

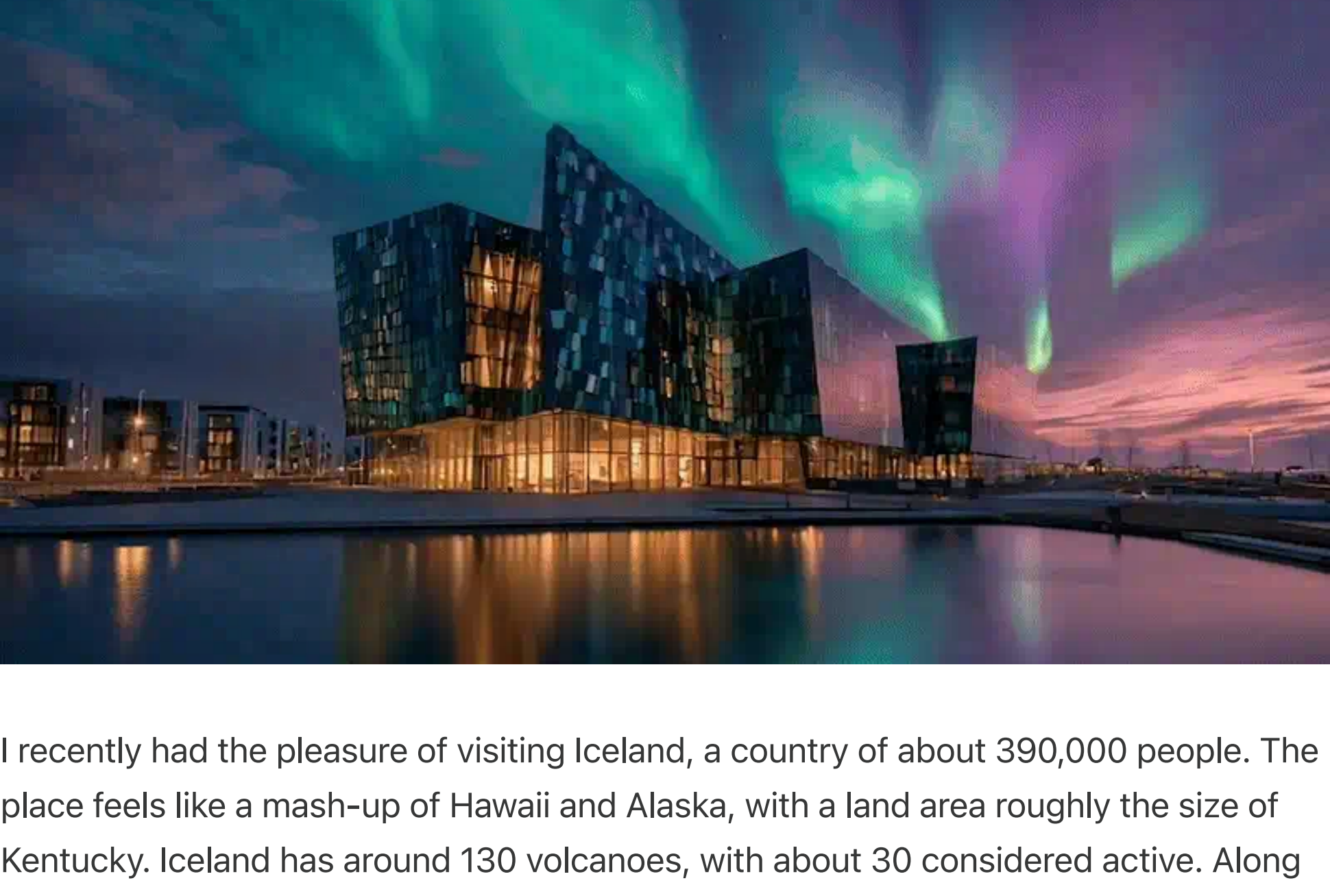
The Land of Ice, Fire, and Innovation

Innovation has served Iceland for 1,150 years. Why change a working recipe?

GALE POOLEY

DEC 03, 2025

20 9 1 Share ...



I recently had the pleasure of visiting Iceland, a country of about 390,000 people. The place feels like a mash-up of Hawaii and Alaska, with a land area roughly the size of Kentucky. Iceland has around 130 volcanoes, with about 30 considered active. Along with the volcanoes there are around 500 earthquakes per week. Many of these are microquakes (below a magnitude of 2.0) that go unnoticed, but about 44 a year register a magnitude of 4.0 or higher within 180 miles of the island.

The [International Monetary Fund](#) projects Iceland’s GDP per capita to reach \$81,220 in 2025, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP). This compares to \$89,110 for the US and \$64,550 for the European Union (EU).

The purpose of my visit was to talk about why Iceland should or should not join the EU.

The event was hosted by Students for Liberty Europe and RSE, the Icelandic Centre for Social and Economic Research. What does this topic have to do with our book, *Superabundance*?

In our book we argue that we’re experiencing a period of superabundance, where personal resource abundance is increasing faster than population growth. This period started about 200 years ago after millennia of stagnation. We attribute this in large part to people recognizing that the freedom to innovate lifts humanity out of poverty. Innovation is the discovering and sharing of valuable new knowledge in markets. Around 1820, the planet’s dormant entrepreneurs began to blossom and bear fruit. But Iceland has been innovating much longer than 200 years.

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Iceland can be considered a creation of entrepreneurs. It was first settled around 874 CE by Norse explorers, primarily from Norway, led by Ingólfr Arnarson, who is traditionally recognized as the island’s first permanent settler. He established his homestead in what is now Reykjavík (“Smoky Bay”), named after the steam rising from nearby hot springs.

Throughout history, the creators have fled the takers—escaping oppression to found new realms of freedom where ideas could multiply and wealth could grow. This is the ancient rhythm of renewal that gave birth to America. The settlers of Iceland were largely Vikings, along with some Celtic slaves (it was typical of the times to enslave defeated peoples) and settlers from the British Isles. Drawn by the island’s fish and grazing land, they sought independence from Norway’s consolidating monarchy.

By 930 CE, the settlers established the Althing, one of the world’s oldest parliaments, at Pingvellir, creating a system of governance where chieftains met annually to settle disputes and make laws. This marked the start of the Icelandic Commonwealth, a decentralized society without a king.

The population grew to around 50,000 by the 11th century, sustained by farming, fishing, and trade. The Commonwealth lasted 332 years, until 1262, when internal conflicts and external pressure from Norway led Iceland to pledge allegiance to the Norwegian crown, ending its independence. This set the stage for centuries of foreign rule, first by Norway and later Denmark. Iceland finally achieved full independence 682 years later, in 1944, establishing the modern Republic of Iceland.

Wealth Is Knowledge and Growth Is Learning

Superabundance is based on the ideas of Julian Simon and George Gilder. Two of the book’s key principles are that wealth is knowledge and growth is learning. These apply directly to Iceland—a nation that turned scarcity into strength and desolation into discovery. With little arable land and few natural endowments, Icelanders learned that the ultimate resource was not in the soil or the waters but in the capacity to imagine and create.

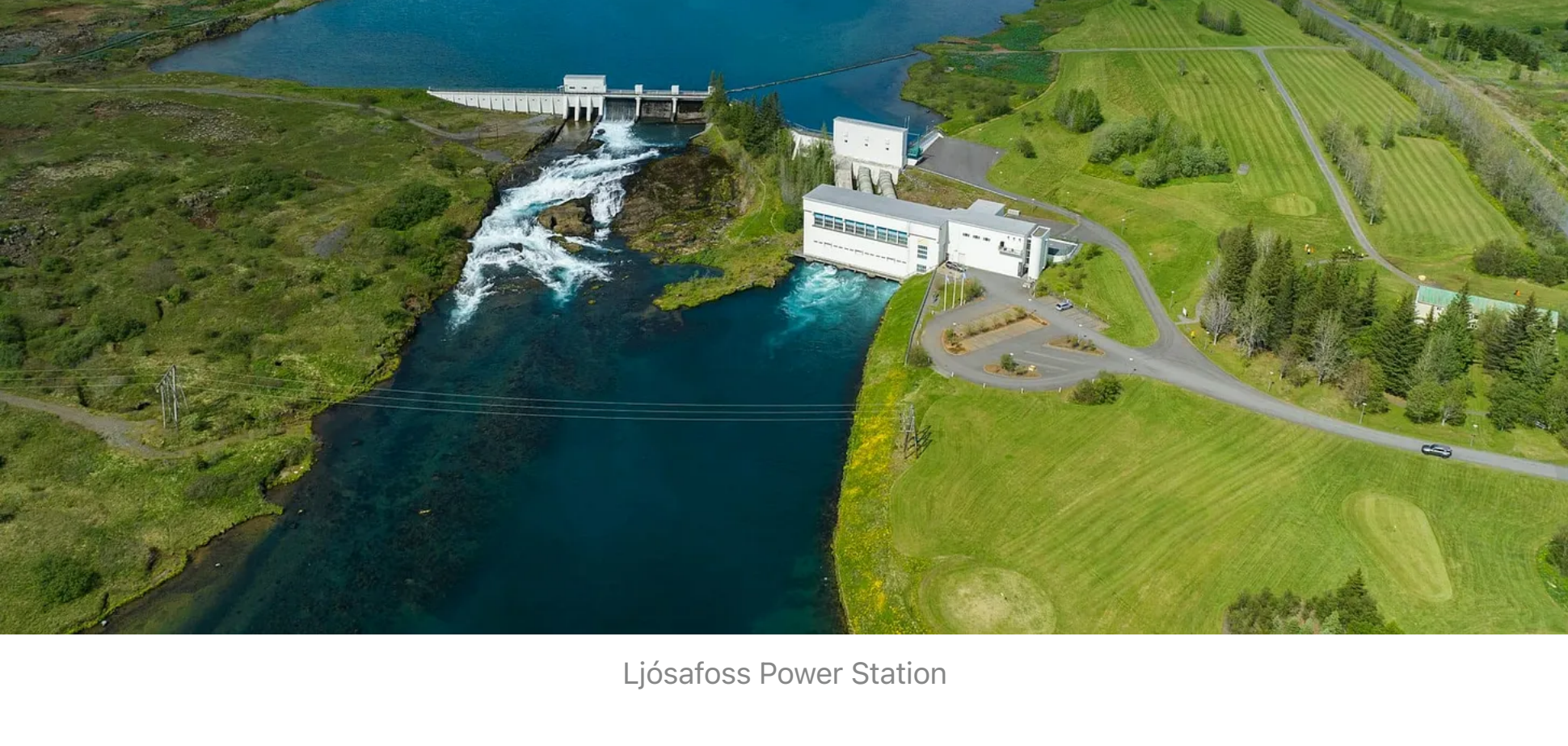
When oil shocks hit in the 1970s, Iceland had little domestic energy. Rather than surrender to scarcity, Icelanders turned to what they had in superabundance. They drilled not for fossil fuels but for fire beneath the earth, turning volcanic fury into light and heat. Today, nearly all of Iceland’s power flows from geothermal and hydroelectric abundance—proof that energy, like wealth, begins not with matter but with knowledge.

And from this same well of ingenuity emerged a national symbol—the Blue Lagoon. The world-famous pools and spa were born from the overflow of the Svartsengi geothermal power station, where geothermal brine spilled into a lava field and transformed an industrial by-product into a national treasure. What began as an accident became an emblem of Icelandic creativity—a living harmony of mind and matter, fire and water.



The Blue Lagoon reminds us that wealth is not drawn from the ground but flows from the fountain of human imagination, where even the castoffs of creation can shimmer with new light. In Iceland, energy is not merely harnessed—it is *redeemed*.

In the early 20th century, Iceland was a country primarily reliant on imported coal to meet its energy needs. The first hydropower station was built in 1904, and today there are 15 stations producing 73 percent of the nation’s electricity. Geothermal represents the other 27 percent.



Abundant, affordable, and reliable energy is one of the fountainheads of modern civilization, turning ingenuity into prosperity. Yet Europe’s leaders, in their zeal to perfect nature, have turned against the very forces that sustain it. By dismantling coal, nuclear, and gas in favor of windmills and solar panels, they are not advancing progress but reversing it, replacing mastery with dependence and innovation with austerity. The continent that once ignited the Industrial Revolution now flirts with a new age of scarcity—an empire of entropy cloaked in virtue. The great tragedy is the belief that prosperity can be preserved by suppressing the freedom that created it. Prosperity follows those who dare to learn from the world, not those who try to silence it.

For Iceland to thrive, it must continue to unleash its creative energy—to innovate, to speak, and to let knowledge flow as freely as its geothermal springs. Iceland is proof that wealth is not in the ground but in the mind. When faced with the scarcity of matter, Icelanders discovered the infinite power of knowledge.

That same spirit of redemption drives Iceland’s modern economy. From *deCODE genetics*, which unlocked the secrets of the Icelandic genome, to *Össur*, whose prosthetics restore mobility with grace and precision, Iceland exports ideas more than goods. Its renewable energy now powers data centers and digital frontiers, where bits replace barrels and imagination fuels growth. And in the northern village of Ísafjörður, *Kerecis* has turned the skin of cod—once discarded as waste—into a life-giving biomaterial that heals human wounds across the world.

Iceland reminds us that every economy is a learning system, and every act of enterprise a revelation. Growth is not a race for resources but a search for truth—the discovery of new knowledge that multiplies as it is shared. In this sense, Iceland has learned its way into wealth, proving that in the long dialogue between man and nature, the mind is the great multiplier.

The story of Iceland is the story of civilization itself. Every act of creation is an act of learning, a small echo of the divine mind that made the world intelligible. Wealth in its truest form is not measured in metals or markets but in moments of revelation—when knowledge transforms scarcities into abundances. Iceland proved the eternal law of creativity: that human learning, illuminated by faith and freedom, can turn even the coldest rock—or the humblest fish—into a beacon of light.

Choose Wisely

So why would a nation of entrepreneurs and innovators want to be subject to a union of regulators and bureaucrats? As of 2024, the number of staff working for the European Commission is over 80,000 across all 76 EU bodies. That would be one regulator for every 4.8 Icelanders. The future of Iceland lies with leaders like Thor Jensen, Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, Fertram Sigurjonsson, Heiðar Guðjónsson, and Bala Kamallakharan, not armies of Brussels bureaucrats.

To secure its future, Iceland must remain a beacon of open inquiry and energy creativity. It should champion innovation over ideology—embracing every technology that multiplies human capability rather than constrains it. By coupling free markets with free minds, Iceland can continue to illuminate a path from scarcity to superabundance, showing the world that the greatest renewable resource is human creativity itself.

Choose wisely, Iceland. Your history is watching.

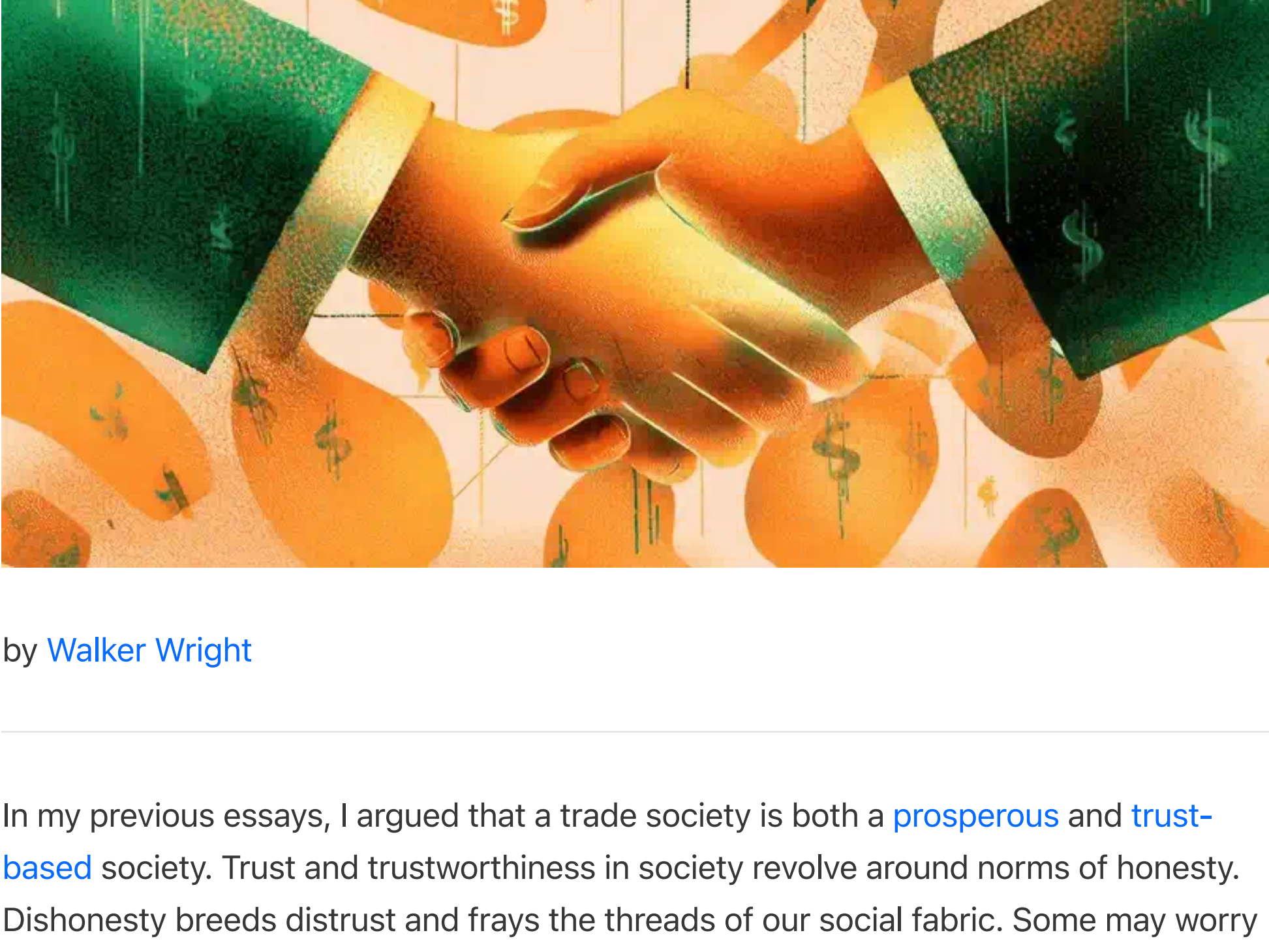
Find more of Gale’s work at his Substack, [Gale Winds](#).

Why Free Economies Are Honest Economies

Market freedom rewards honesty. Regulation breeds corruption.

HUMAN PROGRESS
DEC 05, 2025

19 1 4 Share



by Walker Wright

In my previous essays, I argued that a trade society is both a [prosperous](#) and [trust-based](#) society. Trust and trustworthiness in society revolve around norms of honesty. Dishonesty breeds distrust and frays the threads of our social fabric. Some may worry that dishonesty is the lifeblood of a commercial society: a system that runs on lies, with an every-man-for-himself attitude and shady opportunists around every corner. In fact, greater honesty is best achieved through reputational pressures and the mutual accountability that is fostered by frequent exchange; frequent exchange is enabled by the removal of corrupting restrictions.

In his [Lectures on Jurisprudence](#), the Scottish economist Adam Smith described the commercial society in the following terms:

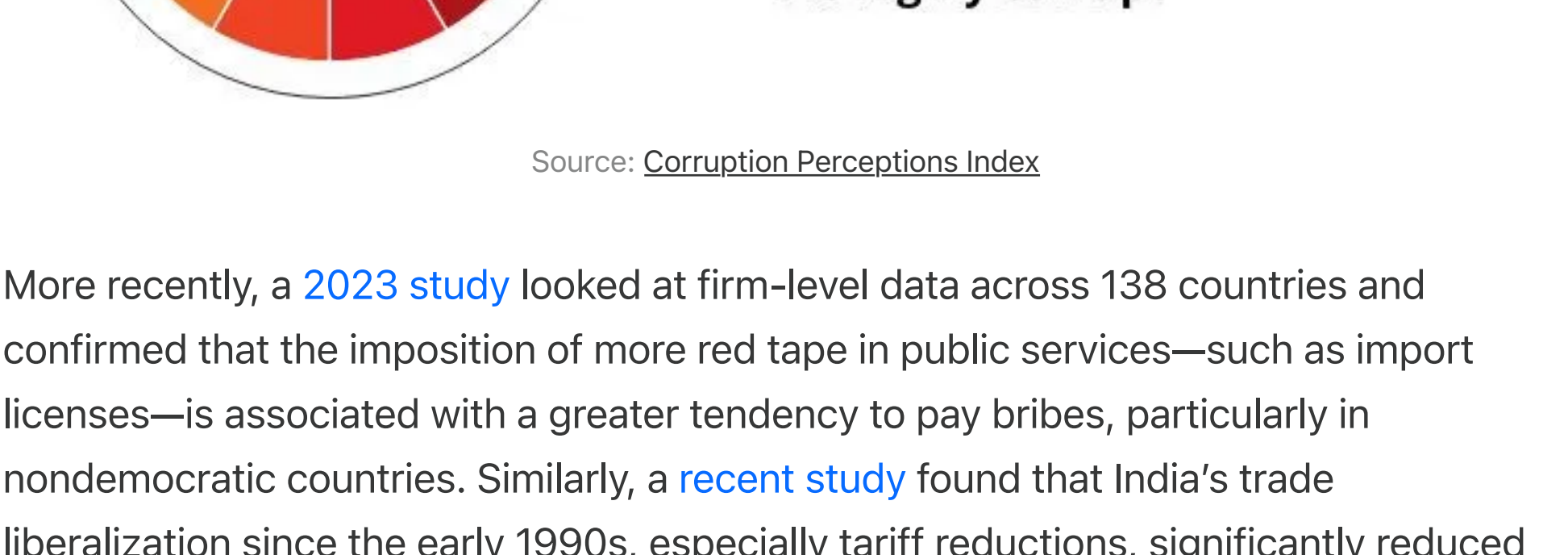
Whenever commerce is introduced into any country, probity and punctuality always accompany it . . . Of all the nations in Europe ... the most commercial, are the most faithfull to their word ... A dealer is afraid of losing his character, and is scrupulous in observing every engagement ... When people seldom deal with one another, we find that they are somewhat disposed to cheat ... When the greater part of people are merchants they always bring probity and punctuality into fashion, and these therefore are the principal virtues of a commercial nation.

In [Smith's view](#), fear of reputational damage and unemployment prevents fraud and dishonesty. [He believed](#) that success within a commercial society stems from “prudent, just, firm, and temperate conduct” and “almost always depends upon the favour and good opinion of ... neighbours and equals; and without a tolerably regular conduct these can very seldom be obtained. The good old proverb, therefore, that honesty is the best policy, holds, in such situations, almost always perfectly true.” For Smith, the market in many ways makes us accountable to each other: repeated dealings and fear of reputational damage incentivize honest behavior. And plenty of empirical evidence supports his outlook.

Laboratory experiments demonstrate that trade teaches participants [whom to trust and whom not to](#). Dishonest behavior is punished in the marketplace, providing an incentive for participants to be honest in their dealings. For example, [one study](#) found that adding market competition to the experiment reduced sellers’ over-diagnosis of high-quality treatment (when lower-quality would suffice) and increased buyer trust. Another experiment found that introducing market competition into one-off exchanges [boosted trust and efficiency](#) to match that of trading networks built on repeated interactions. Adding market competition and private reputation information in [one experiment](#) tripled trust and trustworthiness while increasing efficiency tenfold. By practicing honesty to protect their reputations, trade participants eventually internalize honesty as a habit.

Conversely, trade restrictions lead to greater dishonesty. For example, Transparency International’s [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) (CPI) measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption across numerous countries using multiple surveys of business people and country experts (Figure 1). [Various studies](#) that rely on the CPI CPI have [shown](#) that a greater amount of international trade and foreign direct investment and low levels of state control of the economy curtail corruption. [High levels of regulation](#)—including [regulation on trade](#)—tend to be a [strong predictor](#) of corruption. Even seemingly small adjustments to trade procedures can make a difference. For example, the World Bank’s [2020 Doing Business report](#) found that “economies that have adopted electronic means of compliance with regulatory requirements . . . experience a lower incidence of bribery.” That includes digital trade reforms such as electronic single-window systems, e-payments, paperless clearance, online certificate issuance, and more.

Figure 1. Corruption Perceptions Index scale

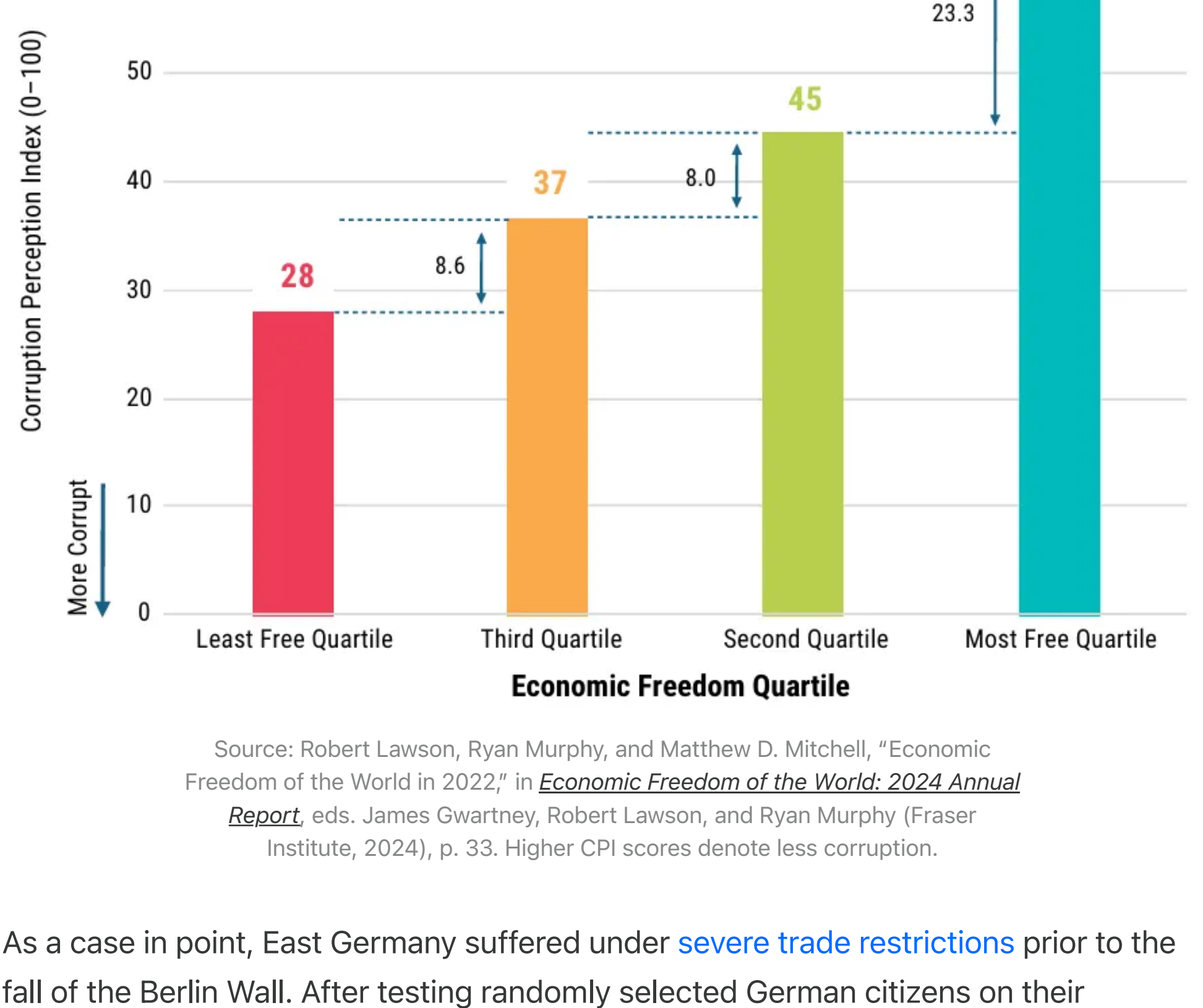


Source: [Corruption Perceptions Index](#)

More recently, a [2023 study](#) looked at firm-level data across 138 countries and confirmed that the imposition of more red tape in public services—such as import licenses—is associated with a greater tendency to pay bribes, particularly in nondemocratic countries. Similarly, a [recent study](#) found that India’s trade liberalization since the early 1990s, especially tariff reductions, significantly reduced the economic advantages of politically connected firms by decreasing their reliance on political favoritism. It appears that the friendlier a nation’s economy is to trade, the [less corrupt](#) it tends to be. Economic restrictions and regulations allow corruption to grow, instead of the economy. By reducing barriers, more trade is unleashed, which in turn promotes the “probity and punctuality” that Smith described.

When the level of economic freedom within countries is compared to their level of corruption, economically-free countries come out looking relatively clean. And the scores of the freest countries are more than [twice as high](#) as those of the least free countries (Figure 2). That’s because various aspects of economic freedom—including trade openness—are [associated](#) with [less corruption](#). Freer trade makes reputation king, mitigating corrupt incentives and embedding honest norms throughout society.

Figure 2. Economic freedom and corruption

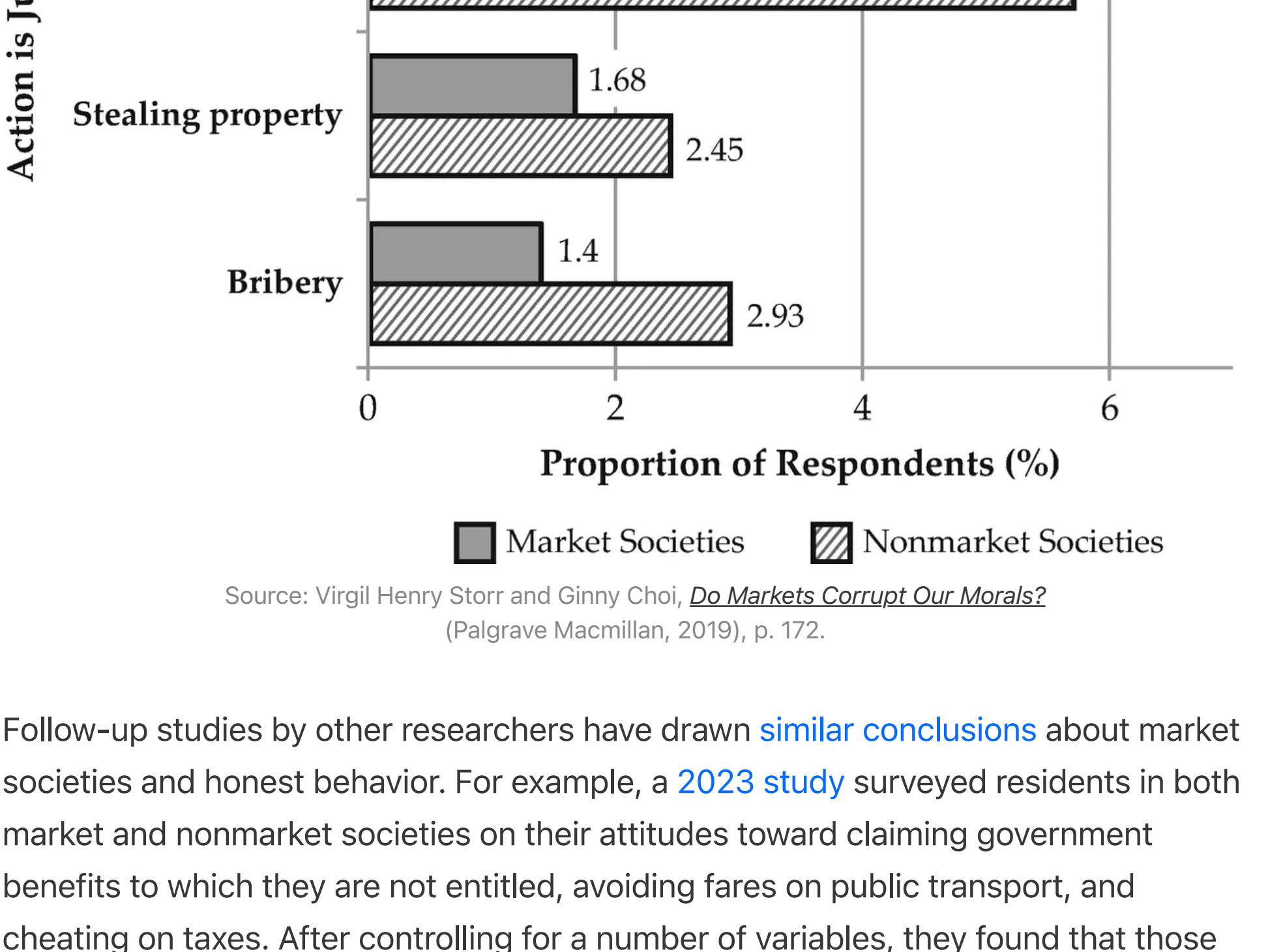


Source: Robert Lawson, Ryan Murphy, and Matthew D. Mitchell, “Economic Freedom of the World in 2022,” in [Economic Freedom of the World: 2024 Annual Report](#), eds. James Gwartney, Robert Lawson, and Ryan Murphy (Fraser Institute, 2024), p. 33. Higher CPI scores denote less corruption.

As a case in point, East Germany suffered under [severe trade restrictions](#) prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. After testing randomly selected German citizens on their willingness to cheat at a die-rolling game, researchers [found](#) that those who had East German (communist) roots were significantly more likely to cheat compared to those with West German (capitalist) roots. It was also shown that the longer the person had exposure to communism and its trade barriers (i.e., those who were at least 20 years old when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 compared to those who were only 10 years old), the greater their likelihood to cheat.

These findings are supported by the work of the Mercatus Center’s Virgil Storr and Ginny Choi, [who discovered](#) a significant difference in attitudes between members of nonmarket and market societies: More than double the number of nonmarket residents versus market residents believe that avoiding fares on public transport, cheating on taxes, and bribery are justifiable. Those from nonmarket societies are also more accepting of theft compared to those from market societies (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Market versus nonmarket societies on dishonest behavior



Source: Virgil Henry Storr and Ginny Choi, [Do Markets Corrupt Our Morals?](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 172.

Follow-up studies by other researchers have drawn [similar conclusions](#) about market societies and honest behavior. For example, a [2023 study](#) surveyed residents in both market and nonmarket societies on their attitudes toward claiming government benefits to which they are not entitled, avoiding fares on public transport, and cheating on taxes. After controlling for a number of variables, they found that those with greater exposure to markets were less likely to justify these dishonest actions. What’s more, individuals who preferred markets (“market thinking”) were also less likely to justify dishonesty. The researchers [concluded](#) that there is “a universal association between markets and morality” and “a robust association between an increase in market exposure and an increase in civic morality.”

Even within communist countries, research shows that the more trade-oriented areas tend to be the least corrupt. A study in [China Economic Review](#) employed the National Economic Research Institute (NERI) Index of Marketization, which measures five major fields of Chinese marketization with 23 indicators. Examining different provinces in China, the authors’ analysis found that deregulation and trade reduce corruption: a 1 percent increase in the marketization index leads to a 2.72 percent reduction in corruption. Regions that increased trade openness by 1 percent experienced a 0.35 percent reduction in corruption.

Overall, the evidence [overwhelmingly suggests](#) that open economies stifle the spread of corruption and reinforce honest habits through reputation-building exchange. The removal of trade barriers allows for more commerce to take place and, consequently, more reputations to be a stake—a powerful incentive to keep honorable reputations intact. The most enduring way to achieve this is through genuinely honest conduct. A commercial society is, at its core, a society of integrity: it limits the opportunities for corruption and encourages honest behavior in the process. The norms of commerce—Smith’s “probity and punctuality”—settle in like a kind of glue, helping to bind society together.

Author: Walker Wright, the manager for Academic Programs at a public policy think tank in Washington, DC, and an adjunct faculty member at Brigham Young University–Idaho. His forthcoming book, *In Trade We Trust: How Commerce Makes Us More Social*, will be published by Bloomsbury.

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Global economic resilience, a hurricane dearth, emergency response drones, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
DEC 07, 2025

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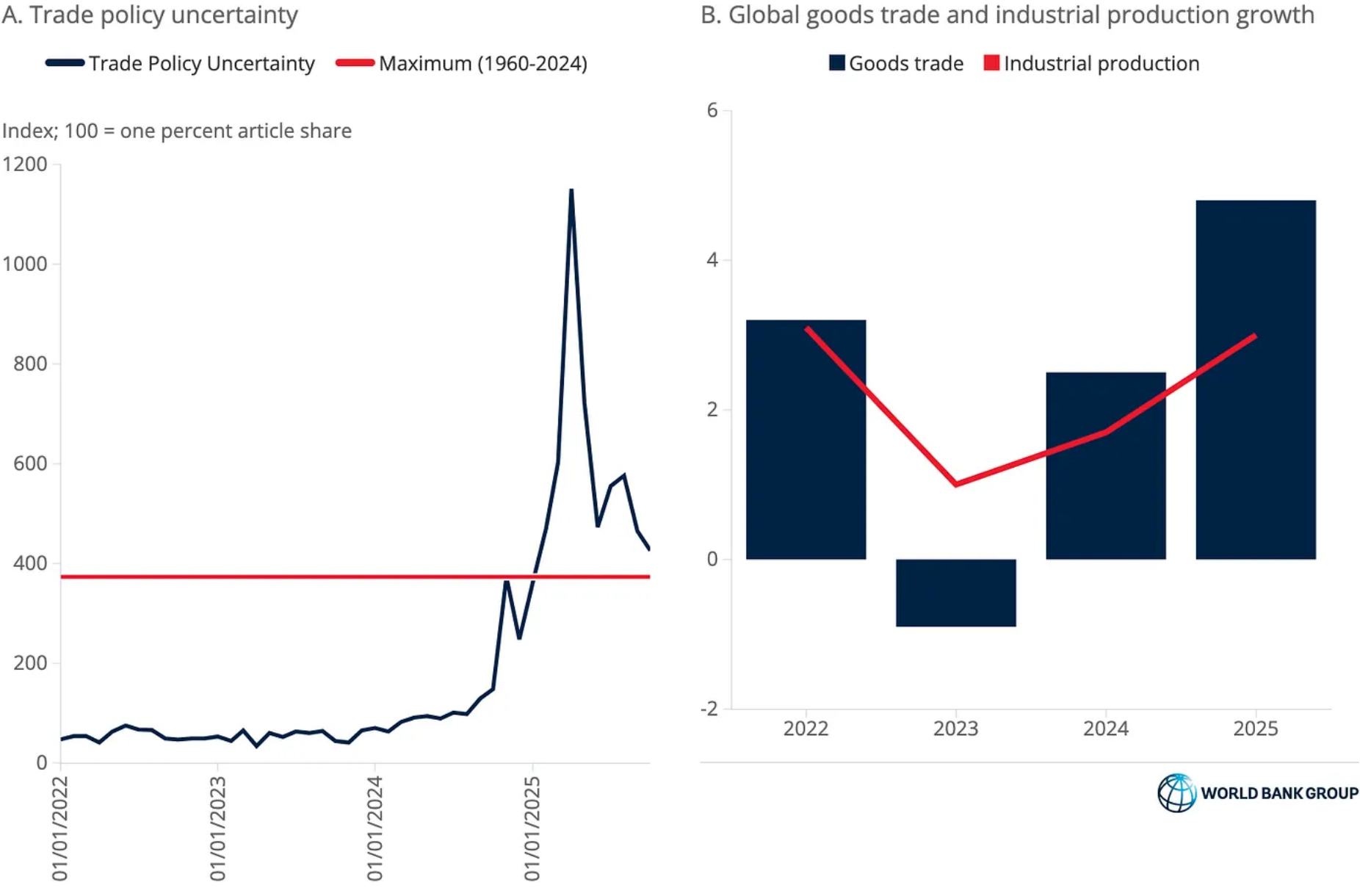
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Economics & Development

- Despite trade tensions driven by the United States, **forecasters now expect the global economy to grow 2.7 percent in 2025**, beating some [pessimistic forecasts](#) from earlier this year. The sunnier predictions are based partly on [falling energy prices](#) and a robust 4.8 percent increase in global goods trade.



Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity

- A [recently published survey](#) from the IUCN counted **135,690 African forest elephants between 2016 and 2024, 16 percent more than the previous attempt** (2006-2015). The increase is partly due to better detection—this time around, the researchers used DNA signatures in dung to track individual elephants—so it’s not clear whether it reflects a real recovery.
- Since 1949, China’s forest cover has grown from 10 percent of its land area to 25 percent**, partly thanks to government efforts to halt desertification. The reforestation has been so extensive that it has [altered the country’s water cycle](#).
- The Fen Orchid is no longer “under threat” in Britain** after conservationists successfully restored the rare plant to multiple sites across the island.
- Wolves, bears, and boars are growing in number in Greece**. A wildlife specialist referenced in the article credits milder winters and the falling popularity of hunting.

Energy and natural resources

- Zanskar Geothermal and Minerals, a geothermal energy company, has **discovered a commercially viable geothermal reservoir in Nevada using an AI model** that predicts the location of geothermal activity. The site had been entirely overlooked: it showed no surface signs of heat and had no history of exploration.

Natural disasters

- Zero hurricanes made landfall in the continental United States this year**—the first time this has happened since 2015. And while hurricanes in the North Atlantic were 9 percent more intense this year compared to the 1991-2020 average, throughout the entire Northern Hemisphere, hurricane intensity was **19 percent lower** than usual.

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Health & Demographics

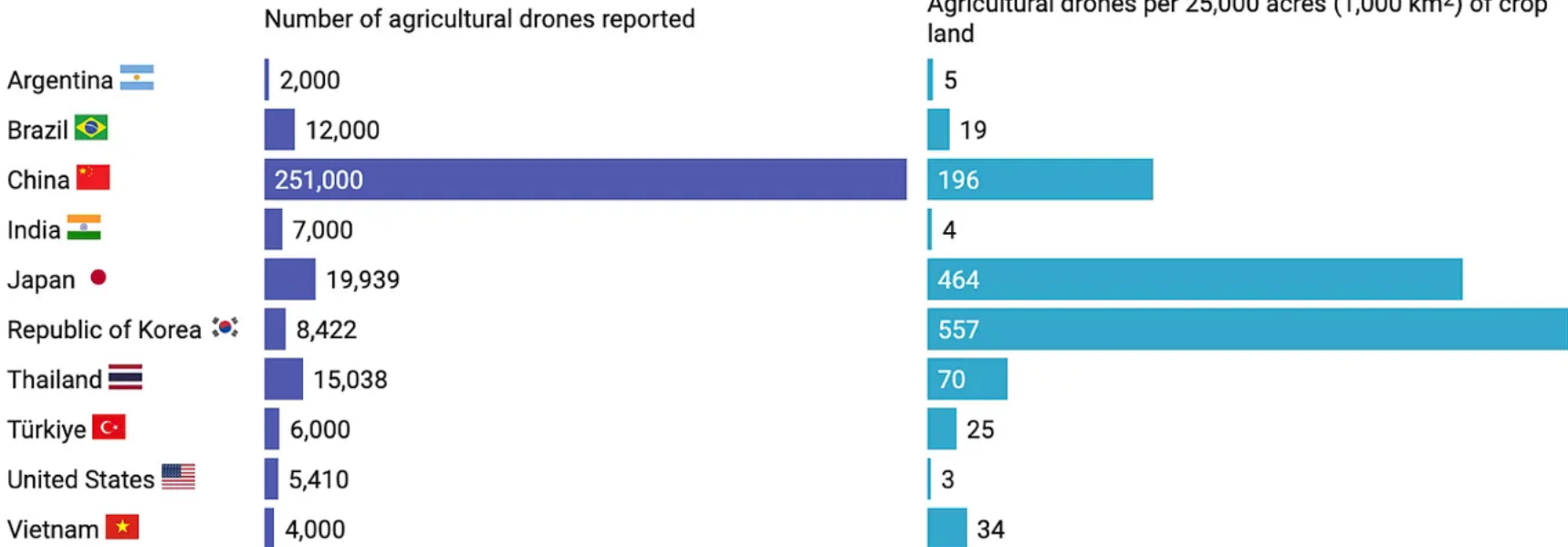
- Since 2022, **Gavi**, an international partnership that funds and supports vaccination programs, **has helped increase the number of girls in low-income countries protected by the HPV vaccine nearly sevenfold**—from 13 million to 86 million—saving around a million lives.
- Eswatini and Zambia have received their first doses of lenacapavir, which prevents HIV infection** with just two yearly injections. The United States Department of State, Gilead Sciences, and the Global Fund have committed to providing at least 2 million doses to various HIV-afflicted countries by 2028.
- In Clemmons, North Carolina, Duke University researchers are **sending defibrillators by drone to real 911 calls**, the first program of its kind in the US. The drones’ median response time is 2 to 3 minutes faster than an ambulance, giving bystanders a chance to start lifesaving treatment sooner.
- Belite Bio may have developed **the first treatment for Stargardt disease**, a genetic disorder that causes vision loss in children. Its experimental pill slowed retinal damage by about 36 percent in a [recent trial](#), offering the first real hope of delaying the condition, which currently has no cure.
- Okava Pharmaceuticals is developing a **GLP-1 weight loss drug for obese cats**.

Science & Technology

- NASA has [recovered samples from the asteroid Bennu that contain ribose and glucose](#), simple sugars necessary for building basic biological molecules like RNA. The discovery adds to [earlier findings](#) from Bennu containing amino acids and other life-linked chemicals, strengthening the idea that asteroids may have delivered some of the ingredients of life to Earth.
- Agricultural drones are spreading worldwide**, especially across East and Southeast Asia. They’re mainly used to spray agrochemicals—a job that, in many poorer countries, is still carried out by hand.

Drone adoption for farming varies widely around the world

There is a wide range in the number of agricultural drones reported to be operating in different countries, as well as how that number of drones compares to the amount of land cultivated in that country.



Data as of mid-2025.
Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: [Belton, Baldiga et al., 2025](#) • [Get the data](#) • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Violence & Coercion

- According to the Associated Press, there have been just **17 mass killings in the United States so far this year, the lowest number in their record since 2006**.

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The Myth of the Golden Years of Housing

Housing amenity abundance has increased significantly since 1956.

GALE POOLEY
DEC 13, 2025

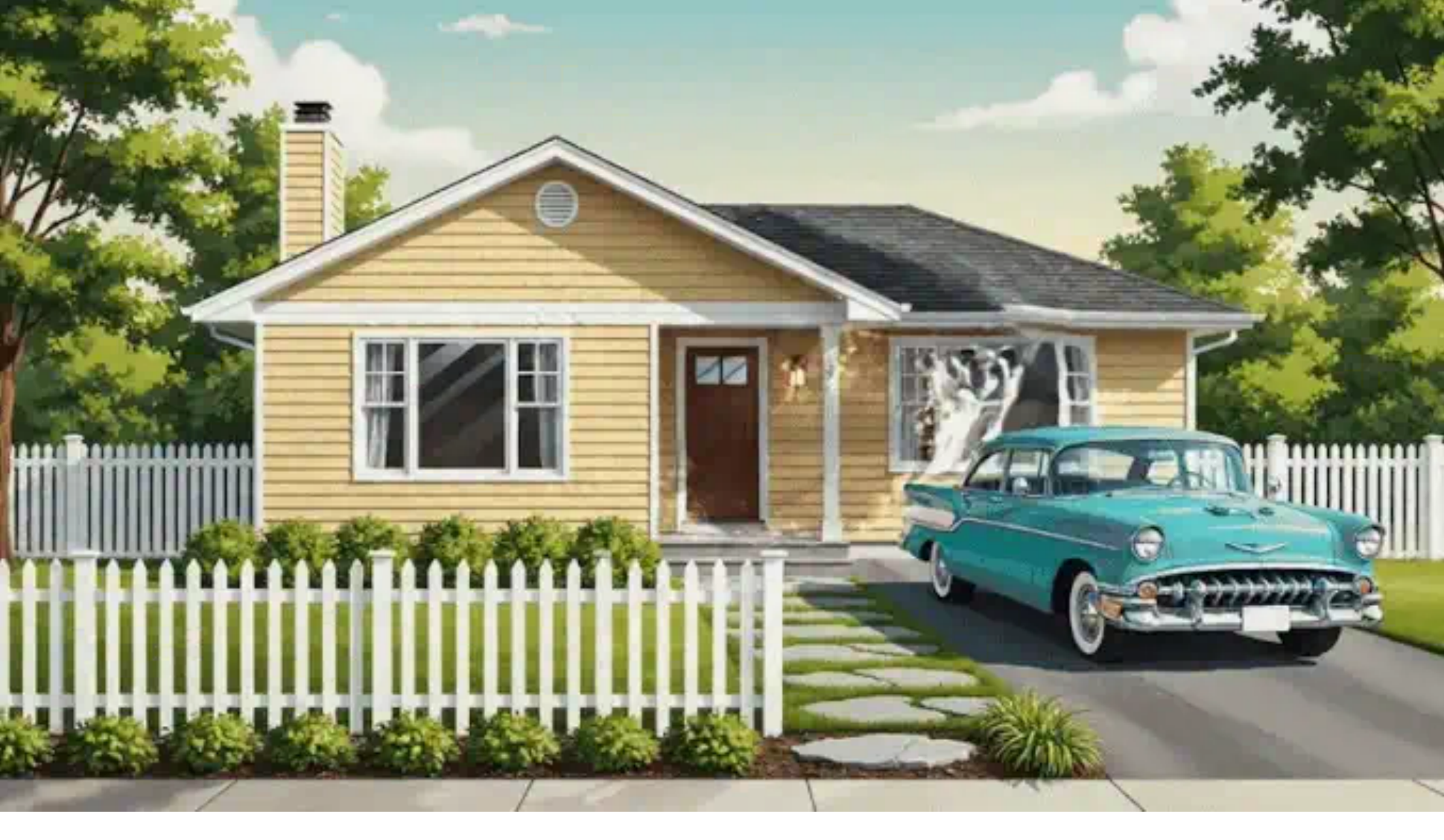
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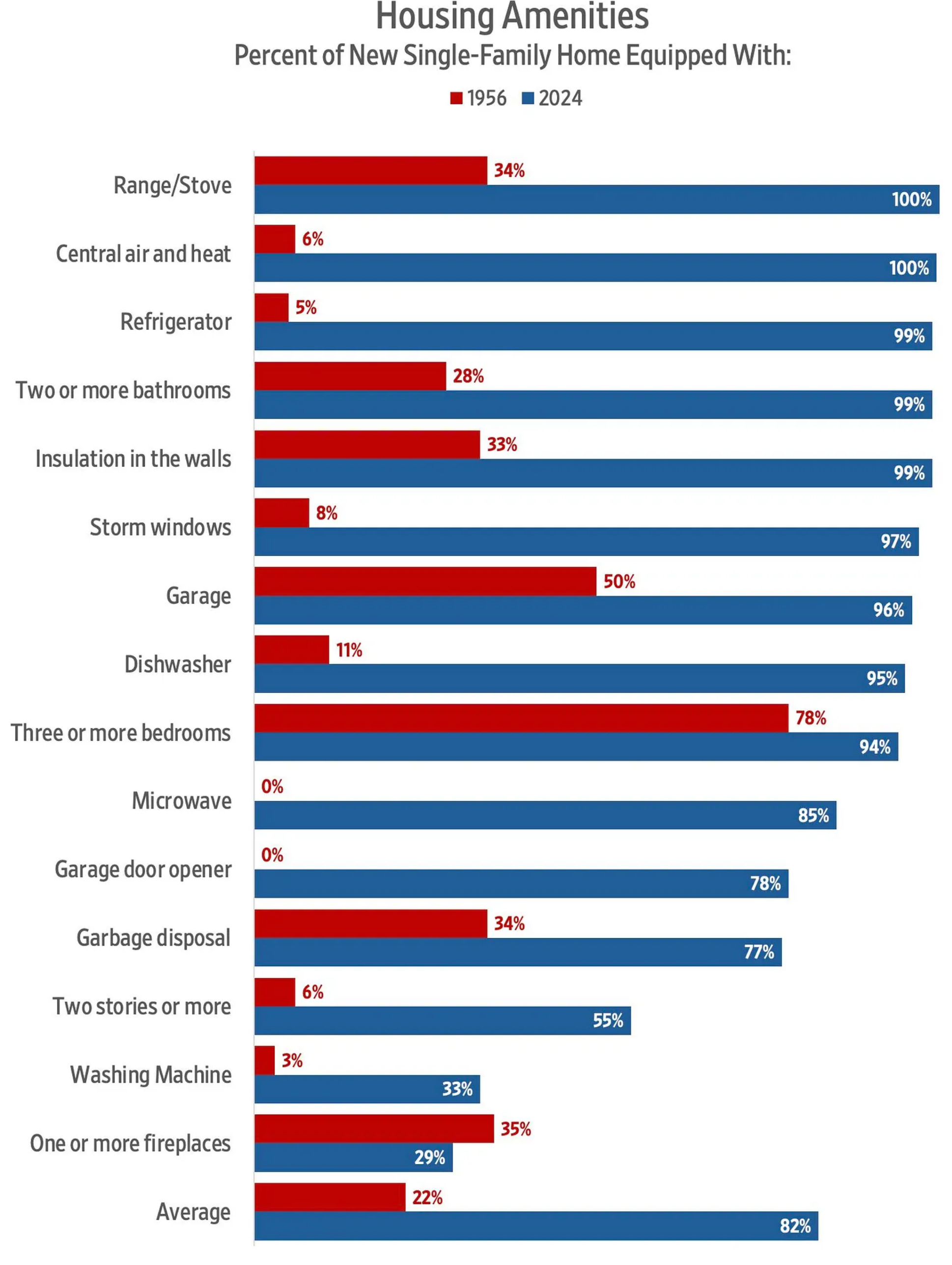
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The year 1956 was remarkable. The “baby boom” was in full swing, Dwight Eisenhower won a second term in the White House, and Elvis Presley topped the charts twice. It was the year IBM unveiled the world’s first computer hard drive—a 1-ton machine, the IBM 305 RAMAC, that could store a grand total of about 5 megabytes.



It was also the year I was born. Some have suggested it was the golden year for housing; however, the facts tell a much different story. Jeremy Horpedahl, an associate professor of economics at the University of Central Arkansas and a Cato Institute adjunct scholar, completed an [analysis on housing amenities](#) and found the following:



According to Horpedahl’s findings, fireplaces are the only amenity we have less of because central heating has replaced most of them. On average, only 22 percent of homes had the amenities Horpedahl looked at in 1956; today, 82 percent of them do.

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Bigger Houses, Fewer Persons per Household

Median home size has almost doubled, rising from about 1,150 square feet in 1956 to roughly 2,210 square feet today. Over the same period, average household size has shrunk from 3.3 people to 2.51. The result is a dramatic increase in living space per person—from just 348 square feet in 1956 to about 880 square feet today. That’s 532 more square feet per person, or a 153 percent increase. Had space per person stayed at its 1956 level, the typical home today would measure only about 874 square feet.

Lower Time Price per Square Foot

The median home cost about \$14,500 in 1956—roughly \$12.61 per square foot. With average wages at \$1.85 an hour, each square foot required 6.82 hours of earning. Today, the median home price is about \$420,300, or \$190.18 per square foot. However, average wages have risen to \$36.53 an hour (before benefits), bringing the time price down to 5.21 hours per square foot. So, while the dollar price per square foot has risen 15-fold, wages have increased nearly 20-fold. The result is the time price of housing has fallen by almost 24 percent.

Compared to 1956, we now enjoy 532 more square feet per person as well as homes packed with 3.7 times more amenities—and all of it for about 24 percent less time per square foot.

Find more of Gale’s work at his Substack, [Gale Winds](#).

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Critical minerals in Utah, an impressive weight-loss drug, fake catastrophes, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
DEC 14, 2025

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Economics & Development

- Argentina’s poverty rate has fallen to **36 percent** in the third quarter of 2025, roughly 9 percentage points lower than the same period last year, amid slowing inflation.

Energy & Environment

- Ionic Mineral Technologies has **discovered high concentrations of 16 critical minerals**—including lithium, germanium, and cesium—in a clay deposit **in Utah**. The full extent of the find is unknown, but the company claims it could be “the most significant critical mineral reserve in the US.”
- The **endangered Palau ground dove is showing signs of recovery on Ulong Island** in the Pacific following a successful rat eradication.
- A recently published **analysis of the ecological impacts of deep-sea mining** found that, unsurprisingly, scraping off the first few centimeters of the seafloor sharply reduced animal life along the machine’s path. However, researchers found **no evidence that sediment kicked up by the mining vehicle reduced overall animal abundance** in the wider area—something many scientists had feared.

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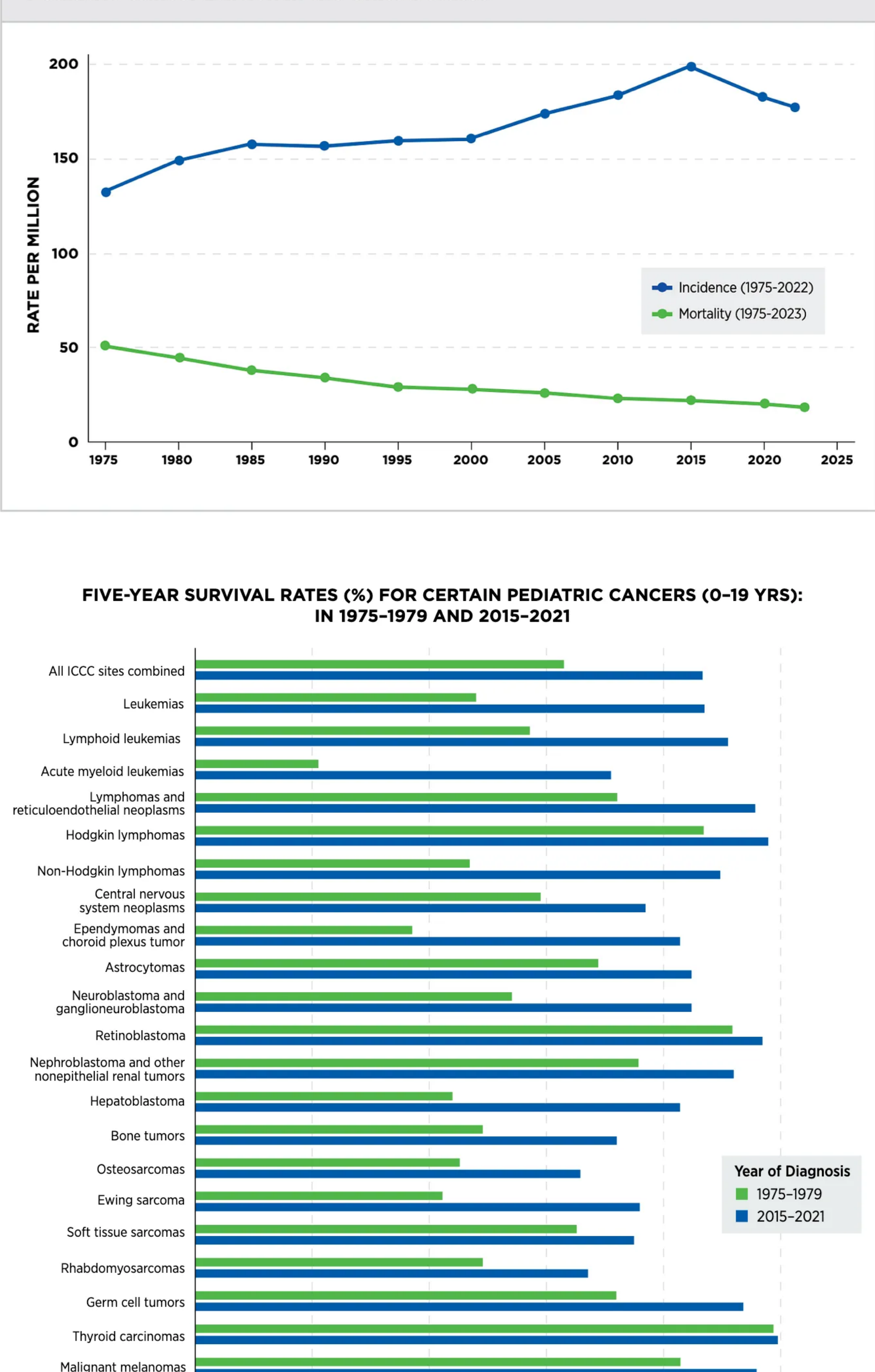
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Health & Demographics

- In a late-stage trial, Eli Lilly’s experimental obesity drug retatrutide delivered **some of the best weight-loss results ever seen**. Patients on the highest dose lost nearly 29 percent of their body weight over 68 weeks. **Across all treated participants, average weight loss was about 24 percent**, appearing to outperform currently approved drugs like semaglutide and tirzepatide.
- The FDA has approved **two new oral antibiotics to treat gonorrhea**, the first new oral therapies for uncomplicated gonorrhea in decades. These new drugs are especially important because the bacteria that cause gonorrhea have been evolving resistance to most existing treatments.
- A new study strengthens the case that the shingles vaccine might lower dementia risk. By using an age-based rollout in Wales as a natural experiment, scientists found **vaccinated elderly people were about 20 percent less likely to develop dementia over seven years** than those just outside the eligibility cutoff.

This study **examined Zostavax**, a discontinued shingles vaccine, not the currently used Shingrix vaccine.

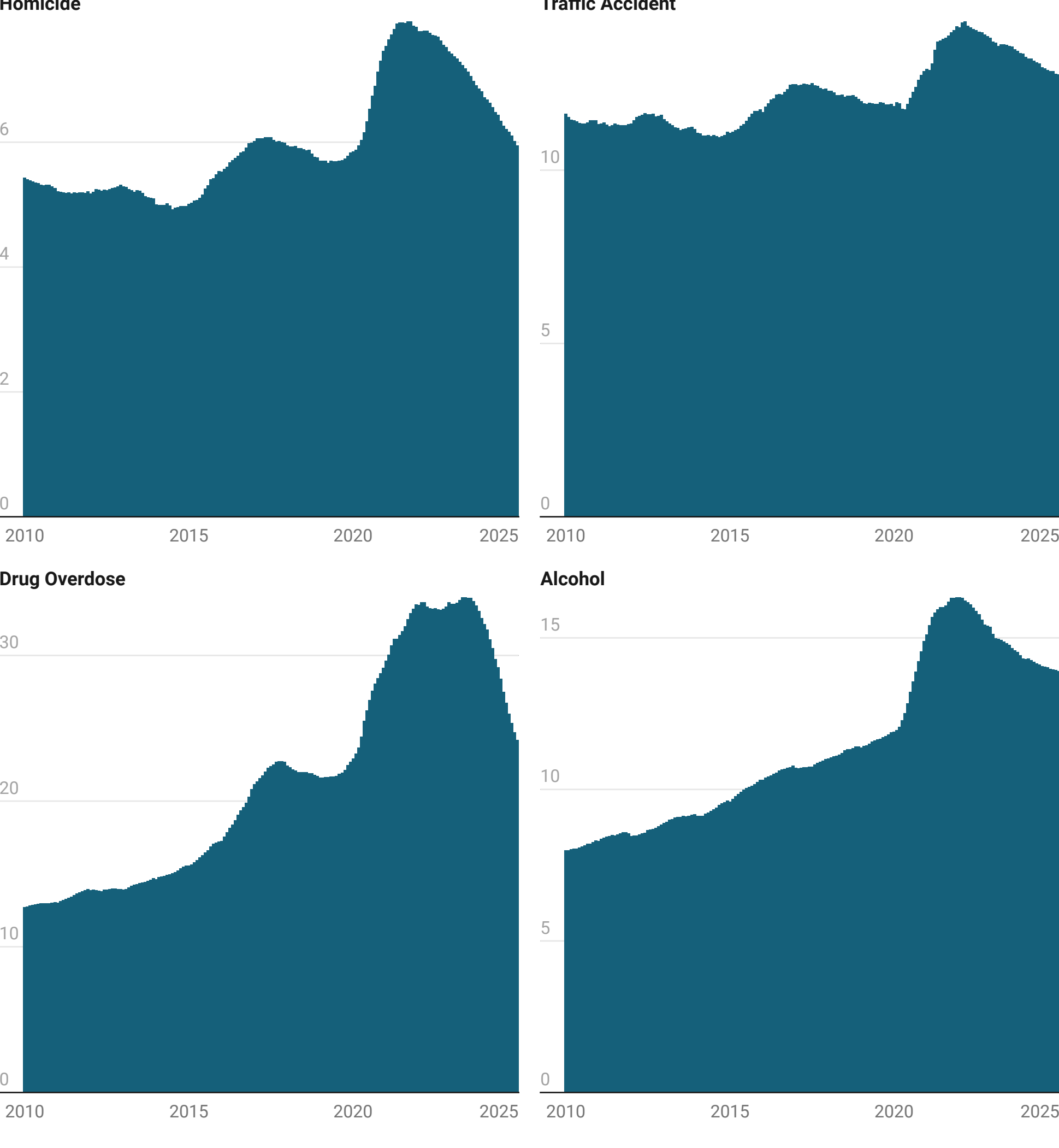
- The American Association for Cancer Research has a **new report** highlighting **some incredible progress against pediatric cancer in the United States**, including a roughly two-thirds decline in the death rate since the 1970s.



- According to CDC data **compiled by Jeff Asher**, **deaths in the United States caused by homicides, traffic accidents, drug overdoses, and alcohol are all down significantly from their early-2020s peaks**.

*Note that the 2025 data on this chart only include January.

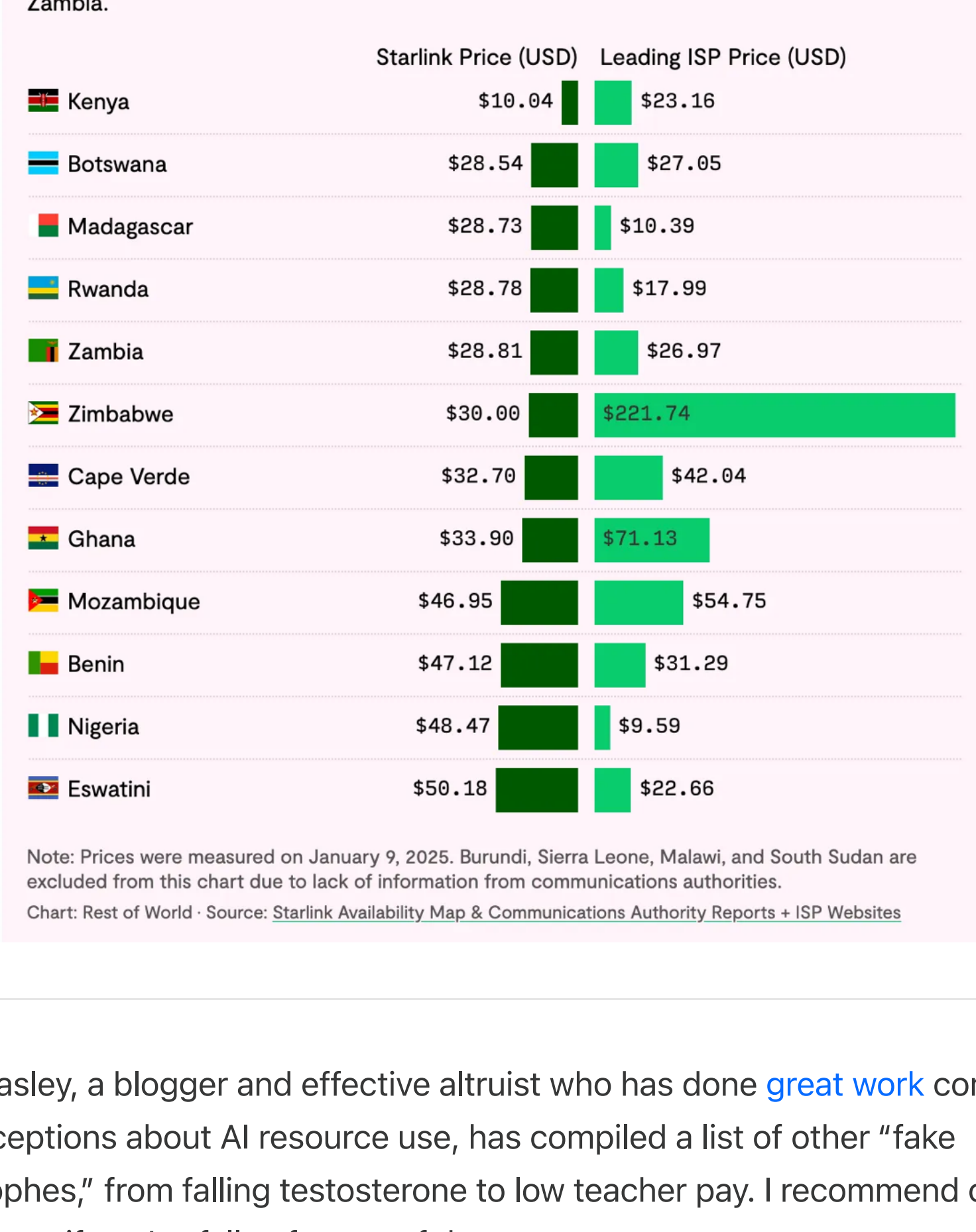
Rate of US Deaths by Cause Per 100k Rolling Over 12 Months



Source: CDC • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Science & Technology

- Aurora Innovation, a self-driving truck company, is expanding its operations in Texas**. In 2026, it plans to launch a fleet of autonomous trucks to haul sand used for oil and gas drilling around the Permian Basin.
- A startup called Overview Energy has **completed a major engineering milestone for space-based solar power**, successfully **beaming energy from a moving aircraft** to a ground receiver. The company plans to use the same method and similar hardware to transmit power from satellites in orbit.
- In many developing countries, Starlink provides much faster and more reliable internet connection than local providers. In at least five African countries—Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Cape Verde—it is also cheaper than the leading provider.



- Andy Masley, a blogger and effective altruist who has done **great work** correcting misconceptions about AI resource use, has compiled a list of other “fake catastrophes,” from falling testosterone to low teacher pay. I recommend checking it out to see if you’ve fallen for any of these:



The Weird Turn Pro

A list of other catastrophes that are probably fake

I've gotten a lot of mileage out of declaring over and over again that the massive moral panic over the climate and water impacts of individual chatbot prompts is ridiculous and based on wild simple misunderstandings that take a few minutes of googling to disprove...


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The Psychology of Moral Progress

Our competing moral assumptions are instinctual, but not arbitrary.

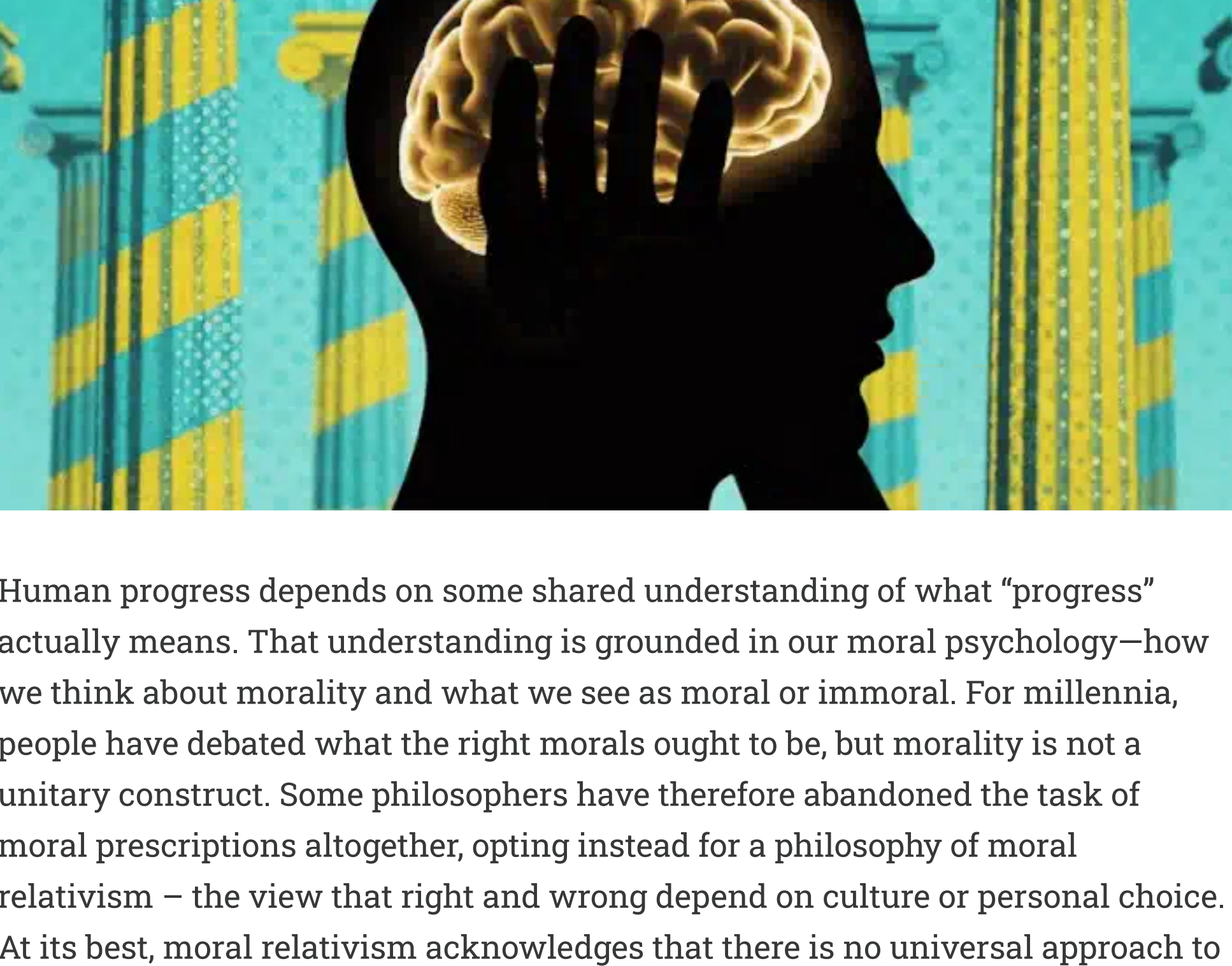
 ADAM OMARY
DEC 16, 2025

22 3 4 Share

CROSS-POSTED BY THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROGRESS

"Adam Omary discusses the psychological roots of our moral concerns—and the trade-offs they entail."

- Human Progress



Human progress depends on some shared understanding of what “progress” actually means. That understanding is grounded in our moral psychology—how we think about morality and what we see as moral or immoral. For millennia, people have debated what the right morals ought to be, but morality is not a unitary construct. Some philosophers have therefore abandoned the task of moral prescriptions altogether, opting instead for a philosophy of moral relativism – the view that right and wrong depend on culture or personal choice. At its best, moral relativism acknowledges that there is no universal approach to human flourishing across all contexts, leading to a more nuanced discussion on human progress. At its worst, moral relativism represents a complete disregard for moral constraints.

Postmodernist philosophers, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, argued that morality is not objective but rather an arbitrary social construct, one typically shaped and enforced to serve the interests of those in power. This interpretation has disastrous consequences: If morality is nothing more than a mask for power, then justice becomes indistinguishable from domination, and every moral claim is reduced to a struggle for control. The possibility of truth, virtue, or genuine liberty disappears, leaving only competing moral narratives without any objective ethical standards to apply. But that is an extreme and perhaps deliberately provocative position. There exists a more nuanced understanding of moral relativism, grounded in evolutionary psychology, that acknowledges different moral values as real but often involving personal and societal trade-offs.

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Experts in the field of personality psychology have proposed the “Big Five” theory, which features a five-factor model of personality measuring extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. This theory is the dominant explanation describing personality in terms of biologically rooted, independent, stable traits. A similar quintet has been applied to moral psychology: the American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s five-factor Moral Foundations Theory. Haidt argues that morality can be understood through five core dimensions shaped by evolutionary concerns: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity.

Just as with personality traits, where individuals can fall on the high or low end of a continuous trait—such as being extraverted, introverted, or somewhere in between—Moral Foundations Theory proposes that both individuals and cultures may differ in their valuation of different moral concerns. Importantly, these factor models of personality and morality do not claim whether it is better or worse to be high or low in a trait. Any configuration of this factor model may be adaptive for survival in different environmental niches, but we have evolved levels of traits that, on average, tend to serve us best.

For instance, the adaptiveness of high or low extraversion can depend on the environment. In a resource-rich, socially interconnected environment, greater sociability can enhance cooperation and access to shared goods; however, in a resource-scarce or unstable setting, less sociability may conserve energy and improve self-reliance. As we are social beings, even the most introverted humans tend to be more extroverted than species that fend for themselves. Even the most isolated adult humans learn to speak a language and depend on others in childhood, demonstrating our fundamental extraversion compared with much of the animal kingdom.

Similarly, moral foundations such as care may seem like an unequivocal good, but they are judged not in absolute terms but relative to the human baseline. Even relatively callous humans tend to be more empathetic than the most empathetic chimpanzees, our notoriously violent evolutionary cousins. Moral Foundations Theory suggests that extreme care can sometimes be disadvantageous. For example, excessive care could lead to expending precious resources on the sick and vulnerable at the expense of the group. A lower care value, however, might make hunters and warriors more effective at feeding and defending the tribe, especially when paired with greater loyalty.

Similarly, while fairness is widely regarded as a moral good, it is also one of the most context-dependent traits. Fairness in opportunity often conflicts with fairness in outcome. A society that rewards merit and effort inevitably produces inequality, while one that enforces equality of outcome risks punishing productivity and innovation. In school, grading everyone equally regardless of performance may appear compassionate, but it undermines excellence. In the workplace, equality in compensation can erode motivation among high performers.

Psychological research shows that moral outrage at unfairness typically stems from perceived deceit, exploitation, or free riding, rather than from unequal outcomes in a meritocracy. For example, in behavioral economics research, participants might play a game where each person starts with a fixed amount of money and decides how much to contribute to a public good, such as a water well. The public good benefits everyone, regardless of individual contributions. When some individuals contribute nothing yet still receive its benefits, others frequently choose to spend their own money to penalize these free riders. Evolutionary psychology suggests that moral outrage toward unfairness, including even the willingness to punish cheaters at a personal cost, is an adaptation that safeguards communal welfare and ensures that exploitation is more costly than cooperation.

Sometimes loyalty is directly at odds with care, fairness, and authority. What do you do if a family member has committed a serious criminal offense? Do you protect them from being discovered, or report them to the authorities? Social psychology research shows that people vary in where their loyalties lie, especially across cultures. People from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) societies tend to support legal justice even when it means punishing their kin. In contrast, people from so-called cultures of honor, particularly those in the Middle East, tend to prioritize loyalty to their families over the law.

A useful way to conceptualize the difference between the psychological foundations of loyalty and authority is to consider the extent to which allegiances apply between or within groups. Loyalty is fundamentally an intergroup phenomenon. Evolutionary theory suggests that people from the same family or tribe tend to be loyal to each other but not necessarily to out-groups. From a psychological perspective, betrayal rarely stems from a total lack of loyalty—more often, it indicates conflicting loyalties. For instance, a person might leave one lover to commit to another; a whistleblower might betray their employer out of loyalty to their country; and Jean Valjean steals bread to feed his family. In each case, betrayal is relative to one’s personal judgment regarding who belongs to the ingroup.

Authority, however, pertains to dynamics within groups. People within a family or nation may deserve the same level of loyalty and care but not necessarily the same level of authority. Like primate social groups, human societies are deeply hierarchical. Elders and people with strong skill sets, such as the best hunters in hunter-gatherer tribes, often command the most authority. Respect for authority may stabilize a society, especially in a well-functioning meritocracy. But in corrupt countries, where positions of authority are often held by unworthy individuals, subversion of authority is more adaptive. In all cases, it is adaptive to have a range of personality dispositions in the gene pool and a range of moral dispositions across cultures. This allows humans to adapt to changing environments.

Last is purity, a moral foundation rooted in our behavioral immune system. The emotion of disgust evolved as a protection against pathogens. That is why moral prescriptions regarding purity often extend beyond cleanliness to include restrictions on sexual activity, dietary customs, and rules governing the treatment of outsiders. From an evolutionary perspective, all these practices offer potential benefits, but they can also introduce pathogens. Individuals who value purity tend to avoid novel sources of calories, mating opportunities, and contact with strangers, whereas those who do not prioritize purity may reap the benefits while incurring some risk. Neither is better nor worse in any environment, but most people tend to cluster around a baseline that is, on average, adaptive.

Personality psychology primarily focuses on individual differences in traits such as the Big Five and the Moral Foundations, but personality dynamics also occur at the group level. People literally see the world differently based on their personality, and they form or adhere to ideologies as a function of their psychological disposition. Highly empathetic people tend to be left-wing, while highly conscientious people tend to be right-wing. People with like-minded personalities cluster into groups, and these groups become political.

The same goes for moralizing dispositions, as the Harvard University psychologist Joshua Greene explains in his book, *Moral Tribes*. Progressives tend to most strongly value moral concerns of care and fairness; conservatives, however, tend to most strongly value loyalty, authority, and purity. As mentioned above, these concerns are neither better nor worse, but each brings with it different problems and trade-offs. As Haidt writes in his book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, progressive values of care and fairness, when taken to their extremes, can stifle meritocracy and foster fragility in children who have not been adequately challenged under the pretext of care. Similarly, conservative values of loyalty, authority, and purity, when also taken to their extremes, can demand conformity, suppress dissent, and justify exclusion in the name of order.

In today’s polarized landscape, these insights into moral foundations reveal why political debates often feel intractable. Disagreements are not merely about facts; they are about competing moral priorities—care versus loyalty, or fairness versus authority. Each moral value is rooted in evolved psychological dispositions. When one side frames inequality as exploitation and the other frames redistribution as coercion, both are acting from deeply ingrained moral instincts. Recognizing that fact does not eliminate conflict, but it reframes it: A society that understands morality as a set of context-dependent trade-offs among competing values can better resist the extremes of both rigid absolutism and cynical relativism.

Just as with personality traits—where diversity ensures a society has both creative innovators and cautious stabilizers—moral diversity serves an adaptive function. A healthy society requires individuals who emphasize care and fairness to protect the vulnerable, and it needs those who emphasize loyalty, authority, and purity to preserve cohesion and continuity. Neither orientation is superior; each corrects the excesses of the other. Moral relativism, rightly understood, does not imply that all values are equal or arbitrary. Rather, like personality traits, it acknowledges that there is a plethora of legitimate moral concerns that come with their own adaptive trade-offs. In this view, moral truth emerges not from deontology—or a strict rule set—but from a free market of moral ideas where different values can evolve, contend, and refine one another through open discourse. Preservation of that discourse is important not only for a peaceful coexistence between citizens with very different moral viewpoints, but for human progress itself.

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American Poverty Is a Measurement Problem

Bad measurement choices dramatically distort the picture of poverty and inequality in the United States.

MARIAN L TUPY AND SCOTT WINSHIP

DEC 20, 2025

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Transcript

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Pundits routinely claim that American poverty remains stubbornly high and that decades of economic growth have failed to improve life for those at the bottom.

These claims are mostly wrong, and the errors behind them are shockingly trivial.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, Scott Winship, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, joins Marian Tupy to explain how bad measurement choices dramatically distort the picture of poverty, inequality, and economic mobility in the United States.

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

Let's start with the broader picture. It is my sense that popular narratives about the state of the American worker are much darker than the data support.

Am I terribly wrong in this assessment?

There are surveys that look at economic anxiety or insecurity among Americans. And if you look at a question that has been asked for 25 years or so, about how people feel about their own personal finances, about half the population says their finances are “excellent or good.” We might wish that number were higher, but the main thing is it’s not any lower than it was 25 years ago. It’s been pretty steady over time.

However, if you ask people how they think the American economy is doing, the share of people who say “excellent or good” is really low. So, there’s this misconception about how other people are doing, but if you ask people how they’re doing, they aren’t especially worried.

That is a finding in psychological literature that repeats itself time and time again. It’s called the optimism gap. When people are asked to reflect on their own lives, they are invariably much more optimistic than when they are asked about the situation in the country. The explanation for this phenomenon, according to psychologists, is that people are much better judges of what is happening in their own personal lives as opposed to what is happening to the country as a whole. In the latter case, their opinion is also swayed by the media, which is very negative.

There is also this myth that the American worker has not really seen real progress since the 1970s. What would you say to that?

I was born in 1973, so I don’t have a lot of memories in the 1970s, but it was a period of high inflation, worse than we’ve had in the last five years. And for a longer period of time, there was very high unemployment. There was a lot of terrorism and other violence. There were a lot of drug overdoses. Not a great decade, I think, by anybody’s standards.

People often claim that earnings have stagnated since the 1970s, particularly men’s earnings, but the numbers that I’ve published in the last year suggest that since 1973, earnings among men are up by something like 45 percent, and earnings among women are up by around 120 percent. Hourly wages, annual incomes, and family incomes are all either at all-time highs now or have been at some point in the last five years.

Another major part of your work has to do with mobility and opportunity in the United States. We are told that society is fundamentally stagnant: if you are born into unlucky circumstances, then you are stuck there.

So, how would you summarize your research on economic and social mobility in the United States?

There are two main ways that people talk about intergenerational mobility. One is comparing adult kids to their parents. The way to think about that is “if you start in the bottom fifth, are you able to make it to the middle fifth by the time you’re an adult?” That hasn’t gotten worse over time, but you’d be hard-pressed to find people who say it’s gotten better, either.

The other big way that people think about mobility is “Do you make more money at the same age than your parents did?” The conventional wisdom there is based on the work of Raj Chetty and his colleagues, who found that, if you were born in 1940, you had a 90 percent chance of ending up better off than your parents. For kids born in 1980, that had dropped to about a 50 percent chance. So, a big decline over time.

My colleagues and I are investigating that evidence right now. Preliminarily, it looks to us like if you use a better inflation adjustment, and if you take into account the fact that families have become smaller, it looks to us like in the United States, 70 percent of recent waves of adults are better off than their parents were, down from 90 percent.

Now, everything I said about mobility was comparing individual people to their parents. If you’re just asking how well new generations are doing compared to previous generations, the evidence is that Millennials and Gen Z are already better off at the same age than previous generations in terms of earnings and wealth.

However, student debt levels are higher in younger generations because college graduation rates are higher than they used to be. But for most people, that investment is going to pay off down the road. And Homeownership is lower. Now, I think the reason that homeownership is down for recent generations is that marriage rates have plummeted, and single young adults have never had high homeownership rates. There’s been a case of reverse causality there, where people say, “nobody’s getting married because they can’t afford a home,” but it’s never been the case that a majority of young parents have owned a home. They’ve always tended to be renters, and then after some time, they become homeowners.

What did you find out about income inequality in the United States?

Ten years ago, I was writing a ton on this. I was trying to push back on Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, who were claiming that there was an incredible increase in the share of income that was being captured by the top 1 percent.

There were a number of problems with their analysis. They used pre-tax and pre-transfer incomes, which miss the effect of progressive taxation and the social safety net. There was a problem where a lot of teenagers and young adults who were living with parents with a summer job were classified as low-income Americans. There were also issues with how they treated capital gains. People strategically time when they receive these gains based on tax law and the state of the economy, so you might have 20 years of gains that show up in the data as one year, which, as you can imagine, tends to inflate the incomes at the top. They also only included taxable gains, and the main way that the middle class gets wealth is through homeownership, which didn’t show up in the data.

Eventually, Saez, Piketty, and Zucman improved on the earlier estimates and found smaller increases in inequality over time. So, the consensus now is that inequality has gone up, but by much less than everybody thought around the time of the financial crisis. And when you take into account redistribution through progressive taxation, there hasn’t been much of an increase in inequality since the 1960s.

You’re a mild-mannered scholar and might not want to endorse what I’m about to say, but reporting pre-tax and pre-transfer statistics seems like intellectual deceit. What does it matter what your pre-tax income is if the government ends up taking 40 to 50 percent of it? And what’s the point of talking about Americans at the very bottom of the income ladder not earning anything if they are getting tens of thousands of dollars in transfers?

Yeah, I agree. Folks on the left would point to the Piketty and Saez numbers and say, “Look how bad inequality is, we need more redistribution,” but they weren’t even counting the redistribution we currently do. If you don’t include redistribution, inequality wouldn’t fall even if we leveled incomes.

Even the official poverty statistics that the US government releases don’t include most of the ways that we have tried to reduce poverty over time. It doesn’t count food stamps, Medicaid, housing subsidies, or refundable tax credits, which are the major ways that we’ve tried to reduce poverty over the last 20 years.

That’s extraordinary.

It reminds me of the finding in the Gramm and Boudreaux book, *The Triumph of Economic Freedom: Debunking the Seven Great Myths of American Capitalism*. They found that once you account for taxes and transfers, the difference between the top quintile and the bottom quintile of American earners decreases from 16 to one to four to one.

One last thing on poverty. We have a relative poverty measure that tends to bump around between 12 percent and 8 percent since the 1960s. But I have seen a couple of papers suggesting that once you measure poverty by consumption, it falls to about 2 to 2.5 percent.

Why would there be such a huge difference between the official poverty rate and the consumption poverty rate? Are people simply not reporting their incomes?

I think a couple of things are going on.

First, you’re absolutely right that people underreport their incomes. If you look at the bottom fifth of families, for instance, people are spending 20 or 30 percent more than the incomes they report. And I’ve talked to folks on the left who say, “Oh, that’s because they’re going into debt.” Bruce Meyer and his colleagues have looked at that, and that doesn’t seem to be the case at all. It’s pretty well known that there’s a lot of underreporting both at the bottom and at the very top, and that underreporting has gotten worse over time.

The second issue is that most of the poverty measures out there, including the official ones, simply don’t count a bunch of sources of income. And they overstate inflation, so the poverty line becomes a more and more difficult threshold to get over. When you measure incomes more comprehensively and when you use a better price index, the income poverty trend tends to look a lot like the consumption poverty trend.

You could argue that poverty lines are ultimately pretty arbitrary. You can set them so that 2 percent of the population is poor, or you can set them so that 10 percent of the population is poor. The important thing is that you hold them constant over time. Rich Burkhauser, Kevin Corinth, and Jeff Larrimore [have a paper](#) where they say, All right, let’s take seriously when Lyndon Johnson said in 1963 that 20 percent of the population was in poverty. Let’s measure everything as best we can and see what that implies about poverty today. And it’s 2 percent.

Now, you run into people who say, “How can you believe poverty is at 2 percent? That’s completely unrealistic.” To which I say it’s arbitrary. If you prefer to start today with the official poverty rate of around 10 percent, we can go back to 1963 and see how many people lived under that line. It turns out that was 70 percent.

Good god.

Let me just repeat that for our listeners. If you decided that the poverty rate today in the United States is 10 percent, then, by that standard, 70 percent of Americans were poor in the 1960s?

That’s right.

Michael Green, who I believe is an investor of some kind, posted on his Substack that the real poverty line in the United States today should be \$140,000. For reasons that are mysterious to me, *The Free Press* decided to republish that article on its website, which of course got everybody very excited. And then you stepped in. So, what does he get wrong?

He gets to this number two different ways.

The first thing he did was misinterpret the official poverty line. In the early 1960s, Lyndon Johnson wanted to start the war on poverty, and he wanted to say that a fifth of the population was poor. And there were a number of different researchers who had arrived at a poverty line of around \$3,000 at the time. One of those researchers was a woman named Mollie Orshansky, who had gotten there by noting that nationally, Americans at the time spent about a third of their incomes on food. The US Department of Agriculture had this minimally adequate food budget, so she just took that and multiplied it by three, and that got you to a little over \$3,000 for a family of four. Eventually, in 1969, they said, let’s just go with Mollie Orshansky’s numbers, except we’re going to adjust them for inflation moving forward. So, we’re not going to get into how much of people’s income they spend on food. We’re not going to change what an adequate diet is. We’re just going to take her line and adjust it for the cost of living over time. And that’s still the official poverty line today.

Green thought he understood how the poverty line was initially developed, and he said, “Okay, let’s look at how much Americans spend on food today.” And it turns out Americans today spend around 5 or 6 percent of their income on food. From there, Green said, “Okay, so let’s not multiply the original food budget by three. Instead, we should be multiplying it by 17. And clearly, if you multiply this number by 17 instead of 3, you get a much higher threshold.

It’s a ludicrous way of calculating poverty. We spend a smaller share of our incomes on food because we are richer, but Green has used that to argue we are poorer. It makes no sense.

The other way that he got to \$140,000 was that he took these estimates of how much families of four need to spend on things like food, childcare, health care, housing, transportation, and some other things. He got these from this living wage calculator that someone has created online, which also had a bunch of problems with it. Maybe the biggest one was that he was using Essex County, New Jersey, to represent the United States. Turns out Essex County is one of the four or five richest counties in the country.

The key thing for Americans to understand is that, in general, wages are increasing faster than prices. However, certain parts of our spending, primarily education and healthcare, are becoming more expensive relative to wages.

So let’s finish by talking a little bit about the Baumol effect, which is basically that, even in industries where there is no growth in productivity, we still have to pay people higher wages because of productivity growth in other industries. Basically, nurses and teachers might not be getting much more productive over time, but we still need to pay them more, or we won’t have any nurses or teachers.

However, in the book that I co-wrote with Gale Pooley, *Superabundance*, we found that plastic surgery prices are dropping like a rock relative to income. So, how much of the inflation in healthcare is thanks to the Baumol effect as opposed to government subsidies? Would the Baumol effect be lessened if we had proper competition?

It’s a great question, and I don’t think there’s been enough research done on it. But clearly, government intervention has been incredibly important.

In every realm except for healthcare, insurance is essentially a tool to pay a little bit in regular amounts to avoid a giant cost that you have a low probability of ever having to pay. That’s why we have car insurance. There’s a small chance that you’re going to get in a big car accident, and rather than risking bankruptcy if that accident happens, you pay into an insurance policy that will take care of it.

In healthcare, largely because of government mandates, it’s not like that at all. Health insurance covers annual checkups, which are completely predictable. By including a bunch of things like that in health insurance coverage, you incentivize people to overconsume health care, which pushes up costs.

The analogy I make is imagine if the government mandated that car insurance had to cover paint jobs. Well, if I’m paying for insurance that includes an annual paint job and I’m not taking advantage of it, then I’m a sucker. Other people are getting these fancy paint jobs with their insurance coverage, so I will too. That’s going to increase the cost of car insurance, and it’s going to increase the cost of paint jobs. That’s what we’re getting in the healthcare sector.

Read the full transcript

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Agricultural resilience, the fruits of Indian economic growth, a real-world housing policy experiment, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
DEC 21, 2025

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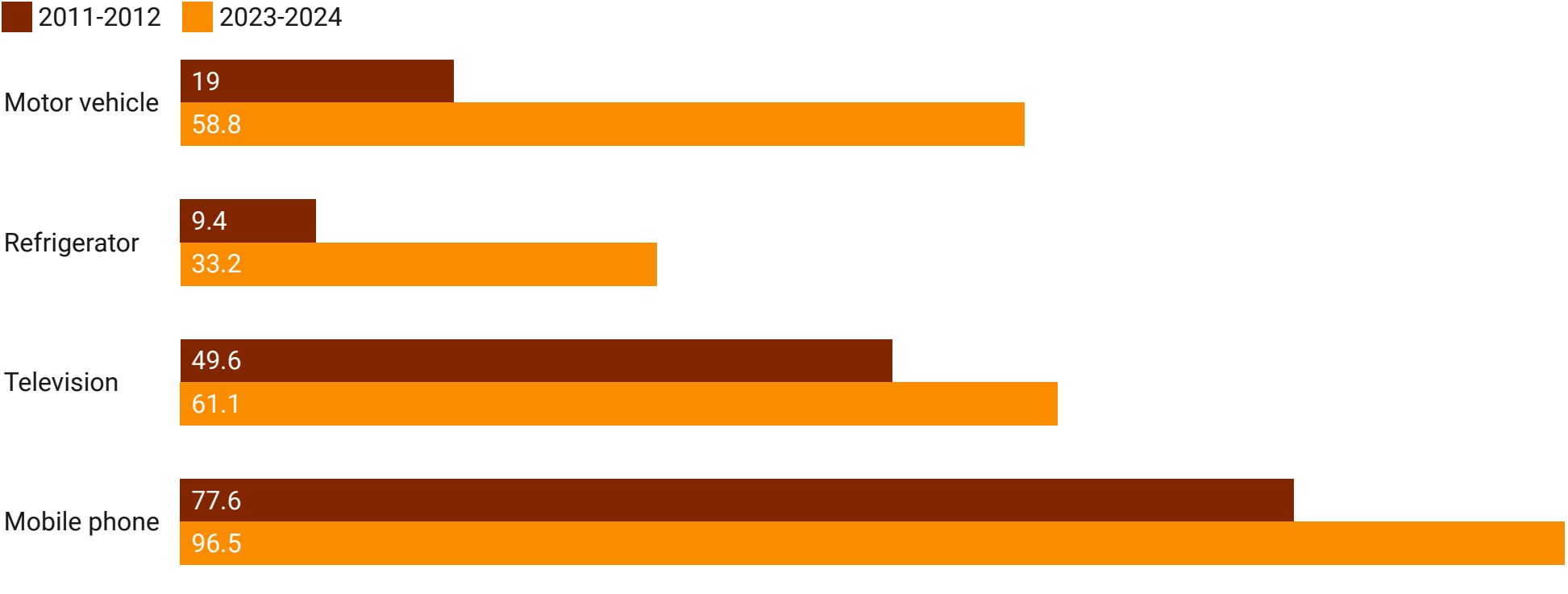
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Economics & Development

- Over the past few years, **Minnesota's Twin Cities have run a real-world housing experiment**. St. Paul instituted strict rent control that froze development and eventually forced the city to roll back the policy. Minneapolis loosened zoning instead, unleashing a surge of new apartments and keeping rent growth below both St. Paul's and the national average.
- Recent research from Vanguard finds that AI does not yet seem to be having a strong effect on employment in the United States. According to [their analysis](#), both **wage and job growth were faster in AI-exposed industries than in the economy as a whole** between mid-2023 and mid-2025.
- Thanks to sustained economic growth, **household spending in India is moving from basic needs to more sophisticated goods**. As a result of that growth, an increasing share of Indian households can afford durable consumer goods like cars, refrigerators, TVs, and mobile phones.

The share of rural Indian households that own a...



Source: [Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

The share of urban Indian households that own a...



Source: [Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Energy & Environment

- India's Parliament has passed a new law allowing private companies to build and operate nuclear reactors** in the country, ending decades of tight state control over the industry.
- Thanks to decades of improving water quality, **otters are making a comeback in the UK**, turning up in rivers all over the country and even wandering into urban waterways and backyard ponds.
- Polar bears may be adapting to a warmer Arctic faster than expected**. [New research](#) from the University of East Anglia found that polar bears in southeastern Greenland show shifts in gene activity linked to heat stress, metabolism, and ageing as temperatures rise, hinting at early genetic responses to climate change.
- A [new report](#) from the Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit, a UK-based think tank, finds that **global economic growth is becoming increasingly decoupled from carbon emissions**:

Between 2015 and 2023, countries representing more than 46% of global GDP absolutely decoupled — growing their economies while cutting CO2 emissions in absolute terms. That share is up from just over 38% in the pre-Paris period.

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Food & Hunger:

- Despite a severe drought, farmers in Canada are achieving record crop yields** thanks to improved agricultural technology like zero-till farming, better drainage, slow-release fertilizers, hardier cultivars, and more precise sensors and machines, suggesting that predictions from climate scientists that crop yields will decline this century are overly pessimistic.

Health & Demographics

- Brazil has cut mother-to-child HIV transmission to under 2 percent**, meeting the WHO's threshold for "elimination."
- Taiwan has nearly achieved the WHO's elimination targets for hepatitis C**, with diagnosis and treatment rates of roughly 90 percent.
- Doctors Without Borders has administered the first full course of the R21 malaria vaccine in Ethiopia**, vaccinating 2,100 children in a refugee camp. The organization reports that the camp hospital saw 50 percent fewer malaria deaths in the period after the campaign, which also included other malaria prevention methods.

Science & Technology

- Researchers from Nokia Bell Labs have [figured out](#) how to use **seafloor telecom cables as earthquake detectors**, using the existing fiber-optic network to record real seismic events. While the system isn't yet used for routine monitoring or early warning, the proof-of-concept shows that today's global cable network could double as a dense, low-cost sensor array for offshore earthquakes and tsunamis.
- Waymo's robotaxis are known for being safe but excessively timid, often driving far more slowly and cautiously than humans. However, according to [reporting in the Wall Street Journal](#), **Waymo is now pushing its vehicles to be more assertive on the road**.
- Walmart drone delivery has already begun in Atlanta and is coming to Orlando** in early 2026.

[Read more news stories on our website](#)

The Christmas Miracle of Toy Abundance

Get 14.5 toys today for the price of one in 1978.

GALE POOLEY
DEC 22, 2025

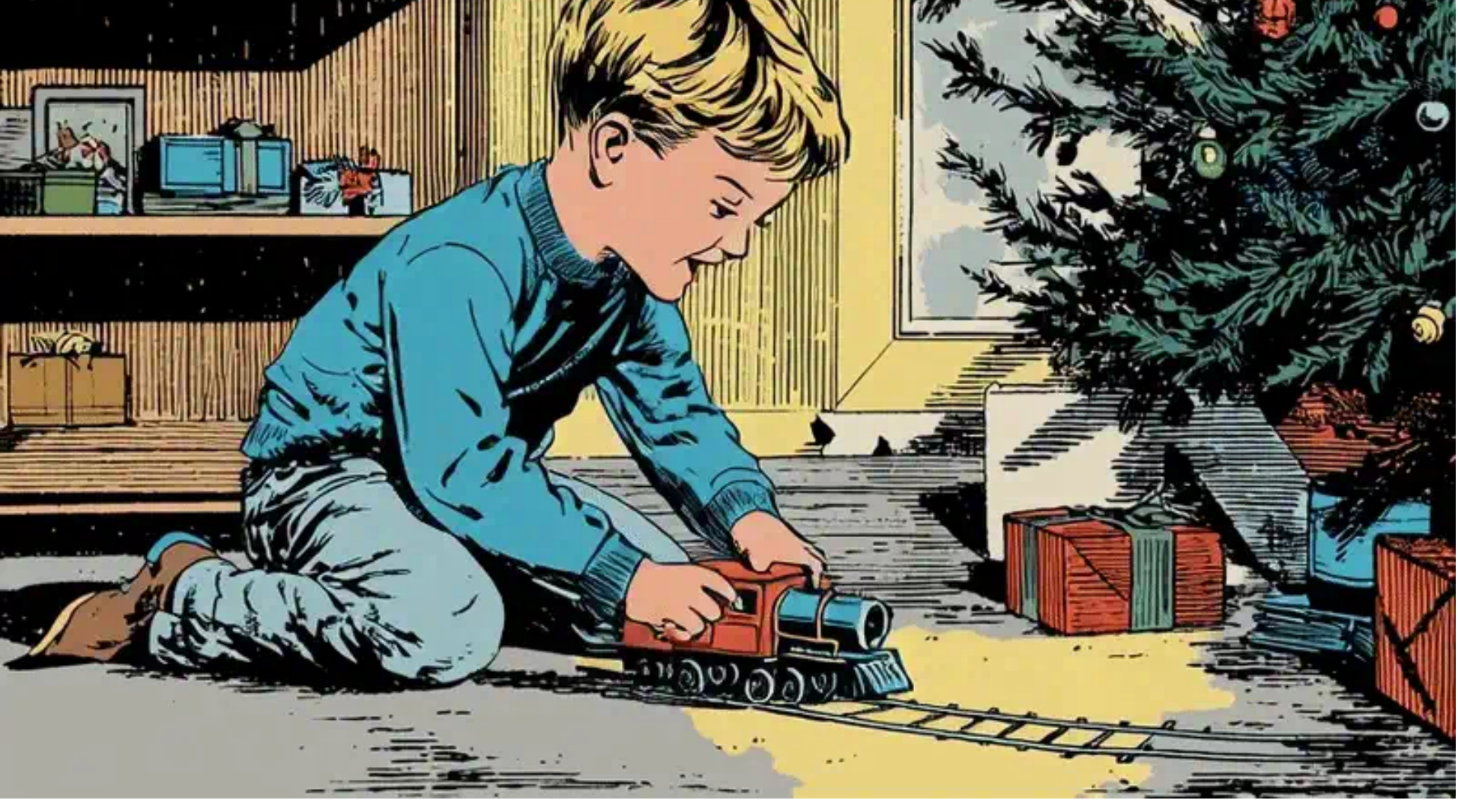
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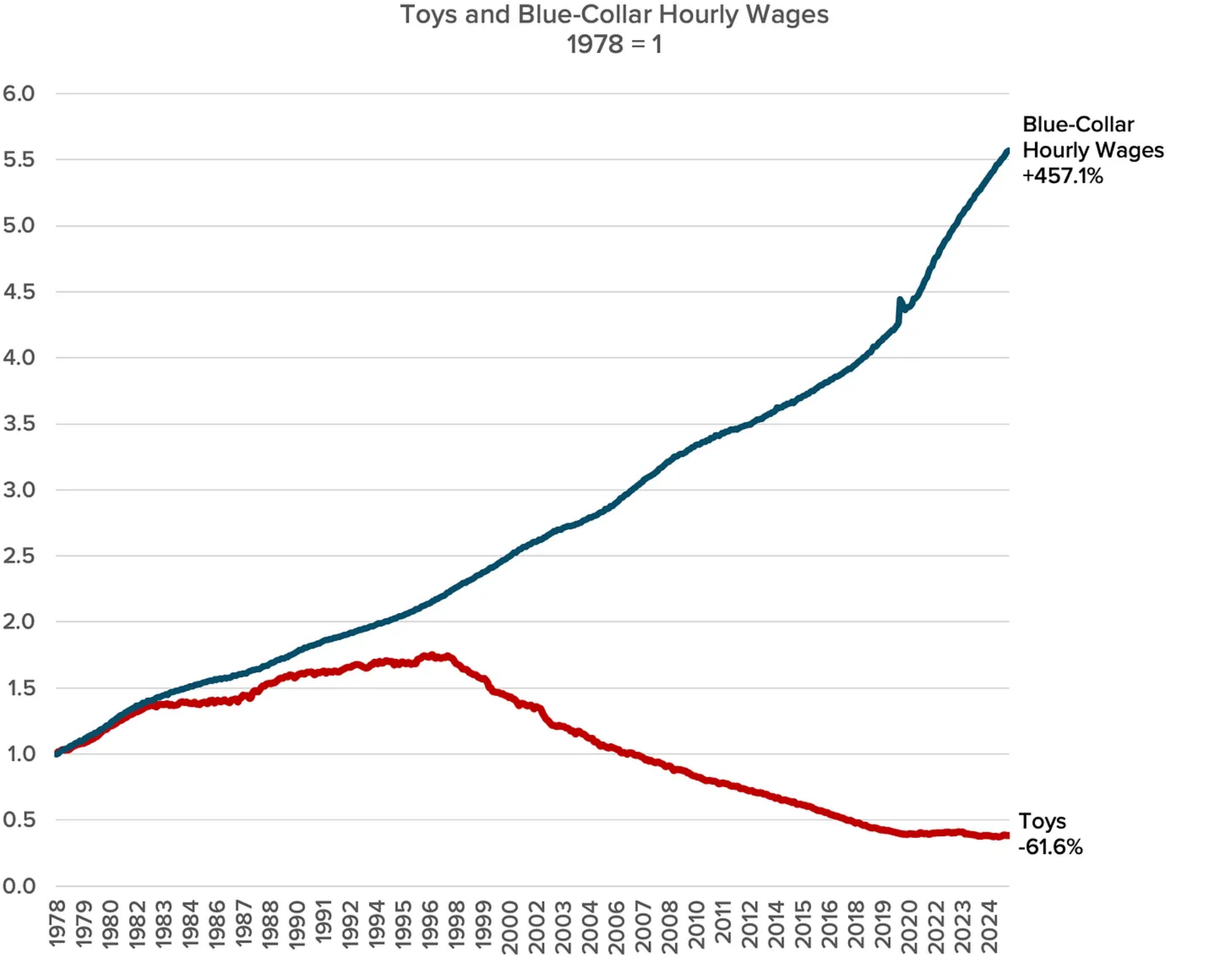
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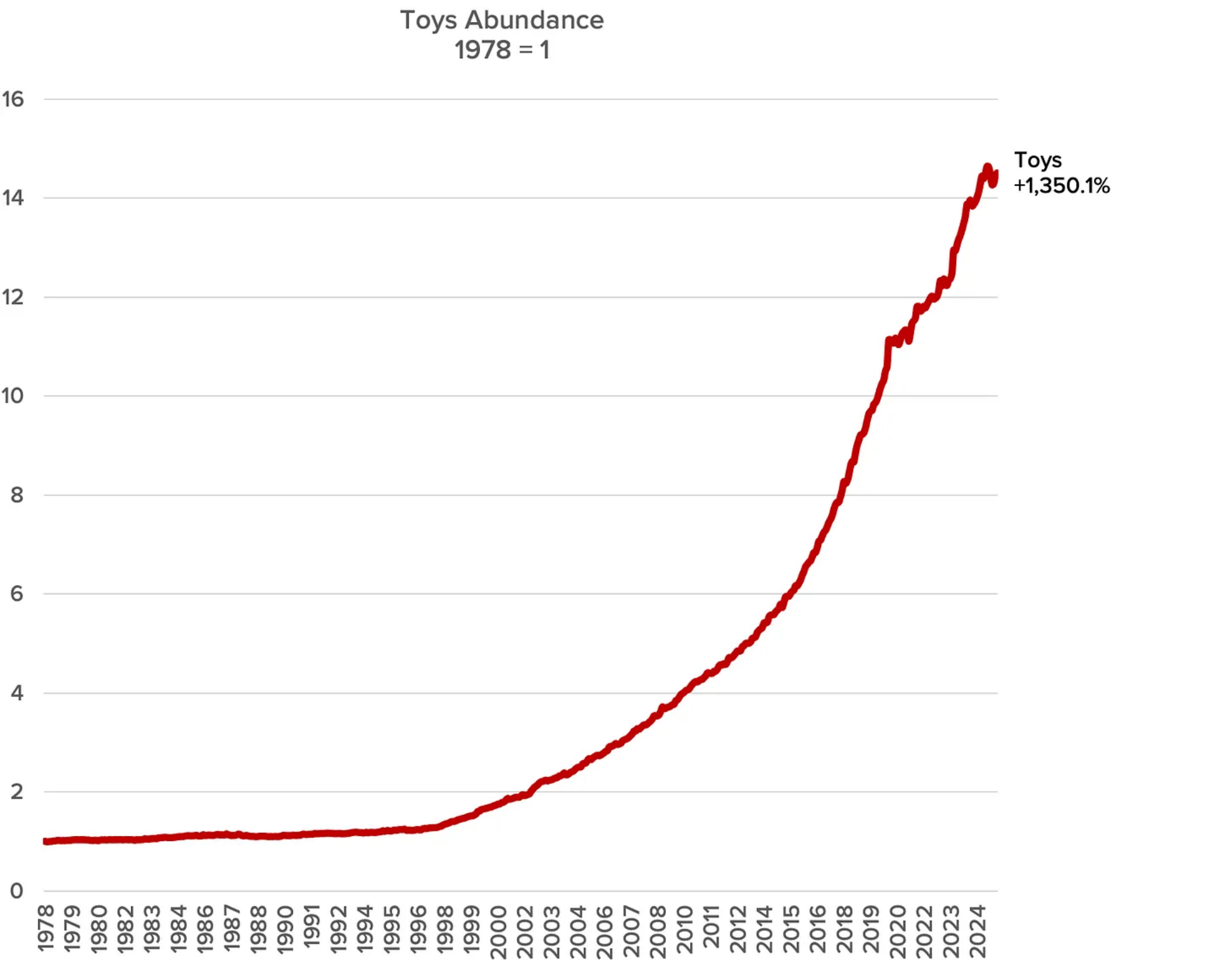
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The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) started [tracking](#) the nominal prices of toys back in 1978. Prices peaked in 1997 and then began a steady decline. Since 1978, toy prices have decreased 61.6 percent. During this same period, blue-collar wages [increased](#) 457.1 percent from \$5.66 per hour to \$31.53 per hour.



That indicates a 93.1 percent decrease in the time price of toys for blue-collar workers, who now get 14.5 toys for the time price of one back in 1978.



Upskilling Workers

Most people don't begin their careers as blue-collar workers and remain there for 47 years. Consider entry-level workers, who earned \$3.40 per hour in 1978. If, over the past four decades, these workers have upskilled and advanced to the average US private sector wage of \$36.67 per hour, their nominal wage would have risen 978 percent. For these workers, the time price of toys fell by 96.4 percent, meaning they get 28 toys today for the time price of one in 1978. What used to take 10 hours of work to buy, now only takes 22 minutes. Innovation and free market competition have given us nine hours and 38 minutes of more time to enjoy the holidays.

Find more of Gale's work at his Substack, [Gale Winds](#).

How a Century of Progress Changed Christmas

Why O. Henry would be shocked by holiday giving in 2025.

ADAM OMARY
DEC 24, 2025

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On a cold December day in 1905, the American writer O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) introduced the world to two poor young lovers with hearts of gold. In “[The Gift of the Magi](#),” Della cuts her beautiful knee-length hair to buy her husband Jim a gold chain for his watch. Meanwhile, Jim sells his watch, a magnificent family heirloom, to buy his wife a set of ornate combs for her hair. Their love for each other motivated them to sacrifice their prized possessions in the spirit of Christmas giving.

We still read the story because the emotion is timeless, but the material world its characters inhabit has almost vanished. In 1905, the average American household did not have electricity or running water, let alone the opportunity to buy gifts manufactured worldwide with two-day Amazon delivery. Light came from candles or kerosene. Water was carried or pumped. Heat required daily labor and fuel. Most time and wages went towards basic survival.

According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), households on average spent over 42 percent of their average wages on food in 1901. In O. Henry’s story, Jim is said to have spent \$8 of his \$20 weekly income, or an additional 40 percent, on renting not a whole home or apartment, but a mere furnished room for him and his wife. That left \$3.60, or \$132 in 2025 dollars, for everything else—firewood or coal for heating and cooking; candles or kerosene for lighting; soap, lye, and cleaning supplies; replacement shoes and work clothes as they wore out; basic medical care and medicines; postage and newspapers; and the ever-present risk of emergency expenses. And, of course, Christmas gifts.

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Before modern manufacturing, the most basic items required many hours of work. A comb could cost half a day’s labor—a watch chain, several days’ worth. Contrast that with today, when the very ease of gift-giving can feel almost embarrassing. The time price of a comb—once measured in hours—is now measured in minutes. A watch chain that would have taken a week of labor to afford in 1905 can now be purchased with a single hour’s wages.

Material abundance has accelerated so dramatically that some of us now worry not about whether we can give but whether we are giving too wastefully—plastic toys used once, novelty items that break by New Year’s, and holiday packaging that fills recycling bins to the brim. Where Jim and Della confronted problems of scarcity, we confront problems of prosperity.

Today, because [material goods demand so little labor](#), the most meaningful gifts often return to the immaterial: a sentimental note, a memorable experience, or a handcrafted gift. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t wish for those noise-canceling headphones or a virtual-reality headset. The modern economy offers goods that would have been fantastical luxuries or science fiction for our ancestors. But goods as gifts become even more meaningful when their purchase involves saving, budgeting, and sacrifice. Thankfully, buying a meaningful gift rarely requires giving up one of the few prized assets a household owns.

This Christmas, during a season when gifts can be purchased in minutes and delivered in hours, it is worth remembering O. Henry’s landscape of scarcity. Our world is richer not only in goods but also in freedom and choice.

Doomslayer: 1,084 Reasons the World Isn't Falling Apart

A list of all the good news we collected this year.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
DEC 29, 2025

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In a [Gallup poll](#) from last January, around one-fifth of Americans reported being satisfied with how things are going in the country. Just four percent were very satisfied.

It's not a surprising finding for anyone who goes outside and talks to people. This Christmas, I attended a community potluck, a place where you might expect to find an unusually sociable and well-adjusted crowd. Snow was falling, the fire was crackling, children were frolicking, and still, the conversation turned intractably toward all that's going wrong in the world (the main culprits at this New England gathering were identified as "a lack of empathy" and "artificial intelligence").

That same poll, however, found that over 80 percent of Americans were satisfied with their own lives. Obviously, those results are in contradiction; a country cannot be doing that poorly if a supermajority of its citizens are having an excellent time. That contradiction is also a highly replicated psychological finding. Across developed countries, people are [consistently pessimistic](#) about the state of society in general, yet optimistic about their own lives.

Part of the gap is thanks to the media. News outlets compete for our attention by writing [increasingly negative](#) headlines, which are more likely to be [clicked](#) and [shared on social media](#). Some is also due to [human nature](#). The media is not conspiring against us, but simply indulging our [innate preference](#) for negative news and susceptibility to anecdotes over statistics, which tend to be [more optimistic](#).

That last point is the reason for the list below, which contains 1,084 good news stories we collected in 2025. More precisely, it exists so that when people at your local potluck ask, "How can you be so optimistic? Don't you read the news?", you can refer them to a barrage of anecdotal evidence that the world is not, in fact, falling apart. I also urge you to scroll through it yourself; it will leave you calmer, more cheerful, and better informed.

[1,084 Good News Stories](#)

Our Editor’s 2025 End-of-Year Missive

MARIAN L TUPY
DEC 31, 2025

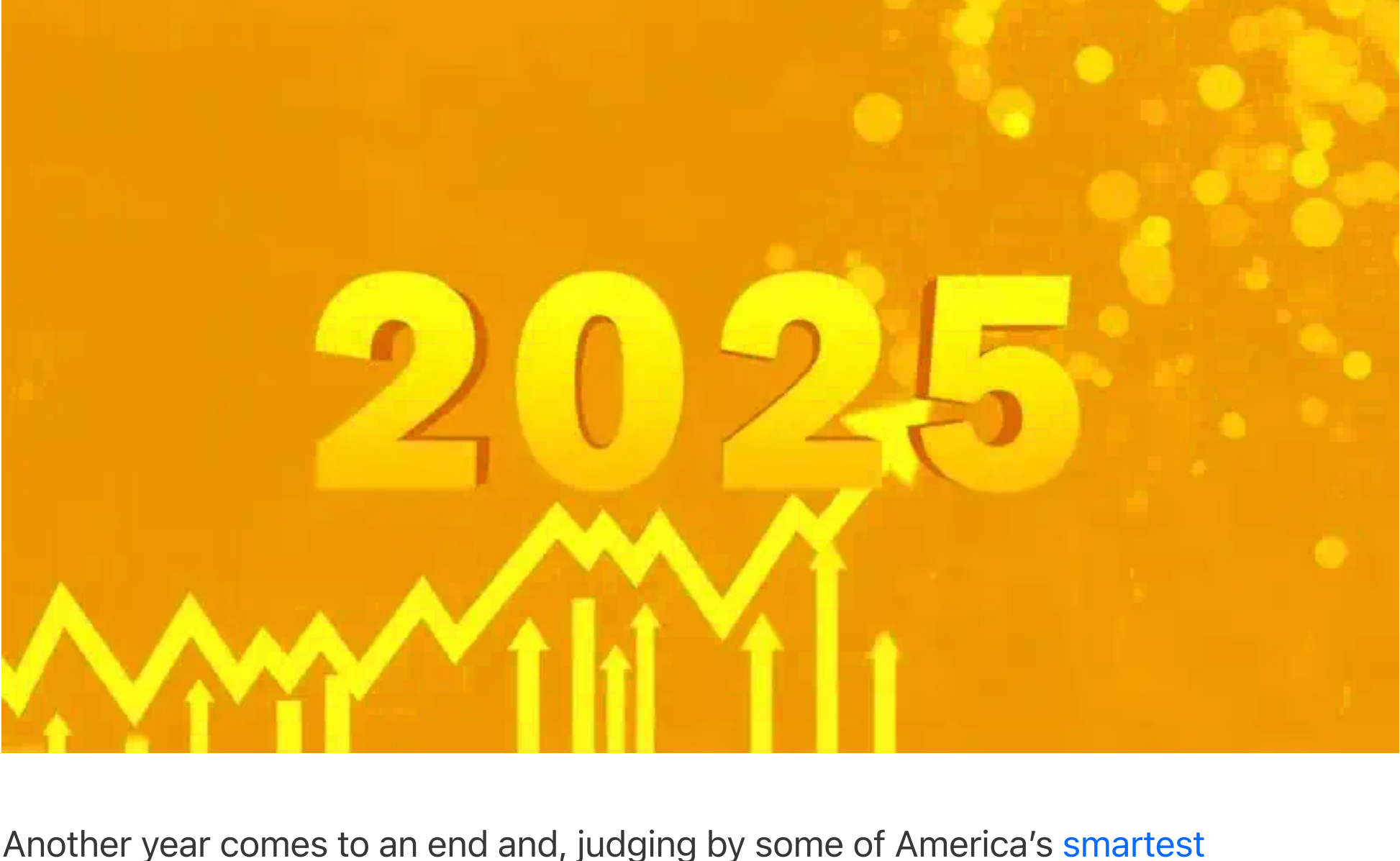
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Another year comes to an end and, judging by some of America’s [smartest commentators](#), it shan’t be missed. The war in Ukraine rages on. U.S. debt is stratospheric. Conspiracies abound. Populism of left-wing and right-wing varieties marches on. There is plenty that is wrong with the world. But that was always the case and always will be, for, as Immanuel Kant reminds us, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.”

I am not so dismissive. Though I am frequently described as the Cato Institute’s resident optimist, I prefer to call myself a realist. Let me explain.

First, human “progress does not mean,” in the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker’s words, “that everything becomes better for everyone everywhere all the time. That would be a miracle, and progress is not a miracle but problem-solving.” And behind the gory headlines that capture the public’s attention, millions of intelligent and industrious people across the globe are doing just that.

Malcolm Cochran, our digital communications manager, has laboriously collected [1,084 good-news stories](#), most of which never made it onto the front pages of the world’s newspapers. Here are some highlights:

- Life expectancy has continued to rise in the world’s longest-lived countries, indicating ongoing progress against mortality at older ages.
- In 2024, about 8.2 percent of people (roughly 673 million) were undernourished, 14 million fewer than in 2023.
- Extreme poverty was estimated at 10.5 percent in 2022 (about 838 million people) and is projected to fall to 9.9 percent by the end of 2025.
- Child extreme poverty fell from 507 million (2014) to 412 million (2024).
- The number of child laborers dropped by over 100 million since 2000, even while the global child population grew by about 230 million.
- Safely managed drinking-water access expanded to 2.2 billion more people between 2000 and 2024.
- Safely managed sanitation expanded to 2.8 billion more people between 2000 and 2024.
- Measles deaths fell about 88 percent since 2000, and measles vaccination is estimated to have saved nearly 59 million lives since 2000.
- The global maternal mortality ratio fell by about 40 percent from 2000 to 2023.
- The global suicide rate fell by about 35 percent over the last 20 years.

Second, I believe we are experiencing a contagion of negativity, driven by the hypercompetitive media environment, with newspapers, television stations, radio, and websites presenting a highly skewed picture of the state of the world. If it bleeds, it leads. But do not blame the media alone. Humans evolved to prioritize bad news, which means that, as experiments show, our eyes gravitate toward negative stories even when we deliberately set out to consume positive content. If you doubt that, the George Mason University economist [Tyler Cowen makes a similar point](#) in a podcast we recorded earlier this year.

So, when I say that I am a realist, I mean to convey that the true state of the world is much better than it seems from the barrage of negativity that the public is exposed to daily.

The problem, as always, is that unless you make a concerted effort to seek out good news, such as by signing up for our *Doomsayer* newsletter, you may never learn about the gradual, incremental improvements occurring around the world each day. Even then, it is easy to be overwhelmed by terrible headlines elsewhere, contributing to rising anxiety and depression. For that reason, I am particularly pleased that we expanded our team to include [Adam Omary](#), a freshly minted PhD from Harvard University’s psychology department.

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Adam joined Human Progress as a research fellow in October 2025. In his first three months, he published four articles, recorded two interviews for our podcast, and launched [The Psychology of Progress](#) on Substack. He is also co-directing a Cato initiative to commission original empirical studies on the psychological trade-offs of material, technological, and social progress. The project aims to understand why mental health appears to be faltering in the some prosperous societies and what psychological or cultural conditions are necessary to promote and sustain human flourishing.

Chelsea Follett recorded several podcasts and authored opinion pieces that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Hill*, and elsewhere. She gave numerous presentations, including at the New Orleans Book Festival and at universities in Texas and Florida. Her book *Centers of Progress* was republished in Korean. Chelsea completed the manuscript for her second book, which seeks to de-romanticize the preindustrial past, as well as a draft of a new policy analysis paper coauthored with George Mason University’s Vincent Geloso on global inequality; both will be published next year.

Saul Zimet improved and expanded Human Progress’s use of AI across the website and social media to make our content more visually compelling and better optimized for digital platforms. Most notably, what began as a relatively simple experiment in creating Chelsea’s AI clone in late 2024 has blossomed into a suite of fine-tuned AI avatars of me, Chelsea, and Gale Pooley. That work has resulted in 54 mixed-media videos on our social accounts, along with much more content on our website.

Malcolm Cochran was busy managing our social media presence and newsletter. Across all platforms, our audience grew by 14,000, and our content was viewed more than 32 million times. He also workshopped and significantly improved his progress roundups, transforming them from a low-profile side project into a polished and widely read weekly feature. As noted, you can see the culmination of his efforts in this year’s list of 1,084 good-news stories.

As for me, it has been a busy year. I recorded several podcasts and traveled across the United States to give talks. My articles appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Free Press*, *The Dispatch*, *Quillette*, and elsewhere. Last month, I recorded what may well be the world’s first course on human progress for the Peterson Academy. The book on degrowth and romanticism that I am co-writing with the State University of New York-Oswego philosopher [Craig Delancey](#) is progressing, and we hope to have the manuscript ready in the first half of next year.

Those, then, are some of the efforts our team has made over the last twelve months to promote and defend human progress. The hours are long, but ours is a labor of love.