

Doomsayer: Progress Roundup

2025 in review. Plus a free trade island, new research on inequality and mental health, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
JAN 04, 2026

26 likes 3 comments 6 shares Share

2025 in Review

Thankfully, we at Human Progress are not the only rational optimists writing on the internet.

Before the usual news roundup, I'd like to share a few reflections from our fellow travelers on the progress the world enjoyed this past year.

- Saloni Dattani has compiled a list of the most important medical breakthroughs of 2025. Avid roundup readers will recognize many of these innovations, but Saloni's expert curation and explanation make this list well worth reviewing.

Scientific Discovery

Medical breakthroughs in 2025

If you fell unconscious in 1950, no one around you would know how to perform CPR: it wouldn't be invented for another 10 years. Or take type 1 diabetes, where survival would involve injecting yourself every day with a thick glass syringe of insulin that was extracted from animal pancreases (with...

[Read more](#)

2 months ago · 232 likes · 26 comments · Saloni Dattani

- Roger Pielke Jr. writes that 2025 may have seen the **lowest death rate** from extreme weather in history. He notes that this good news is not a fluke, but part of an enduring trend of disaster resilience:

Make no mistake, 2025 is not unique, but part of a much longer-term trend of reduced vulnerability and improved preparation for extreme events. Underlying this trend lies the successful application of science, technology, and policy in a world that has grown much wealthier and thus far better equipped to protect people when, inevitably, extreme events do occur.

THB The Honest Broker

Congratulations World!

Here at THB we are ending 2025 with some incredibly good news that you might not hear about anywhere else — Globally, 2025 has had one of the lowest annual death rates from disasters associated with extreme weather events in recorded history...

[Read more](#)

2 months ago · 255 likes · 34 comments · Roger Pielke Jr.

- According to Jeff Asher, a much-cited crime data analyst, crime fell dramatically across the United States in 2025. He finds the same trend in many different datasets, including those from law enforcement agencies, the CDC, and municipal reports.

Jeff-alytics

2025 Year in Review: A Remarkable Drop In Crime

The number of crimes reported to law enforcement agencies almost certainly fell at a historic clip in 2025 led by the largest one-year drop in murder ever recorded — the third straight year setting a new record — and sizable drops in reported violent and property crime. This assessment will not be confirmed until the FBI releases formal estimates for 20...

[Read more](#)

2 months ago · 37 likes · 11 comments · Jeff Asher

- The eminent blogger Noah Smith has a (paywalled) list of some more heartening trends in American society. Many of our more pernicious social ills, such as substance abuse, suicide, obesity, and social atomization, appear to have alleviated over the past few years.

Noahpinion

Ten things that are going right in America

A lot of readers tell me that my fundamental optimism about the world is one of the reasons they appreciate my blog. I think my usual sunny attitude springs from my above-average skill at resisting the negativity bias inherent in the media. It's very easy to read the news every day and conclude that the world is in a never-ending hydra-headed ...

[Read more](#)

2 months ago · 415 likes · 83 comments · Noah Smith

- Africa remains the most troubled region of the world, suffering from persistent poverty, corruption, terrorism, and brutal wars. However, it's not all bad news. Ken Opalo notes some of what's going well on the continent, including widespread "catch-up" growth and economic liberalization in Ethiopia.

An Africanist Perspective

2025: Year in Review

Thank you for being a regular reader of An Africanist Perspective. If you haven't done so yet, please hit subscribe to receive timely updates on new posts along with over 32,000 other subscribers. All new regular content is free. Book reviews and the archives are gated...

[Read more](#)

2 months ago · 54 likes · 7 comments · Ken Opalo

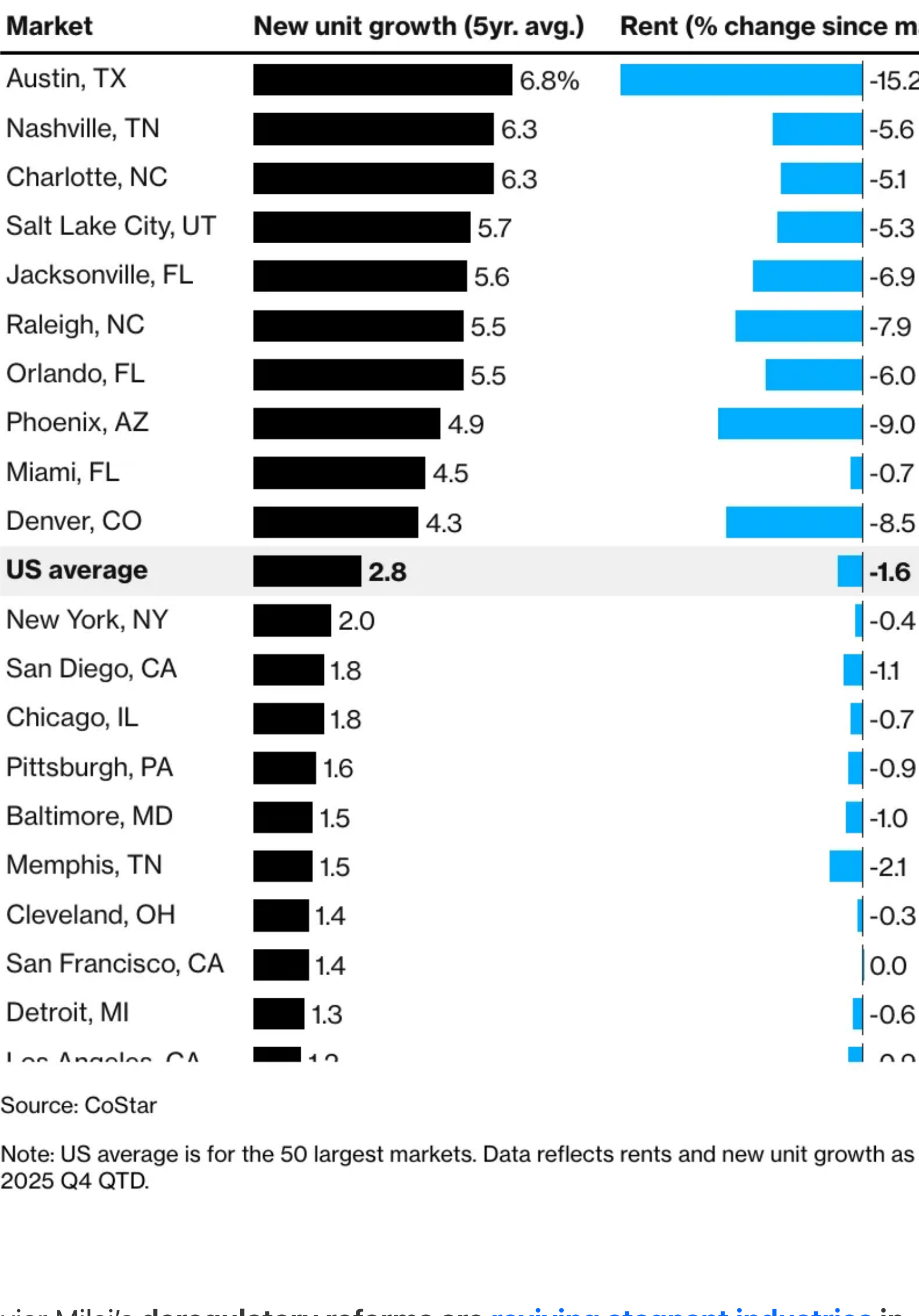
- Finally, if you enjoyed our [megalist of 1,084 progress stories](#), you might also appreciate these excellent lists from [The Progress Network](#) and [Arb Research/Renaissance Philanthropy](#).

On to the news.

Economics & Development

- A recent [meta-analysis](#) of the effects of economic inequality on mental health found that **economic inequality does not worsen our psychological well-being**. After surveying 168 studies, the authors found a small negative correlation between economic inequality and mental health, but the relationship disappeared after adjusting for publication bias.

- There's a common claim in progressive housing debates that deregulating real estate mainly produces luxury housing for the rich, with little benefit to average renters. The data show that to be false: according to CoStar, a real estate research company, **US cities that allowed the most construction over the past 5 years also saw the largest declines in rent**.



- Javier Milei's **deregulatory reforms are reviving stagnant industries in Argentina**, including salmon farming, copper mining, and oil drilling.

Thanks for reading Doomsayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

[Subscribe](#)

Energy & Environment

- Local authorities in Japan's Niigata prefecture have approved a **plan to restart** the nuclear power plant at Kashiwazaki-Kariwa, **the world's largest nuclear facility** that was **unwisely shut down** after the Fukushima disaster in 2011.

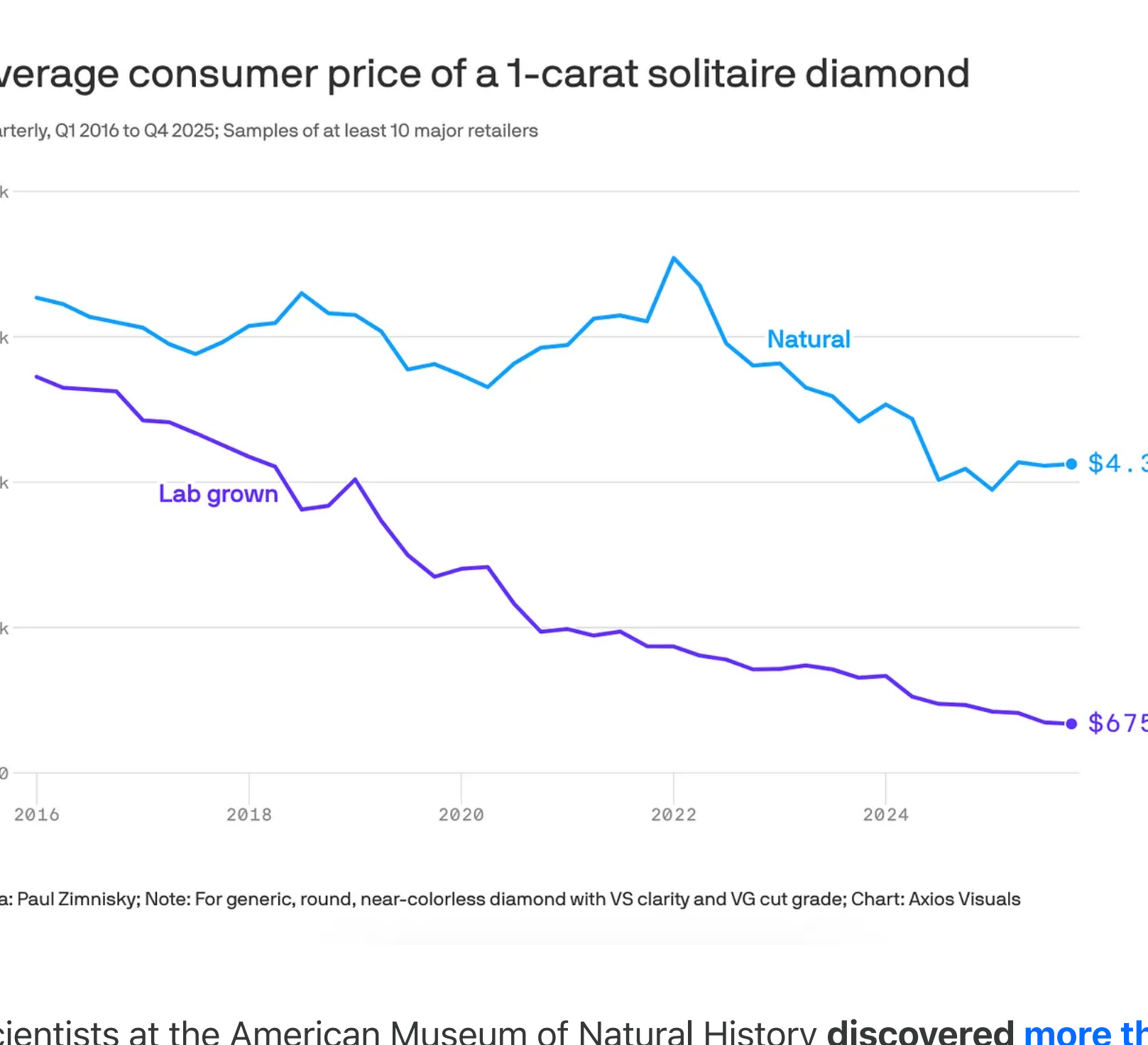
- Pumped hydro, the oldest and most reliable form of large-scale energy storage, is still evolving**. An [article in Wired magazine](#) describes several efforts to refine the technology, including a company that mixes dense particles into the water, increasing its mass and therefore the amount of potential energy it can store.

Politics & Freedom

- China has designated the province of Hainan as a duty-free customs zone**, allowing companies based on the island to import materials and components without tariffs and bring their goods into the rest of the Chinese market tariff-free if they meet local value-added and regulatory requirements.

Science & Technology

- Synthetic diamonds are **not only getting cheaper** but also driving down prices for their natural counterparts. Consumers are responding by **purchasing larger stones**.



- Scientists at the American Museum of Natural History **discovered more than 70 new species in 2025**: living, extinct, and mineral.

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

Why Your Groceries Are Cheaper than Kevin McCallister's

Since 1990, grocery abundance has increased by 43.2 percent for blue-collar workers.

GALE POOLEY
JAN 06, 2026

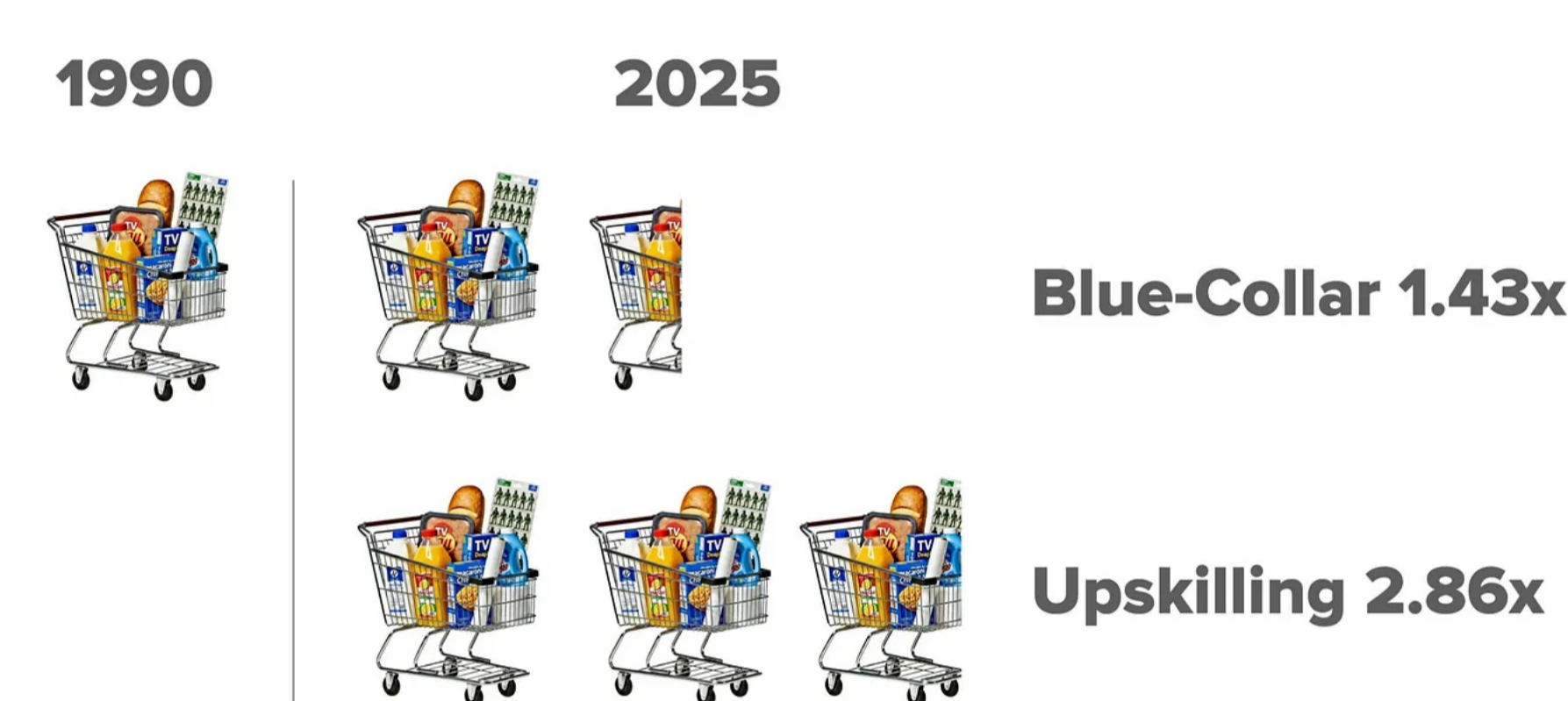
31 2 Share

In the 1990 movie *Home Alone*, eight-year-old Kevin McCallister went grocery shopping. He bought a half gallon of milk, a half gallon of orange juice, a TV dinner, bread, frozen mac and cheese, laundry detergent, cling wrap, toilet paper, a pack of army men, and dryer sheets. His bill came to \$19.83.



Professor Christopher Clarke at Washington State University does an annual price analysis of Kevin McCallister's shopping basket and estimates that today's price for those items would be around 114.5 percent higher (\$42.54) than was the case in 1990. But, as my readers know quite well, things can become more expensive and more affordable at the same time. How is that possible? It's possible because wages typically increase faster than prices. In the past 35 years, blue-collar hourly wages have increased by 207.7 percent, from \$10.32 per hour in 1990 to \$31.76 today.

Kevin's basket in 1990, in time prices, would have cost 1.92 hours compared to 1.34 hours today. The time price of Kevin's basket has fallen by 30.2 percent. For the time it took to earn the money to buy the basket of goods in 1990, you get 1.432 baskets today. Grocery abundance has increased by 43.2 percent.



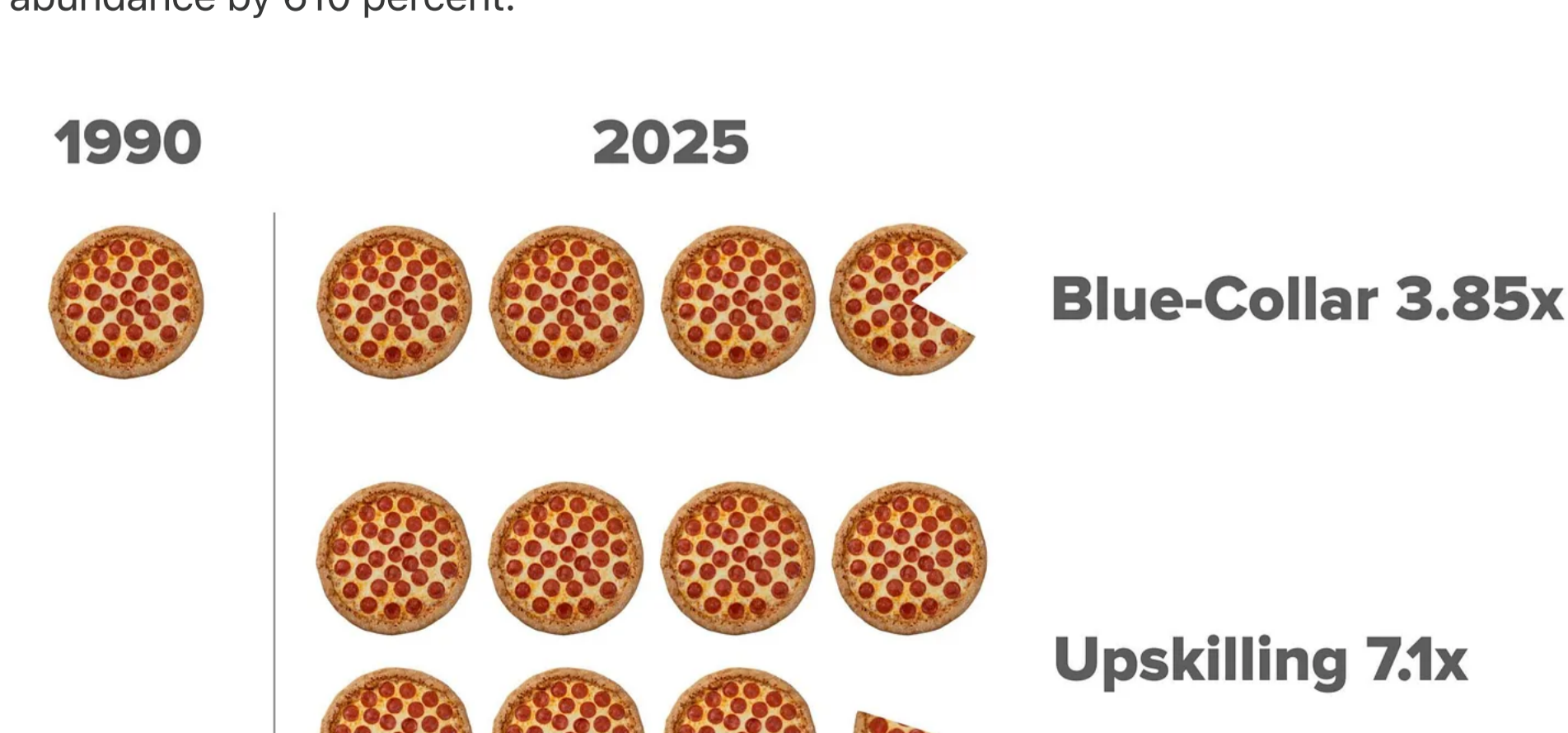
Thanks for reading Doomslayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

If you got your first job in 1990 as an entry-level worker and have been upskilling for the past 35 years and are now an average worker, your hourly wage rate increased 511.3 percent: from \$6.03 an hour in 1990 to \$36.86 an hour today. Your grocery basket time price fell by 65 percent, giving you 2.86 baskets today. Your grocery abundance has increased by 186 percent.



In the movie, the McCallister family also orders 10 pizzas, and the bill comes to \$122.50 (plus tip). That would put the time price for 1990s blue-collar workers at 11.87 hours, or about one hour and 11 minutes per pizza.

Professor Clarke did a price check on how much 10 classic cheese and pepperoni pizzas cost at a Little Caesars pizzeria near the McCallister's home today—it comes to only \$98.09 (plus tip). The nominal price has actually shrunk! That would put today's time price at 3.08 hours for the 10 pizzas, or about 18.5 minutes per pizza. The time price has fallen by 74 percent. That means that for the time it took to earn the money to buy one pizza in 1990 you get 3.85 pizzas today. Pizza abundance has increased by 285 percent. If you are an upskilled worker, your pizza time price fell by 85.9 percent, giving you 7.1 pizzas today for the time price of 1 in 1990, thus increasing your abundance by 610 percent.



Hopefully you didn't forget to count the kids before taking off on Christmas vacation this year! And remember, life can become more abundant every day if people are free to innovate.

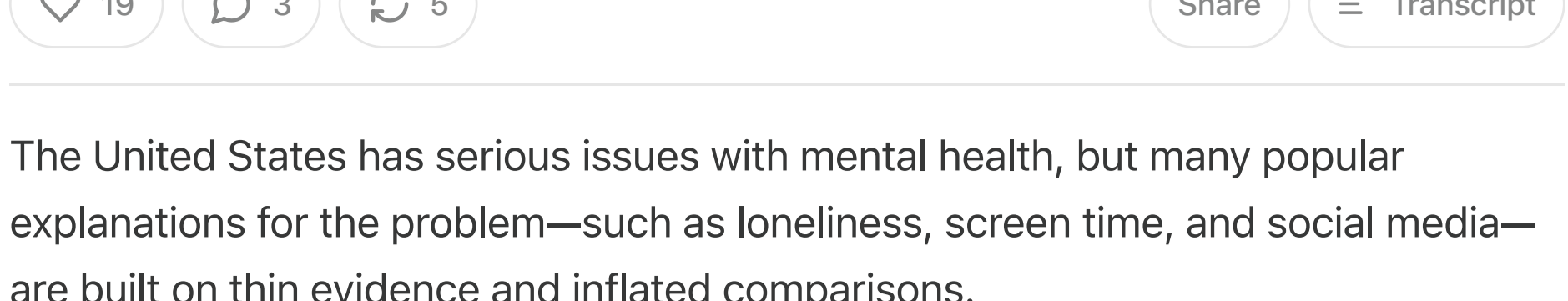
Find more of Gale's work at his Substack, [Gale Winds](#).

The Misdiagnosis of American Mental Health

Chris Ferguson joins Adam Omary to discuss American mental health, cognitive biases, and the dangers of narrative overreach.

ADAM OMARY AND CHRISTOPHER J FERGUSON, PH.D.

JAN 10, 2026



The United States has serious issues with mental health, but many popular explanations for the problem—such as loneliness, screen time, and social media—are built on thin evidence and inflated comparisons.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, Adam Omary speaks with Chris Ferguson, a clinical psychologist and Stetson University professor, about what the research actually shows about our psychological well-being.

[Listen on your favorite podcast app](#)

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

Before we talk about your book, *Catastrophe! How Psychology Explains Why Good People Make Bad Situations Worse*, I'd love to talk about your recent excellent article on what people have called the "Loneliness Epidemic."

Americans are increasingly alone, but are they really lonely?

This idea has been battled around for about a decade, and it was reinforced by the US Surgeon General about two years ago when they released this advisory saying there's a loneliness epidemic and we're lonelier than ever.

I was curious to see what the evidence was in support of this idea, and one of the things I noticed was that people kept switching what they were talking about. They would say, "We have a loneliness epidemic. Look over here, we're spending less time with other people." But those aren't exactly the same thing.

We are spending a modestly smaller amount of time with other people. In one of the studies that the Supreme Court had highlighted, it worked out to be about a 1.7 percent decrease over about 20 years, excluding 2020, the Covid year. That seems to be robust, but of course, very modest. On the other hand, that's not necessarily bad. People can be annoying, so sometimes spending less time around other people can be good. The classic example is that more people are working remotely, and remote work seems to be something a lot of people prefer.

Above all, we just don't see robust evidence that we actually feel worse because of this modest change in the time we spend with others. So, I think the Surgeon General made a mistake by interpreting a modest decline in time with others as a mental health crisis.

These measures of time spent alone also revolve around physical proximity, literally being in the room with someone. But what about hanging out online? I'm a pretty big geek, and I play Dungeons & Dragons online with friends from around the country. We're talking, we're laughing, we're having a good time, but we're thousands of miles away from each other. Shouldn't that count as time spent with others?

You and I met online and are talking in real time, which feels pretty socially fulfilling. I've done, at this point, well over 100 podcasts like these and met over 100 people that I've not met physically. So, I feel, in some ways, more socially connected than I would have been without this technology. On the other hand, it's probably true that if none of these online avenues were afforded to me, I would go out and meet more people in person.

Is it a problem that, because meeting our social needs online is more convenient, people choose to do that over meeting people in person?

There are people who really do benefit socially from social media and smartphones because they struggle to meet people in real life. You can think of high-functioning autistic individuals, people with social phobias, or regular old garden-variety introverts. There are also certainly some people who don't do social media well. Most people are probably somewhere in between, where it's just frosting on the cake. They're fine with it, but they would've been fine without it, too.

There are a few studies that looked at this and found that time spent on smartphones and time spent on social media do not actually have much impact on real-life relationships. Usually, time spent on social media and on smartphones draws teens and young adults away from television. So television is really the big casualty of the social media age.

Now, fifty years ago, people worried about television drawing people away from real-life relationships. The landline was also the subject of a similar panic 100-plus years ago, but it was about women. There was a sense that women were going to neglect their household duties and find lovers via the telephone. People also worried about the telegraph. And at the beginning of the 19th century, people were worried that young people would spend hours looking into kaleidoscopes and ruin their lives. So, there is a cycle of panic that goes on and on without anybody worrying too much about evidence.

To some degree, this is a perennial problem. People, especially older generations, tend to catastrophize new technology, but new generations eventually adapt to it.

At the same time, we are seeing real trends of worsening mental health, and it seems plausible that, especially in young people, social media could be creating maladaptive patterns. You could imagine that, if someone is raised in a world where online interaction is the default, they might lack the opportunity to build the skills that would allow them to delay gratification and find a healthy balance between screens and in-person life. Do you worry about that?

We have evidence that contradicts that narrative.

First, in most countries that have adopted smartphones and social media, we do not see a pattern of declining youth mental health. It seems to be something very specific to the United States. For various reasons, I think the best metric to track is suicides, because a body is a body, and self-report tends to be rubbish. And in most European countries, and in Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, we don't see any evidence of a youth mental health crisis. In the United States, there was an increase in youth suicide in the 2010s, but it has now begun to reverse. Maybe it will reverse again, but so far, we're seeing an improving trend for youth in the United States.

Second, the increase in suicide was actually much worse for middle-aged adults than it was for teens. Everybody's worried about teenage girls, but a white male from 45 to 55 has roughly a three to five times elevated suicide risk compared to a teenage girl.

It seems to be a generational thing: Gen X was one of the worst generations on record, and if you follow the US trend line in teen suicide, it tracks almost perfectly with the suicide trend for middle-aged adults. We tend to find that the teens who are at the highest risk of suicide are those who have had parents who committed suicide, have substance abuse issues, or have been incarcerated, so the problems we've seen with teens in the United States may be downstream of their parents' mental health problems.

We also have hundreds of studies that look at time spent on social media and mental health. Generally, across this literature, we do not find that time spent on social media or smartphones is predictive of negative mental health outcomes, nor do we find that reducing social media time improves mental health in experimental studies.

What makes the US an outlier for suicide?

Probably a few different things. Part of it is simply that the United States has a sine wave when it comes to suicide. In other words, it constantly goes up and down. We had a peak of suicide in the late '80s and early '90s that was as high as the peak around 2017 in the United States.

Nobody really knows why the US has this sine wave of suicide, but changes in media use don't seem to matter. What you do see is that parent suicide predicts later teen suicide. Political instability or polarization also seems to correlate, as well as income inequality. There were also some changes in education that occurred in the 2010s. For lack of a better word, I'm going to use the term "woke." I understand it's a controversial word, but the narrative that the US is racist, sexist, and oppressive seems to correlate with an increase in teen suicides.

My best guess is not that teens are watching the news and picking up on political polarization, but that these all represent general anxieties in society that are affecting the parents, and that trickles down. If your teacher is telling you that the US is racist and sexist and you have no chance of succeeding, and your parent has a fentanyl addiction, you're getting hit from both sides.

I think the big mistake we made in this whole narrative about teens is that the real anxiety the parents in this whole narrative is their parents. We looked at kids by themselves and didn't look at their parents and how badly they are doing. It's like the blind man and the elephant parable; if you only touch one part, you don't see the larger picture. To the extent that teenagers are struggling, it's probably because their parents, and to a lesser extent, their teachers, are freaking out. We should have addressed this as a middle-aged adult issue rather than a teen issue.

I've been fascinated lately with the role of narrative in mental health. There's this interesting paradox where you can have stories that are objectively false, but still have real outcomes, including something like having a pessimistic take on your own history or identity.

Do you think that children might be more susceptible to those pessimistic narratives?

Yeah. Young kids are going to believe what the authorities tell them. When they hit puberty, they start believing that adults are wrong. So, first off, lessons need to be developmentally appropriate. On the progressive side, messages about race and gender issues were just not developmentally appropriate. You don't want to tell five-year-olds that their country's a hellhole or that maybe they're a boy instead of a girl.

At the same time, you want to tell kids the truth. You could rightly criticize earlier conservative teachings as whitewashing American sins around slavery, segregation, and brutality towards an overcorrection, but that's no longer the norm in American teaching. There was a narrative that portrayed the United States and Europeans as uniquely bad, that slavery was invented by Spaniards and Native Americans before European arrival sat around campfires holding hands and singing Kumbaya. I think you can tell kids that people did bad things throughout history, and all societies have good and bad features. That we're all human, and deeply flawed. But nobody wants to tell the truth; the truth is complicated.

Speaking of developmentally appropriate narratives, it's interesting how children's stories are dramatically oversimplified. There's a good guy and a bad guy, and everyone's cheering for the hero. You also talk in your book about how political narratives often simplify things with a similar binary. It's cognitively demanding to digest nuance.

A lot of this comes down to a cognitive bias called "myside bias," which is that we are generally more forgiving of individuals that we see as part of our social group and less forgiving of those we see as part of another social group.

Back around 2020, we saw a lot of progressive cancel culture. If you said the wrong thing about a sensitive issue, you could lose your job. Everybody on the right said this was terrible, which was true. You shouldn't lose your job over a controversial post on your personal social media page. And now, five years later, we have people getting arrested by ICE because they wrote the wrong op-ed in a newspaper and getting canceled for their opinions about Charlie Kirk's murder. Some of the things people posted were awful and unwise, but there was this reversal where conservatives who criticized cancel culture in 2020 suddenly thought it was the right thing to do today.

Cognitive biases are a perennial problem with human nature, which is, I think, both great news and tragic news. The great news is that society isn't suddenly crumbling before us; these are problems we've overcome before. On the other hand, even highly educated people cherry-pick data and default to tribalism and emotional thinking. It takes not only training, but constant practice to overcome these biases.

I sometimes see my own rational thinking slip into some of these intuitive arguments, though fortunately, I have a network of peers and colleagues who can check me.

Yeah, it's important to recognize that none of us are perfect, and sometimes the same people who talk about the importance of rational thinking can themselves slip into nonsense. We need to have the humility, both moral and epistemological, to recognize that sometimes we can just be wrong, and there's no shame in reversing our position if the data shows us that we should.

People also often simply take the positions that they get rewarded for taking. 2020 was a great example. For like six months, everybody was saying "defund the police." I do some criminal justice research, and I thought I woke up in opposite land, because there's nothing in criminal justice research that suggests any form of defunding the police is going to be effective. If anything, you want to train them better and attract better talent, which is going to cost more money. Then, a couple of years later, people came forward and quietly said, "Well, I never really thought that was going to work, but I was so scared that if I said anything, I would lose my job or my funding, or I wouldn't be able to get published." I'm talking about academics here, but I think it's true in the broader sense as well.

One thing that stood out to me in your loneliness article is that, oftentimes, technically true claims are spun in a way that packs unwarranted punch.

Let's talk about the claim from the Surgeon General's report that we discussed at the beginning, that loneliness has the same adverse health effects as smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day. When you read the original study, they have a categorical measure of smoking. There are people who smoke more than 15 cigarettes per day, and people who smoke less, and it's technically true that the small adverse effect of loneliness was the same as the effect of cigarettes on people in the low smoking category.

In reality, the bulk of the effect is coming from people in the zero to one-cigarette range, and if you're smoking 15 cigarettes, statistically, you're almost identical to the next group up. So, while you're making a technically true claim, people are going to interpret it as though loneliness causes the same amount of harm as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Sadly, as you mentioned, scientists are often incentivized to maximally spin the narrative within the realm of what's technically true into whatever sells and gets the grant funding.

Yeah, it was a very strange comparison. And while it's technically true, why compare loneliness to the low smoking group and not the high smoking group? The same person who did that study was the person who wrote the Surgeon General's advisory. I reached out to her, and she just referred us to her frequently asked questions page. My only possible guess is that she used one to 15 because that was the comparison that sounded best.

You can also technically say that Americans are spending the most time alone that has ever been recorded. But the decrease in time spent with others over the past 20 years was 1.7 percent. So, one version of this story sounds horrible, and the other sounds like not a big deal.

This issue of effect size is a consistent problem with a lot of research in medicine and the social sciences. It's entirely true that a study can find a statistically significant effect that has no meaning whatsoever in the real world. There've been a couple of unpublished studies of cell phone bans in schools that have been hyped as if they provide evidence for these bans, but they don't, because the effect size is near zero. The actual impact of cell phone bans on student learning is zero. It does not improve student standardized testing scores, grades, or anything else. But when you run 600,000 kids through an analysis, everything is statistically significant. Plucking a hair out of their head once a day could've been statistically significant.

We need much greater rigor around this issue of effect sizes, and unfortunately, we are not rigorous either in medicine or in social science around that issue right now.

Despite your book being called *Catastrophe*, it ends on an optimistic note: once we're aware of our cognitive biases, we can seek to limit them and prioritize truth seeking. Are there any of these adaptive strategies that we ought to cover?

Yeah. There are two things that I can think of. One is simply that people do listen to data; you just have to be super patient with them. Most people are not going to back down in the middle of an argument and admit they're wrong, so oftentimes when you've persuaded people, you may never find out. So, persuasion can feel very unfruitful and unrewarding. I have had arguments with people where I thought we'd never talk again, but a month later, they came back and said, "I actually thought about what you said, and I agree with some of the points you made." And then usually you try to reciprocate and say, "Well, you made good points too," and you eventually find some common ground. So repeating data over and over can work if you are patient and try to look like the more reasonable one in the debate. And you should recognize that you may not get rewarding feedback.

Another thing is the idea of stoicism. I find the research that stoicism is a good aspect of resiliency to be pretty compelling. First off, a lot of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is essentially trying to teach stoicism: you have this belief, so test it against reality. What are some alternative hypotheses that may explain the same event? What is the evidence you have for each of these? How can you approach this in an intellectual rather than an emotional way?

Over the last 10 years, we've told people to do the opposite of that, to immerse themselves in their feelings and explore every nook and cranny of their trauma. I actually find that trying to intellectualize your way through things is related to more positive outcomes. I was just talking about persuasion in the sense of trying to give people data, but on the other side, being able to change our hypotheses about the world and about ourselves in accordance with data is very, very healthy.

[Read the full transcript](#)

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Faster growth in Africa, a huge new trade deal, the first vaccine for a deadly bat virus, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

JAN 11, 2026

18

1

2

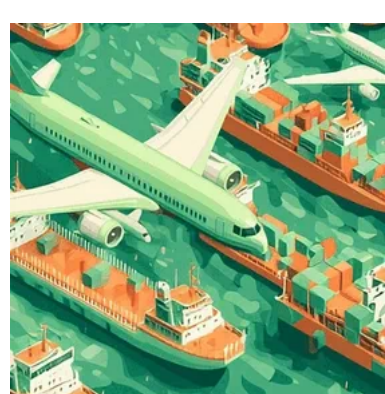
Share

Economics & Development

- The International Monetary Fund predicts that in 2026, **for the first time in history, Sub-Saharan Africa's economies will grow faster than Asia's**—about 4.4 percent compared with Asia's 4.1 percent.
- In an [op-ed in the *Financial Times*](#), Duvvuri Subbarao, the former governor of the Reserve Bank of India, argues that **India may have graduated to a "higher growth trajectory"** thanks in part to more responsible fiscal and monetary policy. He writes that in 2025, the country's economy grew over 7 percent without a surge in inflation, a problem that has historically accompanied the country's growth spurts.
- **Poverty in Buenos Aires fell to 17.3 percent** in late 2025, down from 28.1 percent a year earlier.
- After 25 years of negotiations, **EU member states have approved a trade agreement with the South American Mercosur bloc** (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) that will lower tariffs on **over 90 percent** of goods traded between the two markets.

The Rising Tide: How Trade Lifts All Boats

HUMAN PROGRESS • AUGUST 15, 2025



Free exchange turns scarcity into abundance for rich and poor alike.

[Read full story](#) →

Thanks for reading Doomslayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

Subscribe

Health & Demographics

- According to the World Health Organization, **the number of people at risk of contracting trachoma**, a bacterial eye infection, **fell to 97 million in late 2025**, down from 1.5 billion in 2002.
- **A vaccine for Nipah virus**, a highly deadly bat-borne disease with no existing treatments, **has entered phase 2 clinical trials** for the first time.
- **Novo Nordisk is now selling the pill version of its weight loss drug Wegovy** in the United States. The new medication is much cheaper than its injectable predecessor, potentially widening access to obesity treatment and putting downward price pressure on the weight-loss drug market.
- Researchers at Ovo Labs, a fertility biotech startup, say they've found **a way to reduce chromosome errors in human eggs**, a major cause of fertility issues for older women. After restoring a protein that helps chromosomes separate correctly, the team observed abnormal chromosomes in 29 percent of treated eggs compared to 53 percent in a control sample.
- **OpenAI is launching a new health feature** that lets people upload their medical records and other health data to ChatGPT, allowing the AI model to give more personalized medical advice.

Science & Technology

- According to its [annual progress report](#), **Starlink expanded to 35 additional countries in 2025 and added 4.6 million subscribers**, more than doubling its customer base.
- Scientists have produced **the first 3D images of Popocatepetl, a highly active volcano near Mexico City**, revealing multiple magma pockets deep underground. The images give researchers a clearer view of the volcano's structure and could eventually improve warnings for the millions of people living nearby.
- **Billionaires Eric and Wendy Schmidt are funding four advanced telescopes**, including a space observatory akin to Hubble and multiple ground-based facilities. The most ambitious part of the plan is the timeline: all four are meant to be operational within just four years.
- Utah has begun **a pilot program to test whether artificial intelligence can safely renew medical prescriptions**. The program is operated by Doctronic, a healthcare AI company that claims its system can perform the service faster, more cheaply, and just as responsibly as doctors.

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

It's Time to Shelf the Myths About Food Prices

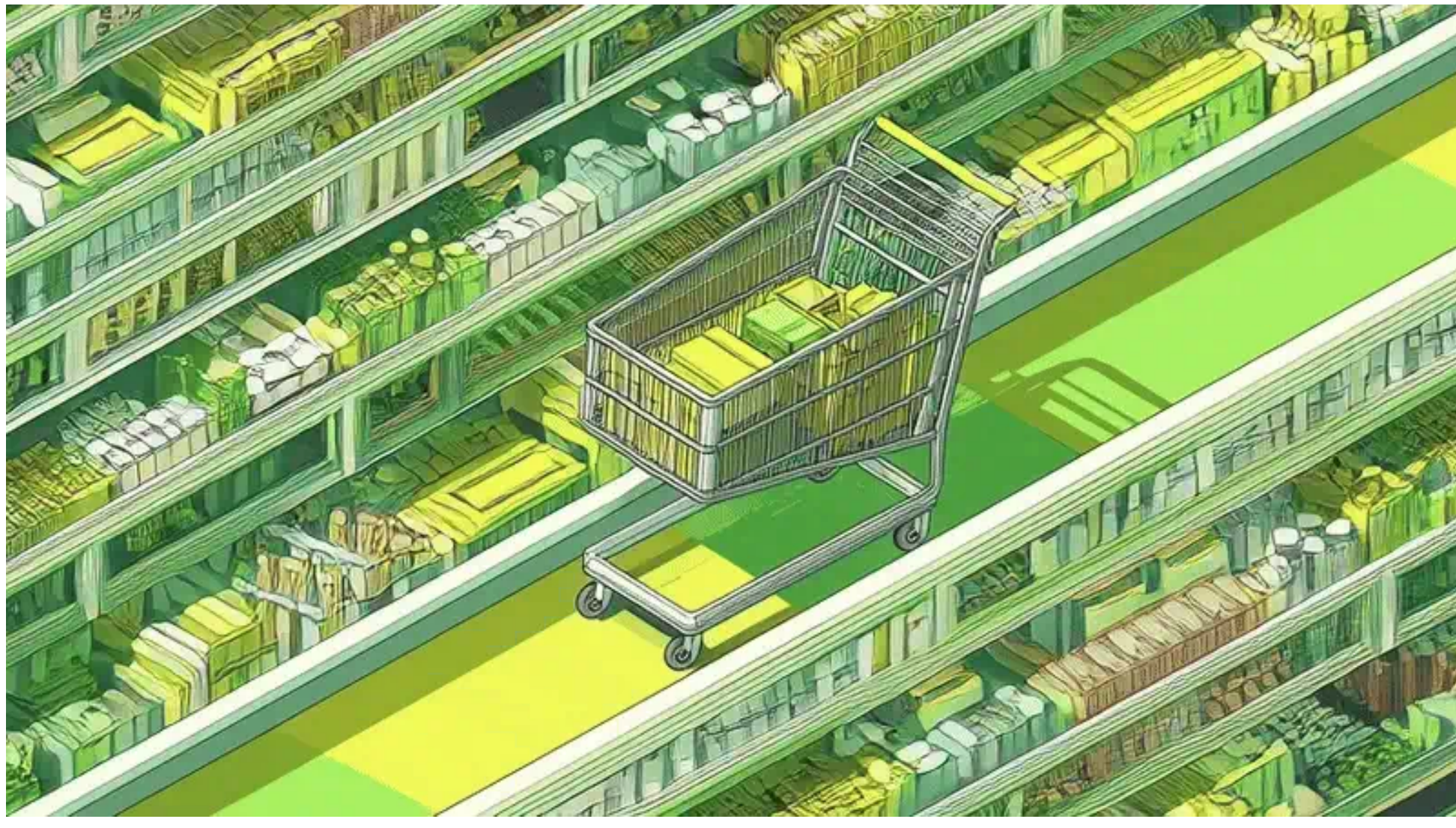
Measure the time needed to earn the money to pay for a meal. That's what matters.

MARIAN L TUPY AND GALE POOLEY

JAN 13, 2026

22 2 4

Share



With one big family-gathering meal out of the way and more soon to come (Christmas? New Year's? Super Bowl?), let's talk about food prices and the "affordability crisis" much in the news and in politicians' rhetoric. [Judging from polls](#), many Americans believe that the grocery prices are slipping out of reach. Inflation since 2021 left a mark on household budgets, but step back from the checkout line and look at the longer record. Measured the way people experience prices — through hours of work — food at home has become *more* affordable, not less.

Start with the relationship that matters: wages versus prices. Using Bureau of Labor Statistics data on blue-collar pay and the consumer price index for "Food at Home," we can compare wage growth with grocery inflation over multiple time horizons. Over the past year, blue-collar wages rose 3.8 percent while supermarket prices rose 2.7 percent. Over the past two years, wages increased 8.1 percent compared with a 4 percent rise for food. Over 10 years, wages rose 49.5 percent, prices 29.7 percent. Over 30 years, wages climbed 169 percent, prices 111 percent. Over 50 years, wages rose 558 percent, food prices 403 percent.

Put differently, wages grew about 40 percent faster than food prices over the past year, with often higher jumps in the other annual comparisons. The longer the period, the larger the cumulative advantage for workers.

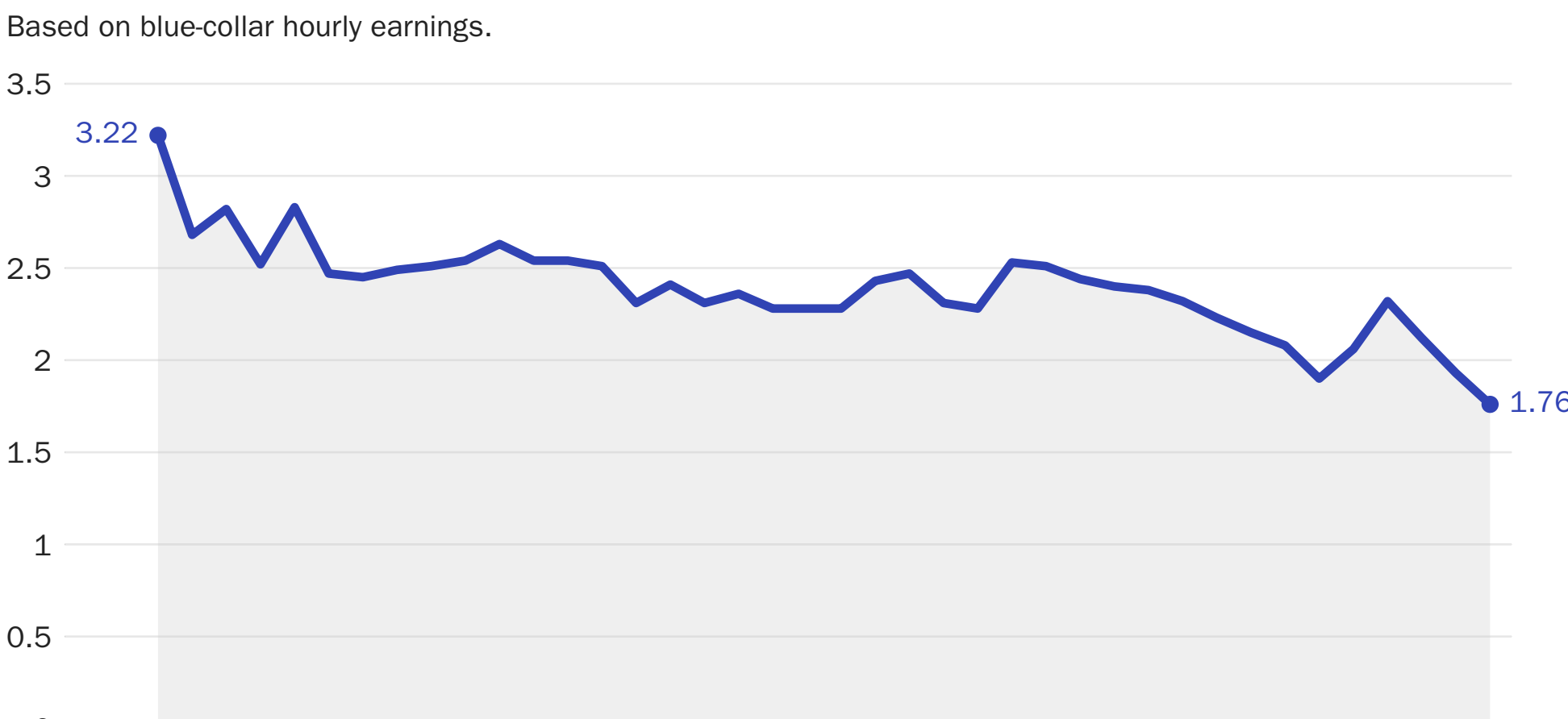
Thanks for reading Doomslayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

The most useful way to express this advantage, as we argued in our 2022 book "[Superabundance](#)," is not in dollars but in "time prices." Americans buy goods with money, but pay for them with time. To calculate a time price, divide the dollar price of a good by the hourly wage. The result is the number of minutes a worker must spend on the job to earn that good.

Applying this measure to the American Farm Bureau Federation's [annual survey](#) of the ingredients for a Thanksgiving meal serving 10 people — or any other similar holiday feast or special occasion, for that matter — reveals fascinating information about basic "affordability."

Thanksgiving dinner price, in hours of work

Based on blue-collar hourly earnings.



[Download image](#)

Source: Farm Bureau Annual Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics

In dollar terms, the Farm Bureau basket rose from \$28.74 in 1986 to \$55.18 in 2025, a 92 percent increase; over the same period, the blue-collar hourly wage rose from \$8.92 to \$31.33, a gain of 251 percent. Once you convert those figures into time prices, an even more reassuring picture emerges. In 1986, a blue-collar worker had to work 3.22 hours to buy that dinner for 10. By 2025, the same meal required 1.76 hours. The time price fell 45.3 percent. For the time increment required to buy that meal in 1986, a worker can now buy 1.83 of them — nearly doubling what the labor will buy. Food abundance for that worker rose 83 percent.

This reflects a broader pattern. U.S. consumers spent about 17 percent of disposable personal income on food in 1960; by 2019, that share had fallen to 9.5 percent, driven largely by more affordable food at home. Even after the inflation spike in recent years, Americans last year devoted 10.4 percent of disposable income to food, still roughly half the share common in the mid-20th century and lower than [in most other countries](#). That is a textbook case of [Engel's law](#): As incomes rise, the share of income spent on food declines.

What produced these gains is not mysterious. Better seeds, fertilizers, machinery, transport, refrigeration, packaging, inventory management and data systems all raise agricultural productivity. Competition in retailing and global trade further push producers to deliver more nutrition for each hour of work on the demand side. The result shows up not only in fuller supermarket shelves but in long-run trends in wages, prices and time prices.

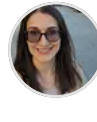
None of that denies the pressure that higher rents, insurance premiums or interest rates place on families. Nor does it imply that every household shares equally in the gains. Time prices capture the average worker, not the person between jobs or outside the labor force. Policy debates about safety nets, housing supply or tax burdens remain important.

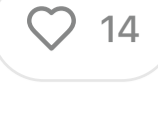
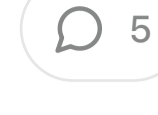
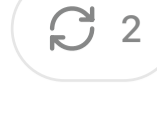
But when political candidates and commentators claim that food has never been less affordable, the evidence does not support them. In terms of hours of work, the typical American must sacrifice less time than earlier generations to put groceries on the table. That's worth celebrating in the holiday season.

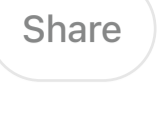
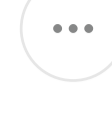
This article was originally [published](#) in the Washington Post on 12/2/2025.

How Robot Housekeepers Could Spark a New Baby Boom

The potential of technology to free humanity from the burden of household labor deserves more attention.

 CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT
JAN 16, 2026

 14  5  2

 Share 

 [CROSS-POSTED BY PAST IMPERFECT](#)

"Our managing editor Chelsea Follett reflects on the relationship between automation, household labor, and fertility."

- [Human Progress](#)



The debut of the robot butler NEO has drawn widespread [ridicule](#). Unable to perform many chores without a [remote human operator](#), the machine has become a target of social media backlash. Videos circulating online show the robot struggling with basic tasks, such as [closing a dishwasher](#).

But don't underestimate the potential of robotic housekeepers just yet.

The technology is dawning at an opportune time. Consider the [growing concerns](#) about plummeting birth rates. Last year saw the lowest fertility rate ever recorded in the United States, [below 1.6 children](#) per woman.

Could robots help to reverse the trend by relieving the household drudgery associated with child-rearing?

Thanks for reading Past Imperfect! Subscribe for free to receive new posts in your inbox.

 [Subscribed](#)

The question has broad implications because the United States' low fertility is no anomaly. [Global fertility decline](#) is speeding up, doubling between the 2000s and 2010s and again this decade. This means the world's population will almost certainly [peak earlier](#) than experts projected, and at a much lower level. Many countries are contemplating expensive taxpayer-funded efforts to spark a new [baby boom](#), despite the [poor track record](#) of such policies.

There is much disagreement on what caused the 1950s baby boom, but one theory is that the rise of [time-saving technologies](#) played a key role. Between the 1920s and 1950s, domestic responsibilities were transformed as the number of households equipped with electric appliances, including refrigerators, stoves, vacuums and washing machines, rose dramatically. The [new machines](#) lessened the burden of household labor, freeing up time and making parenthood easier.

In the present era, technology is once again freeing up more time for many people, and not just by reducing commute times through [remote or hybrid work](#). While reading about the latest breakthroughs, one might get the impression that machines are only learning to perform enjoyable and creative tasks, such as writing or drawing, rather than tending to the menial household chores that many would prefer to automate. One internet user [expressed](#) the sentiment this way: "I don't want AI to do my art so I can do my laundry and dishes. I want AI to do my laundry and dishes so I can do my art." Many would gladly welcome [Rosey the robot maid](#) into their homes.

The potential of technology to free humanity from the burden of household labor deserves more attention. Perhaps no group would benefit more than parents. The more children one has, the more laundry piles up and dishes fill the sink.

Various companies are racing to offer the public affordable robots to do housework. [Robotic housekeepers](#) might be here sooner than you think — even if NEO is seemingly not yet able to live up to its creator's [vision](#) of a robot butler able to effortlessly empty the dishwasher, water house plants and do other chores. Tesla's Optimus robot can [fold laundry](#) and [take out the garbage](#), among other tasks. There are even robots that can [wash dishes](#) as fast as a human can.

If such technologies become widely available, everyday life will be far easier, and so will parenthood.

There are already robotic lawn mowers. In fact, a 2025 survey found that 13% of U.S. homes own a [robotic lawn mower](#). And robot vacuums have become so common as to be unremarkable. In the United States, 15% of households now own a robotic vacuum, according to a [YouGov poll](#). In the United Kingdom, one in 10 households owns one, while one in seven households [reportedly](#) plans to buy one within the next 12 months.

I remember when my family purchased a robot vacuum. We watched, mesmerized, as it zigzagged across the nursery carpet. Our toddler oohed and followed it around. Our awe reminded me of a touching account of a grandmother who had painstakingly scrubbed clothes by hand her whole life and then watched with wonder as her new [laundry machine](#) completed the task for her. One of the reasons I have more children than most is that I'm a techno-optimist, and I believe that my children will inherit a world with less toil and more joy. (My husband and I are expecting our fourth child.)

Of course, outsourcing all household chores to robots wouldn't guarantee higher fertility. One lesson from the history of demographic forecasting is the need for humility.

After all, birth rates have dropped [faster](#) than demographers anticipated. But one thing is clear: Technological advancements have the potential to raise the standard of living, free up time and allow people to pursue their dreams. For many, this means having children.

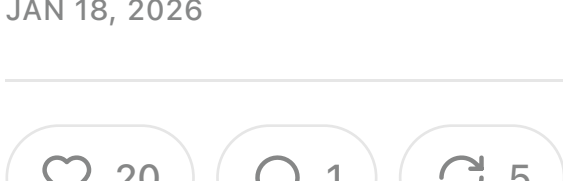
A version of this article was originally [published](#) at Deseret News on 11/29/2025.

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Five million lives saved from cancer, a self-cloning rice cultivar, a drought-free winter in California, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

JAN 18, 2026



Share

Economics & Development

- According to the World Bank, **poverty fell in three-quarters of countries between 2021 and 2024**. The organization also estimates that 80 percent of countries saw poverty decline in 2025.

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity:

- The **critically endangered Lesser Antillean iguana is recovering** after conservationists relocated some of the species' last survivors to an island free of competing lizards.
- The **endangered flat-headed cat has been spotted in Thailand for the first time in 30 years**. Previously, scientists had suspected that the elusive feline was extinct in the country.
- Numbering just 384 individuals, the **North Atlantic right whale** is among the most vulnerable whale species in the world. Thankfully, its **prospects may be improving**; the population has grown about 7 percent since 2020, and scientists are reporting an **unusually fruitful calving season** this winter.
- Fishermen around Scotland are **catching increasing numbers of flapper skate**, suggesting that the endangered fish is recovering in the area.

Energy and natural resources:

- Amazon has **struck a deal with Rio Tinto to supply US data centers with copper extracted by microorganisms**. The company claims that the process, called bioleaching, produces pure copper from low-quality ore with far lower carbon emissions and water use than conventional smelting.

Natural disasters and pollution:

- For the first time in 25 years, **there is no drought anywhere in California**.
- Over the past few years, a number of **widely publicized studies have made extreme claims about microplastic accumulation** in the human body. But a **recent investigation** by *The Guardian* finds that much of **the research is deeply flawed**, with many reported detections likely driven by contamination and false positives. Critics say a commonly used detection method can mistake fats in human tissue for plastic, and that some studies report microplastic exposure that is simply "not biologically plausible."

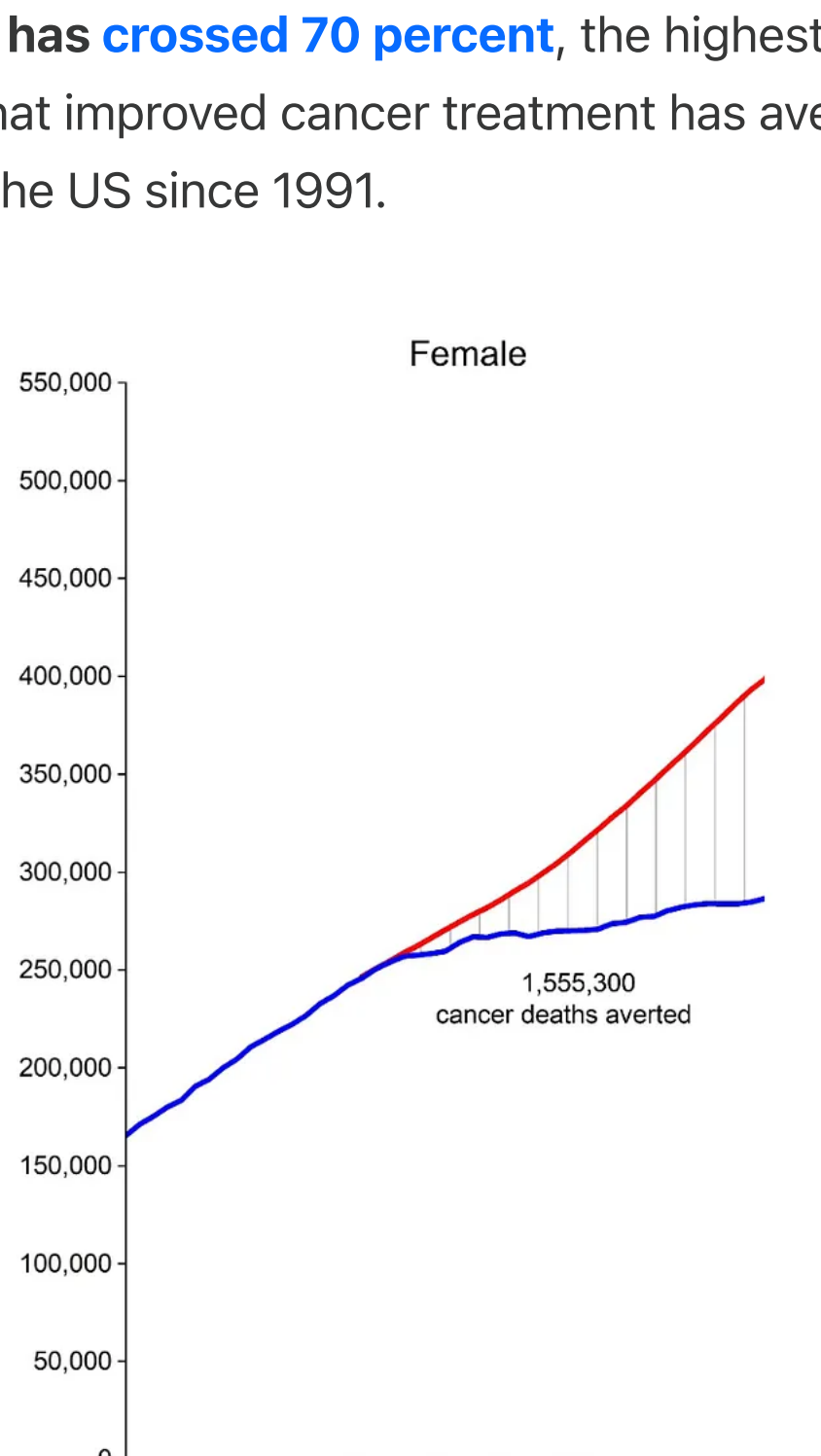
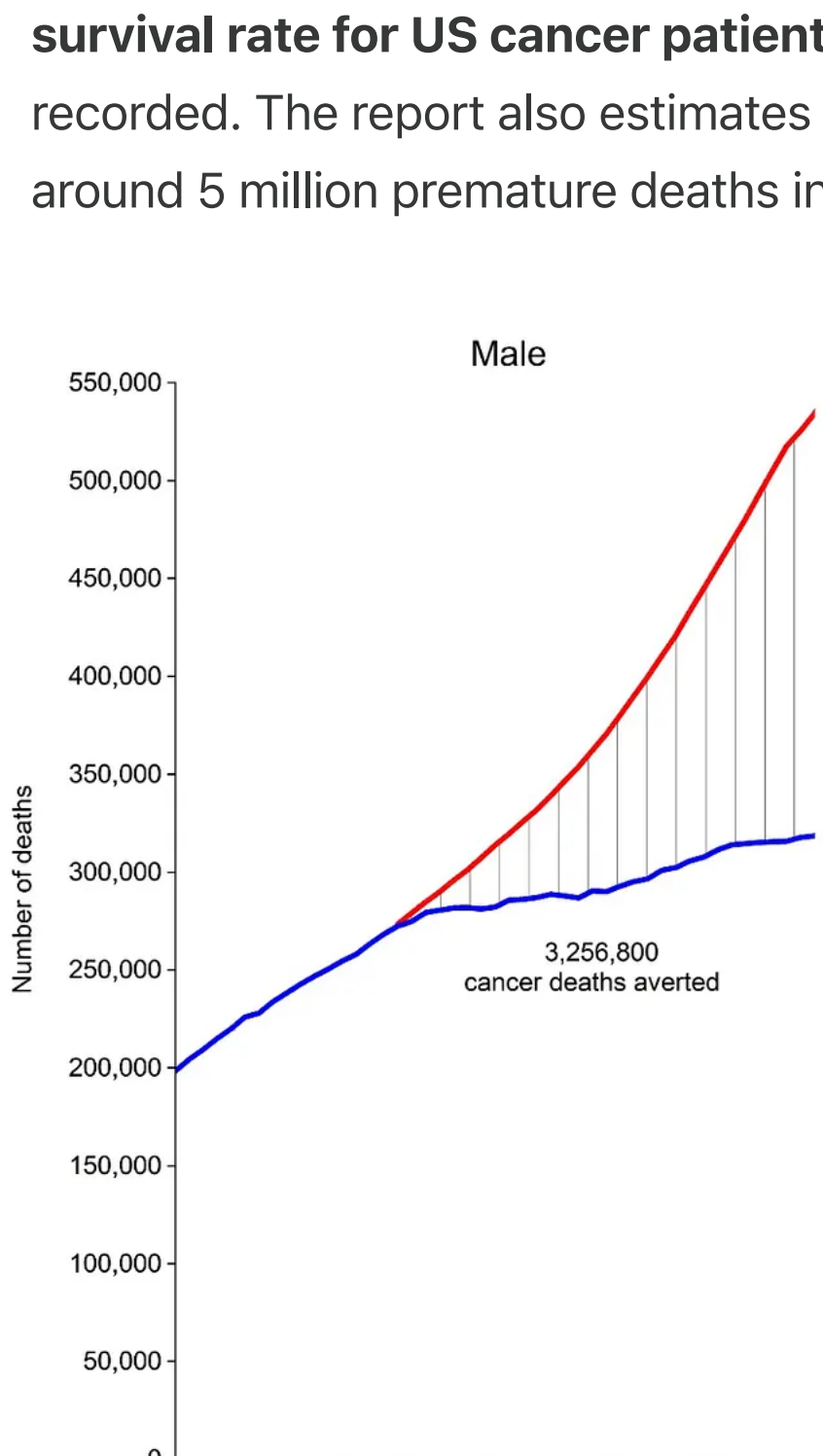
Thanks for reading Doomslayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

Food & Hunger:

- Hybrid rice, produced by crossing two genetically distinct parent varieties, typically produces much higher yields through a phenomenon called **heterosis**, or "hybrid vigor." However, the benefit doesn't extend to the next generation of seeds, which lose their yield advantage when replanted, forcing farmers to buy new seed every season. Scientists at the China National Rice Research Institute now claim they've **solved that problem** by creating **hybrid rice that produces seeds that are genetically identical to itself**, a long-sought breakthrough in rice breeding.
- The share of Rwandan children with stunted growth fell to 27 percent in 2025, down from 33 percent in 2020**. Acute malnutrition declined from 8 percent to 6 percent over the same period.

Health & Demographics

- According to the **annual report** from the American Cancer Society, **the five-year survival rate for US cancer patients has crossed 70 percent**, the highest ever recorded. The report also estimates that improved cancer treatment has averted around 5 million premature deaths in the US since 1991.



- Stanford Medicine researchers have **developed an AI model that can analyze sleep data to estimate a person's future risk of more than 100 health conditions**, including cancer, heart disease, and neurological disorders.
- The FDA has **instructed Eli Lilly and Novo Nordisk to remove suicide-risk warnings from their GLP-1 weight-loss drugs** after concluding that the evidence doesn't support the concern.

Science & Technology

- NASA is about to launch the first crewed mission in its Artemis program**, which aims to return humans to the Moon and lay the groundwork for a long-term lunar presence. The upcoming mission will send four astronauts on a ten day journey around the Moon and back, marking humanity's first crewed flight beyond low-Earth orbit in more than fifty years.
- Despite a communications blackout, **Iranian dissidents were able to share footage of state violence online using thousands of illegal Starlink terminals**. One researcher at Amnesty International said that **almost every video** they analyzed during the protests was uploaded by someone with access to Starlink.
- A Finnish startup is building **glasses that automatically adjust your prescription** based on what you're looking at, using eye-tracking sensors and liquid crystals. They are marketing the device as a more flexible alternative to bifocal lenses.

Violence & Coercion

Crime

- There were just 97 murders in London last year**, the lowest number since 2014. The murder rate was the lowest since 1997.
- In 2025, **New York City saw overall crime fall 3 percent, murders fall 20.2 percent, and robberies fall nearly 10 percent, according to the NYPD**.
- State Police data show **a sustained decline in New Jersey shootings and car thefts**.
- The number of murders fell 32 percent last year in DC, and violent crime in general fell 29 percent**, according to metropolitan police statistics.

Treatment of animals

- South Korea has banned bear bile farming**, a cruel traditional practice that typically involves confining bears to tiny cages for their entire lives.

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

Free Trade Is Fairer Than You Think

Capitalism fosters impartiality, not unfairness

HUMAN PROGRESS
JAN 22, 2026

16 likes, 2 comments, 4 shares. Share button.

by Walker Wright

In earlier essays, I argued that trade makes us [more prosperous](#), [more trusting](#), and [less corrupt](#). But isn't trade unfair? Doesn't the constant churn of global competition take power out of the hands of ordinary people and place it in the hands of wealthy individuals and corporations? Is democracy dying a slow death from the disease of globalization? As I show in this essay, the answer to each of these questions is an emphatic *no*. Trade, it turns out, strengthens democratic institutions and encourages more impartial treatment of one another. Overall, the complexity of the globalized economy has made us a much fairer bunch.

The French philosopher Montesquieu [wrote](#), "The spirit of commerce produces in men a certain feeling for exact justice." As Middlebury political scientist Keegan Callanan [notes](#), Montesquieu believed that everyday trade trains us in habits of fair dealing. Over time, these small, routine acts of fairness cultivate a broader sense of exact justice that extends far beyond the marketplace. And researchers have tried to test this philosophical hunch.

Take the Ultimatum Game as an example. In this experiment, two participants are provided a specific sum of money. One participant is granted the power to divide the sum between the two. If the other player accepts the division—whether it is 50:50 or 99:1—both players keep their share. If the receiver rejects the offer, both go home empty-handed. Harvard anthropologist Joseph Henrich has [found](#) that proposers from industrial societies (e.g., United States, Indonesia, Japan, and Israel) tend to make offers between 44 and 48 percent, while the Machiguenga of the Peruvian Amazon offer only 26 percent.

Experiments by [Henrich](#) and [fellow researchers](#) involving 15 small-scale agrarian societies—consisting of hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists, nomadic herders, and sedentary farmers—have also shown that groups more heavily immersed in trade and market exchange with outsiders are less likely to make inequitable offers. Later experiments [confirmed](#) "that fairness (making more equal offers) in transactions with anonymous partners is robustly correlated with increasing market integration."

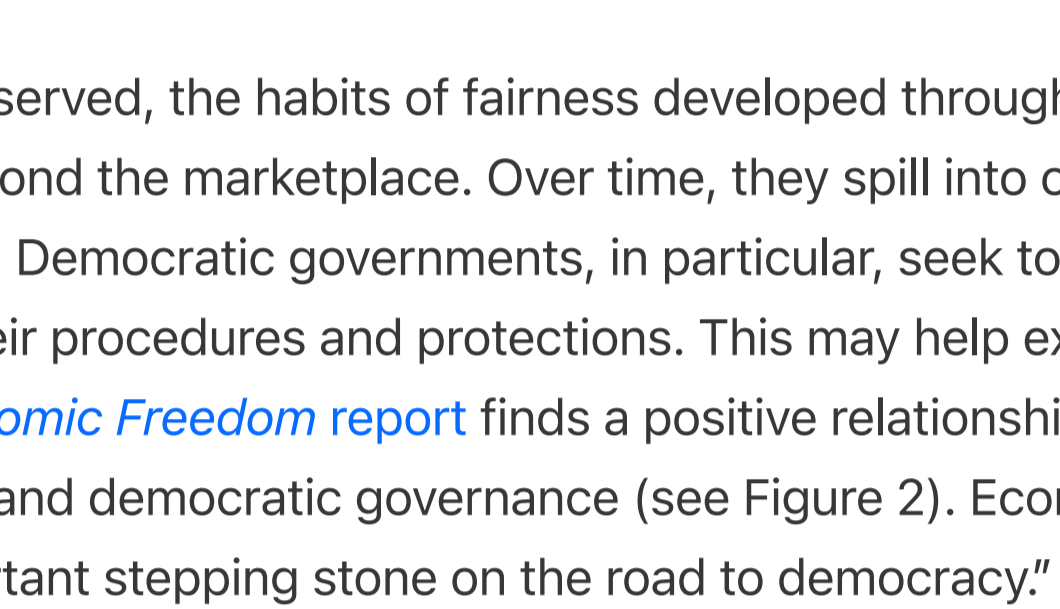
Thanks for reading Doomslayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

Within the Ultimatum Game, however, there is still a risk for the proposer: the possibility of going home with nothing if the offer is too small. A proposer might therefore make a more generous offer out of self-interest simply as a strategy to avoid missing out on free money. To explore how deeply rooted this sense of fairness is, Henrich and his colleagues added the Dictator Game to their experiments. In this economic game, the receiver has no opportunity to reject the offer: they get whatever they are given. Yet even under these new rules, Henrich [reported](#) that

people living in more market-integrated communities again made higher offers (closer to 50 percent of the stake). People with little or no market integration offered only about a quarter of the stake. Going from a fully subsistence-oriented population with no market integration...to a fully market-integrated community increases offers by 10 to 20 percentile points [see Figure 1].

Even when fairness and generosity have no strategic payoff, market integration predicts more equal treatment.

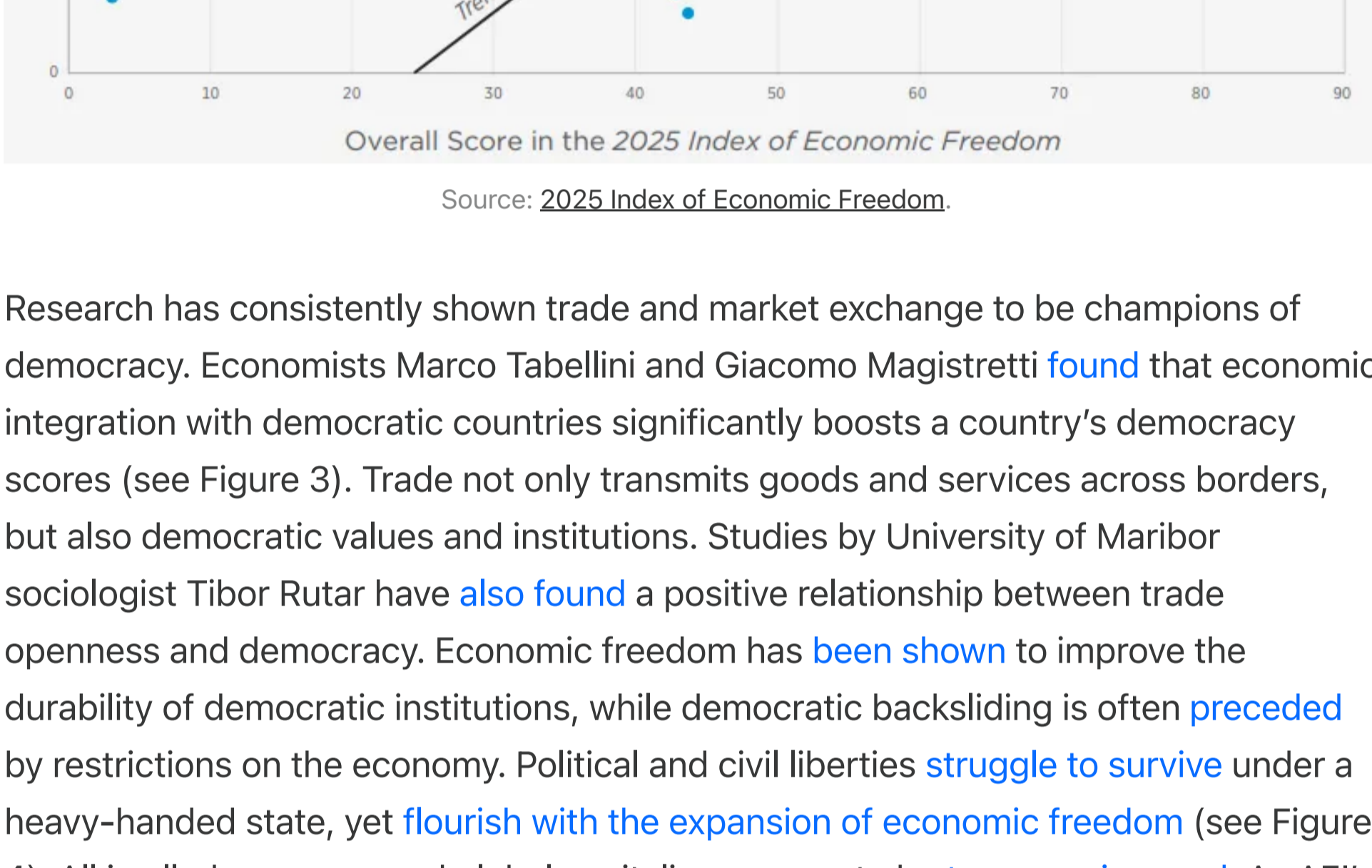
Figure 1. Dictator Game offers and market integration



Source: Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), p. 293.

As Montesquieu observed, the habits of fairness developed through everyday trade can extend well beyond the marketplace. Over time, they spill into our civic and political institutions. Democratic governments, in particular, seek to concretize fairness through their procedures and protections. This may help explain why the [2025 Index of Economic Freedom report](#) finds a positive relationship between economic freedom and democratic governance (see Figure 2). Economic freedom, it argues, is "an important stepping stone on the road to democracy."

Figure 2. Economic freedom and democratic governance



Source: [2025 Index of Economic Freedom](#).

Research has consistently shown trade and market exchange to be champions of democracy. Economists Marco Tabellini and Giacomo Magistretti [found](#) that economic integration with democratic countries significantly boosts a country's democracy scores (see Figure 3). Trade not only transmits goods and services across borders, but also democratic values and institutions. Studies by University of Maribor sociologist Tibor Rutar have [also found](#) a positive relationship between trade openness and democracy. Economic freedom has [been shown](#) to improve the durability of democratic institutions, while democratic backsliding is often [preceded](#) by restrictions on the economy. Political and civil liberties [struggle to survive](#) under a heavy-handed state, yet [flourish with the expansion of economic freedom](#) (see Figure 4). All in all, democracy and global capitalism appear to be [two peas in a pod](#). As AEI's Michael Strain [explains](#):

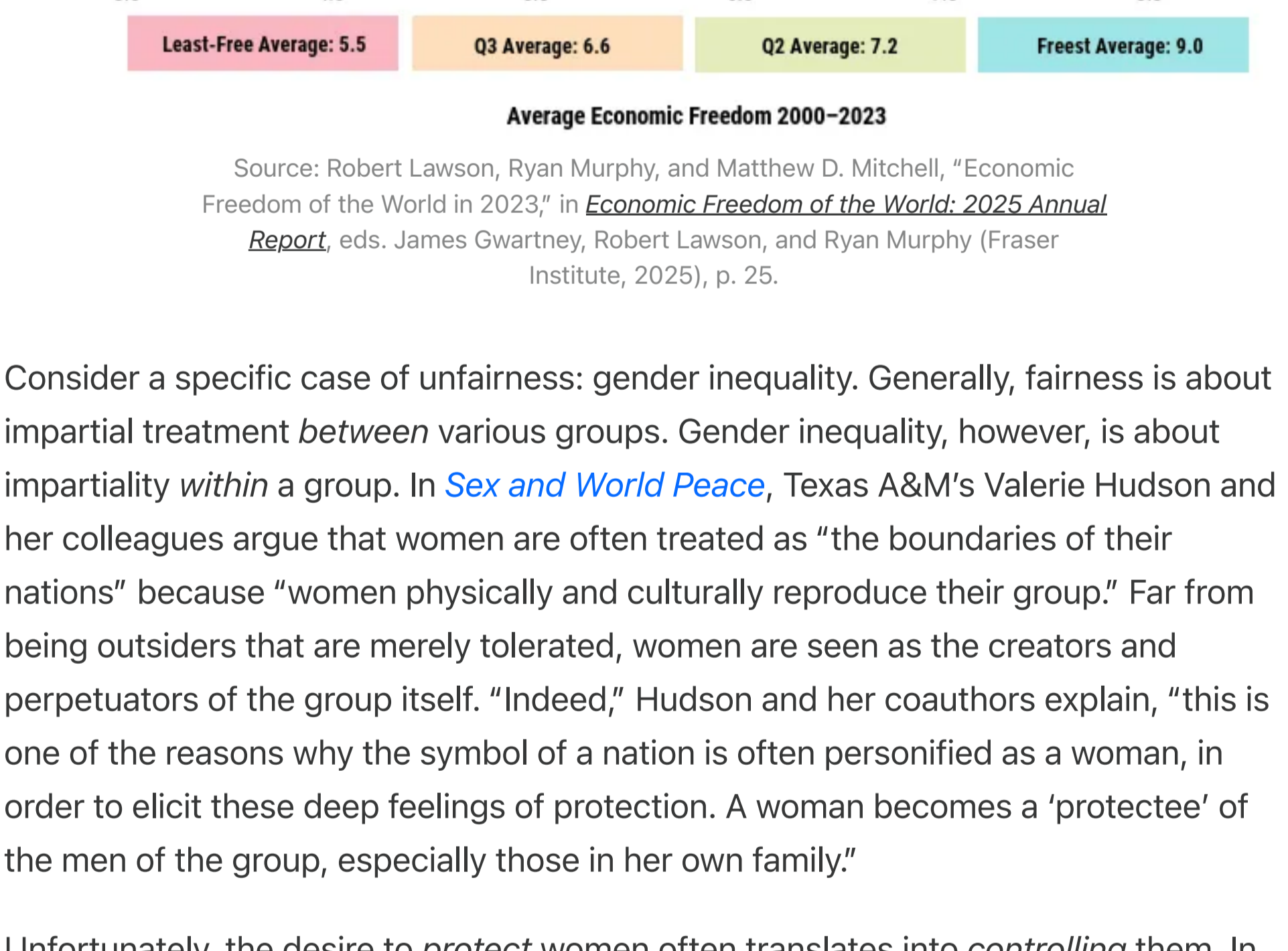
It is no surprise that the rise of populism and economic nationalism has coincided with growing skepticism toward liberal democracy and growing comfort with political violence. The erosion of economic liberalism – free people, free markets, limited government, openness, global commerce – reflects a loss of respect for the choices people make in the marketplace. If we devalue choices made in markets, why wouldn't we devalue choices made at the ballot box?

Figure 3. Trade with democracies and democratization



Source: Marco Tabellini and Giacomo Magistretti, "Economic Integration and the Transmission of Democracy," Harvard Business School Working Paper 19-003, March 2024, p. 42. Note: The y-axis (Polity 2) shows democracy levels. The x-axis (Log) measures trade with democratic countries (relative to GDP).

Figure 4. Economic freedom and personal freedom



Source: Robert Lawson, Ryan Murphy, and Matthew D. Mitchell, "Economic Freedom of the World in 2023," in *Economic Freedom of the World: 2025 Annual Report*, eds. James Gwartney, Robert Lawson, and Ryan Murphy (Fraser Institute, 2025), p. 25.

Consider a specific case of unfairness: gender inequality. Generally, fairness is about impartial treatment *between* various groups. Gender inequality, however, is about impartiality *within* a group. In *Sex and World Peace*, Texas A&M's Valerie Hudson and her colleagues argue that women are often treated as "the boundaries of their nations" because "women physically and culturally reproduce their group." Far from being outsiders that are merely tolerated, women are seen as the creators and perpetrators of the group itself. "Indeed," Hudson and her coauthors explain, "this is one of the reasons why the symbol of a nation is often personified as a woman, in order to elicit these deep feelings of protection. A woman becomes a 'protectee' of the men of the group, especially those in her own family."

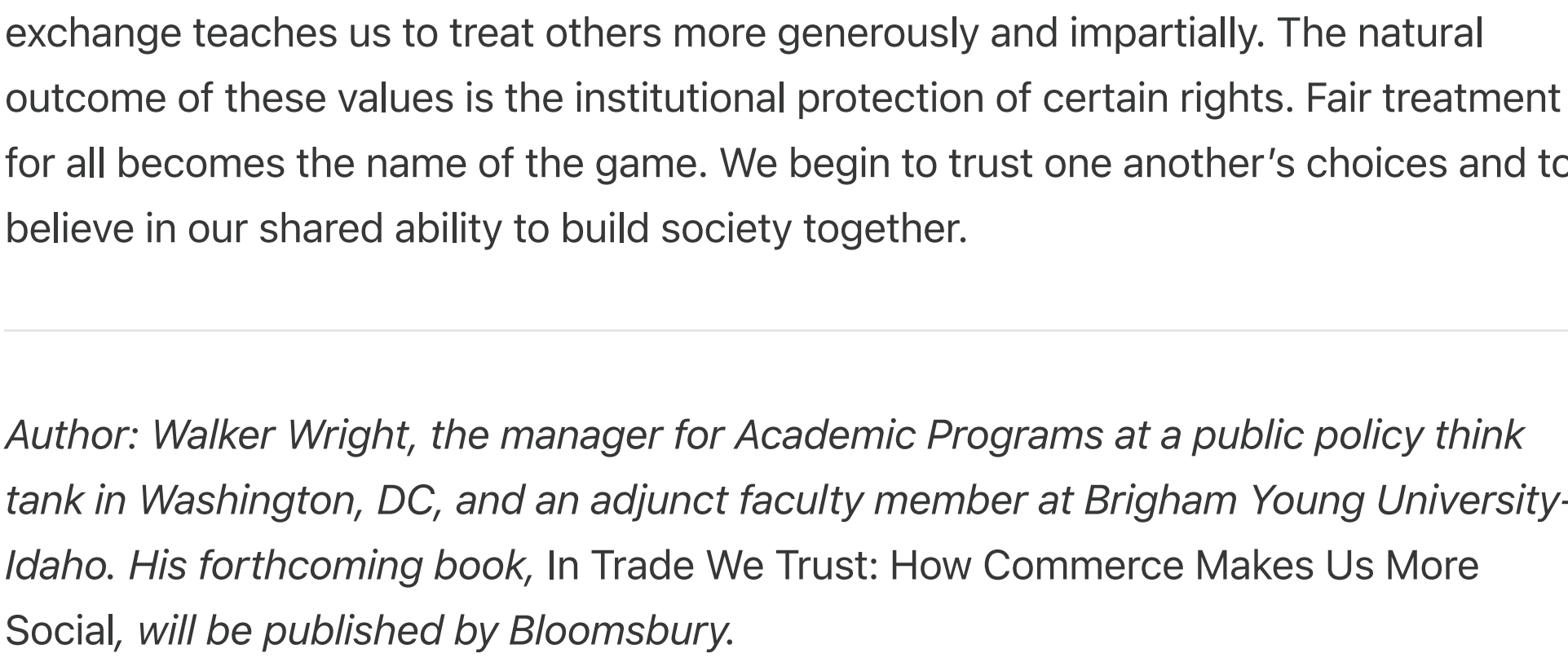
Unfortunately, the desire to *protect* women often translates into *controlling* them. In order to preserve the supposed cultural integrity of the in-group, women's freedom is restricted. Their behavior becomes closely bound to the honor of their family and community—especially the men of both.

Greater exposure to the global economy, however, weakens this unfair patriarchal hold. For example, political scientists David Richards and Ronald Gelleny [explored](#) the effects of economic globalization—measured by foreign direct investment, portfolio investment, trade openness, and IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies—on what they termed "women's status" or women's ability to fully exercise specific rights found in the corpus of international human rights law. Overall, they found that "sixty-seven percent of the statistically significant coefficients indicated an association with improved women's status." [Similar measures](#)—along with additional indicators such as the number of McDonald's restaurants and IKEA stores per capita—are associated with improvements in women's decision-making power within households, freedom in movement and dress, safety from physical violence, ownership rights, and declines in son preference and the number of "missing women."

Supporting these findings, political scientists Eric Neumayer and Indra de Soysa [have shown](#) that increased trade openness reduces forced labor among women and increases their economic rights, including equal pay for equal work, equality in hiring and promotion practices, and the right to gainful employment without the permission of a husband or male relative. [Other studies](#) reach similar conclusions. Analyzing global data from 1981 to 2007, Neumayer and de Soysa [also found](#) that increased trade openness improves both economic and social rights, including the right to initiate divorce, the right to an education, and freedom from forced sterilization and female genital mutilation.

A study published in the journal *International Organization* examined four measures of women's equality: (1) life expectancy at birth, (2) female illiteracy rates among those over age 15, (3) women's share of the workforce, and (4) women's share of seats in parliament. The study found that international trade and investment led to improvements in women's health, literacy, and economic and political participation. The evidence makes clear that [economic freedom matters](#) for the well-being of women everywhere (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Economic freedom and gender equality



Source: Rosemarie Fike, *Moving Closer to Gender Equality?*, Women and Progress Report, Fraser Institute, 2023, p. 11. Note: Countries are divided into four quartiles based on their [Economic Freedom of the World Index \(EFW\)](#) scores, from most to least economically free. The EFW measures the size of government, rule of law and property rights, currency stability, trade openness, and regulation. The bars show the average [Gender Disparity Index \(GDI\)](#) score for each quartile. The GDI measures women's freedom of movement, property rights, freedom to work, and legal status. A higher GDI score indicates greater gender equality.

Unfairness is one of the most common criticisms leveled against commercial society, often accompanied by claims that it undermines democracy and fosters partiality. The evidence presented here suggests the opposite. Engaging in trade and market exchange teaches us to treat others more generously and impartially. The natural outcome of these values is the institutional protection of certain rights. Fair treatment for all becomes the name of the game. We begin to trust one another's choices and to believe in our shared ability to build 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.

The Pattern Behind History's Golden Ages

Johan Norberg examines the conditions that create human flourishing and why golden ages so often come to an end.

CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT AND JOHAN NORBERG

JAN 23, 2026

13 2 1 Share Transcript

The historian Johan Norberg's latest book, *Peak Human*, traces the rise and fall of history's greatest civilizations.

He finds that, from ancient Athens to the Dutch Republic, humanity's golden ages follow a strikingly similar pattern: they are built on openness, intellectual freedom, and trade, and are undone by fear, orthodoxy, and isolation.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, Johan Norberg joins Chelsea Follett to discuss the conditions that create human flourishing, why golden ages so often come to an end, and what history can teach us about preserving our current, global golden age.

Listen on your favorite podcast app

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

Joining me today is Johan Norberg, a historian, commentator, and my colleague here at the Cato Institute. His books include *The Capitalist Manifesto*, *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*, and *Open: The Story of Human Progress*. His latest book is *Peak Human*.

Johan, tell me about what inspired you to write *Peak Human*?

One reason is that we live in a golden age right now, and I would like it to keep going for a bit longer. I think it's useful to look to history for clues about how you build and maintain thriving, dynamic civilizations.

What do you mean by the term golden age?

I'm glad you asked. I'm not thinking about mighty empires and territorial expansion. I'm thinking about decent, dynamic, and innovative civilizations that grow and prosper. I'm looking at periods where you saw a great many innovations in different spheres of human experience: cultural creativity, scientific curiosity, technological innovation, and economic growth.

You have this great line in the introduction where you say, "If we discard all the achievements of those who came before us because they weren't sufficiently enlightened and decent, and they weren't, we will eventually lose the capacity to discern what is enlightened and decent."

What did you mean by that?

It's incredibly easy to dismiss everything that wasn't up to our modern moral standards, but if we do that, we lose the ability to understand progress. Some of these past civilizations, imperfect as they were, were incredibly important stepping stones on the way to the Enlightenment, to individual rights, and to prosperity.

Let's walk through the different golden ages you focus on, starting with ancient Athens.

In the 4th century BC, Athens was just one among thousands of different Greek city-states. That was a great thing for them, because they could compare what they were doing with others and learn. And the Athenians, partly because of their bad soil, were a trading civilization that ventured outward to find useful things, which created a spirit of curiosity and innovation. They even created this ancient form of democracy that, while it excluded women and slaves, gave a lot of power to the average man.

Along with all these things—democracy, openness, and trade—they began to experiment with new ideas in everything from architecture to theater to philosophy. I would argue that this was the first civilization where we actually see people saying that it's a good thing to criticize your forefathers and come up with something original. And if you start doing that, you'll come up with lots of exciting ideas.

What lessons can we learn from Athens?

One obvious lesson, which appears in all of these golden ages, is that without one strong man in charge, you open up the whole system to experimentation; ideas can come from anywhere in the network. You basically crowdsource your ideas and, while you'll get more bad ideas, you'll also get more great ideas that people can build upon.

I think that's an important lesson for us. When we think of how to move on and find something better, do we create a great big plan telling people what to do, or do we simply allow more people to join in the game?

What brought the Athenian golden age to an end?

The very long Peloponnesian War against Sparta started to erode that sense of openness and curiosity. Thucydides, the great Greek historian, talked about how people on all sides became tribalists, constantly thinking about how to search for scapegoats and traitors rather than new trading partners. Obviously, the strongest example is when Socrates was sentenced to death for his teachings. That's something that happens by the end of most of these golden ages; once they sour on intellectual openness, they try to impose some sort of orthodoxy and force people to think and behave in the same way.

Let's move on to Abbasid-era Baghdad and the Islamic golden age.

One thousand years ago, the greatest thinkers in Europe got their best ideas from Arabs, who had far superior science and technology. Algebra, algorithm, arithmetic, average—all those terms come from this melting pot of an empire that was built from northern Africa all the way to Afghanistan. It was a huge free trade area with the same set of laws and the same language, but it was also very open to different peoples and religions. In Baghdad, they invited thinkers from other cultures and from other religions to talk about their ideas, and constantly translated their texts in order to benefit from them. They considered themselves the successors to the Greek philosophical tradition.

It is often said that the end of the Abbasid Caliphate was when the Mongols invaded in the 1250s. However, by the time of the Mongol invasion, the Caliphate had already been in decline for over 200 years. It started losing its way internally because of a fear of religious difference. Not fear of Christians or Jews, but fear of different traditions within Islam. The Abbasids built state-funded schools where teachers simply repeated Sunni dogma. The intellectuals who used to have various, diverse benefactors got government jobs on the condition that they left their critical judgment outside. That began to undermine the dynamic, open-minded intellectual tradition of the Arab world. You can actually see how texts on science and on technology begin to decline in the areas that got these state-run Madrasas.

Tell me about Song Dynasty China. It's been said that they came very close to initiating an industrial revolution.

Karl Marx talked about how, in the 19th century, there were three major innovations that ushered in bourgeois society in Europe: Gunpowder, the compass, and printing. But the Chinese had those 1000 years earlier. They were the most innovative and wealthiest society on the planet.

How did they become so wealthy? Well, you have to focus on the Song Dynasty. From the 10th century to the 13th century, China had a relatively strong rule of law and free market. Farmers had property rights rather than being feudal peasants. They were very innovative; they borrowed new crops from other parts of the world, created new irrigation systems, and even came up with paper money. So much food was produced during the Song Dynasty that the Chinese population doubled. That led to urbanization and the rise of an early manufacturing economy. They produced so much iron and steel that Europe couldn't compete for several hundred years. They also experimented with new textile machines in order to automate the manufacturing of textiles. It's possible that if they had continued that path, they might have come up with some of the innovations that gave us the Industrial Revolution.

Unfortunately, this golden age was cut short. There was a period of war against Mongol invaders, then civil strife, and in the 14th century, the Ming Dynasty took power. They very self-consciously styled themselves as the dynasty that would restore stability in a top-down uniform way, and they wanted to halt economic change. They grounded their amazing armada and restricted international trade. They were almost role-playing a nostalgic idea of Chinese culture, and even forced people to dress like they did 400 years previously. People were bound to their local village and to their professions. All this created stability at the cost of hundreds of years of stagnation. In the end, the greatest civilization on the planet became a relatively poor civilization that was ultimately humiliated by Western colonial powers.

Moving on to Renaissance Italy, which was also an incredible era of human flourishing.

After the long Middle Ages, the Italian city-states began to pick up scientific, technological, and business ideas from trade with the Arab civilization. The Pope didn't like all this trading with the infidels, but the Italians said that trade should be free along the gates of hell, which I think is a very powerful, free trade slogan. This combination of new ideas and new technologies, combined with these fiercely competitive city-states, led to a lot of experimentation and social mobility. And when you have social mobility, people want to show their status, and they did that by funding art. There was an intimate connection between this new capitalist wealth and a spectacular cultural flourishing.

How did it end?

It sounds like I'm repeating the Abbasid story, but it was religious fragmentation. Both the Pope and the Protestants began to think that they had the one true religion, and that the only way to create a harmonious, unified society was to ensure we all thought in the same way. This "competitive fanaticism," as Stephen Davies calls it, started in the early 16th century and created widespread fear and anxiety. The popes, who used to be very tolerant of the Renaissance humanists and their secular ideas, began to think, "We have lost our way. We have to return to something pure, something strong." So, they began to purge the dissenters like Galileo Galilei. Over a very short period, you move from a very tolerant, dynamic, and open Italian civilization to a battle over fanaticism, and no matter who wins, they start to purge their societies of this tolerance.

That's a great segue into the next society you feature: the Dutch Republic.

The Dutch Republic was the great European exception. They were crazy: they thought that people should be allowed to believe different things. So even though there was a Calvinist majority, other Protestants were accepted, as well as Catholics and Jews. So, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Dutch Republic collected refugees and dissenters from all over Europe, and books that were purged and burnt in other places could be published in Amsterdam. Everyone from John Locke to Descartes moved to Amsterdam to develop their ideas.

Everybody else thought that Dutch society would break down in utter collapse. Instead, the opposite happened. The other great European states broke down thanks to civil strife and religious war, and the only place left standing was the Dutch Republic. And it wasn't just that they had relative peace and stability; they also managed to build the richest civilization on the planet because of their relative openness, free markets, and rule of law.

The success of the Dutch Republic was an incredibly important lesson for Europeans in the 17th century, and I think it was one of the reasons that classical liberalism began to take off. As our dear colleague Deirdre McCloskey points out, for the first time in Europe, there was a sense that it was not bad to be a merchant or producer. European civilizations did a lot of trade and production, but they frowned upon it. They thought that production and trade should be left to slaves and foreigners because a real gentleman should just own land passively and make war. This begins to change in the Dutch Republic.

What led to the downfall of the Dutch Republic?

That's a very sad story. One of the great recurring themes in history is that fear and anxiety often create some sort of societal fight or flight instinct. When you think that everything is breaking down, you want to hide from the world behind walls or a strong leader. This is what happened in the Dutch Republic in the late 17th century.

Admittedly, they faced difficult prospects. They were being invaded repeatedly by their neighbors, and in 1672, they were invaded by England and France at the same time. It was an existential moment where almost everything broke down. Unfortunately, the panicked reaction amongst the Dutch people, and especially some of the more radical Calvinists, led to this idea that, again, we have to return to some pure orthodoxy in order to protect what we've got. They began to purge their universities of independent thinkers, and they started to hand power to a strong man, the Stadtholder William of Orange, whom they wanted to assume total power.

In 1672, rioters lynched their previous prime minister, Johan de Witt, and even ate parts of him. The fact that even the sensible Dutch can go that far in times of trouble speaks volumes about human nature when we're anxious.

Let's move to the Anglosphere, the last Golden Age featured in your book.

This is a long story: we've got the Enlightenment, the Scottish Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the foundations of liberal democracy. But it all starts with a Dutch revolution in 1688. This is the nice ending to the Dutch Republic: when they feared being surrounded once again in the 1680s by France and England, the Dutch decided to do one last Hail Mary and invade England. However, it's not a standard foreign invasion; they were invited by the English Parliament; the Whig party wanted the Dutch to protect them against the Stuart monarchs. The Dutch succeeded with this invasion, and many of their ideas were passed on to the English. Ideas about limiting the power of the royalty, property rights, free trade, and free speech.

The rest is history. We get more experimentation, new ideas, science, and technology, and that leads to the Industrial Revolution. It's not just a British story, of course; it's a pan-European development, but it is turbocharged in Britain in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Then we get it in America as well, and that changes the whole world. The Dutch ideas that had been transplanted into a bigger British body politic were now transplanted into the American one. And after the Second World War, America decided to be the protector and guarantor of a relatively liberal world order, which is based, I would argue, on Dutch ideas.

With this world order, which makes the world relatively safe for liberal democracies, we see for the first time a truly global golden age. Weird peripheries like Sweden or East Asian nations can suddenly get access to the frontier knowledge and technology. We suddenly move from a world where 8 out of 10 people live in extreme poverty to one where less than one out of 10 people live in extreme poverty. Despite all the problems today, we live in history's greatest golden age.

How do we ensure that our current golden age doesn't end?

The first thing is to learn from our mistakes. First, don't take progress for granted. We take wealth and freedom for granted because we happen to have been brought up in an extraordinarily prosperous world. But that wasn't the rule throughout history; it has to be fought for. We have to fight for our institutions if we want to continue enjoying their results.

The second lesson is that we have to learn how to count to ten when we're anxious. As Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, put it, there are two different mindsets: the Athenian mindset of going out into the world to learn or acquire something new, and the mindset of staying at home to protect what you've got. If you do that, you tend to lose what you've got because it's not there. Knowledge, technology, and ultimately wealth are not like piles of gold that just lie around; they have to be constantly regenerated. If we become like Spartans and try to protect what we've got by ending openness, trade, migration, and the rule of law, we will lose what we've got, as we've seen throughout history.

You also have a prediction in your conclusion that future golden ages might be more diluted than in the past.

What sets this time apart from all the others is that we have more golden age eggs in different baskets.

Historically, when Rome or Baghdad collapsed, you could really talk about the end of civilization. You lost knowledge that was only rediscovered thousands of years later. Today, we live in a global civilization, not just when it comes to our values or ideas, but in terms of access to the latest knowledge about science and technology. Even if we failed and stopped producing stuff, others would pick up the torch, and in a way, that's a relief. We won't see the complete end of civilization this time around unless we do something really bad.

This also means that I have a hard time thinking that some part of the world could just speed ahead of everybody else, because we can imitate ideas so much faster than we could in the past. The only question is, what do you do as an individual, as a business, as a city, or as a nation? Are you open to those ideas? Are you constantly comparing notes and benchmarking, or do you shut your mind off to all that stuff? That will decide whether or not you help create a golden age, not where you happen to be placed geographically.

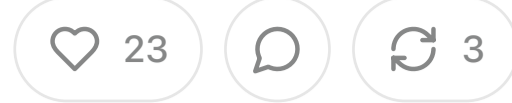
Read the full transcript

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

A growing Mexican middle class, automated recycling, the lowest murder rate since 1900, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

JAN 25, 2026



Share

Economics & Development

- According to World Bank data, **the middle class now outnumbered the poor in Mexico**. The calculation is based on World Bank income thresholds for upper-middle-income countries. ¹
- Iraq's national poverty rate has fallen from 23 percent to 17.5 percent over the past three years**, according to government data.
- The International Monetary Fund's global economic growth forecast has grown more optimistic**, with the world economy now expected to expand 3.3 percent in 2026, up from an earlier prediction of 3.1 percent in October. The revision is based largely on a surge in AI-related investment.

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity:

- The much-diminished European water vole population is rebounding in the East of England** after a program to cull the American Mink, one of the vole's predators.
- Thailand's tiger population is enjoying a robust recovery**, thanks in part to a newly protected forest corridor that is allowing the cats to expand into new habitats.
- The Kākāpō**, a critically endangered, flightless, owl-faced parrot from New Zealand, **is expected to have a very fruitful mating season** this year.
- China created 3.6 million hectares of forest and 4.9 million hectares of grasslands in 2025**, as part of its decades-long effort to control desertification.
- Once common across eastern North America, the American chestnut was nearly wiped out in the early 20th century by an invasive tree fungus. Since the 1980s, scientists have been trying to restore the species by breeding and genetically engineering blight-tolerant trees. A **recent field trial** in Maine shows the project is bearing some fruit: **American chestnut saplings given a gene from blight-resistant wheat developed much smaller blight cankers** than both their non-engineered counterparts and the Chinese chestnut, which coevolved with the disease.

Thanks for reading Doomslayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

Subscribe

Energy and natural resources:

- People in Nigeria **imported solar panels** with a **combined 1,721 MW** of generation capacity between June 2024 and 2025—equal to 5 percent of the country's total electricity demand. The panels **are bringing electricity to large swaths of the Nigerian population** who lack reliable access to the national grid.
- Tesla has begun operating a new lithium refinery** that the company claims is the largest and most advanced in the United States.
- Japan has begun the world's first deep-sea mud mining test** in an attempt to reduce its dependence on Chinese rare earth minerals.
- US recycling firms are investing billions in automating recycling facilities, using AI-driven vision systems and high-speed sorting to pull valuable metals, plastics, and paper out of waste. According to [reporting](#) in *The Wall Street Journal*, **the new technology is making recycling far more efficient and eliminating some unpleasant jobs**.

Natural disasters and pollution:

- Not only has human microplastic exposure likely been **overstated**, but **new research** from the University of Vienna finds that **previous estimates of atmospheric microplastic pollution may have been exaggerated by "several orders of magnitude."** By comparing real-world environmental samples with widely used models, the researchers found that modeled atmospheric microplastic levels were **100 to 10,000 times higher** than what measurements actually showed.
- A century ago, pollution in Boston Harbor was so severe that shellfishing was banned, save for a handful of licensed, tightly regulated producers. Now, **after decades of cleanup, the state of Massachusetts is opening parts of Boston Harbor to shellfish harvesting by the general public**.

Health & Demographics

- Moderna and Merck have released the results of a Phase 2b trial of their mRNA cancer vaccine**. In the trial, the vaccine combined with the immunotherapy drug Keytruda **cut the risk** of melanoma recurrence and deaths within 5 years by half compared with Keytruda alone.
- India's malaria incidence has fallen over 80 percent since 2015**, according to an announcement from the health minister, **while tuberculosis incidence has fallen 21 percent**.
- US overdose deaths continued to fall during the first half of 2025**. The CDC reports that there were 73,000 overdose deaths between August 2024 and 2025, 21 percent fewer than in the previous 12 months.
- Maternal mortality in Uzbekistan has fallen nearly 80 percent since 1991**, from 65 deaths per 100,000 live births to less than 15. **Infant and child mortality fell by around 75 percent** over the same period.
- The investment banking firm Jefferies has **calculated** that, if widespread use of **GLP-1 weight loss drugs** makes airline passengers about 10 percent lighter on average, the resulting fuel savings **could boost US airlines' earnings per share** by as much as 4 percent.

Politics & Freedom

- Poland's government has approved a bill offering "cohabitation contracts"** for couples of any sex, which would give **same-sex couples some of the legal rights and protections of marriage** without the formal title.

Science & Technology

- Shai Wininger, the president of the **Lemonade insurance company**, has **announced** that the company **will offer 50 percent lower per-mile premiums for Tesla drivers who use self-driving**—a testament to the technology's safety compared to human drivers.
- This year, Walmart plans to launch Wing drone delivery in an additional 150 locations** across the United States, bringing the service to 12 percent of the population.
- Zipline, another drone courier, has now made over 2 million commercial deliveries**.
- Blue Origin is planning to launch its own Starlink-style satellite internet network**. Unlike Starlink, however, Blue Origin will not serve the everyday consumer market; its goal is to provide speeds of six terabits per second anywhere on Earth—useful for very large-scale data processing.

Violence & Coercion

- A [report](#) from the Council on Criminal Justice indicates that **the US murder rate in 2025 may have been the lowest since 1900**. The research uses police data from **35 large American cities** to approximate the national murder rate.

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

¹ Using 2021 PPP dollars, with poverty defined as living on less than \$8.30 per person per day (the World Bank's upper-middle-income poverty line) and the middle class beginning at around \$17 per person per day.

Rethinking the Cost of Living with Mark Perry's "Chart of the Century"

Always compare prices to hourly wages to understand the true change in living standards.

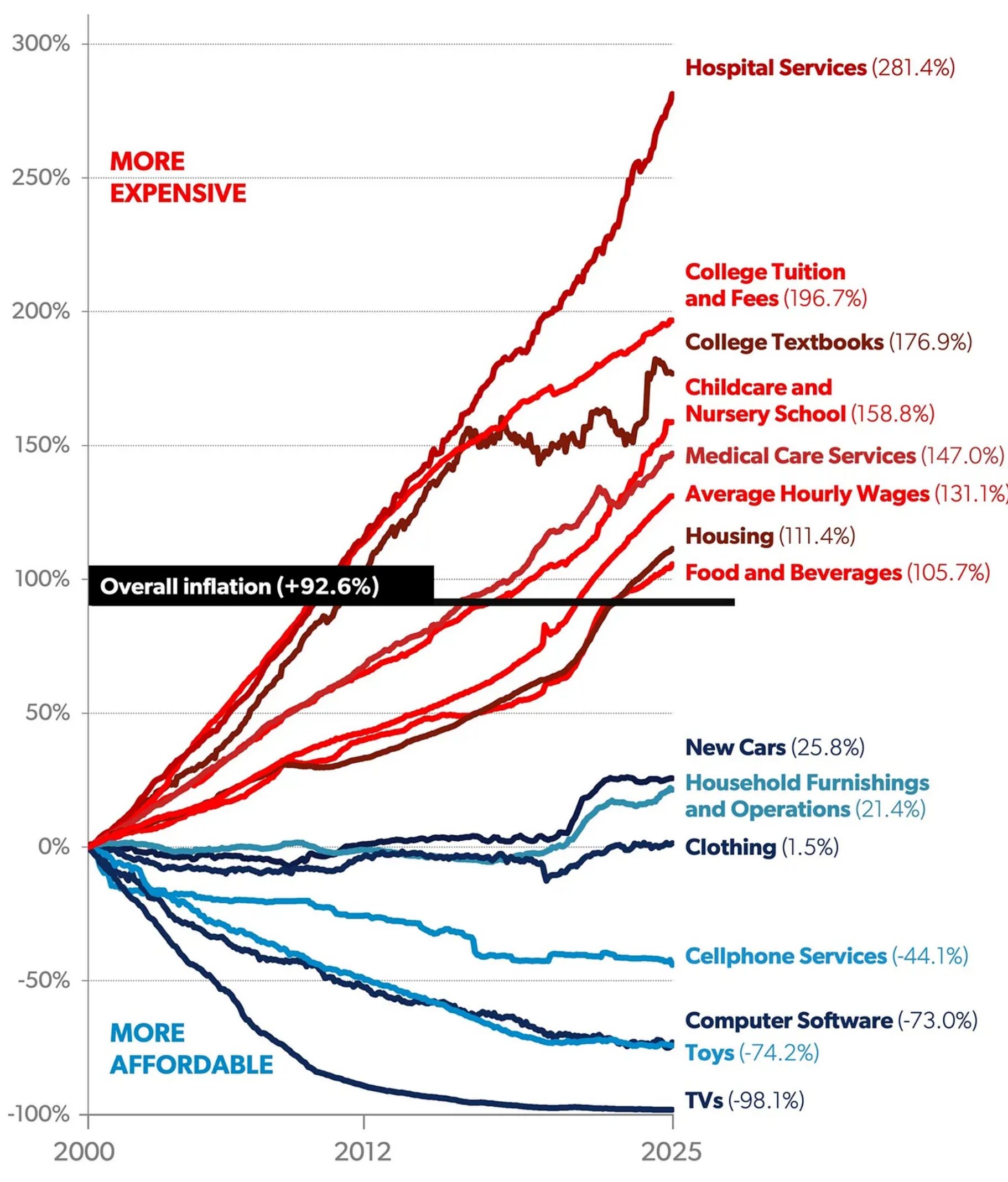
GALE POOLEY
JAN 27, 2026



Professor Mark Perry from the American Enterprise Institute recently [posted](#) an updated version of his "Chart of the Century," featuring price and wage data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The chart tracks 14 items over the 25-year period from January 2000 to December 2025. It also includes the overall inflation rate and changes in average hourly wages.

Price changes (Jan. 2000–Dec. 2025)

Selected US Consumer Goods and Services, and Wages



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Mark J. Perry

To examine the data from a different perspective, we calculated the change in the time prices of these 14 items relative to the change in the average hourly wage rate. We then calculated the abundance multiplier—a value indicating how many units you could buy today for the time it took to earn money to buy one unit in 2000. If there were no change, the abundance multiplier would equal one. A value below one indicates decreasing abundance, while a value above one reflects increasing abundance. We also calculated the percentage change in abundance for each item.

Price and Wage Changes January 2000 To December 2025	Price Change	Price Change Relative to Wage Change	Abundance Multiplier	Percentage Change in Abundance
TVs	-98.1%	-99.2%	121.63	12,063.2%
Toys	-74.2%	-88.8%	8.96	795.7%
Computer Software	-73.0%	-88.3%	8.56	755.9%
Cellphone Services	-44.1%	-75.8%	4.13	313.4%
Clothing	1.5%	-56.1%	2.28	127.7%
Household Furnishings	21.4%	-47.5%	1.90	90.4%
New Cars	25.8%	-45.6%	1.84	83.7%
General CPI	92.6%	-16.7%	1.20	20.0%
Food and Beverages	105.7%	-11.0%	1.12	12.3%
Housing	111.4%	-8.5%	1.09	9.3%
Average Hourly Wages	131.1%	0.0%	1.00	
Medical Care Services	147.0%	6.9%	0.94	-6.4%
Childcare and Nursery School	158.8%	12.0%	0.89	-10.7%
College Textbooks	196.7%	28.4%	0.78	-22.1%
College Tuition and Fees	196.7%	28.4%	0.78	-22.1%
Hospital Services	281.4%	65.0%	0.61	-39.4%

● Money price increased and time price decreased

Thanks for reading Doomsayer! [Subscribe for free](#) to receive new posts in your inbox.

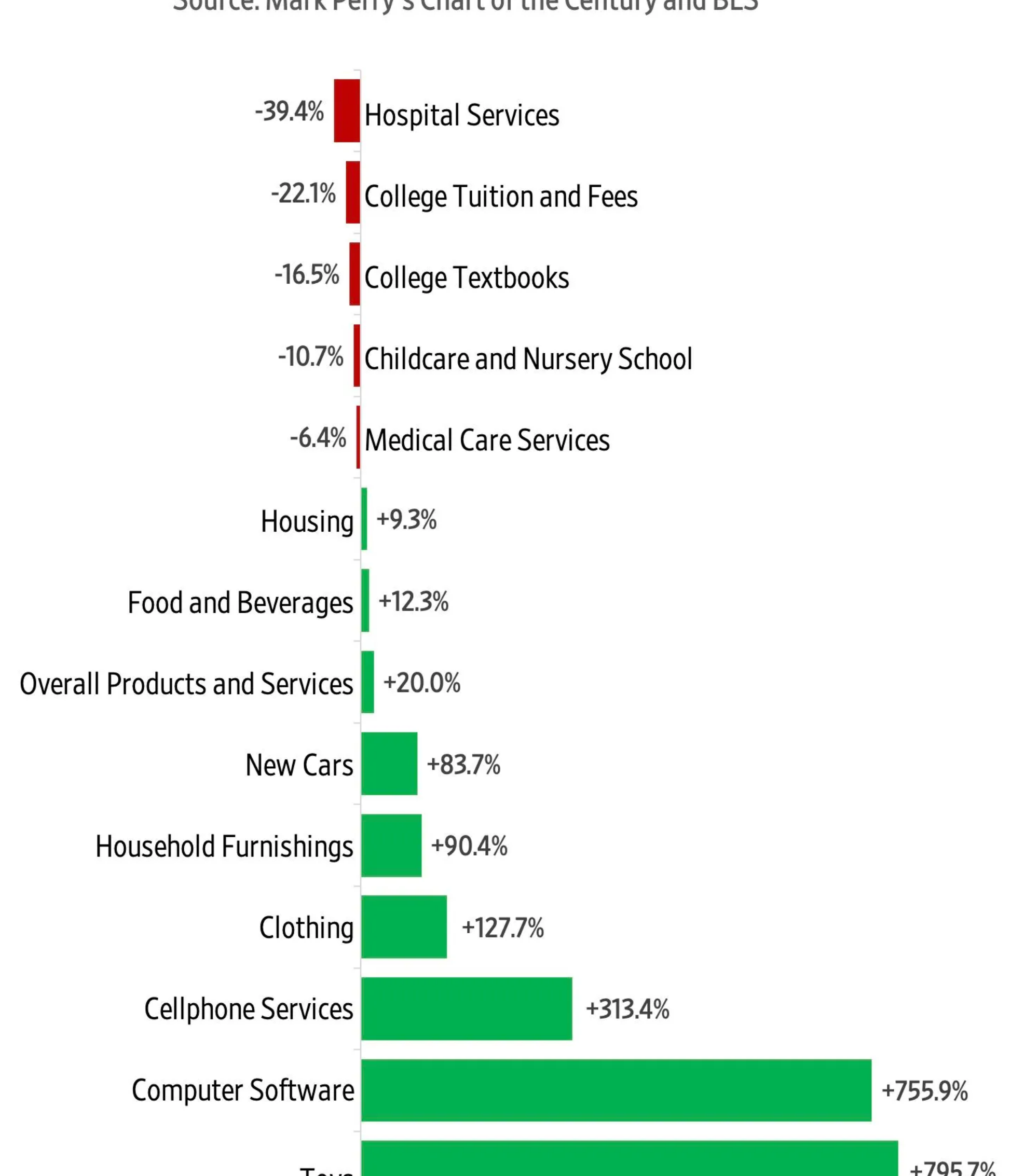
This analysis illustrates that things can become more expensive in dollar terms while simultaneously becoming more affordable in time prices. For instance, while the general Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 92.6 percent, average hourly wages increased by 131.1 percent. As such, time prices fell by 16.7 percent. For the time it took to earn enough money to purchase one CPI basket in January 2000, a consumer could purchase 1.2 baskets in December 2025—an abundance increase of 20 percent.

Notably, categories such as housing, food and beverages, new cars, household furnishings, and clothing all increased in money prices; however, after adjusting for rising wages, they all became more affordable in time-price terms. Although 10 of the 14 items rose in nominal prices over the 25-year period, only five had higher time prices when accounting for the 131.1 percent increase in hourly wages.

Selected U.S. Consumer Goods and Services

Percentage Change in Abundance Relative to Average Hourly Wages
January 2000 - December 2025

Source: Mark Perry's Chart of the Century and BLS




* Note that TVs are not on this scale. TV abundance has increased by 12,163%

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

Dinner With Dickens Was Slim Pickins

Claims that characters in "A Christmas Carol" were better off than modern Americans are pure humbug.

 CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT
JAN 30, 2026

 24    Share 

 **CROSS-POSTED BY PAST IMPERFECT**
"Our managing editor Chelsea Follett dismantles recent nostalgia for the Victorian era."
- Human Progress



Christmas is often a time for nostalgia. We look back on our own childhood holidays. Songs and traditions from the past dominate the culture.


Nostalgia is **not without its purposes**. But it can also be misleading. Take those who view the material circumstances of Charles Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” as superior to our own.

Claims that an American today earning the minimum wage is worse off than the working poor of the 19th century have been popular **since at least 2021**. A recent **post** with thousands of likes reads:

Time for your annual reminder that, according to A Christmas Carol, Bob Cratchit makes 15 shillings a week. Adjusted for inflation, that’s \$530.27/wk, \$27,574/yr, or \$13.50/ hr. Most Americans on minimum wage earn less than a Dickensian allegory for destitution.

This is humbug.

Thanks for reading Past Imperfect! Subscribe for free to receive new posts in your inbox.

 **Subscribed**

Consider how harsh living conditions were for a Victorian earning 15 shillings a week.

Dickens **writes** that Mr. Cratchit lives with his wife and six children in a four-room house. It is rare for modern residents of developed nations to crowd eight people into four rooms.

It was common in the Victorian era. **According to Britain’s National Archives**, a typical home had no more than four rooms. Worse yet, it lacked running water and a toilet. Entire streets (or more) would share a few toilets and a pump with water that was often polluted.

The Cratchit household has few possessions. Their glassware consists of merely “two tumblers, and a custard-cup without a handle.” For Christmas dinner, Mr. Cratchit wears “threadbare clothes” while his wife is “dressed out but poorly in a twice-turned gown.”

People used to turn clothing inside-out and alter the stitching to extend its lifespan. The practice predated the Victorian era, but continued into it. Eventually, clothes would become “napless, threadbare and tattered,” as the historian Emily Cockayne **noted**.

The Cratchits didn’t out-earn a modern American earning the minimum wage. Mr. Cratchit’s weekly salary of 15 shillings in 1843, the year “A Christmas Carol” was published, is **equivalent to almost £122 in 2025**. Converted to U.S. dollars, **that’s about \$160** a week, for an annual salary of \$8,320.

The U.S. federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour or \$15,080 per year for a full-time worker. That’s about half of what the meme claims Mr. Cratchit earned. **Only 1% of U.S. workers** earned the federal minimum wage or less last year. Most states set a higher minimum wage. The average worker earns **considerably more**. Clerks like Mr. Cratchit now earn an average annual salary of **\$49,210**.

Mr. Cratchit couldn’t have purchased much of the modern “basket of goods” used in inflation calculations. Many of the basket’s items weren’t available in 1843. The U.K.’s Office of National Statistics recently **added virtual reality headsets** to it.

Another way to compare the relative situation of Mr. Cratchit and a minimum-wage worker today is to see how long it would take each of them to earn enough to buy something comparable. A **BBC article** notes that, according to an 1844 theatrical adaptation of “A Christmas Carol,” it would have taken Mr. Cratchit a week’s wages to purchase the trappings of a Christmas feast: “seven shillings for the goose, five for the pudding, and three for the onions, sage and oranges.” Mr. Cratchit opts for a goose for the family’s Christmas meal. A turkey—then a costlier option—was too expensive.

The American Farm Bureau Federation found that the ingredients for a turkey-centered holiday meal serving 10 people cost \$55.18 in 2025. At the federal minimum wage, someone would need to work seven hours and 37 minutes to afford that feast.

A minimum-wage worker could earn more than enough in a single workday to purchase a meal far more lavish than the modest Christmas dinner that cost Mr. Cratchit an entire week’s pay. And the amount of time a person needs to work to afford a holiday meal has **fallen dramatically** for the average blue-collar worker in recent years despite inflation. Wages have grown faster than food prices.

There has been **substantial progress** in living conditions since the 1840s. We’re much better off than the Cratchits were. In fact, most people today enjoy far greater **material comfort** than did even Dickens’s rich miser Ebenezer Scrooge.

*This article was originally **published** in the Wall Street Journal on 12/23/2025.*