

NATIONAL INDEX FINDS TREND OF LESSENING VIOLENCE AND HARM IN THE U.S.

TREATMENT OF MOST VULNERABLE A NOTABLE EXCEPTION

NORTH MANCHESTER, Ind. (November 12, 2005) – According to the National Index of Violence and Harm (NIVAH) people in the U.S. are experiencing less violence and harm than a decade ago. Overall there has been improvement in fourteen of the nineteen variables measured over the period studied (1995-2003), with twelve of these positive trends being statistically significant.* Furthermore, 13 of the 19 improved from 2002 to 2003. One notable exception is in how we treat our most vulnerable. This is seen in an increase in those without health insurance and a dramatic rise in hunger and homelessness.

Manchester College researchers have been annually gathering NIVAH data since 1995. The Index is divided into two broad categories of violence/harm. The Personal Index includes interpersonal (for example homicide, battery, and robbery) and intrapersonal (suicide and deaths by substance abuse). The Societal Index includes harm caused by the institutions of government (for example, abuse/misconduct by law enforcement), corporations (for instance air pollution) and families (such as child abuse). It also includes harm resulting from the structuring of society (including poverty and discrimination).

As research team member Dr. Bradley Yoder notes, “As opposed to the more familiar and dramatic personal harm, such as homicide, societal harm is just as destructive and is far more pervasive in our society. Many more people are adversely affected by structural and institutional forces.”

Street crime, called "interpersonal violence" in the index, has declined sharply over the years, with all five variables showing improvement. The two "intrapersonal" variables, however, have diverged, with a downward trend for "suicide/self-injury," and an increase in deaths from substance abuse, fueled almost entirely by a sharp increase from illicit drugs. Altogether, these changes resulted in an overall drop in the Personal Index of 14% since 1995, a strong statistically significant trend.

For Societal violence and harm, the drop was not as sharp, but was still fairly consistent across measures. Within Societal violence/harm, only the Government category (correctional system and law enforcement) increased, while a drop was seen in the Corporate, Family, and Structural categories.

The clearest example of worsening societal harm is social negligence, which continues to climb. Though the high school drop-out rate did drop significantly in 2002 to 3.4% (after hovering near 4.5% for the previous six years), in 2003 it

bounced up to 3.8%. Other social negligence indicators continued to rise in 2003, some dramatically: (a) lack of health insurance—from 15.2 to 15.6% of the population, with approximately 45 million uninsured in 2003; (b) hunger—according to the USDA over 12.5 million households experienced food insecurity, (up from 12.1 million in 2002), and (c) homelessness—in 2003 an average increase of 7% in requests for emergency housing across major metropolitan areas. Measures of homelessness, hunger, and lack of health insurance have all increased for most years since 1995, increasing 70%, 80%, and 10%, respectively, since 1995.

Using the Poverty Disparity variable, several issues in interpreting this research can be illustrated. First, the Index itself measures changes over time, not whether the level of any variable should be considered high or low. For example, within Poverty Disparity, a comparison was made between whites and non-whites regarding poverty level, with the gap closing by 18% over the years studied, a statistically significant trend. However, non-whites were still 2.7 times more likely to be in poverty in 2003 than were whites. Poverty Disparity, along with several other variables, is comprised of more than one measure, providing sometimes conflicting input into the overall variable. For example, while the gap in poverty disparity declined strongly for gender, race, and age over the time period studied, class differences continued to climb, with the disparity for 2003 being the greatest on record.

In summary, lead researcher Neil Wollman states, "Although I had seen the individual data over the years, I had not tuned into the global picture that was developing and was surprised by the consistent improvement in so many measures. What did not surprise me was the always dramatic and continuing deterioration for those most vulnerable in our society. Unless new forces come into play, the overall picture cannot be expected to improve in the foreseeable future. In fact, hunger, homelessness, and lack of health insurance worsened again in 2003. With financial demands for Katrina here and Iraq abroad, the plight of the poor will likely worsen further. Given the basic nature of these long unfulfilled needs—and the fact that a number of other countries see fit to provide in these areas—we may need to look more closely at ourselves and our self-image of being a compassionate people."

The Index is a project of Manchester College's Peace Studies Institute, with researchers Neil Wollman (primary contact), Ph.D., Senior Fellow of the Manchester College Peace Studies Institute and Professor of Psychology (260.982.5346, njwollman@manchester.edu); Bradley L. Yoder, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Social Work: (260.982.5366, byoder@manchester.edu); James P. Brumbaugh-Smith, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Mathematics (260.982.5011, jbrumbaugh-smith@manchester.edu); Heidi Gross, B.S. (former intern, Manchester College Peace Studies Institute); and Jon Largent, student, (jlargent@manchester.edu).

The chart below outlines all index variables and basic figures. Annual values are indexed relative to the baseline of 100.0 in 1995. Thus an index of 102.0 indicates a two percent increase from 1995, while an index of 98.0 indicates a two percent decrease. Significant upward or downward trends are identified on the chart by either a single asterisk (significant) or double asterisk (highly significant). A “statistically significant” trend indicates these steady increases or decreases in violence and harm were highly unlikely to have occurred due to only random fluctuations in the data being measured (= only a five percent chance; ** = only a one percent chance). Analysis of NIVAH statistics was conducted by mathematician Dr. James Brumbaugh-Smith.

Details on methodology, variable definitions, background, and further statistics can be found at www.manchester.edu/links/violenceindex/.

IF YOU WISH TO RECEIVE PERIODIC UPDATES ON THE NATIONAL INDEX OF VIOLENCE AND HARM, WRITE NJWOLLMAN@MANCHESTER.EDU, WITH “SEND NIVAH UPDATES” IN THE SUBJECT LINE.