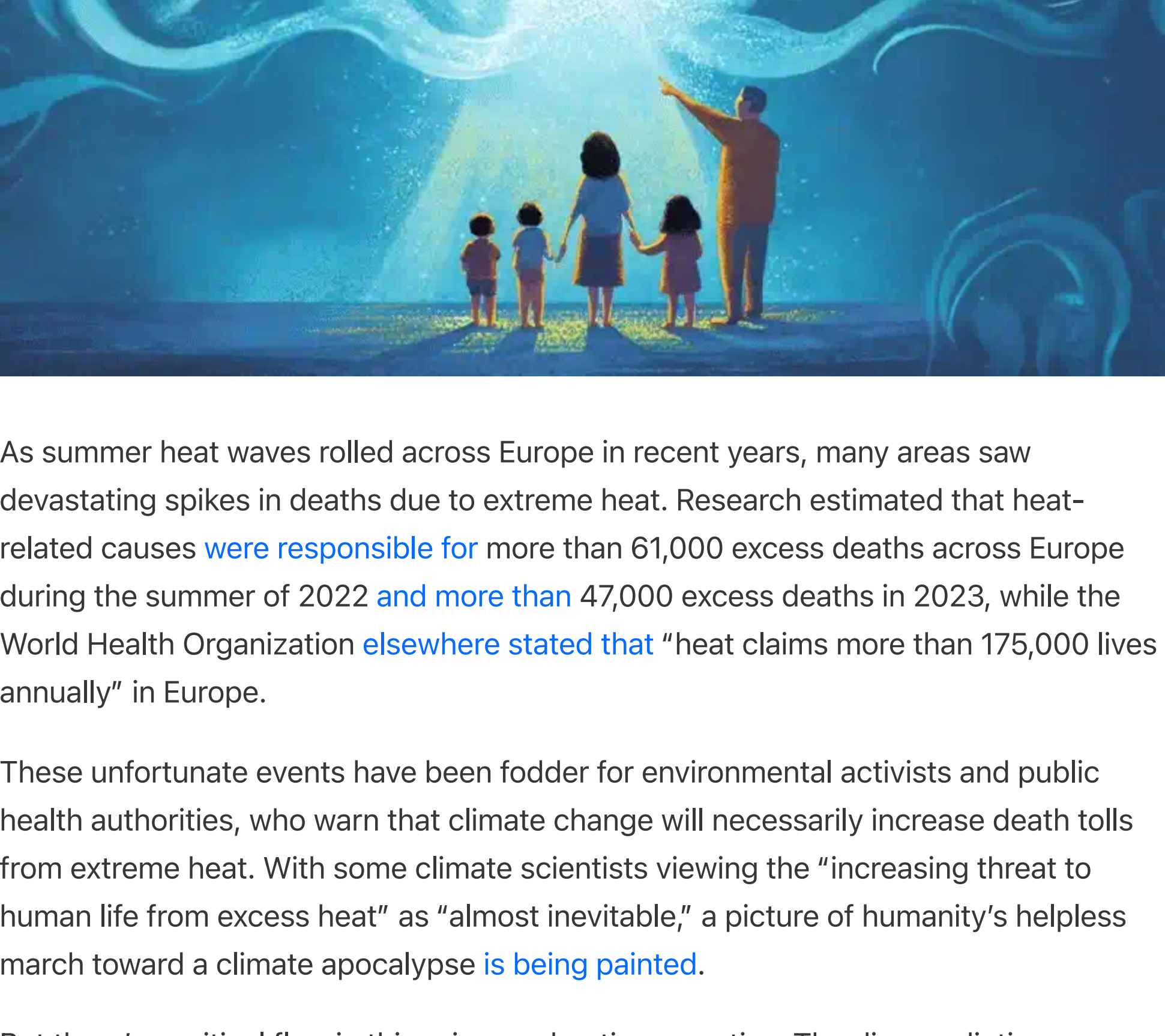


# Half-Baked Crisis: We Aren't Going to Cook Ourselves to Death

Rising temperatures don't necessarily mean rising death rates.

KYLE O'DONNELL  
SEP 03, 2025

34 8 1 Share



As summer heat waves rolled across Europe in recent years, many areas saw devastating spikes in deaths due to extreme heat. Research estimated that heat-related causes [were responsible for](#) more than 61,000 excess deaths across Europe during the summer of 2022 [and more than](#) 47,000 excess deaths in 2023, while the World Health Organization [elsewhere stated that](#) “heat claims more than 175,000 lives annually” in Europe.

These unfortunate events have been fodder for environmental activists and public health authorities, who warn that climate change will necessarily increase death tolls from extreme heat. With some climate scientists viewing the “increasing threat to human life from excess heat” as “almost inevitable,” a picture of humanity’s helpless march toward a climate apocalypse [is being painted](#).

But there’s a critical flaw in this grim overheating narrative. The dire predictions presume a direct mechanical relationship between rising temperatures and human mortality that *does not exist*.

To be sure, extremely hot weather poses numerous [serious health hazards](#). High temperatures can cause acute conditions, such as heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and dehydration, while exacerbating cardiovascular and kidney diseases. Negative mental health impacts and adverse pregnancy outcomes also increase with heat exposure. Chronic exposure to sustained hot weather can result in a progressive loss of physical and cognitive capacity, worsening of chronic diseases, and cumulative impacts on well-being and productivity. These effects lead to increased morbidity and mortality, especially among vulnerable populations such as the elderly and outdoor workers.

Yet the outcome we care about—morbidity and mortality from extreme heat—depends not only on weather patterns but also on people’s adaptations—behavioral, social, and technological—to high temperatures. The reality is that people are creative problem-solvers who learn and adapt to changing conditions.

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## The Power of Air Conditioning

Research shows that human adaptation to rising temperatures [has considerably weakened](#), if not broken, the link between high temperatures and mortality over time. [A landmark study](#) by economists showed that the mortality impact of extremely hot days fell by 75 percent in the United States between 1960 and 2004, driven primarily by the adoption of residential air conditioning (AC). [Another study found](#) that the number of deaths per 1,000 deaths attributable to each 10°F increase in same-day temperature decreased from 51 in 1987 to just 19 in 2005.

Comparing heat-wave impacts between regions with different levels of technological adaptation highlights the effectiveness of AC. The contrast between recent European heat waves and similar temperatures in the United States is striking. The summer of 2024 was Arizona’s [hottest on record](#), with an average daily temperature of 99°F, with [Phoenix experiencing](#) 113 consecutive days above 100°F. In Maricopa County, where Phoenix is located, 464 residents [died of heat-related causes](#) out of a population of 4.49 million [over the entirety of 2024](#), at a rate of 10.3 per 100,000. In contrast, the 2022 summer heat wave in Europe [resulted in more than](#) 61,000 heat-related deaths, about 11.4 per 100,000, even though the average daily temperature was only around 69°F. The hardest-hit countries, including Italy, Spain, and Greece, experienced *maximum* daily temperatures close to the *average* temperatures seen in Arizona, albeit with mortality rates [two to three times higher](#). The difference? The widespread adoption of air conditioning.

In the United States, the residential air conditioning rate of adoption [exceeds 90 percent](#) nationally, with rates exceeding 95 percent in hot-climate states such as Arizona, Texas, and Florida. In contrast, air conditioning use in European countries remains around [19 percent overall](#), with [much lower rates](#) in specific countries—only about 5 percent of homes in the UK have cooling systems, and just 3 percent in Germany.

While various explanations of this gap have been offered—including supposed differences in culture—the most plausible seems to be simply a matter of weather and geography. Most European cities sit at latitudes comparable to Canada (London is north of Calgary), and historical weather patterns provided naturally mild summers. [Research shows that](#) human populations have continuously adapted to local climates, with the “minimum mortality temperature” closely tracking local temperature patterns. As conditions change, so do people’s investments and behaviors, as we can already see in the increasing rate of AC adoption across Europe—[where AC unit sales](#) have doubled since 1990 and continue to accelerate.

The market forces driving AC adoption deserve special attention. As markets for cooling technologies expand, economies of scale drive down costs and improve performance. [The same window air conditioner](#) that cost thousands of dollars (inflation-adjusted) in the 1950s now costs a few hundred dollars, while using half the energy. The same competitive forces that reduced computer and smartphone costs are making air conditioning increasingly affordable—the International Energy Agency expects the number of air conditioning units globally [to triple by 2050](#), increasing from 2 billion to 5.6 billion, with two-thirds of the world’s households having AC.

## Beyond Air Conditioning: The Full Spectrum of Adaptation

While AC is one of the most effective technological responses to heat challenges implemented thus far, it represents just one solution among many. Human ingenuity operates across multiple levels, from individual behavioral changes to planet-wide interventions. This multilevel approach also helps to illuminate how technological adaptations depend on economics and institutional context, not simply on technical factors alone.

### A Note About Conventional Behavioral and Social Adaptations

Before examining technological solutions, it’s worth considering conventional social and behavioral adaptations to extreme heat: increased hydration, appropriate clothing, avoiding outdoor activity during peak temperatures, and adjusting work schedules. Social solutions predominate at higher levels, from community wellness checks to early warning systems and public education campaigns.

While these nontechnological adaptations have their place as first-line responses, they have limitations. Beyond requiring consistent vigilance and behavioral modification, social and behavioral adaptations cannot directly address the core problem of dangerously hot ambient temperatures.

### Micro Level: Individual and Building-Level Solutions

At the micro level, personal technological solutions are emerging rapidly. [Wearable neck fans](#) provide portable cooling, while phase-change materials [integrated into clothing](#) can absorb and release body heat to maintain comfortable body temperatures. Cooling vests used by outdoor workers can significantly [reduce heat stress](#) during physical labor.

At the building level, property rights and market competition create especially strong incentives for innovation. When people own their buildings, they internalize both the benefits and costs of cooling investments, with competition driving responsiveness to changing preferences, spurring adaptation without government mandates.

Many innovations use passive cooling techniques in countless forms. Modern wind-catchers, or *badgirs*, inspired by Persian architecture, [can reduce](#) indoor temperatures by 8–20°F without any energy input. Double-skin facades [act as insulation while channeling](#) air flows to cool buildings. Companies such as [Pirta](#) have developed specialized coatings that reflect [more than 99 percent](#) of solar radiation, enabling [cool roofs](#) that reduce indoor temperatures. Radiative cooling materials from companies such as SkyCool Systems dissipate heat to space even during daytime, [achieving subambient cooling](#) without energy input. [Green walls](#) provide natural cooling through evapotranspiration, while phase-change materials integrated into building materials [create structures](#) that use day-night temperature fluctuations for natural temperature regulation. Together, these innovations in various combinations have further potential in mitigating urban heat island effects.

### Meso Level: Community and Urban-Scale Solutions

Moving beyond individual buildings, large indoor complexes represent an intermediate scale of adaptation. [The West Edmonton Mall](#) in Canada, spanning 5.3 million square feet, maintains year-round climate control for shopping, entertainment, and even indoor beaches. Dubai [plans to build](#) a 4,000-mile network of air-conditioned walkways connecting major buildings and city-areas. These massive climate-controlled environments—enabled by technological innovations, effective property rights, and economies of scale—provide refuge and maintain economic activity during extreme heat.

At the city scale, density contributes to urban heat island effects but can also work to the advantage of heat-mitigation solutions. District cooling systems such as [those in Singapore](#) can be 40 percent more efficient than individual building systems, leveraging massive economies of scale. These systems work by concentrating all cooling production in one or more large optimized plants that chill water to near-freezing temperatures, then pumping this cold water through insulated underground pipes to multiple buildings across a district, where heat exchangers in each building transfer the cooling to internal air systems—thus eliminating the need for individual air conditioning units in every structure. Time-of-use electricity pricing naturally spreads cooling demand throughout the day, reducing peak loads and infrastructure requirements.

Los Angeles’ [cool pavement program](#) that employs reflective pavement coatings has shown surface temperature reductions of 10–12°F on treated streets and ambient air temperature reductions of 0.5–3.5°F. Singapore’s [comprehensive greening program](#) has helped moderate urban temperatures despite rapid development.

### Macro Level: Regional and Global Solutions

At the macro level, technologies are being developed that could modulate the planet’s temperature directly. Solar geoengineering proposals could provide regional or global cooling. [Stratospheric aerosol injection](#), mimicking volcanic eruptions’ cooling effects, could reduce global temperatures within months. [Marine cloud brightening](#) could provide targeted regional cooling for especially vulnerable areas such as coral reefs. The massive scale of these interventions could potentially protect billions of people simultaneously.

These mega-solutions highlight important economic factors that come with increasing scale. At planetary scales, property rights can’t feasibly be defined or enforced, hindering the internalization of benefits and costs. However, the potential economies of scale are enormous. An organization might undertake such projects if it expects sufficient benefits to justify the costs, even without capturing all benefits—similar to how philanthropists fund various activities for the public interest today.

Looking further ahead, the prospect of energy abundance through fusion power could fundamentally transform our cooling capabilities. With essentially unlimited clean energy at near-zero marginal cost, we could deploy massive atmospheric cooling systems, power continent-spanning networks of air conditioning, or even implement science-fiction-scale projects like orbital sunshades—effectively refrigerating vulnerable regions or the entire planet. What seems economically impossible today becomes feasible when energy scarcity no longer constrains our adaptive capacity.

### Institutional Flexibility Enables Diverse Solutions

There isn’t one big solution to the challenge of extreme heat. Instead, myriad solutions—each partial and imperfect—work together without being planned or necessarily designed as such. It’s beyond human abilities to design the complex tapestries of adaptations that solve big problems. Instead, we can cultivate robust institutional arrangements that support their emergence.

Institutional flexibility enables diverse approaches to coexist and compete, allowing different regions to experiment and adapt solutions to their specific conditions. This experimentation generates knowledge that benefits adaptation efforts globally, as successful innovations spread through market mechanisms and technology transfers.

### The Path Forward

The evidence is clear: Humans don’t have to passively accept increased heat-related mortality. Through technological innovation supported by appropriate institutions, we can adapt to rising temperatures while maintaining and improving quality of life.

Climate change presents real challenges, but human ingenuity—when supported by property rights, market mechanisms, and institutional flexibility—has consistently overcome environmental obstacles throughout history. The same innovative capacity that enabled survival in harsh climates from the Arctic tundra to desert regions can address the challenges of a warming world.

Yet frustratingly, even as evidence mounts that technological adaptation saves lives, many environmental organizations and public health institutions actively resist or ignore AC as a solution. The World Health Organization’s “Heat and Health” fact sheet from May 2024 mentions AC once, buried in a list of recommendations, and even then conditionally: *“If using air conditioning...”*. In an August statement about [175,000 annual heat deaths in Europe](#), the organization omitted any mention of AC at all, focusing instead on demonstrably less effective behavioral changes. Its [published guidance for Europe](#) begrudgingly admits to AC’s effectiveness in a few places, followed immediately by emphasized caveats. Indeed, the single full-page focused on AC’s benefits, out of roughly 200 pages, is followed immediately by two and a half pages about its drawbacks.

This ideological opposition to technological solutions—rooted in eco-puritanism rather than concern for human welfare—prioritizes energy conservation over human lives. When organizations claim to care about heat deaths while ignoring an incredibly effective existing technological solution, they reveal a troubling willingness to sacrifice human welfare on the altar of environmental orthodoxy.

In many European countries, byzantine regulations govern exterior modifications to buildings, including air conditioning installations. In France, installing an AC unit that alters a building’s external appearance [can require](#) a multistep process and approval from multiple agencies, or even a majority vote of property co-owners for co-op residents. In Germany, strict noise regulations often prohibit AC installation in residential areas. These restrictions increase costs and complexity, reducing adoption rates and leaving residents vulnerable—a deadly form of aesthetic preservation that values architectural purity over human life.

For those concerned about absolute living standards and human welfare, the implications are clear. Markets and property rights have already enabled dramatic reductions in heat mortality where they’ve been allowed to function. Extending these benefits globally doesn’t require complex international agreements or massive wealth transfers—it simply requires allowing people the freedom to invest in their own comfort and survival. As incomes rise and technology advances, cooling solutions will become accessible to ever-broader populations, continuing the remarkable decline in heat-related mortality that markets have already delivered in developed nations.

Finally, while heat-related deaths capture headlines, research consistently shows that cold weather [kills more people](#) globally than hot weather. A [comprehensive 2021 study](#) in The Lancet Planetary Health found that 8.52 percent of global deaths were linked to cold temperatures, while less than 1 percent were linked to hot temperatures—roughly a 9:1 ratio. That doesn’t diminish concerns about heat-related mortality, but it provides important context about the relative scale of temperature-related health risks.

Doomsday predictions about inevitable heat mortality are pessimistic as well as condescending, viewing humans as passive, hapless creatures who will plod along to their doom—rather like frogs basking in a pot of water on a stove. A realist would recognize humans’ capacity for institutional and technological innovations that have characterized our species throughout history. The path forward requires institutional arrangements that foster and guide humans’ creative energies toward continual adaptation and problem-solving.

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MALCOLM COCHRAN  
SEP 05, 2025

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We’re also launching dedicated blogs for our full-time policy analysts.

The first, [Past Imperfect](#), is already live. It will feature the work of Chelsea Follett, who is currently focused on deromanticizing the past using historical research and data.



### Past Imperfect

Shattering rose-colored views of the past.

By Chelsea Olivia Follett

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We’ll continue sharing her most important essays via the *Doomslayer* email list, but if you’re interested in deeper and more frequent dispatches from Chelsea, consider subscribing directly to [Past Imperfect](#).

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# Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Tortoise de-extinction, solar and nuclear energy records, cleaner waters, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN  
SEP 07, 2025

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To better respect your inbox and your time, progress roundups will be sent biweekly going forward. You'll receive the same amount of content, just delivered less frequently.

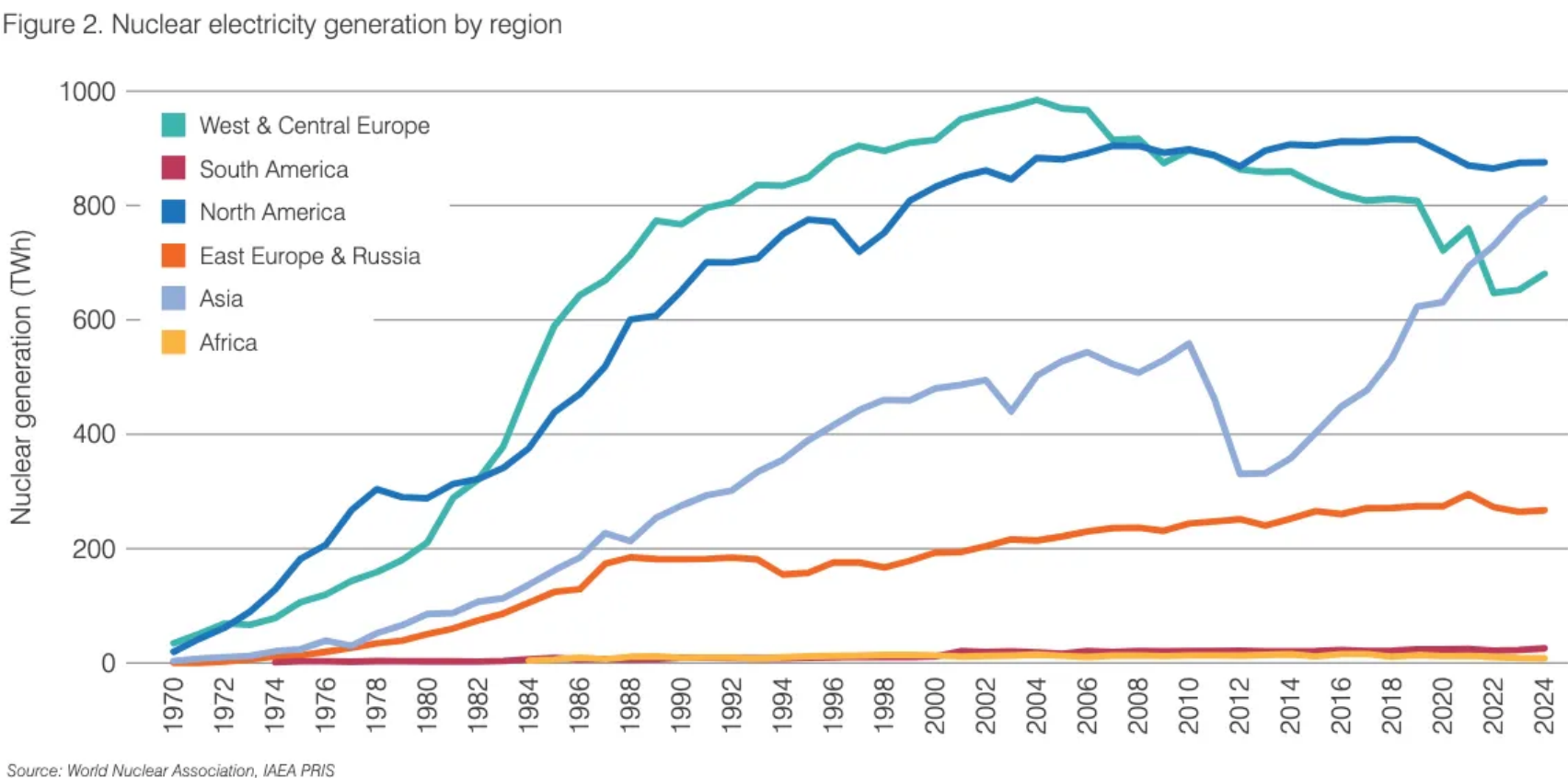
## Energy & Environment

### Conservation and biodiversity

- A 2024 census found **5,326 jaguars** in Mexico, 30 percent more than the 2010 count.
- In other jaguar news, **a cub has been spotted** in northwestern Argentina—the first known wild jaguar birth in the region since the 1990s.
- The non-profit Rewilding Spain is **introducing** Przewalski's horses and **aurochs**-lookalike Taurus cattle to the Spanish countryside in **an attempt to fill the ecological niches left empty by the long-extinct European megafauna**.
- **In the 19th century, hungry whalers hunted the Floreana giant tortoise to extinction.** But because the tortoises were often kept alive aboard ships, some ended up as castaways on neighboring Galápagos islands, where they interbred with local giant tortoise subspecies. In 2000, scientists identified these hybrids and, in the 2010s, began selectively breeding them back toward the original Floreana lineage. Hundreds of juveniles have since hatched, and **now the “resurrected” subspecies is being reintroduced to its home island.**

### Energy & Natural Resources

- **Global solar additions reached nearly 600 gigawatts in 2024, and the pace has quickened—380 gigawatts** were installed in the first half of 2025, putting this year on track for another record.
  - The latest *World Nuclear Performance Report* claims that **nuclear energy generation reached a record 2667 terawatt-hours in 2024**, narrowly surpassing the previous record of 2660 terawatt-hours in 2016.
- Over the past decade, almost all the growth in nuclear energy generation occurred in Asia—home to **59 of the 70 nuclear reactors currently under construction**—while generation in Western Europe fell substantially.



Fortunately, a policy shift is now underway that might end this ill-advised nuclear phase-out.

## The New Nuclear Energy Resurgence

ZION LIGHTS • JUN 28



Ideology is finally giving way to realistic energy goals.

[Read full story →](#)

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## Pollution

- Thanks to improved infrastructure and pollution control, **the number of fish species living in the Chicago River has surged from 5 in the 1970s to more than 70 today.** Humans are another species newly utilizing the river: in two weeks, the city plans to host its **first Chicago River swim since 1927.**
- **China is also reporting significant progress against water pollution.** According to the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment, the share of surface waters “suitable for drinking, fishing and direct human contact” grew from 63 percent to 90.4 percent between 2014 and 2024.

## Health & Demographics

- Togo has **added the malaria vaccine** to its national immunization program.
- **Child nutrition is improving in rapidly-developing Vietnam.** Between 2010 and 2024, the share of children who were underweight fell from **17.5 percent to 10.4 percent.** The country has made similar progress against childhood stunting, anemia, and vitamin deficiency.

## Science & Technology

- Waymo has **announced plans** to bring its robotaxi service to Denver and Seattle.
- Monumental Labs, **a startup based in Brooklyn, is trying to automate stone carving.** The company uses robotic arms to sculpt statues and facades, and has already helped restore parts of Carnegie Hall and the Frick Museum. For now, Monumental can carve pieces up to 12 feet tall, but they have ambitions to scale up their process until it can tackle giant structural stone blocks.

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# From Muscle to Mind

Office workers use 77.8 percent less energy and experience a 95.3 percent lower fatality rate than construction workers.

GALE POOLEY  
SEP 09, 2025

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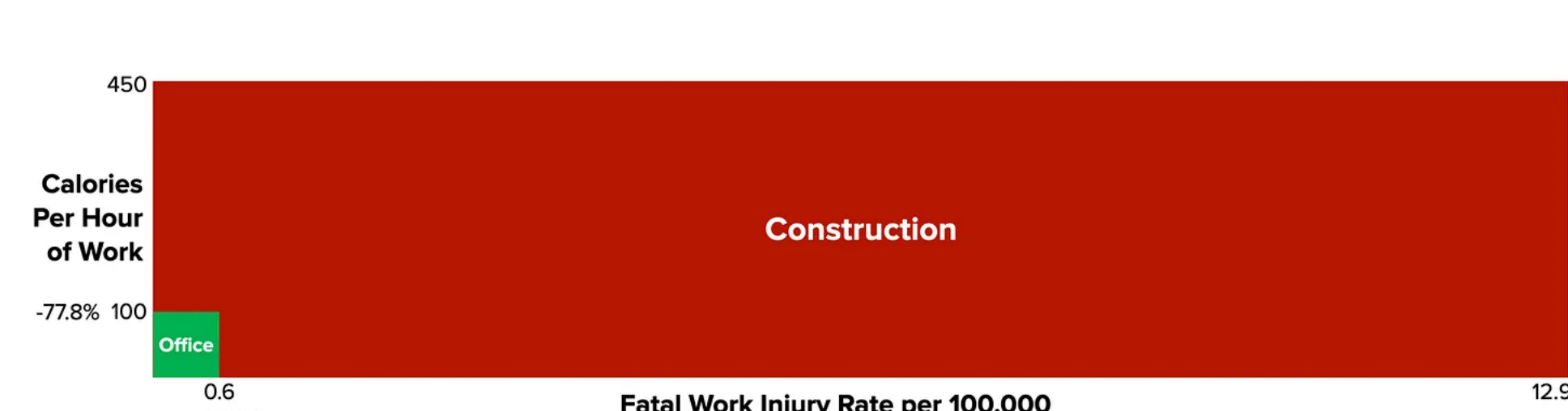
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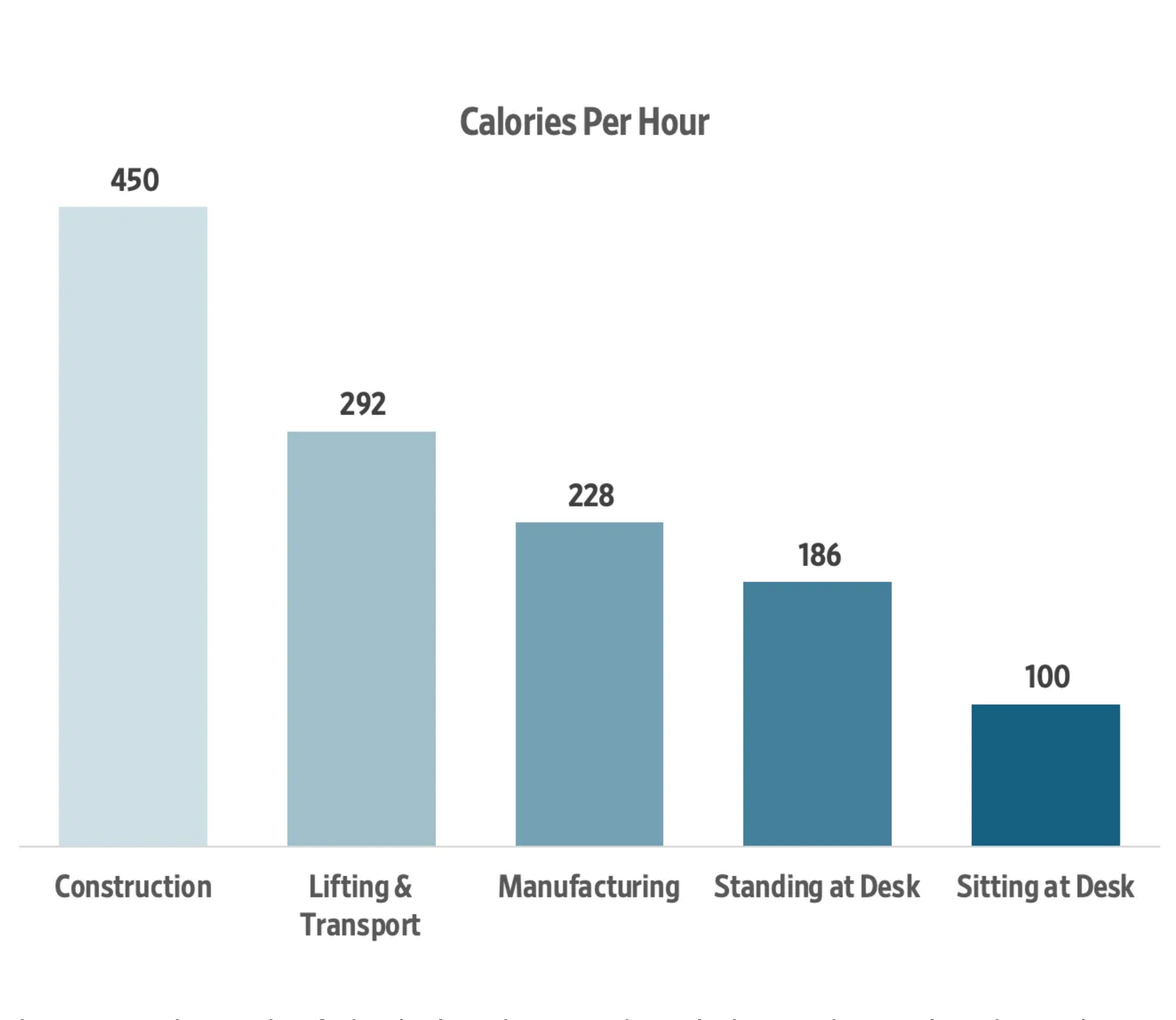


The economist George Gilder points out that using blue-collar hourly wage rates to calculate time prices underestimates the gains we’re enjoying in an economy that’s no longer driven by muscle but by mind. Knowledge workers earn more in an hour, consume fewer calories, and risk far less death or injury than other workers. In other words, they do far more with far less. This is the true compounding of progress—and we can see it mapped on a single chart.

## Calories Per Hour of Work



I asked several AI models about the number of calories per hour that different kinds of work require and this is what I got:



The energy demands of physical work versus knowledge work reveals a dramatic difference in caloric expenditure. Workers in physically demanding jobs burn significantly more calories than do their office counterparts:

### High-energy physical work:

- Construction tasks such as masonry or hanging sheetrock: 400–500 calories per hour (equivalent to running or high-intensity aerobics)
- Heavy lifting and transport: 285–300 calories per hour for a 170-pound worker

### Moderate physical work:

- Manufacturing: 228 calories per hour (men), 180 calories per hour (women)

### Office work:

- Standing desk: 186 calories per hour for a 170-pound person
- Sitting desk work: 100 calories per hour

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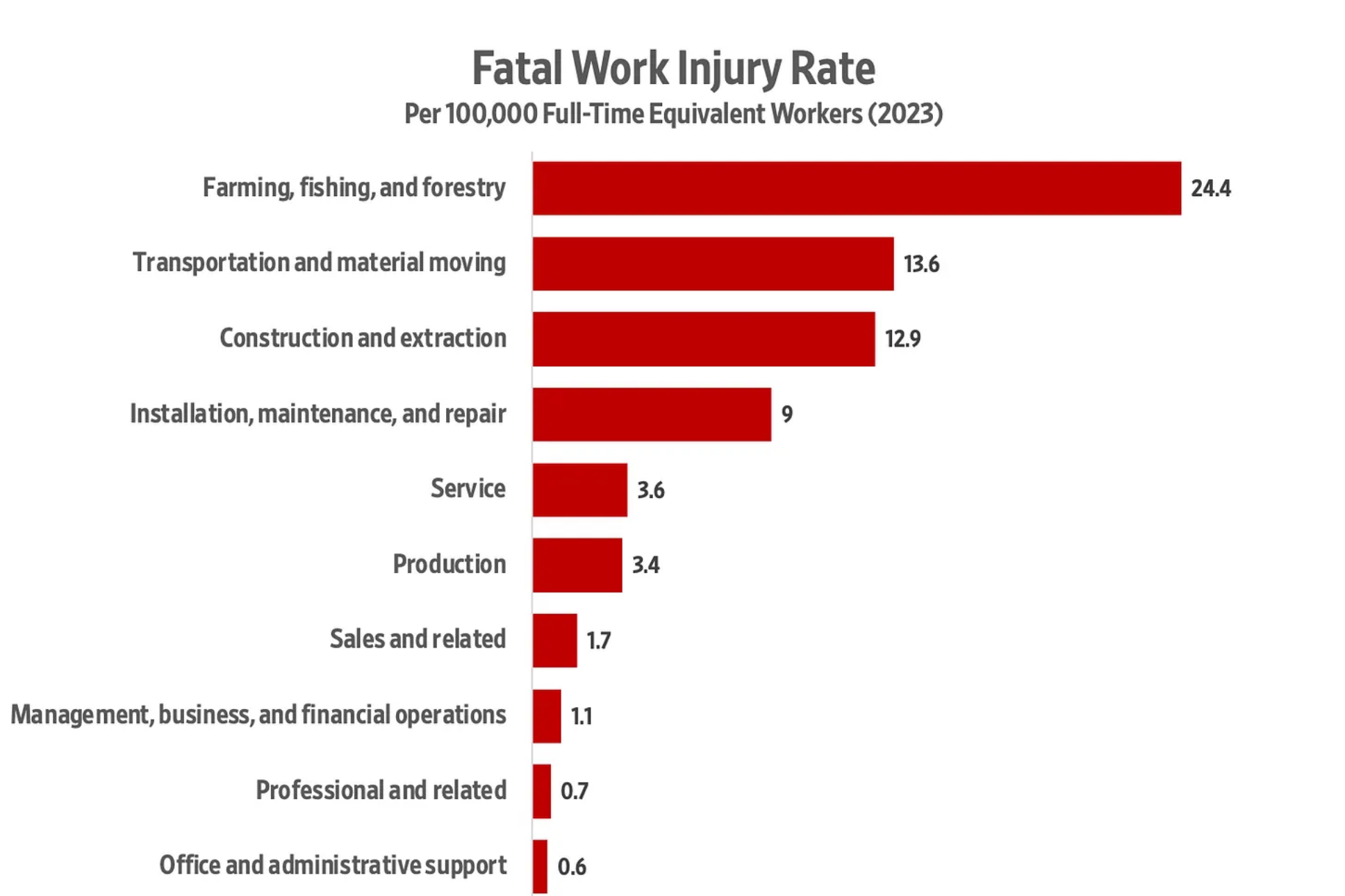
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As we transition from working with atoms to working with knowledge our bodies require a lot less energy to perform that work. Moving from construction work to sitting at a desk in an office requires 77.8 percent fewer calories per hour. Put another way, the calories needed to fuel one construction worker can power 4.5 office workers. The result is an economic system that creates more value with less resource consumption.

## Fatal work injury rate

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports on fatalities on the job:



Farming, fishing, and forestry are the most dangerous professions at 24.4 fatal injuries, with transportation and material moving at 13.6, and construction and extraction at 12.9. Office and administrative support are the least risky professions at 0.6. Farmers, fishermen, and loggers are more than 40 times likely than an office worker to be killed on the job. Moving from construction work to sitting at a desk in an office reduces the risk of a work fatality by 95.3 percent. Adjusted for population size, construction workers experience a work-related fatality rate more than 21 times higher than that of office workers.

And it was much worse in the past—something that we tend to forget when looking at present statistics. In 1900, deaths in the mining and oil extractions fields (lumped under mining) was [estimated](#) at 333 per 100,000 workers and remained that high through the 1920s. We can hardly comprehend just how good we’ve got it now.

## Calorie-fatality index

If we combine these two factors into a calorie-fatality index and compare the construction and office industries, we note that office work is 99 percent lower than construction work on the index. Moving from blue-collar construction work to an office job indicates an overall improvement factor of 96.75 (or 9,575 percent) on the calorie-fatality index.

	Calories Per Hour	Fatal Work Injury Rate	Calorie-Fatality Index
Construction	450	12.9	5,805
Office	100	0.6	60
Percentage Difference	-77.8%	-95.3%	-99.0%
Improvement Factor	4.5	21.5	96.75
Improvement Percentage	350%	2,050%	9,575%

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# Fox Tossing: When Animal Cruelty Was High Society Fun

Humans aren't the only beneficiaries of moral progress.


 CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT  
SEP 12, 2025

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*"For much of human history, killing small animals in inventive ways was a popular form of entertainment."*

- Human Progress



When a New Mexico sheriff’s deputy was recently filmed grinning as he killed a rabbit by throwing it against a police vehicle, **public outrage** was swift. He was placed on leave and charged with extreme cruelty to animals, which is a felony. The incident was stomach-turning, yet perhaps even more shocking is how ordinary such violence used to be.

For much of human history, killing small animals for fun wasn’t just tolerated, but celebrated. Among the more disturbing examples was the European bloodsport known as “fox tossing,” a competitive event popular among aristocrats in the 17th and 18th centuries. Despite the name, the victims were not limited to foxes; hares, beavers, badgers, wildcats, boars and even wolves were also flung to their deaths in this brutal form of entertainment.



An engraving of German aristocrats engaged in the sport of fox tossing or Fuchsprellen (lit. “fox bouncing”).

The rules were simple and horrifying. European courtiers would gather in an enclosed or cordoned-off area and form pairs, with each person holding one end of a length of cloth. Both men and women partook in this strange pastime, and it was a popular sport among romantic couples. Terrified animals were released into the enclosure. When one darted across a cloth, the participants would pull it upward to launch the animals into the air. The goal was to hurl the critters as high as possible. Some managed to reach heights of approximately **7.5 meters**, or 24.6 feet.

Whatever animals survived the ordeal were bludgeoned to death at the event’s end. At one fox tossing contest in Vienna in 1672, Leopold I, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, is **said to have** personally joined in the lethal clubbing of the injured animals.

For a later emperor, Charles VI of Austria (1685-1740), custom **held that** “the hunting season started with fox tossing,” a tradition not to be skipped.

Augustus the Strong, an 18th century ruler of Saxony and King of Poland, had a particular love of the bloodsport. When King Frederick William of Prussia visited Saxony in 1728, Augustus **greeted him** with a gruesome display that saw 200 foxes thrown to their deaths. But that was hardly his record. At one contest that Augustus held at Dresden, an astonishing “**687 foxes**, 533 hares, 34 badgers and 21 wildcats were tossed to their deaths. At the end, 34 young boars and three wolves were turned into the enclosure” to mark the game’s grand finale.

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The game wasn’t without risks to the players, either. Wild animals don’t take kindly to being turned into projectiles. Fox-tossers were frequently clawed or bitten. “That injuries on such occasions were not infrequent need hardly be mentioned, and more than one tosser was marked for life by the claws of a wildcat or the tusks of a young boar,” **noted** one writer.

Some animals proved more dangerous to victimize than others. One witness noted that wildcats were particularly difficult to toss during these sadistic games, **opining** that they “do not give a pleasing kind of sport, for if they cannot bury their claws and teeth in the faces or legs of the tossers, they cling to the tossing-slings for dear life, and it is next to impossible to give one of these animals a skillful toss.”

It’s easy to look back at this history and recoil in disbelief. But we shouldn’t mistake this for a bizarre cultural footnote. Throughout much of history, tormenting animals for fun was considered unproblematic. In fact, fox tossing was just one among many similarly cruel activities.

“Sports such as eel-pulling, pig-sticking, cat-headbutting and fox-tossing all fall under this purview: these ‘games’ are senselessly brutal, but to players of the era they were merely light pre-supper entertainment,” **notes** writer Edward Brooke-Hitching, who compiled an entire book of such historical pastimes entitled “**Fox Tossing, Octopus Wrestling and Other Forgotten Sports**.” Cruelty was often the centerpiece of communal fun.

So what changed? Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker believes humanity became more compassionate as the spread of literacy, education and reason led people to consider the perspectives of others, expanding humanity’s “**circle of empathy**” and eventually extending compassion even to animals, while **dramatically reducing violence in many different areas of life**. Fox tossing was ultimately recognized as uncivilized in the early 19th century and abandoned, eventually outlawed across Europe and in many other locales. Like other now largely forgotten bloodsports such as **gander-pulling** and ritualistic **cat torture**, humanity tossed “fox tossing” aside in favor of more innocent amusements.

Throwing small animals to their deaths, an activity that once entertained our forebears, is now a criminal offense, as that New Mexico sheriff’s deputy discovered. The cruelty once seen as charming is now met with condemnation.

And that is progress that shouldn’t be tossed away.

*This article was **published** in The Well News on 8/22/2025.*

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# Modern Freedom Beats Feudal Serfdom

Make the Middle Ages Great Again?

MARIAN L TUPY  
SEP 14, 2025

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On a recent podcast, Tucker Carlson [praised feudalism](#) as “so much better than what we have now” because a ruler is “vested in the prosperity of the people he rules.” This romantic view of medieval hierarchy ignores a brutal reality: For most people, feudalism meant grinding poverty, disease, and early death.

As Gale L. Pooley and I found in our 2022 book [Superabundance](#), society in preindustrial Europe was bifurcated between a small minority of the very rich and the vast majority of the very poor. One 17<sup>th</sup>-century observer estimated that the French population consisted of “10 percent rich, 50 percent very poor, 30 percent who were nearly beggars, and 10 percent who were actually beggars.” In 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, the Italian historian Francesco Guicciardini wrote, “except for a few Grantees of the Kingdom who live with great sumptuousness ... others live in great poverty.”

An account from 18<sup>th</sup>-century Naples recorded beggars finding “nocturnal asylum in a few caves, stables or ruined houses” where “they are to be seen there lying like filthy animals, with no distinction of age or sex.” Children fared the worst. Paris, according to the French author Louis-Sébastien Mercier, had “7,000 to 8,000 abandoned children out of some 30,000 births around 1780.” These children were then taken—three at a time—to the poor house, with carriers often finding at least “one of them dead” upon arrival.

People were constantly hungry, and starvation was only ever a few bad harvests away. In 1800, even France, one of the world’s richest countries, had an average food supply of only 1,846 calories per person per day. In other words, the majority of the population was undernourished. (Given that the average person needs about 2,000 calories a day.) That, in the words of the Italian historian Carlo Cipolla, gave rise to “serious forms of avitaminosis,” or medical conditions resulting from vitamin deficiencies. There was also, he noted, a prevalence of intestinal worms, which is “a slow, disgusting, and debilitating disease that caused a vast amount of human misery and ill health.”

Sanitation was a nightmare. As the English historian Lawrence Stone wrote in his book *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*, “city ditches, now often filled with stagnant water, were commonly used as latrines; butchers killed animals in their shops and threw the offal of the carcasses into the streets; dead animals were left to decay and fester where they lay.” London had “poor holes” or “large, deep, open pits in which were laid the bodies of the poor, side by side, row by row.” The stench was overwhelming, for “great quantities of human excrement were cast into the streets.”

The French historian Fernand Braudel found that in 15<sup>th</sup>-century England, “80 percent of private expenditure was on food, with 20 percent spent on bread alone.” An account of 16<sup>th</sup>-century life in rural Lombardy noted that peasants lived on wheat alone: Their “expenses for clothing and other needs are practically non-existent.” Per Cipolla, “One of the main preoccupations of hospital administration was to ensure that the clothes of the deceased should not be usurped but should be given to lawful inheritors. During epidemics of plague, the town authorities had to struggle to confiscate the clothes of the dead and to burn them: people waited for others to die so as to take over their clothes.”

Prior to mechanized agriculture, there were no food surpluses to sustain idle hands, not even those of children. And working conditions were brutal. A 16<sup>th</sup>-century ordinance in Lombardy found that supervisors in rice fields “bring together a large number of children and adolescents, against whom they practice barbarous cruelties ... [They] do not provide these poor creatures with the necessary food and make them labor as slaves by beating them and treating them more harshly than galley slaves, so that many of the children die miserably in the farms and neighboring fields.”

Such violence pervaded daily life. Medieval homicide rates reached 150 murders per 100,000 people in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Florence. In 15<sup>th</sup>-century England, it hovered around 24 per 100,000. (In 2020, the Italian homicide rate was [0.48 per 100,000](#). It was [0.95 per 100,000](#) in England and Wales in 2024.) People resolved their disputes through physical violence because no effective legal system existed. The serfs—serfdom in Russia was abolished only in 1861—lived as property, bound to land they could never own, subject to masters who viewed them as assets rather than humans. And between 1500 and the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europe’s great powers were at war nearly 100 percent of the time.

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Carlson’s nostalgia for feudalism is not unique on the MAGA right. The influential American blogger Curtis Yarvin, for example, attributes to monarchs such as France’s Louis XIV decisive and long-term leadership that modern democracies apparently lack. But less frequently mentioned is how, for example, that same Louis ruined his country during the War of the Spanish Succession. As Winston Churchill wrote in *Marlborough: His Life and Times*,

After more than sixty years of his reign, more than thirty years of which had been consumed in European war, the Great King saw his people face to face with actual famine. Their sufferings were extreme. In Paris the death-rate doubled. Even before Christmas the market-women had marched to Versailles to proclaim their misery. In the countryside the peasantry subsisted on herbs or roots or flocked in despair into the famishing towns. Brigandage was widespread. Bands of starving men, women, and children roamed about in desperation. Châteaux and convents were attacked; the market-place of Amiens was pillaged; credit failed. From every province and from every class rose the cry for bread and peace.

The Great Enrichment, a phrase coined by my Cato Institute colleague Deirdre McCloskey, of the past 200 years or so lifted billions from the misery that defined human existence for millennia. It was driven by market economies and limits on the rulers’ arbitrary power, not feudal hierarchy.

There are many plausible reasons for Carlson’s (and Yarvin’s) openness to giving pre-modern institutions such as feudalism and absolute monarchy a second look. One is a lack of appreciation for the reality of the daily existence of ordinary people whose lives, in the immortal words of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, were “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Another is their apparent conviction that the United States is, in [the words](#) of President Donald Trump, “a failed nation.” Except that we are nothing of the sort. The United States has plenty of problems, but the lives of ordinary Americans in 2025 are incomparably better than those of the kings and queens of the past. Our standard of living is, in fact, the envy of the world, which is the most parsimonious explanation for millions of people trying to get here.

Solving the problems that remain and will arise in the future will depend on careful evaluation of evidence, historical experience, reason, and hard work. Catastrophism does not help, for it rejects human agency by declaring that the future is already decided. Hunkering down under a protective shield of feudal hierarchy or placing our trust in a modern incarnation of Louis XIV is no guarantee of success. We tried it before, and the results were disastrous.

*This article originally appeared in [The Dispatch](#) on August 26, 2025.*

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# The Misunderstood Miracle of American Health Care

Why does such an unpopular system generate so much progress?

RICHARD HANANIA  
SEP 17, 2025

97 29 14 Share



The US health care system is often criticized for being expensive, wasteful, and cruelly indifferent to the least fortunate among us. Analysts point out its high costs, the seeming irrationalities in the system, and the middlemen who appear to be getting rich while providing little value. Someone being denied coverage for a treatment they need hits us at an emotional level. While defenders of the US system focus on its off-the-charts levels of innovation, the availability bias ensures that what people remember most are the horror stories of medical bankruptcies and denied claims, not the silent, invisible gains of new treatments and technologies that only exist because of the incentives embedded in this messy system.

My decades-long struggle with psoriasis is one example of how new medical treatments can change people's lives for the better. All critiques of the US health care system must acknowledge that it is charting more new paths in medicine than any other system.

When I was a little kid, due to a mild case of psoriasis, my scalp would flake and cause dandruff. As I grew older, at some point—I can't even tell you what decade it was—I started to get large and noticeable red spots on my back and torso. Maybe five years ago, these blotches had migrated to my face. When it was a body problem, I didn't really care about it, since I'm not an Instagram model. But now I had to take this seriously.

I was luckier than many others with psoriasis because my blotches didn't itch. They were simply ugly, misshapen patches on my skin.

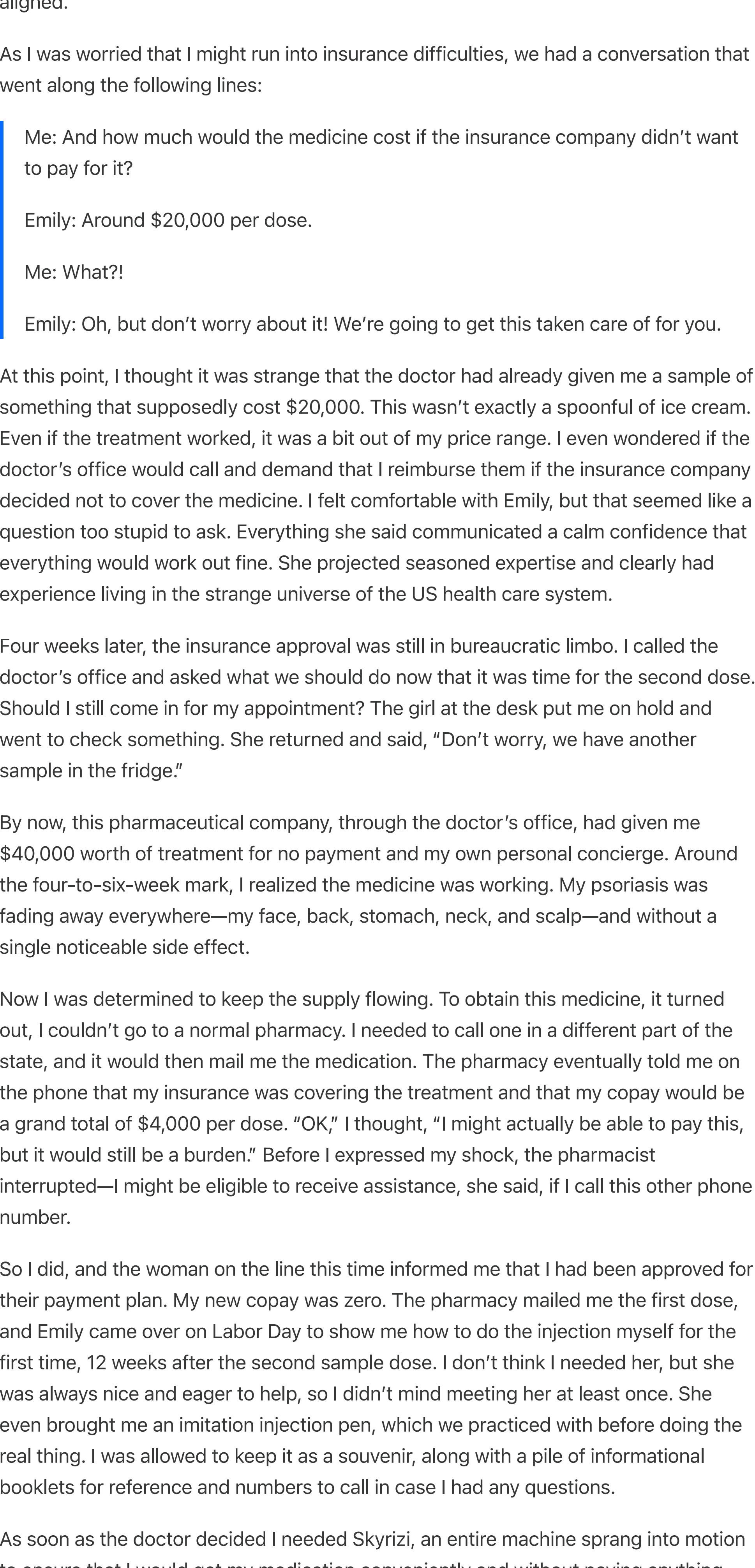
Unfortunately, I was always told that treating psoriasis on the face is extremely difficult. Although you can use strong steroid creams and ointments on the body, the skin on one's face is too sensitive, and it can thin out over time. So I had to use weaker versions of the same medications, and for me, these barely had any effect at all. Since I had no other options, I resorted to using the creams they gave me for my body on my face, even though I was warned that those could do long-term damage. Even then, their effect was weak to nonexistent.

Earlier this year, I had the nagging suspicion that the doctors I was seeing were being too conservative and that there must be some other way to deal with the issue. Using Google, I found a nearby clinic, run by an MD, that had "aesthetics" in its name and that combined medical and nonmedical cosmetic services. My hunch was that an office that did not pay lip service to this arbitrary division between beauty and medicine would be willing to do things on the cutting edge of treatment. As you will see, this will turn out to be a story about the benefits of not only profit incentives in medicine but also the much-maligned practice of medical and pharmaceutical advertising.

On my first trip to the office, the doctor informed me that in the current year, psoriasis isn't a problem anymore. He would simply administer a shot, and it would go away. Shocked, I asked why all the other doctors had kept this a secret from me. He laughed and said that he couldn't say. The medicine was called Skyrizi. He would give me one shot in the stomach, another in four weeks, and then I would only need the shot every 12 weeks as a maintenance dose. No side effects, problem solved.

I went home, did some research, and discovered that this was real. So I came back and received the first shot. Initially, the doctor said that since my case of psoriasis was mild, he would give me a daily pill. I replied that part of the appeal of the shot over the ointments was that I was busy with a successful career and three small children, and I didn't want to waste time with an additional responsibility as part of my daily routine. The doctor said this was fine, even though he often recommended the pills if possible because some people are afraid of needles. I assured him this would not be an issue.

He then pulled out the specially designed single-use pen and gave me the injection.



I was told that this was a sample and that I only needed to go through my insurance to get preapproval for future doses. I didn't feel anything with the first shot, and went home after getting it.

I worried that my insurance provider might not want to pay for this treatment. It seemed new and expensive. Soon after the first appointment, I received a call from a Skyrizi representative. Let's call her Emily. She was reaching out to tell me all about the medication, answer any questions I might have had, and, if need be, go to war with the insurance company on my behalf to get it. She'd even come to my house and show me how to inject the medication myself the first time I received it. All of this was free of charge, which seemed quite strange. A person with anti-market biases might have been turned off by this practice, but I was open to the idea that our interests were aligned.

As I was worried that I might run into insurance difficulties, we had a conversation that went along the following lines:

Me: And how much would the medicine cost if the insurance company didn't want to pay for it?

Emily: Around \$20,000 per dose.

Me: What?!

Emily: Oh, but don't worry about it! We're going to get this taken care of for you.

At this point, I thought it was strange that the doctor had already given me a sample of something that supposedly cost \$20,000. This wasn't exactly a spoonful of ice cream. Even if the treatment worked, it was a bit out of my price range. I even wondered if the doctor's office would call and demand that I reimburse them if the insurance company decided not to cover the medicine. I felt comfortable with Emily, but that seemed like a question too stupid to ask. Everything she said communicated a calm confidence that everything would work out fine. She projected seasoned expertise and clearly had experience living in the strange universe of the US health care system.

Four weeks later, the insurance approval was still in bureaucratic limbo. I called the doctor's office and asked what we should do now that it was time for the second dose. Should I still come in for my appointment? The girl at the desk put me on hold and went to check something. She returned and said, "Don't worry, we have another sample in the fridge."

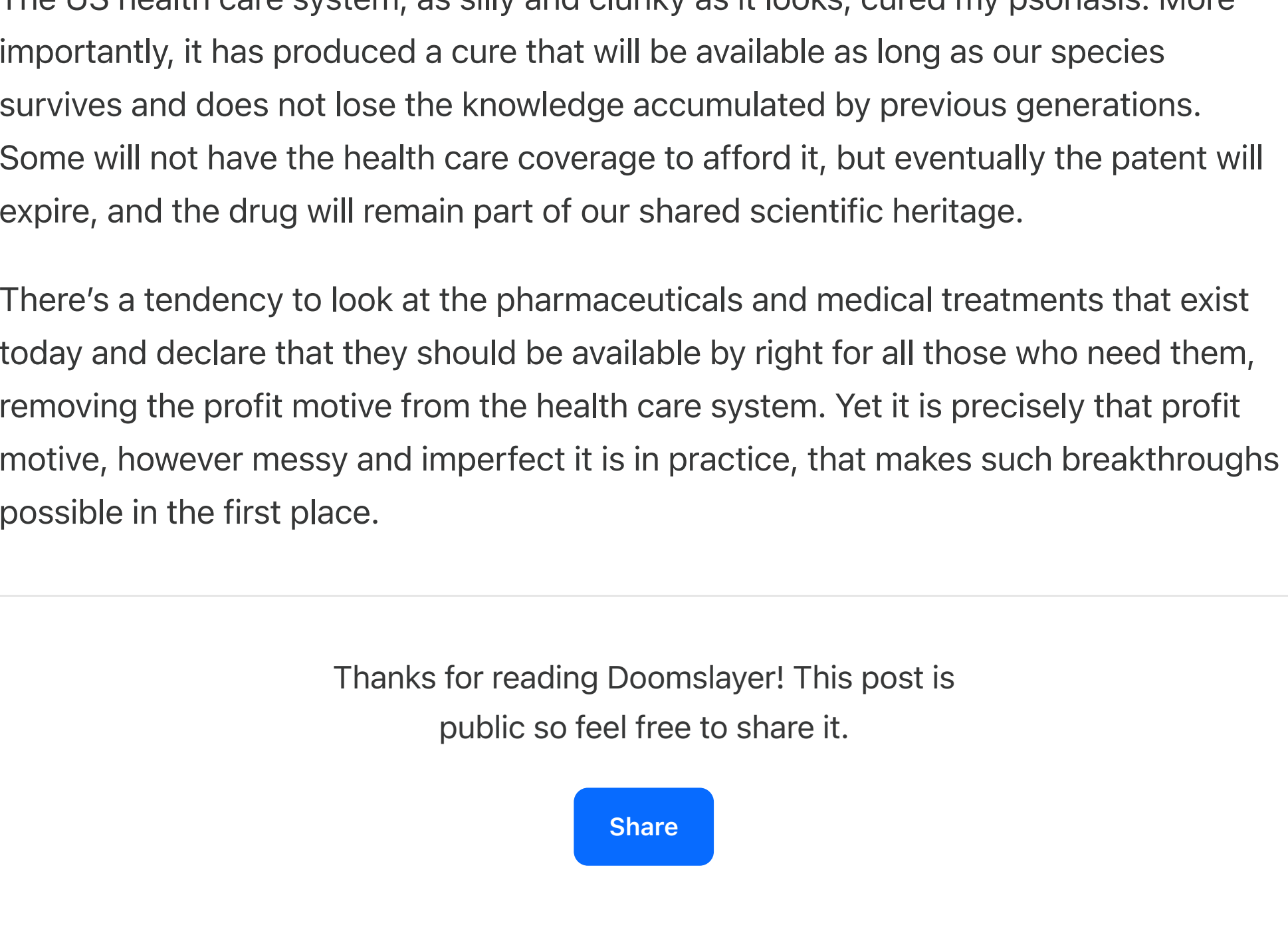
By now, this pharmaceutical company, through the doctor's office, had given me \$40,000 worth of treatment for no payment and my own personal concierge. Around the four-to-six-week mark, I realized the medicine was working. My psoriasis was fading away everywhere—my face, back, stomach, neck, and scalp—and without a single noticeable side effect.

Now I was determined to keep the supply flowing. To obtain this medicine, it turned out, I couldn't go to a normal pharmacy. I needed to call one in a different part of the state, and it would then mail me the medication. The pharmacy eventually told me on the phone that my insurance was covering the treatment and that my copay would be a grand total of \$4,000 per dose. "OK," I thought, "I might actually be able to pay this, but it would still be a burden." Before I expressed my shock, the pharmacist interrupted—I might be eligible to receive assistance, she said, if I call this other phone number.

So I did, and the woman on the line this time informed me that I had been approved for their payment plan. My new copay was zero. The pharmacy mailed me the first dose, and Emily came over on Labor Day to show me how to do the injection myself for the first time, 12 weeks after the second sample dose. I don't think I needed her, but she was always nice and eager to help, so I didn't mind meeting her at least once. She even brought me an imitation injection pen, which we practiced with before doing the real thing. I was allowed to keep it as a souvenir, along with a pile of informational booklets for reference and numbers to call in case I had any questions.

As soon as the doctor decided I needed Skyrizi, an entire machine sprang into motion to ensure that I would get my medication conveniently and without paying anything. On paper, this medicine should have cost about \$100,000 in my first year, and even after my copay, around \$20,000. But these numbers had no connection to any price I would ever be responsible for.

They were all fake. Apparently, since the marginal costs of making a dose of the medication were low, the pharmaceutical company was willing to go above and beyond to make sure I received the treatment. For reasons I don't understand, it had to be done in this strange and roundabout way. Hopefully, a health care expert can one day explain it to me.



This entire process looks irrational. A cost of \$20,000 per dose seems absurd. While I didn't directly pay for the medication, that number must mean something, and one would think that the pharmaceutical companies charging such seemingly exorbitant prices must be screwing over the consumer in some way. The system of free samples, a pharmaceutical rep personally lobbying me to take the drug, and the large copay that magically disappeared with a single phone call gave the whole process a shady quality. Even a supporter of free markets in health care probably wouldn't think things should work like this.

In other developed countries, price controls are much stricter, and central planning is more direct, rather than relying on a patchwork of imaginary prices. Sometimes these prices may be completely covered by insurance, and other times they are either unaffordable or offset by seemingly arbitrary discounts.

Yet, as silly and haphazard as this system looks, it is the innovative engine of the world. The United States carries out the largest share of global research and development in the life sciences. US-based researchers are estimated to generate around 80 percent of the most important breakthroughs in medical, biochemical, and biotechnological fields. Even when companies that make breakthroughs are not in the United States, they are motivated to invest in innovation because they can make more money here than anywhere else.

A 2018 analysis found that US consumers account for 64–78 percent of global pharmaceutical profits, illustrating how US spending and pricing structures subsidize innovation that benefits patients globally. Collectively, these figures underscore the centrality of the United States in shaping medical advancements through both high-volume research activity and breakthrough discoveries. Freedom to advertise new drugs and treatments is another part of the US health care system that is extremely rare. Without the clinic's slick advertising and the Skyrizi brand ambassador holding my hand through the entire complicated process, I may have never gotten the medicine.

What if we had adopted single-payer health care a generation ago? I would've probably received a lifetime supply of creams and ointments that barely worked, which I would have had to apply multiple times a day to large swaths across my entire body. My face would have remained practically untreatable. Foundations were more effective than anything I could get from a medical provider. Instead, I now have a nearly complete cessation of symptoms with nothing more than a shot taken four times a year.

The lesson here is that the most seemingly dysfunctional profit-based system is usually better than even the highest-quality forms of central planning. As long as there is some way to turn ideas and innovation into products and services that people want, no matter how many barriers the government puts in the way, science will move forward. It may go faster or slower depending on the policy choices we make, but it will continue. One advanced economy allows windfall profits in the pharmaceutical space, and it is not a coincidence that ours is the one responsible for the vast majority of important medical breakthroughs.

Socialized medicine is a marshmallow test. It can provide advantages in the short run, yet it ensures that there will be fewer innovations for future generations. Even the supposed benefits are usually exaggerated and often have drawbacks, such as longer wait times for specialists and lower rates of cancer survival.

The US health care system, as silly and clunky as it looks, cured my psoriasis. More importantly, it has produced a cure that will be available as long as our species survives and does not lose the knowledge accumulated by previous generations. Some will not have the health care coverage to afford it, but eventually the patent will expire, and the drug will remain part of our shared scientific heritage.

There's a tendency to look at the pharmaceuticals and medical treatments that exist today and declare that they should be available by right for all those who need them, removing the profit motive from the health care system. Yet it is precisely that profit motive, however messy and imperfect it is in practice, that makes such breakthroughs possible in the first place.

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# Climate Litigation Can't Fix the Past, but It Can Hinder the Future

Dealing with climate change requires technological innovation and economic growth, not legal warfare between nations.

MARIAN L TUPY  
SEP 19, 2025

♡ 22

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The International Court of Justice's [advisory opinion](#) purporting to establish legal grounds that would allow nations to sue one another over climate damages represents judicial overreach that ignores economic history and threatens global development.

While the opinion was undeniably legally adventurous, the framework it envisages would be practically unworkable as well as economically destructive.

The ICJ's ruling suggests countries can be held liable for historical emissions of planet-warming gases. That creates an accounting nightmare that no legal system can resolve. How does one calculate damages from coal burned in Manchester in 1825 versus emissions from a Beijing power plant in 2025? How does one stack up the harm caused by a warming world against the benefits of industrialization?

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Britain began large-scale coal combustion during the Industrial Revolution, when atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations were [280 parts per million](#) and climate science did not exist. Holding Britain liable for actions taken without knowledge of consequences violates basic principles of jurisprudence. The same applies to the United States, whose early industrialization occurred during an era when maximizing economic output was considered unambiguously beneficial to human welfare.

Critics of historical emissions ignore what those emissions purchased. British coal combustion powered textile mills that clothed much of the world, steam engines that revolutionized transportation, and factories that mass-produced goods previously available only to elites. American industrialization followed, creating assembly lines, electrical grids, and chemical processes that form the backbone of modern civilization.

These developments were not zero-sum exercises in resource extraction. They created knowledge, infrastructure, and institutions that benefited everyone. The steam engine led to internal combustion engines, which enabled mechanized agriculture that now feeds 8 billion people. Coal-powered steel production made possible skyscrapers, bridges, and the infrastructure that supports modern cities, where most humans now live longer, healthier lives than their ancestors.

The data on human welfare improvements since industrialization began are explicit. Global life expectancy [increased from approximately 29 years](#) in 1800 to 73 years today. [Infant mortality rates](#) fell from over 40 percent to under 3 percent. Extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$2.15 per day in purchasing power parity terms, [declined](#) from over 80 percent of the global population in 1800 to under 10 percent today.

Nutrition improved dramatically. [Caloric availability per person](#) has increased by roughly 40 percent since 1960 alone, while food prices relative to wages fell consistently. Height, a reliable indicator of childhood nutrition, [increased significantly across all regions](#). Educational attainment expanded from [literacy rates below 10 percent globally](#) in 1800 to over 85 percent today.

These improvements correlate directly with energy consumption and industrial development. Countries that industrialized earliest experienced these welfare gains first, then transmitted the knowledge and technology globally. The antibiotics developed in American and European laboratories now save lives worldwide. The agricultural techniques pioneered in industrialized nations now feed populations that would otherwise face starvation.

The International Court of Justice's liability framework threatens to undermine the very mechanisms that created these welfare improvements. Innovation requires investment, which requires confidence in property rights and legal stability. If successful economic development subjects countries to retroactive liability, the incentive structure tilts away from growth and toward stagnation.

Consider current developing nations. Under this legal framework, should India or Nigeria limit their industrial development to avoid future liability? Should they forgo the coal and natural gas that powered Western development? That creates a perverse situation where the legal system penalizes the exact processes that lifted billions from poverty.

The framework also ignores technological solutions. The same innovative capacity that created the Industrial Revolution is now producing renewable energy technologies, carbon capture systems, and efficiency improvements that address climate concerns without sacrificing development. Market incentives and technological progress offer more promise than legal blame assignment.

Which emissions count as legally actionable? All anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> remains in the atmosphere for centuries, making every emission since 1750 potentially relevant. Should liability begin with James Watt's steam engine improvements in 1769? With the first coal-fired power plant? With Henry Ford's assembly line? The temporal boundaries are arbitrary and politically motivated rather than scientifically determined.

Similarly, which countries qualify as defendants? The largest current emitters include China and India, whose recent emissions dwarf historical American and British totals. China alone now produces more CO<sub>2</sub> annually than the United States and Europe combined. Any coherent liability framework must address current emissions, not just historical ones.

And where would the money go? This aspect of the case was brought up by Vanuatu. If the island nation receives compensation from the UK and the US, should it not be obliged to pay the British and the Americans for a plethora of life-enhancing Western discoveries, including electricity, vaccines, the telephone, radio, aviation, internet, refrigeration, and navigation systems?

Climate adaptation and mitigation require technological innovation and economic growth, not legal warfare between nations. The countries that industrialized first possess the technological capacity and institutional knowledge to develop solutions to today's problems. Channeling resources toward litigation rather than innovation represents a misallocation that benefits lawyers while harming global welfare.

The ICJ opinion reflects wishful thinking rather than practical policy. Legal frameworks cannot repeal economic reality or reverse the historical processes that created modern prosperity. Instead of seeking retroactive justice for emissions that enabled human flourishing, policymakers should focus on technologies and institutions that sustain development while addressing environmental concerns. The alternative is a world where legal systems punish success and innovation while offering nothing constructive in return.

*The original version of this article was [published](#) in National Review on 8/12/2025.*

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# Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

The children of the world are richer and better fed than ever before.

MALCOLM COCHRAN  
SEP 21, 2025

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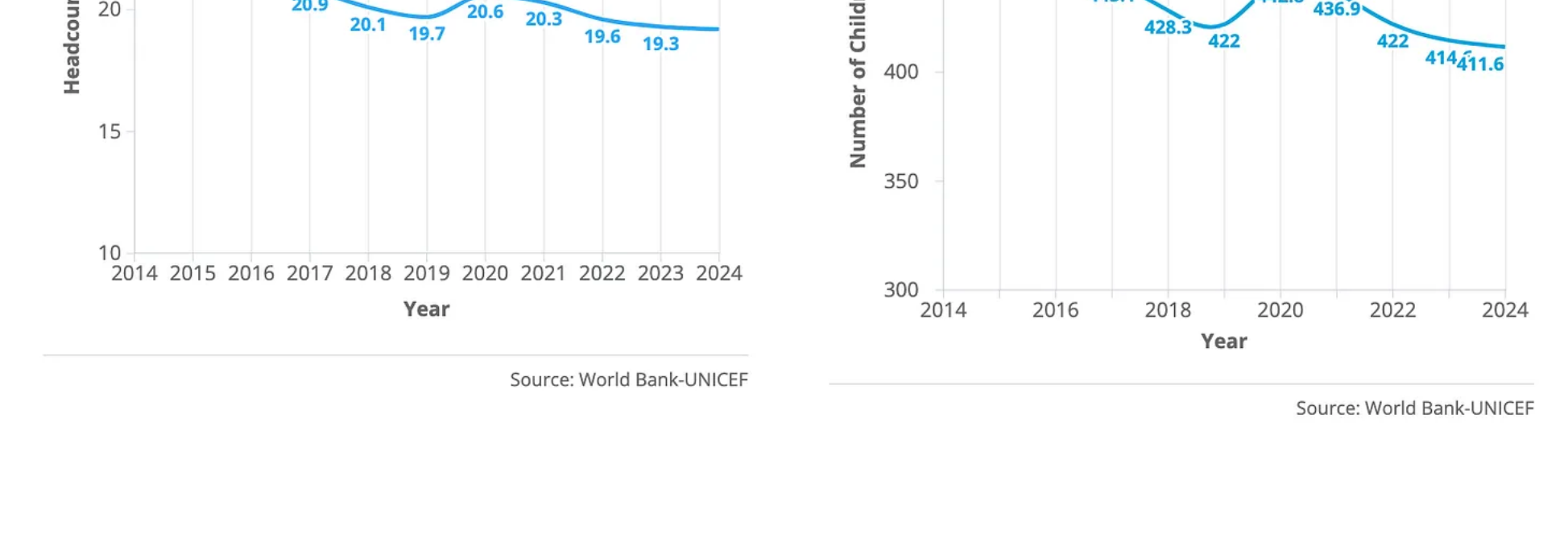
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## Announcements

- **We are trying to determine how frequently we should send out emails. You can help us by filling out this [very short survey](#).**
- On October 18, **Johan Norberg, the [prolific author](#), historian, and Human Progress board member, will speak at a [Cato University seminar](#) for college and graduate students** in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The day-long seminar will focus on cultivating an understanding of how openness to the world can advance peace and prosperity. All who complete the program will receive a \$100 travel stipend. **Interested students [should apply](#) by October 6.**

## Economics & Development

- According to a recent [World Bank report](#), **the number of children living in extreme poverty fell to a record low of 412 million in 2024**, down from 507 million a decade earlier.



## Energy & Environment

### Conservation and biodiversity

- Koalas have a severe chlamydia problem—so severe that some experts [speculate](#) it could push the species toward extinction. Thankfully, **Australian regulators have just approved a [chlamydia vaccine for koalas](#)** that cut deaths by 65 percent in trials.
- **The number of blue iguanas—impressive reptiles native to Grand Cayman—has surged from fewer than 25 in 2002 to over 1,200 today.**
- **The bison population of Yellowstone now [numbers around 5,000](#)**, and a [recent study](#) found that **soil and plants along their migration route have more microbes and nutrients than normal**.

### Energy & Natural Resources

- **A massive freshwater aquifer off the US Northeast coast**, first detected in the 1970s, **has now [been sampled](#) directly for the first time**. This latest expedition should help determine whether the aquifer could one day serve as a usable water supply and offer clues about similar formations hidden elsewhere in the world.

### Natural Disasters & Pollution

- A [recent analysis](#) of flooding impacts in Europe between 1950 and 2020 found that **flood-related deaths dropped about fivefold, while direct economic losses fell by two-thirds relative to GDP**.
- **The ozone hole is [still shrinking](#).**

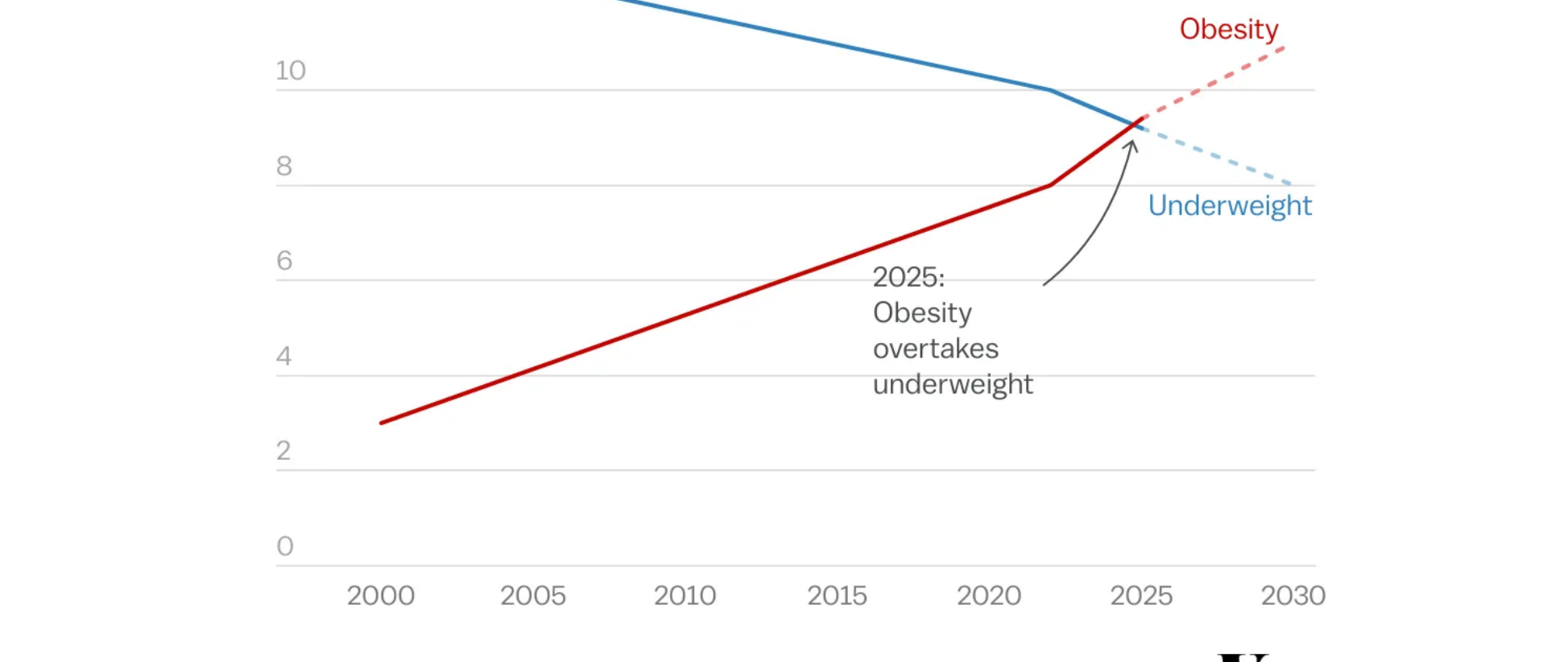
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## Food & Hunger

- UNICEF [reports](#) that, **for the first time in history, more children are obese than underweight**. I urge you to resist being overly cynical about this: while obesity is a serious problem, it kills far more slowly than starvation.

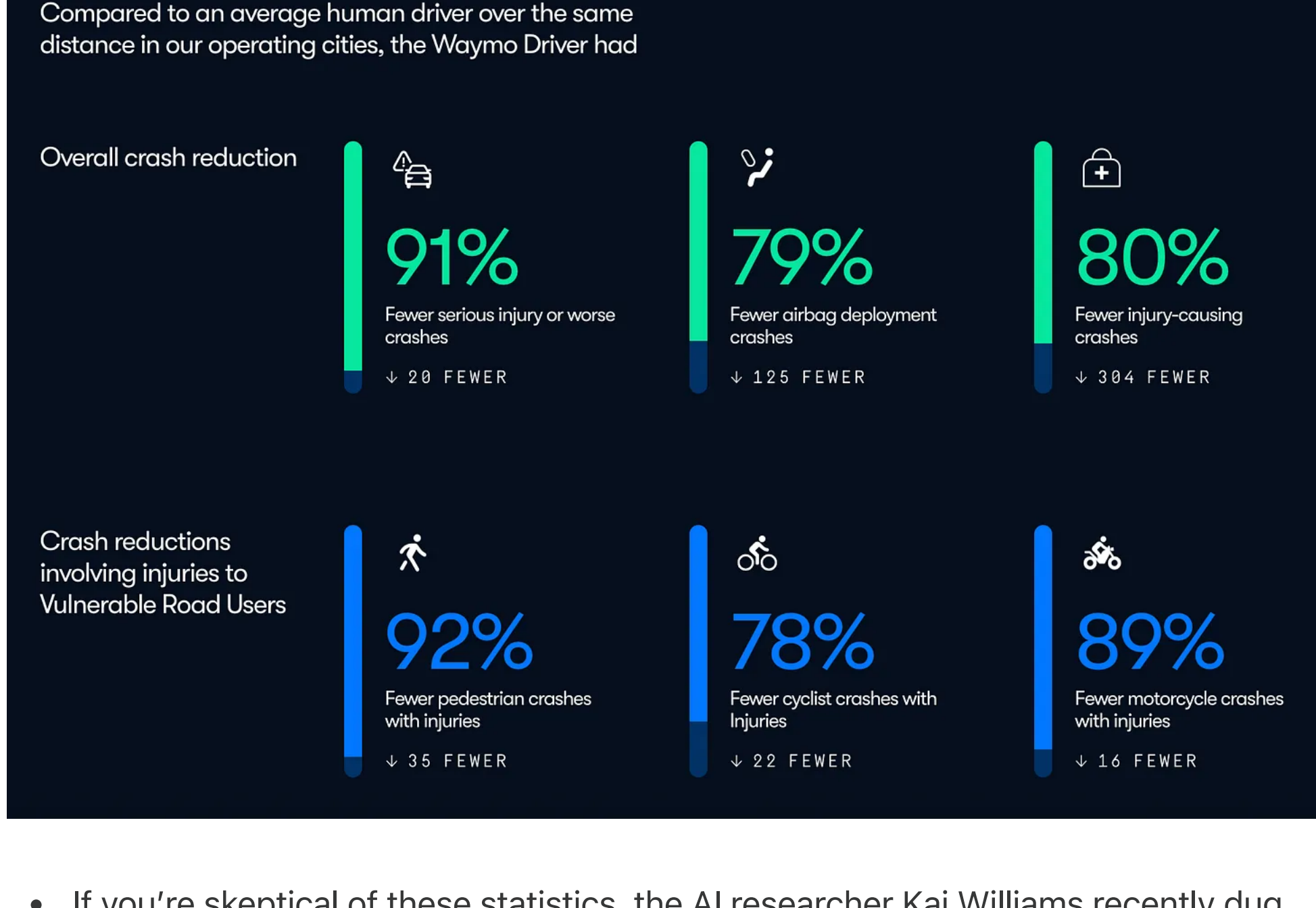


## Health & Demographics

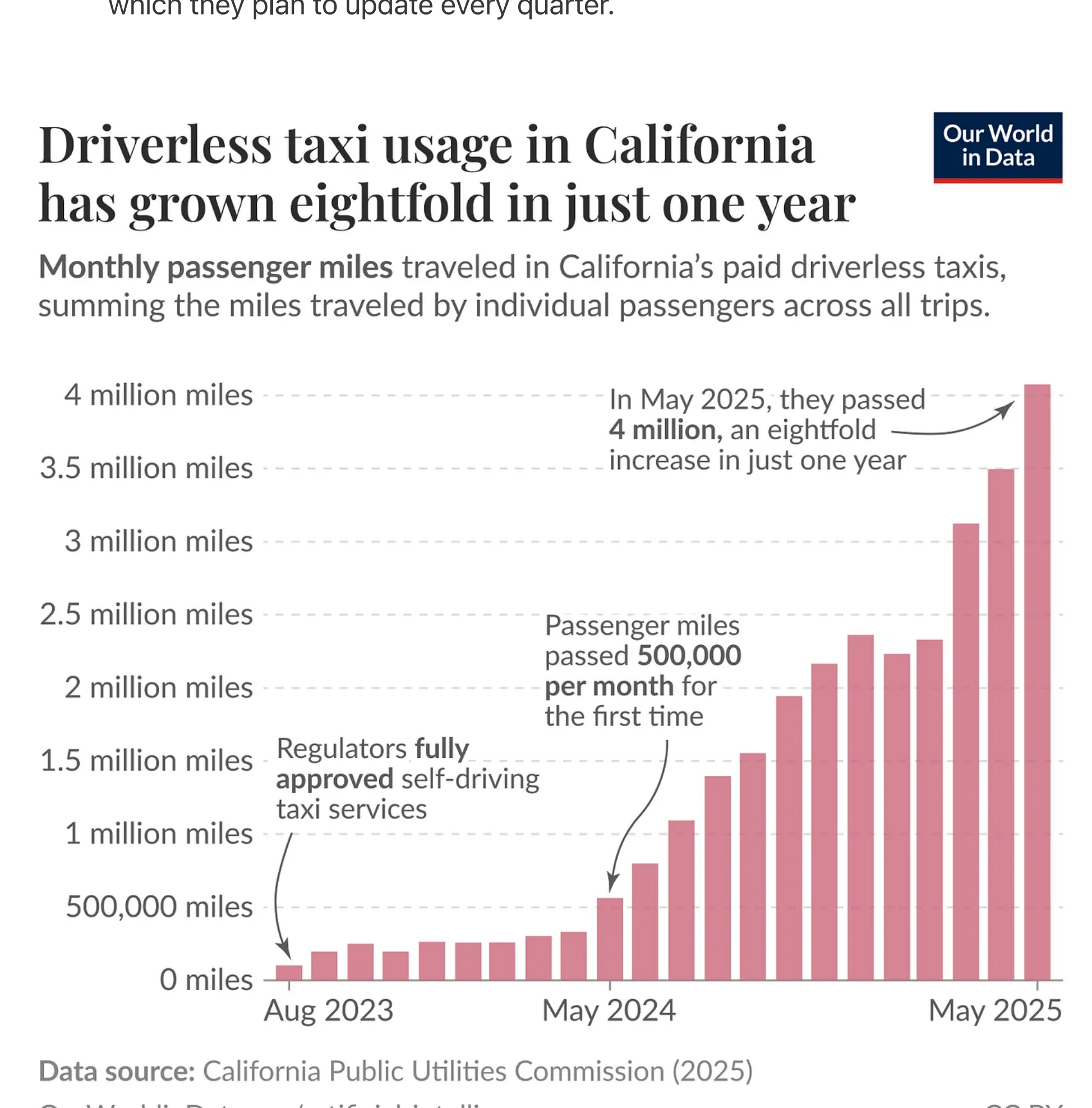
- The World Health Organization has declared that **monkeypox is [no longer an “international health emergency”](#)** following a general decline in cases across Africa.
- **The number of global leprosy cases in 2024 was [5.5 percent lower](#) than in 2023 and 19 percent lower than in 2014.**
- [Recent research](#) in *The Lancet* found that **death rates from non-communicable diseases** (e.g., diabetes, heart disease, and cancer) **fell in 150 of the 185 countries studied** between 2010 and 2019.
- According to a new CDC report, **the age-adjusted death rate in the US [fell by 3.8 percent](#) between 2023 and 2024**.
- **Two leading HPV strains are [nearly extinct](#) in Denmark** thanks to widespread vaccination.
- Tim Andrews, who broke the record for **the longest time spent living with a pig kidney [back in June](#)**, is reportedly still [alive and off dialysis](#). [Another brave recipient](#) is well past the three-month mark.

## Science & Technology

- Researchers at Arc Institute and Stanford University used an AI model called [Evo 2](#) to design [16 viable bacteriophages](#), that is, viruses that infect bacteria—the **first time AI has generated whole living genomes**. Niko McCarty has a [great write-up](#) explaining how they accomplished this feat and what it means for the future of synthetic biology.
- I also recommend his and Saloni Dattani’s roundup of other [recent developments in biology and medicine](#).
- SpaceX has [purchased](#) 50 MHz within the S-band, a block of radio frequencies well-suited for satellite-to-phone service. **The deal gives Starlink the technical capability to bring 5G to ordinary phones**, putting pressure on terrestrial carriers and potentially ending mobile dead zones.
- **Apple’s new AirPods headphones will feature [live speech translation](#).**
- Waymo has released [96 million driverless miles](#) of safety data indicating that their robotaxis boast an 80 percent lower rate of injury-causing accidents compared to the average human driver. Put plainly, **the faster these machines roll out, the fewer people will die**.



- If you’re skeptical of these statistics, the AI researcher Kai Williams recently dug into the details of every Waymo-involved accident over a six-month period and found that **[almost all of them](#) were the human driver’s fault**.
- A few more robotaxi notes:
  - Waymo is now testing its vehicles at the [San Francisco](#) and [San Jose](#) international airports.
  - Here’s a neat [video](#) of a Waymo deftly navigating through a dust storm.
  - Our World in Data has [an impressive chart](#) of robotaxi adoption in California, which they plan to update every quarter.





# Remittances and Our Freedom to Give

A crucial alternative to foreign aid is being threatened.

CAMILLE MINER

SEP 25, 2025

♡ 21

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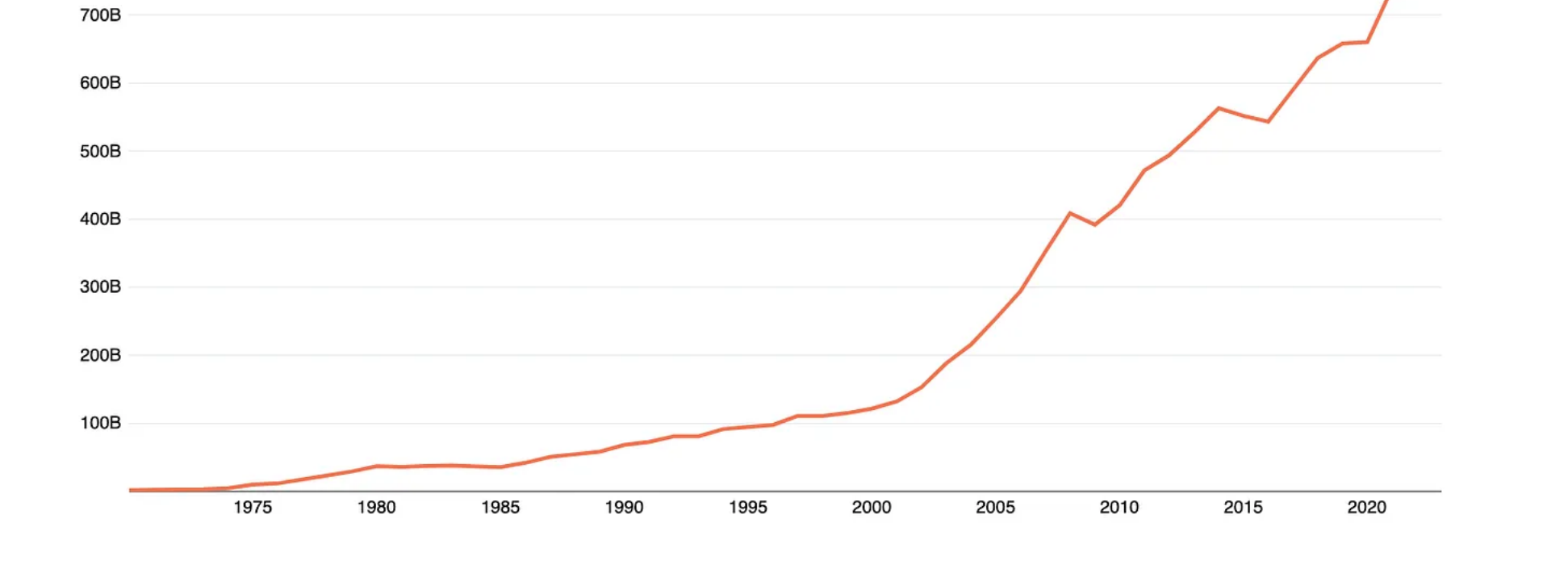
Remittances, the funds immigrants send to family members in their countries of origin, are under political fire. Many US policymakers favor taxing these payments and placing bureaucratic hurdles in the way of those trying to send money home. The rationale? Keep more money circulating in the US economy. It's a seductive argument for many. Yet this idea is not only shortsighted but harmful.

First, consider the scale of these payments. The average global migrant worker sends 15 percent of their salary back home. That is only about \$250 every 1 to 2 months, but it represents one-half the average monthly salary after tax of a worker in [El Salvador](#), and just above the average monthly salary of a worker in [Bangladesh](#). Thus, the flow of cash from a migrant worker can determine who back home can afford a metal roof, a well, pavement, nutritious food, payment of debt, [medical coverage](#), or education.

The United Nations [estimates](#) that one billion people worldwide either pay or receive remittances. The World Bank [anticipates](#) that global remittance payments sent to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) will total \$690 billion by the [end of 2025](#). The amount of [money sent by migrants](#) more than tripled global foreign aid money in 2021.

## Personal remittances, received

current US\$ (1970–2023)



Unlike foreign aid, remittances don't cost US taxpayers a dime. According to Robert Stojanov and Wadim Strielkowski, remittances are absorbed nearly [twice as effectively](#) as official development assistance, or foreign aid for development. The absorption rate represents how effectively money is used and traded in the economy it enters. In other words, money given by remittances is often more effectively used in local developing economies than money provided through foreign aid.

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Remittances are especially important for families because they can reduce child mortality and child labor. When parents receive steady financial support from family members abroad, they are better able to support their children and afford medical care for them. The children, in turn, are less burdened by the need to work and can attend school.

Remittances are also crucial in times of economic uncertainty. During the COVID-19 pandemic, remittances [accounted for more than 30 percent](#) of the gross domestic product (GDP) for The Gambia and Lebanon, providing essential support for recipients and boosting local economic activity.

In the early 2010s, internet and mobile phone access were still limited in many developing countries. However, in just the past decade, the world has seen a 30 percent increase in [internet users](#) worldwide, and the World Bank [estimates](#) that 84 percent of people in developing countries own a mobile phone in 2025. Importantly, the adoption of mobile phones [correlates](#) with the adoption of mobile money accounts, facilitating millions of remittances.

Western Union is the dominant remittance handler in the developing world and has historically used its comfortable market share to impose [high fees](#) to transfer remittances. However, because of the spread of mobile devices in the developing world, fintech companies such as [Wise](#) and [Remitly](#) have since entered the remittance market, offering users lower transfer fees and forcing Western Union to lower its fees in turn.

Prior to the information age, most of Africa suffered from a lack of financial infrastructure, such as automated teller machines (ATM), banks, and tellers. However, since the distribution of mobile devices, companies such as [Wave](#) and [M-PESA](#) have experienced strong adoption of [mobile](#) remittance transfers. These [mobile money](#) payments, like those traditionally handled by Western Union, reduce [poverty](#) and [income inequality](#) in developing countries, but with much lower transfer costs and infrastructure needs.

Remittances also represent an essential human freedom: the right to give. Just as Americans can freely send money through Venmo and Zelle without government interference, individuals who transfer funds internationally should enjoy the same freedom. However, the recently passed One Big Beautiful Bill Act will put a 1 percent excise tax on remittances.

A world with greater freedom and improved economic development demands that all people are free to send and receive money. As [calculated](#) by the Center for Global Development, "for many low- and middle-income countries, the impact of the remittance tax far outweighs the impact of known US aid cuts conducted so far."

During an interview with me, Helen Dempster of the Center for Global Development stated that a remittance tax could decrease remittances themselves. This decrease in transfers [may incentivize](#) banks and lenders to charge higher fees. According to Dempster in the interview on July 4th, 2025:

There's been a campaign for 20 years now to reduce the cost of sending remittances and many remittance service providers, particularly the large ones like Western Union, are keeping fees stubbornly high. I think if they wanted to keep fees low to encourage remittances, they would have reduced their fees by now. So, my sense is that they will pass the whole amount of the cost on to consumers.

Because of this tax, some of the most powerless individuals [will suffer](#) the cost, and the US will earn negligible revenue. As we've seen in [past decades](#), greater freedom to migrants and competition between lenders directly improve the lives of the global poor. Ultimately, preserving our freedom to give not only protects our human rights, but positively transforms the day-to-day lives of millions and the future of the developing world.

*Author: Camille Miner, a student at UC Berkeley studying Philosophy and Social Welfare and a former Research Intern at Human Progress.*

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# Authoritarian Threats to Campus Free Speech

Sarah McLaughlin joins Chelsea Follett to discuss the rising influence of foreign authoritarian governments on college campuses.

CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT AND SARAH MCLAUGHLIN  
SEP 27, 2025

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Transcript

Free speech is increasingly threatened in the United States, especially on college campuses. Cultural norms around free expression seem to be eroding, and speech is sometimes compared to—and even met with—violence, such as in the recent assassination of Charlie Kirk.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, [Sarah McLaughlin](#), a senior scholar at The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, joins Chelsea Follett to discuss another threat to campus speech: the rising influence of foreign authoritarian governments.

Please note that we recorded this interview before Kirk’s murder, so he is not mentioned, though we believe that event makes conversations like this one even more relevant.

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

**Joining me today is Sarah McLaughlin, a senior scholar in Global Expression at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. She has a new book out entitled *Authoritarians in the Academy: How the Internationalization of Higher Education and Borderless Censorship Threaten Free Speech*, which examines how higher education has entangled institutions with censorship demands here in the United States.**

**Before we dive into the book and its arguments, let’s zoom out to the big picture. Why does freedom of speech even matter? What does it do for humanity, democracies, scientific advancement, and progress?**

A lot of political and social movements that have helped protect our rights were only possible because people could speak their minds and draw attention to problems. Free speech also acknowledges a certain humility: human beings are fallible, and we need to be able to question what everyone else believes to be true. If you don’t have that freedom, it becomes very difficult to advance human knowledge.

I also believe that human beings have an innate need for freedom of expression. If we don’t have the ability to express ourselves, it really stunts our growth and limits who we are and what we can become. So, it’s important both for societal and individual development.

**My understanding is that FIRE is a nonpartisan organization. Why hasn’t your organization aligned itself with a political party?**

I think being nonpartisan is the best way to protect freedom of expression. If you start picking and choosing whose rights you want to defend, you’re not really defending the principle of freedom of expression; you’re just defending political views that you agree with.

I think sometimes Americans who are wary about free speech have this idea that it’s a limited resource, that if some people have it, that means others don’t. But that’s not really how it works. In fact, the more people it’s protected for, the more we can ensure it stays protected for everyone. If you defend one group, you’re actually not hurting your own cause: you’re helping it in the long run.

**Let’s move on now to your book. What inspired you to write *Authoritarians in the Academy*?**

For the first few years that I was at FIRE, I was mainly working with students and professors because, for most of its history, FIRE only worked on campus free expression cases. We recently expanded, but at that point, we were only doing campus work. You could probably guess what a lot of these cases were about. Speech about abortion, guns, race, and Israel—the standard starting points of censorship and controversy. But over time, I began hearing more and more about people who felt like they couldn’t speak freely about foreign authoritarian governments. Most often, the Chinese government, but there were also problems arising from universities’ relationships with the Gulf States.

When an industry becomes global, it also becomes vulnerable to pressure from foreign governments. Viewers have probably seen stories about the sometimes-outlandish apologies that companies have issued to the Chinese government because they accidentally mentioned Tibet or Hong Kong. But when higher education is a global industry, there are really unique concerns that emerge. As I mentioned earlier, freedom of expression is essential for the production of knowledge, which is one of the main purposes of higher education. If higher education is not a place where people can speak openly about foreign authoritarian governments, what does that mean for global discourse and research?

**Could you tell me about some of the incidents that you witnessed?**

One of the more disturbing examples I’ve seen was in 2022 at George Washington University in DC.

There was a group of students who put up posters ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics that were meant to criticize human rights abuses in China, and some student groups complained to the university, saying that the posters were offensive, hurtful, that they insulted China, and that the university needed to act. To my surprise and the surprise of many, the university did. The university president at the time said he was personally offended by the posters and that he was going to take them down and conduct an investigation to find the students who posted them.

**Can you describe in more detail the content of these posters?**

They were not particularly graphic. They were actually designed to look like promotional posters for the games, but when you got closer, you realized that it was kind of faceless, anonymous members of China’s team engaged in surveillance or violence, the implication being that this is what the Chinese government does to minorities in its country.

To be clear, the president of George Washington University, after he received criticism, relented and admitted he made a mistake. And that’s a good thing: university leaders need to be able to acknowledge when they’ve made a mistake. But I wrote about it at the time, and I pointed out that if any of the students who put up the posters were international students from China, the university would have been using its own staff to unmask critics of the Chinese government and put them in really serious legal peril. So it’s not just about taking down posters. It’s about students from a foreign country who, after expecting to be able to speak their mind, ended up at risk of serious legal trouble at home.

This is a major fear for dissident students here in the United States. If you are a vocal critic of the Chinese government, there’s a very good chance that, at a minimum, your family will receive threats and visits from Chinese officials. I’ve spoken to students who have faced exactly that. Some of them have courageously come forward under their real name and said, “my father was brought in for questioning because I attended a protest here in the United States.” So that’s something universities need to be aware of. They have large numbers of international students with very specific and unique threats to their free speech, and the universities need to make sure that they are helping protect those students, not helping repress them.

**Let’s try to understand the incentives that are driving this kind of cooperation with authoritarian regimes. Why do you think the president of George Washington University initially supported tearing down these posters?**

I think when universities receive reports from students about offensive speech on campus, their reflex is to respond to their concerns. But that’s something that needs to be treated with care. There is a trend of students who support foreign authoritarian governments making bad faith claims that certain speech is offensive and that the university needs to censor it. I have examples in the book of students calling for the censorship of speakers who are coming to talk about being victims of horrific abuse by the Chinese government, by claiming it is hate speech. So that’s part of it.

There’s also a broader question of universities’ relationships with China. Part of it is international students, but another part of it is the funding that universities have been pursuing. Universities are seeing themselves more and more as businesses rather than institutions of academic freedom and free expression. There was a pretty disturbing example from about a decade ago at Harvard Law, where a visiting Chinese scholar intended to hold an event about human rights in China, and a vice dean at Harvard Law contacted him and said, “I don’t want you to hold this event because it’s going to coincide with a trip that Harvard’s president is making to China to work on the university’s relationships there.” So I think sometimes you can see business decisions being made at the cost of academic freedom and freedom of expression.

**Now that we’ve talked a bit about China, can you also provide some examples of censorship in academia related to the Gulf States?**

Absolutely. So, universities have been looking abroad for funding because there have been a lot of funding challenges here in the US. And they’re looking in wealthy nations, including Qatar and the UAE. So, there’ve been a lot of satellite campuses popping up in Qatar and the UAE from American universities. That isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s good for people to work together and share knowledge across borders. But it’s also important to be transparent about what is actually happening on the ground on those campuses.

One of the more disturbing examples was a few years ago, on Northwestern’s Qatar campus, when they invited a rock band to an event on campus. The lead singer of that event is openly gay, and so they soon cancelled the event because of “ security concerns.” But the Qatar Foundation, which is a state-linked institution that funds these universities, came out and they said, “That’s not what happened. This event was canceled because it didn’t accord with Qatari laws and social customs.” So, universities are opening these campuses and making very flowery promises about freedom of expression, but they’re not willing to talk about the chasm between their commitments to free expression and local laws.

When universities are not transparent about these issues, it allows these authoritarian countries to point to these institutions and say, “If our country were so illiberal and censorious, would we really have an American institution opening up here?” It’s a major PR victory for these countries.

**Can you talk about how those in higher education can fight against this rising censorship and authoritarian influence?**

There are a lot of different ways.

First, university administrators need to reinvestigate their dealings abroad. That doesn’t mean that they need to end them, but they do need to reconsider the basis on which they started them. A lot of universities started this engagement 15 to 20 years ago, and the sad truth is, China and some of these other countries have significantly worsened over that time period, so the political environment in which you opened up a satellite campus in 2005 might not be the same one as today. They need to consider whether those programs are still appropriate, as well as whether there are adequate protections on the ground for academics. I think they also need whistleblower protections because a lot of the academics I spoke to very understandably feel that if they spoke out about these censorship issues at their campuses, they would be fired, and this is in a field where jobs are scarce.

When it comes to international students, make sure they understand what their rights are. They should be making sure students know what resources are available to them if they feel like the Chinese government is knocking at the door. Alumni should also be getting involved and pressing their universities to take this issue seriously. And when it comes to legislators and politicians, we need to encourage them to pursue speech policies that are not destructive to either the rights of immigrants or Americans.

**Absolutely. And if people are curious how their own university measures up in terms of freedom of expression, I believe that your organization provides some tools to help them do that.**

Yes, the FIRE has rankings, and we also look at university speech codes, so people can go and get a good sense of how free their campus is and what policies need to be changed. And FIRE’s policy reform team does a fantastic job of working with universities to try to revise these policies at both public and private universities. So, if you think your university has a speech code that needs reform, give us a call and we’ll be happy to help.

**Thank you so much for highlighting these stories. I think it would be very tragic if universities lost their tradition of freedom of speech, because historically they’ve been so important to scientific progress and the advancement of knowledge, and there do seem to be some very troubling trends.**

**However, because this is The Human Progress Podcast, we usually try to end on a positive note. Are there any trends that you’ve seen that give you hope for the future of freedom of speech on university campuses?**

The situation for free expression is definitely troubling in the United States right now, but I’m hopeful that people will start to see why freedom of expression is so important, why it’s so necessary, and that we can take this moment to fight back for our rights.

Something I say in the book is that free campuses are a building block of free societies. So, I think if we figure out a way to better defend and protect our rights there, we will better defend our rights in civil society more broadly. That’s as hopeful as I can be.

Read the full transcript



# Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Bountiful harvests, the first treatment for Huntington's, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN  
SEP 28, 2025

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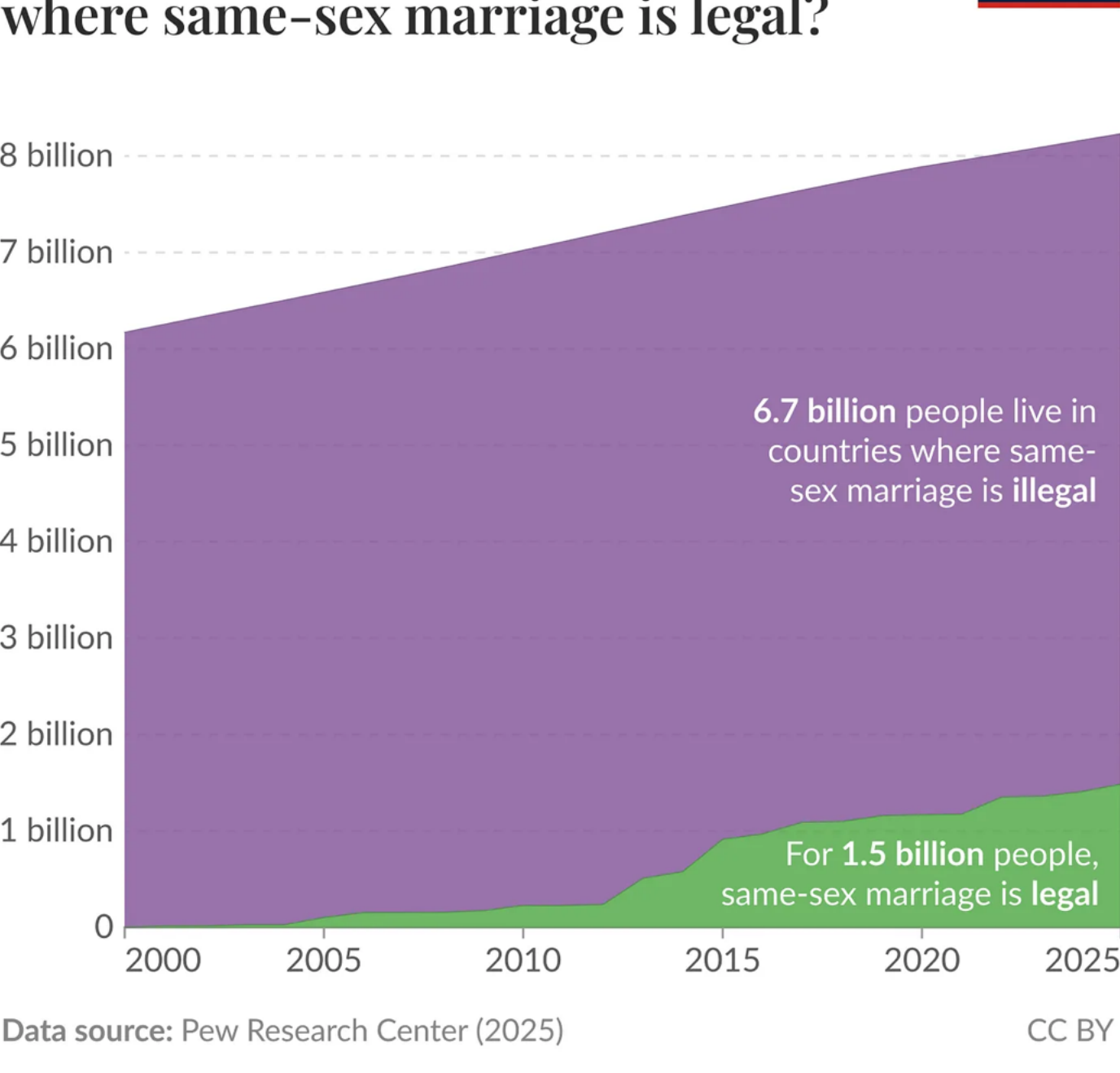
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Thank you to those who filled out [our survey](#). Based on your feedback, we are returning to weekly progress roundups. Also, as a reminder, you can opt out of certain categories of Human Progress content using your [notification settings](#).

## Culture & Tolerance

- Charitable giving in the United States was **3.3 percent higher** in 2024 than in 2023, after adjusting for inflation.
- The freedom to marry a member of the same sex, while still uncommon, is spreading. Today, a record **1.5 billion people** live in countries where same-sex marriage is legal.

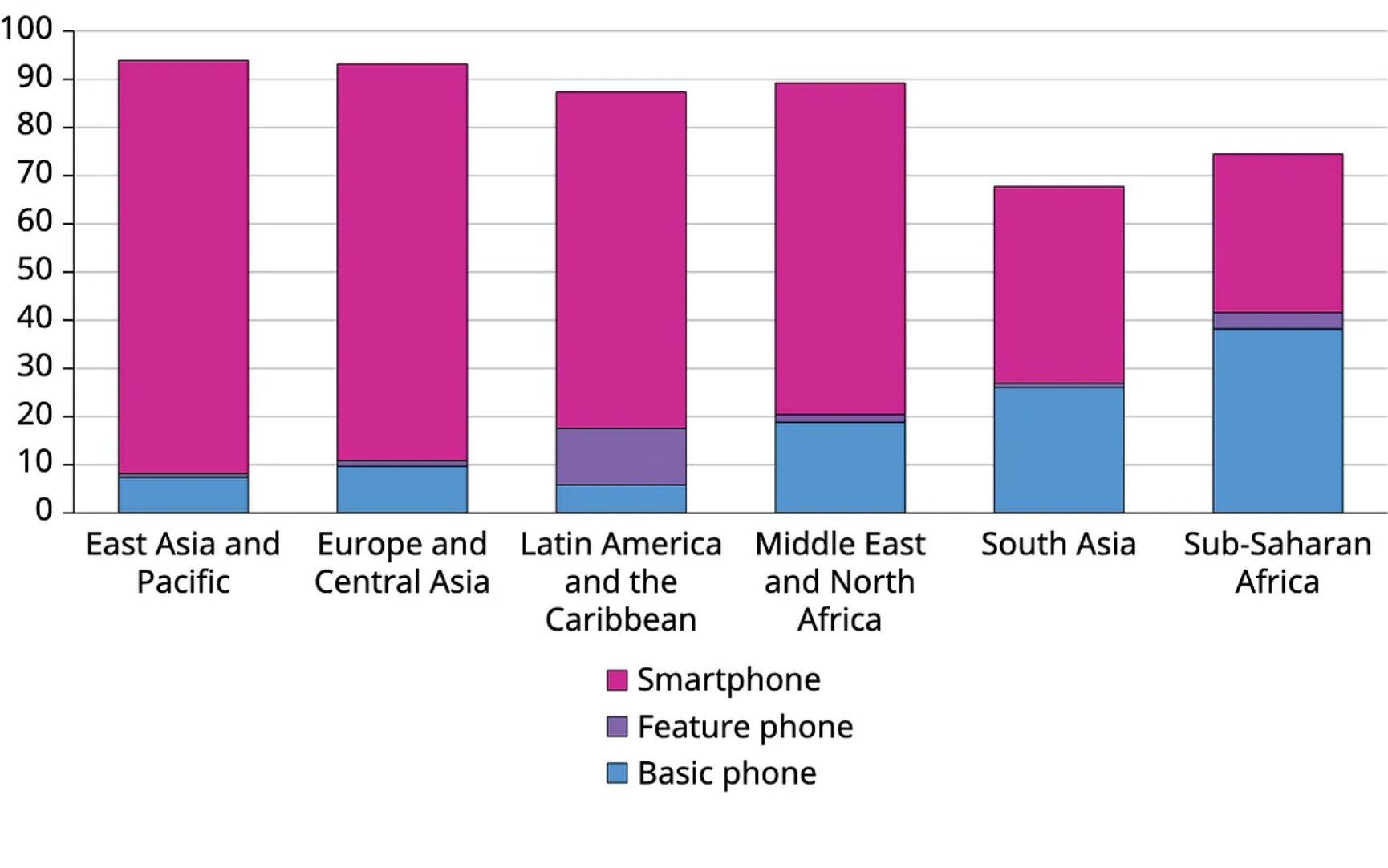


- Gallup polling indicates that, in 2024, **73 percent of adults reported feeling “safe walking alone at night in their city or area,”** the highest share ever recorded.
- Bolivia has **banned child marriage**.

## Economics & Development

- 79 percent** of adults worldwide had a bank account in 2024 according to the World Bank’s Global Findex Database report, up from 74 percent in 2021. Much of this progress is thanks to the proliferation of mobile phones.

Figure ES.2 Worldwide, 86 percent of adults own mobile phones, though smartphones are less common in some regions than others



## Energy & Environment

- An interesting and [counterintuitive paper](#) finds that **wildfires in the western United States might actually improve air quality in the east** thanks to the heat they generate, which blocks smoke from drifting and creates more rainfall that washes pollution out of the air.

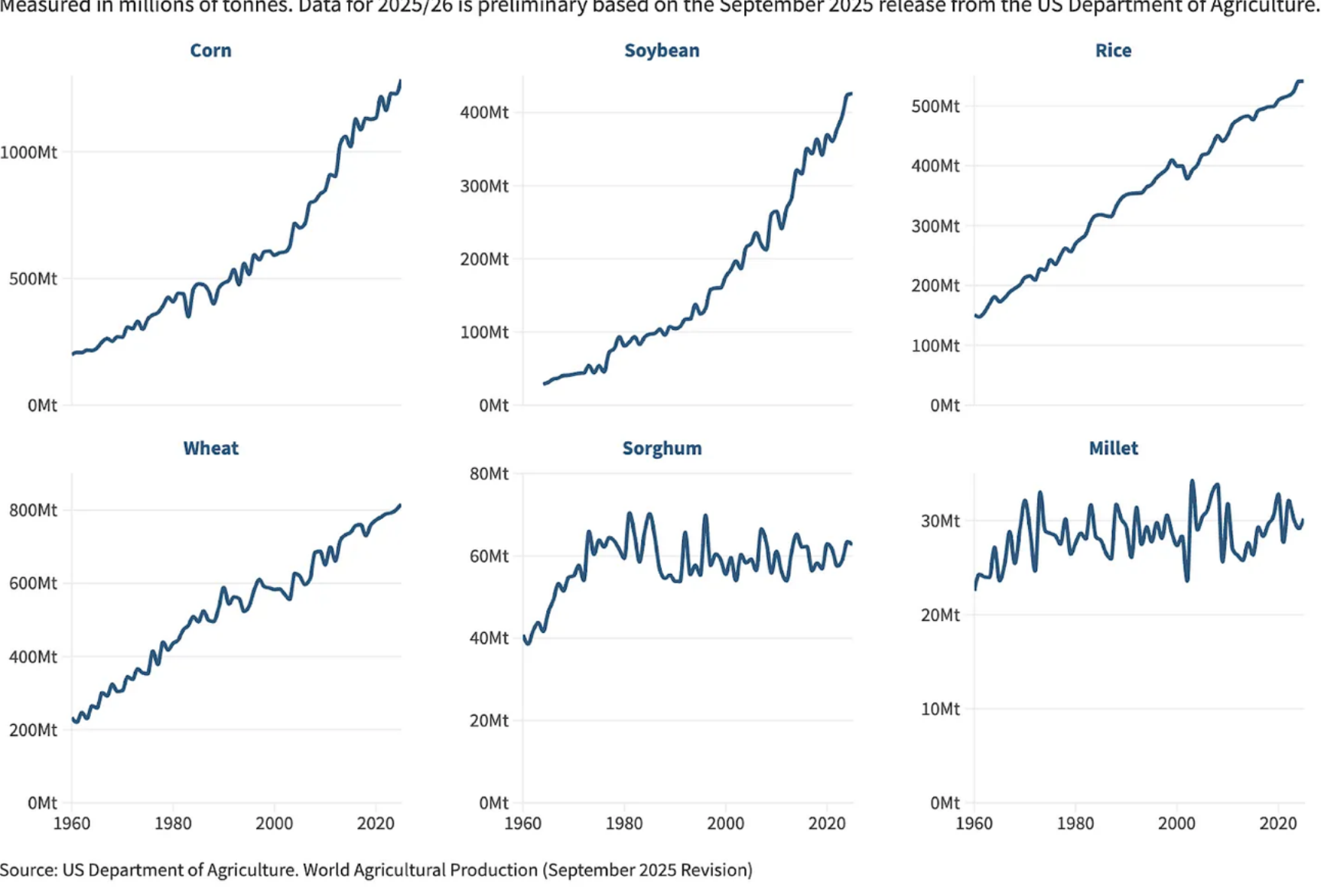
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## Food & Hunger

- Most staple crops are expected to have record-high global harvests** this year, thanks to ever-rising crop yields. Meanwhile, wheat, corn, and soybean **prices have fallen** to levels not seen since 2020.



## Health & Demographics

- In a small preliminary trial, **doctors in the UK slowed the progression of Huntington’s disease by 75 percent** over a three-year period. The intervention, which combined gene therapy with brain surgery, is the first to show meaningful treatment of the condition. One trial participant, who had previously retired due to his illness, even returned to work following the procedure.
- A deal between the Clinton Health Access Initiative, Gates Foundation, and other partners will **lower the cost of the HIV prevention drug lenacapavir from \$28,000 to just \$40 a year in poor countries**. The twice-yearly injection has shown strong protection in trials and, if widely adopted, could prevent hundreds of thousands of new infections each year.

## Science & Technology

- Smartphones** have already [replaced](#) numerous tools, including cameras, radios, alarm clocks, photo albums, voice recorders, and maps. Now, in combination with accessories like AirPods, they **are taking over from a range of health devices**, from hearing aids to glucose monitors.
- Using lasers, NASA recently sent and received data over a distance of 218 million miles** to and from its Psyche spacecraft. The optical signals can carry information **10 to 100 times faster** than radio, a major potential improvement in deep-space communication.
- China may have accomplished the first-ever refueling** in high Earth orbit.
- Researchers at Northwestern have created a **new cellular delivery system for CRISPR**. In lab tests, the gene-editing tools delivered with the new method were three times more likely to get inside cells, produced three times as many successful edits, and caused fewer side effects than current approaches.

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