and what this big book is about?

Popper is mainly known for his scientific work, especially his ideas around falsifiability. He published a book called *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in 1945. He started writing it right after the Nazi annexation of Austria. It’s a very powerful and clarifying set of principles for anybody interested in liberal democracy and the broader project of building open societies around the world today.

So, why talk about liberal democracies and openness? It is our conjecture here at Human Progress that openness is very important. Have you ever thought or written about the connection between openness, liberal democracy, and the scope and speed of human progress?

That’s been a major theme of my work for a long time. I think there is a strong connection between the development of liberal democracy and open societies throughout the 20th century and human progress. Liberal democracy, unlike its authoritarian rivals, has error correction mechanisms built in. It allows for pluralism in society. It allows people to cooperate without the threat of violence or coercion. There’s also the economic element: Liberal democracy facilitates free trade and open exchange because it’s rule-based and law-bound, which are important conditions for economic development.

Human Progress also assumes that there is some directionality in history. We can say that living in 2025 is better than living in 1025 or 25 AD. But you begin your essay by raising the dangers of what Karl Popper called historicism, or a belief in the inevitability of certain political or economic outcomes. Can you unwind that for us? What is the difference between acknowledging the directionality of human history and historicism?

Popper regarded historicism as extremely dangerous because it treats human beings as a means to an end. If you already know what you’re working toward—a glorious worker state or some other utopia—then it doesn’t matter how much pain you have to inflict in the meantime. You’re not treating your citizens as ends whose rights must be protected; you’re treating them as raw material, as characters in this grand historical story.

The second concern is that historicism is anti-scientific because you can hammer any existing data into a form that fits your historicist prophecy.

Marx wrote that the unfolding of history is inevitable. In his view, leaders were just responsible for making that unavoidable transition easier. That’s the central conceit of historicism. If you take a Popperian view, you’re much more modest. You have to ground every policy in empirical reality. You have to adjust when things don’t work. You’re not just birthing a new paradigm you already know everything about. You don’t know what the future holds.

Stalin would say, anytime there was a setback, that it was all part of the same plan. It was all just globalist saboteurs attacking the Soviet Union, or it was some part of the grand historical unfolding that moving toward the dictatorship of the proletariat. There’s no sense in which new information can change the course of a government with historicist ideas.

That differs from a general idea of progress. We have a lot of economic data that suggests that people have escaped poverty at an incredible rate since the middle of the 20th century. We’ve seen democratization on a vast scale around the world. We’ve seen interstate relations become much more tranquil and peaceful over the past several decades. I mean, the idea of Germany and France fighting a war now is pretty much inconceivable to most people. That’s a huge historical victory, it’s unprecedented in the history of Western Europe.

So, there are good reasons to believe that we’ve progressed. And that’s the core difference between the observation and acknowledgment of progress and historicism, which is much less grounded in empirical reality.

Right. The way I understand human progress is backward-looking. We can say that we are richer than we were in the past. Fewer women die in childbirth. Fewer infants die. We have fewer casualties in wars, et cetera. But we don’t know where we are going.

Yeah, absolutely. There were moments during the Cold War that could have plunged us into nuclear war. It makes no sense to try to cram every idea into some existing paradigm or prophecy. All we can do is incrementally move toward a better world.

This brings us to another big name in your piece: Frank Fukuyama. Tell me how you read Fukuyama.

Fukuyama is perhaps the most misread political science writer of our time. There are countless lazy journalists who want to add intellectual heft to their article about some new crisis, and they’ll say, “well, it turns out Fukuyama was wrong. There are still bad things happening in the world.” That’s a fundamental misreading of Fukuyama’s argument. He never said that bad things would stop happening. He never said there would be an end to war, poverty, or political upheaval. His argument was that liberal capitalist democracy is the most sustainable political and economic system, that it had proven itself against the great ideological competitors in the 20th century, and that it would continue to do so in the future.

I think it’s still a live thesis, it hasn’t been proven or disproven. I suppose if the entire world collapsed into totalitarianism and remained that way, then yeah, Fukuyama was wrong. But right now, there’s still a vibrant democratic world competing against the authoritarian world, and I think that liberal democracy will continue to outperform.

You use a phrase in the essay I didn’t quite understand: “the desire for recognition.” What does it mean, and why is it important to Fukuyama?

The desire for recognition is the acknowledgment that human desires go beyond material concerns. We want to be treated as individuals with worth and agency, and we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for purely abstract goals. Liberal democracies are the only systems so far that have met the desire for recognition on a vast scale. Liberal democracies treat people as autonomous, rational ends in themselves, unlike dictatorships, which treat people as expendable, and that’s one of the reasons why liberal democracy has lasted as long as it has.

However, there’s a dark side. Because liberal democracy enables pluralism, people can believe whatever they want religiously and go down whatever political rabbit holes they want to. And, oftentimes, when you have the freedom to join these other tribes, you find yourself more committed to those tribes than to the overall society. If you’re a very serious Christian nationalist, you might want society organized along the lines of the Ten Commandments because that, in your view, is the foundation of morality. So, pluralism, which is one of the strengths of liberal democracy, also creates constant threats that liberal democracy has to navigate.

I noticed in your essay that you are not too concerned. You note that democracy is not in full retreat and that, if you look at the numbers, things are not as dire as they seem. What is the argument?

If you just read annual reports from Freedom House, you would think that we’re on our way to global authoritarianism. However, if you take a longer historical view, even just 80 years versus 20 years, the trend line is still dramatically in favor of liberal democracies. It’s still an amazing historical achievement. It’s getting rolled back, but in the grand sweep of history, it’s getting rolled back on the margins.

Still, it’s a dangerous and frightening trend. And you’re in a dangerous place when you see a country like the United States electing a president who is expressly hostile toward the exchange of power after four years. So, the threats to democracy are real, but we need to have some historical perspective.

So, we are more liberally democratic than we were 40 years ago, but something has happened in the last 15 to 20 years. Some of the trust and belief in liberal democracy has eroded.

How is that connected to the issue of recognition?

In the United States, if you look at just the past five or six years, there has been a dramatic shift toward identity politics, which is a form of the desire for recognition.

On the left, there was an explosion of wokeness, especially in 2020, where there was a lot of authoritarianism. People were shouted down for fairly anodyne comments, and editors were churned out of their roles. And on the right, there’s this sense that native-born Americans are more completely American than other people. All of these things are forms of identity politics, and they privilege one group over another and drive people away from a universal conception of citizenship. That’s one of the big reasons why people have become less committed to pluralism and the classic American idea of *E pluribus unum*.

Have you ever thought about why, specifically after 2012, there was this massive outpouring of wokeness and identity politics? Some people on the right suggest that this is because America has begun to lose religion, and, as a consequence, people are seeking recognition in politics.

I think it could be a consequence of the decline of religion. I’ve written a lot about what many people regard as a crisis of meaning in Western liberal democracies. I think, to some extent, that crisis is overblown. Many people don’t need to have some sort of superstructure or belief system that goes beyond humanism or their commitment to liberalism or what have you.

However, I also think that we’re inclined toward religious belief. We search for things to worship. People don’t really want to create their own belief systems; they would rather go out there and pick a structure off the shelf. For some, it’s Catholicism or Protestantism, and for others, it’s Wokeism or white identity politics. And there were elements of the woke explosion that seemed deeply religious. People talked about original sin and literally fell on their knees.

We also live in an era that has been, by historical standards, extremely peaceful and prosperous, and I think Fukuyama is right that people search for things to fight over. The more prosperous your society is, the more you’ll be incensed by minor inequalities or slights. The complaints you hear from people today would be baffling to people one hundred years ago.

I also think the desire for recognition gets re-normed all the time. It doesn’t really matter how much your aggregate conditions have improved; when new people come into the world, they have a set of expectations based on their surroundings. And it’s a well-established psychological principle that people are less concerned about their absolute level of well-being than their well-being relative to their neighbors. If you see your neighbor has a bigger house or bigger boat, you feel like you’ve been cheated. And this is also the language that Donald Trump uses. It’s very zero-sum, and he traffics in this idea that everything is horrible.

You raised a subject that I’m very interested in, which is the crisis of meaning. I don’t know what to make of it. Everybody, including people I admire and respect, seems to think there is a crisis of meaning, but I don’t know what that means.

Is there more of a crisis of meaning today than there was 100 years ago or even 50 years ago? And what does it really mean? Have you thought about this issue?

You’re right to question where this claim comes from. How can people who claim there is a crisis of meaning see inside the minds of the people who say that they don’t need religion to live a meaningful life? There’s something extremely presumptuous there, and I’m not sure how it’s supposed to be quantified.

People say, well, look at the explosion of conspiracism and pseudoscience. And there are people who’ve become interested in astrology and things like that. But humanity has been crammed with pseudoscience and superstition for as long as we’ve been around. It’s very difficult to compare Western societies today to the way they were a few hundred years ago when people were killed for blasphemy and witchcraft.

And look at what our societies have accomplished in living memory. Look at the vast increase in material well-being, the vast improvements in life expectancy, literacy, everything you can imagine. I find all that very inspiring. I think if we start talking about democracy and capitalism in that grander historical context, then maybe we can make some inroads against the cynicism and the nihilism that have taken root.

[Read the full transcript](#)

US Housing Abundance Has Increased Dramatically

Compared to the early 1970s, we get 74 percent more square feet of housing per person, per percent of household income.

GALE POOLEY
MAY 23, 2025

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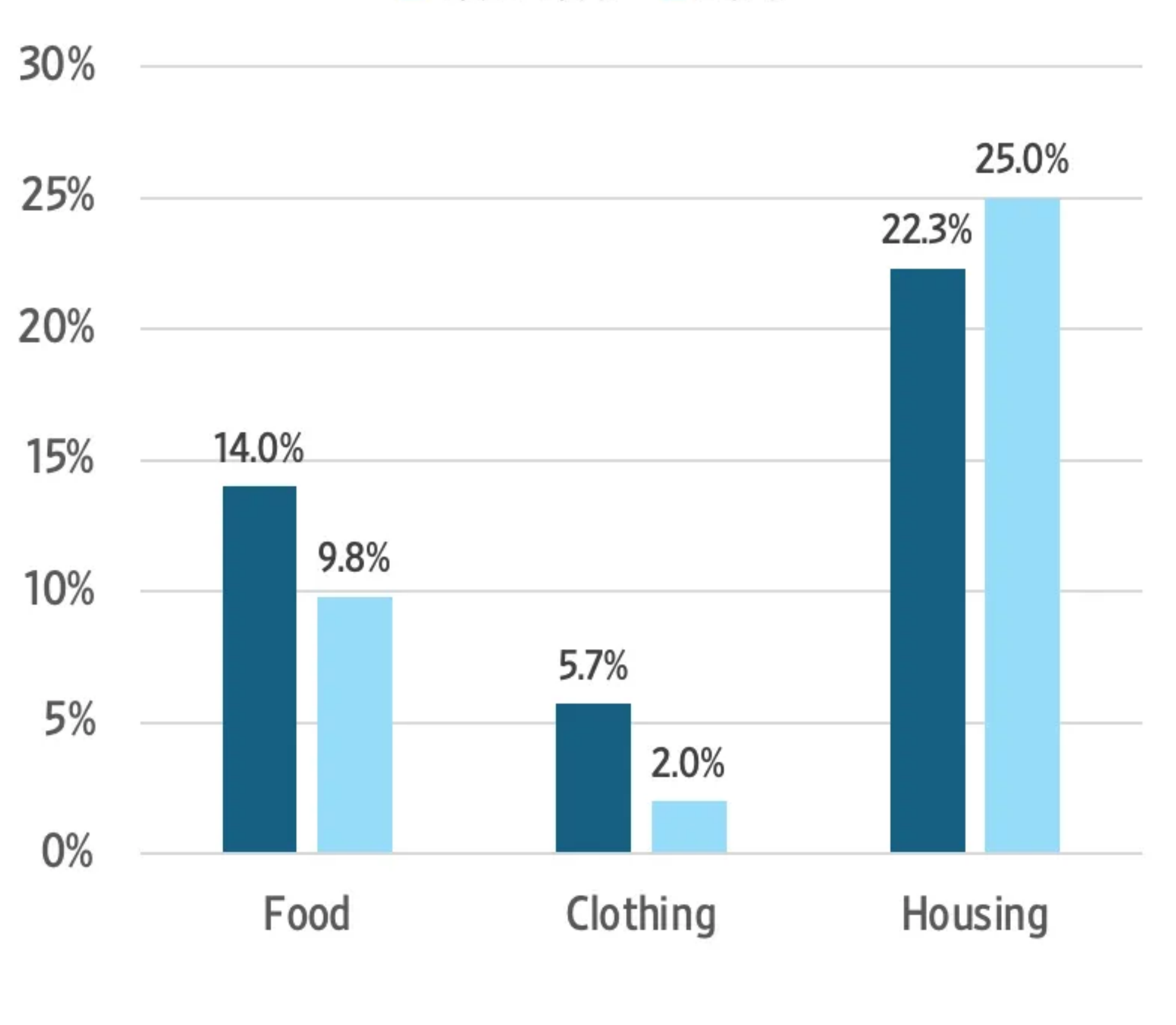
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The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) conducts consumer expenditure surveys, collecting data on a wide variety of products and services.



Over the past 50 years, the percentage of household income spent on food fell 30 percent, and spending on clothing has dropped by 64.9 percent, yet housing costs have increased by 12.1 percent. What explains this rise? At least six key differences between homes in the early 1970s and in 2023 help account for the change:

- Size:** The average home in 1972 measured 1,634 square feet, compared to 2,614 square feet in 2023—a 60 percent increase (980 additional square feet).
- Household Size:** Average household size declined from 3.06 persons in 1972 to 2.51 in 2023, an 18 percent decrease. We’re buying more house per person.



In 1972, the average living space per person was 534 square feet; by 2023, it had nearly doubled to 1,041.4 square feet. In terms of affordability, one percent of household income bought 23.95 square feet of housing in 1972, compared to 41.66 square feet in 2023. We’re getting 74 percent more housing per person for the same share of income.

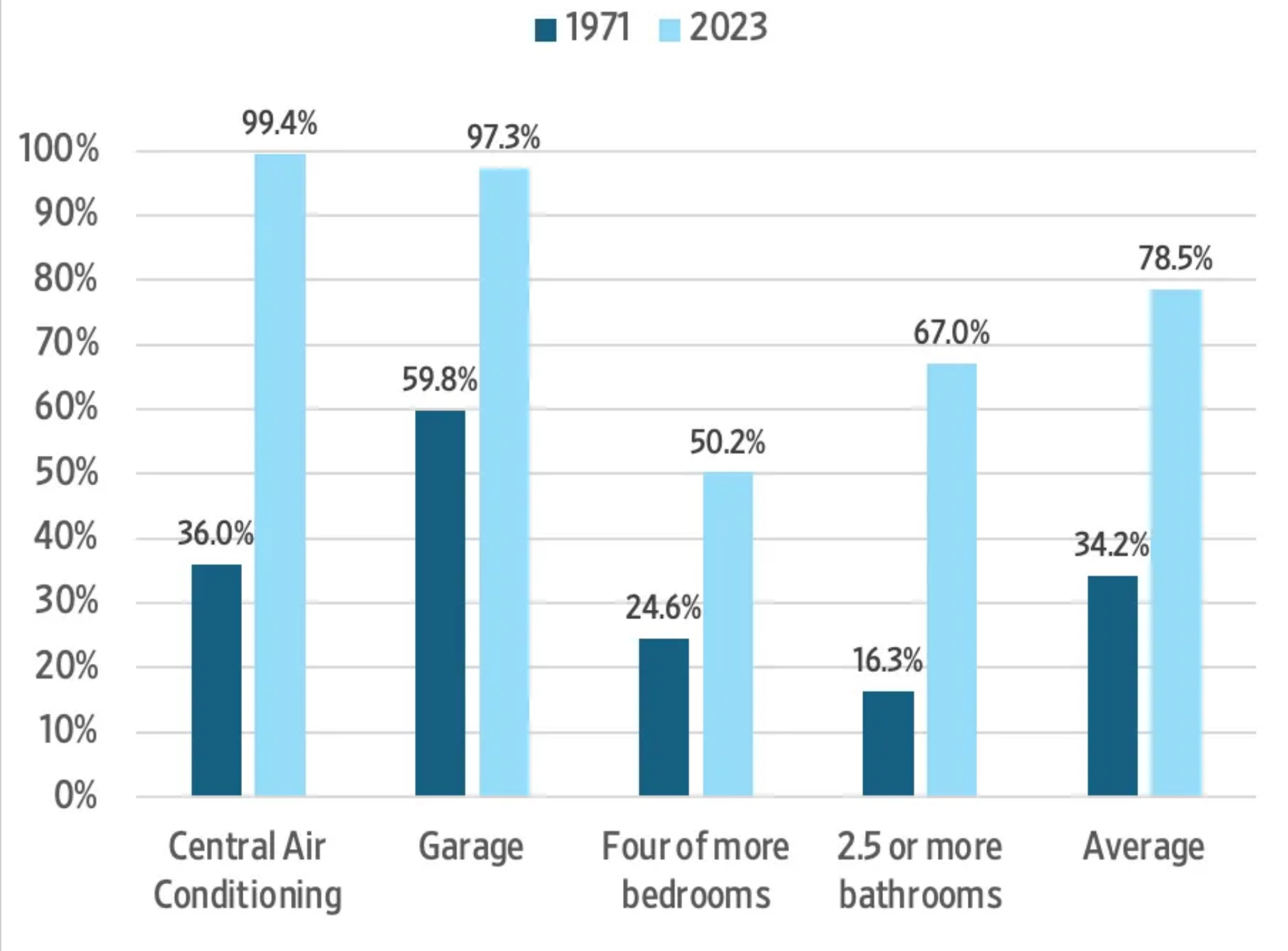
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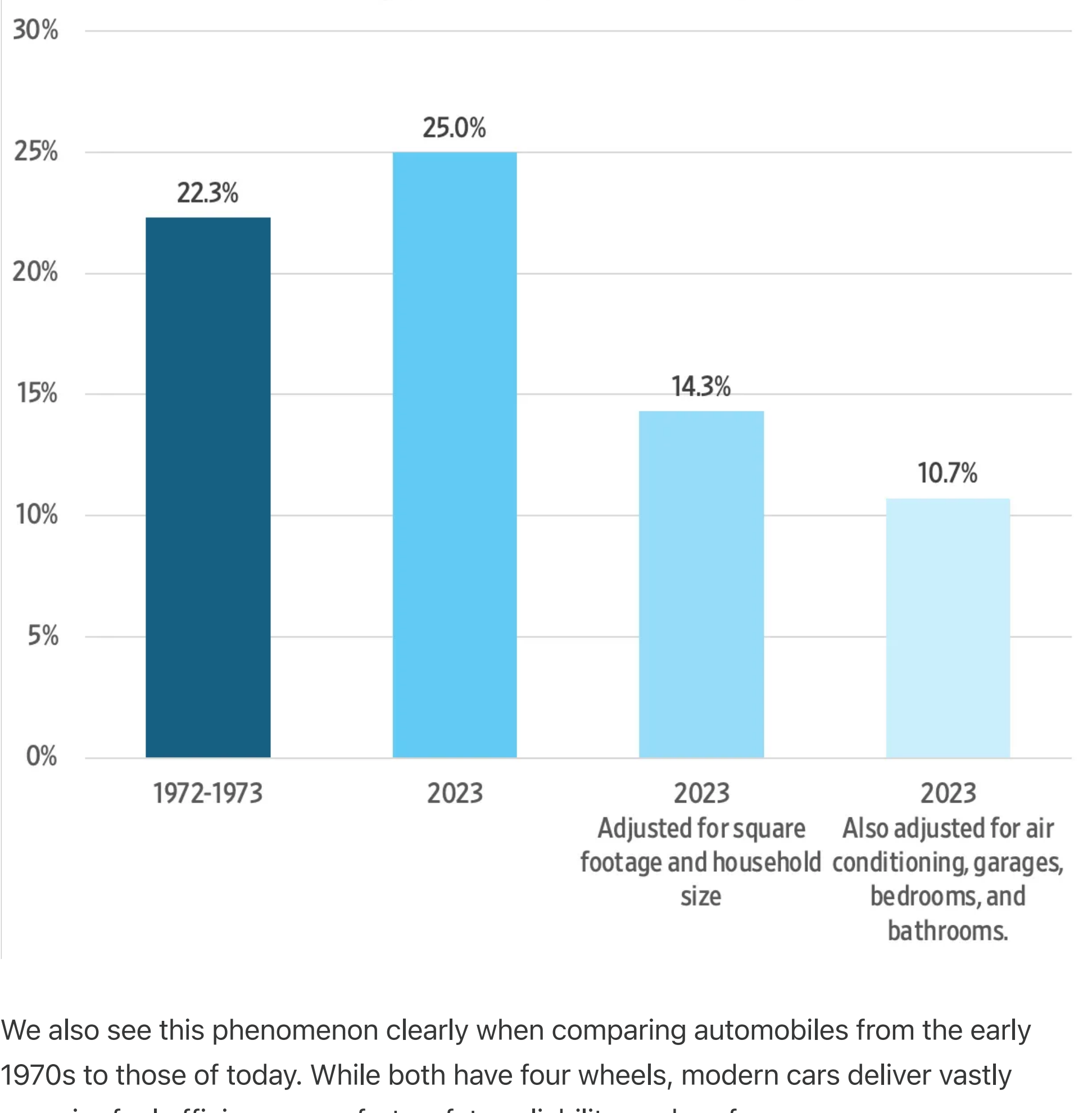
	1972	2023	Percentage Difference
Percent of Income	22.30%	25.00%	12.1%
Average Size in Square Feet	1,634	2,614	60.0%
Household Size	3.06	2.51	-18.0%
Square Feet per Person	534.0	1,041.4	95.0%
Square Feet per Person per Percent of Income	23.95	41.66	74.0%

Four other factors also help explain the difference:

- Air Conditioning:** In 1971, only 36 percent of homes had central air; by 2023, that number had reached 99.4 percent.
- Garages:** The share of homes with garages rose from 59.8 percent in 1971 to 97.3 percent in 2023.
- Bedrooms:** In 1971, only 24.6 percent of homes had four or more bedrooms; in 2023, 50.2 percent did.
- Bathrooms:** The percentage of homes with 2.5 or more bathrooms increased from 16.3 percent in 1971 to 67 percent in 2023.



After adjusting for increased square footage and smaller household size, the share of household income spent on housing falls to 14.3 percent. If we further account for improvements—such as the addition of air conditioning, garages, extra bedrooms, and bathrooms—a modest 25 percent quality adjustment brings the rate closer to 10.7 percent. In effect, we’re now spending less than half as much of our household income on basic housing compared to the early 1970s.



We also see this phenomenon clearly when comparing automobiles from the early 1970s to those of today. While both have four wheels, modern cars deliver vastly superior fuel efficiency, comfort, safety, reliability, and performance.

The real question is: how much would someone have to pay you to trade your 2023 home and 2023 car for their 1972 counterparts?

Tip of the Hat: [Jeremy Horpendahl](#).

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From Silk Stockings to Synthetic Diamonds

Capitalist innovation makes luxury commonplace.

MARIAN L TUPY
MAY 21, 2025

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In his 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter explained one of the most important characteristics of free market economies. He wrote:

It is the cheap cloth, the cheap cotton and rayon fabric, boots, motorcars and so on that are the typical achievements of capitalist production, and not as a rule improvements that would mean much to the rich man. Queen Elizabeth owned silk stockings. The capitalist achievement does not typically consist in providing more silk stockings for queens but in bringing them within the reach of factory girls.


Schumpeter’s anecdote about Queen Elizabeth and silk stockings illustrates capitalism’s remarkable ability to democratize consumption.

Initially, silk stockings symbolized privilege reserved only for royalty and elites. Yet capitalism’s true achievement, Schumpeter argued, is not merely supplying luxury to the rich but making such goods affordable for ordinary people. Entrepreneurial innovation, mass production, competition, and technological advances – driven by profit incentives – bring previously unattainable products within everyone’s reach.

This phenomenon elevates the living standards of the less fortunate by breaking down class barriers and spreading prosperity more broadly. Capitalism’s transformative force, according to Schumpeter, lies in continually converting luxuries into everyday essentials, thereby enhancing human well-being across social strata.

The diamond industry today exemplifies Schumpeter’s insight perfectly. Historically, diamonds represented wealth and exclusivity, accessible primarily to the affluent. However, technological advancements, particularly synthetic diamond production via High Pressure High Temperature (HPHT) methods and Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD) technology, have dramatically changed this dynamic.

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Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD), for example, is a technique for creating synthetic diamonds by depositing carbon atoms from a carbon-rich gas onto a substrate. In this method, a diamond seed crystal is placed in a vacuum chamber filled with gases such as methane and hydrogen. When heated to very high temperatures, these gases break down, and carbon atoms accumulate layer-by-layer on the seed crystal, slowly forming a diamond. This process enables precise control over diamond purity, size, and quality, making it highly efficient and cost-effective compared to traditional diamond mining methods.

Not only have synthetic diamonds become more widely affordable, but they have also placed a downward pressure on natural diamond prices. As a recent article in The Guardian explained:

Natural diamonds cost 26% less in shops than two years ago, a drop during a time of high inflation that would be extraordinary were it not dwarfed by the poor fortune of their identical twins, lab-grown diamonds, which are now 74% cheaper than in 2020.

Furthermore, synthetic diamonds may appeal to modern consumers by offering ethical and environmental advantages over mined diamonds. Instead of sourcing diamonds from some of the world’s bloodiest conflict zones marked by human rights abuses and environments destroyed by primitive forms of mining, today’s diamonds increasingly come from the lab.

Much like silk stockings transitioned from royal exclusivity to widespread accessibility, diamonds today are undergoing a similar evolution. Synthetic diamonds eliminate historical barriers of price, scarcity, and exclusivity, transforming diamonds from symbols of privilege into everyday commodities.