REPORT · GLOBAL

Suffering in the World, 2000–2023

Since 2000 the world has cut poverty, hunger and early death, and suffering has fallen in four of every five countries. But progress has stalled since 2019, and the poorest countries are being left behind.

Gross Domestic Suffering · Elton University · grossdomesticsuffering.org/reports/global/

KEY FINDINGS

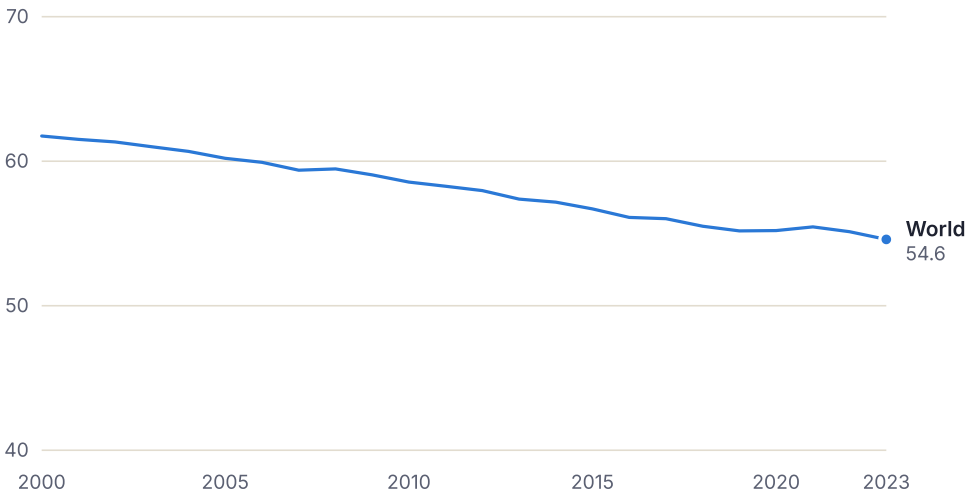
- The world suffers less than it did in 2000. The population-weighted GDS score fell from 61.7 to 54.6, and **145 of 179 countries** improved.[1]
- The number of people living in the highest-suffering countries (a score of 70 or more) fell from 2.1 billion to 1.3 billion, even as the world's population grew by nearly 2 billion.
- Progress has stalled. The world score fell 6.6 points from 2000 to 2019, but only 0.6 from 2019 to 2023, as hunger, war and displacement rose.
- The poorest countries are being left behind: low-income countries improved by less than 1 point, while upper-middle-income countries improved by 12.
- Forced displacement has multiplied more than fivefold since 2000, and unfreedom, from prisons to modern slavery to overwork, has not improved at all.

A generation of progress

The Gross Domestic Suffering (GDS) index scores every country from 0 (least suffering) to 100 (most) across six equally weighted pillars: illness, gender and sexual discrimination, violence, unfreedom, deprivation and animal suffering. Fixed goalposts make scores comparable across countries and years.[1]

Measured this way, the 21st century has brought a large fall in human suffering. The world score fell from 61.7 in 2000 to 58.6 in 2010 and 55.2 in 2019.

World GDS score, 2000–2023 (0 = least suffering, 100 = most)



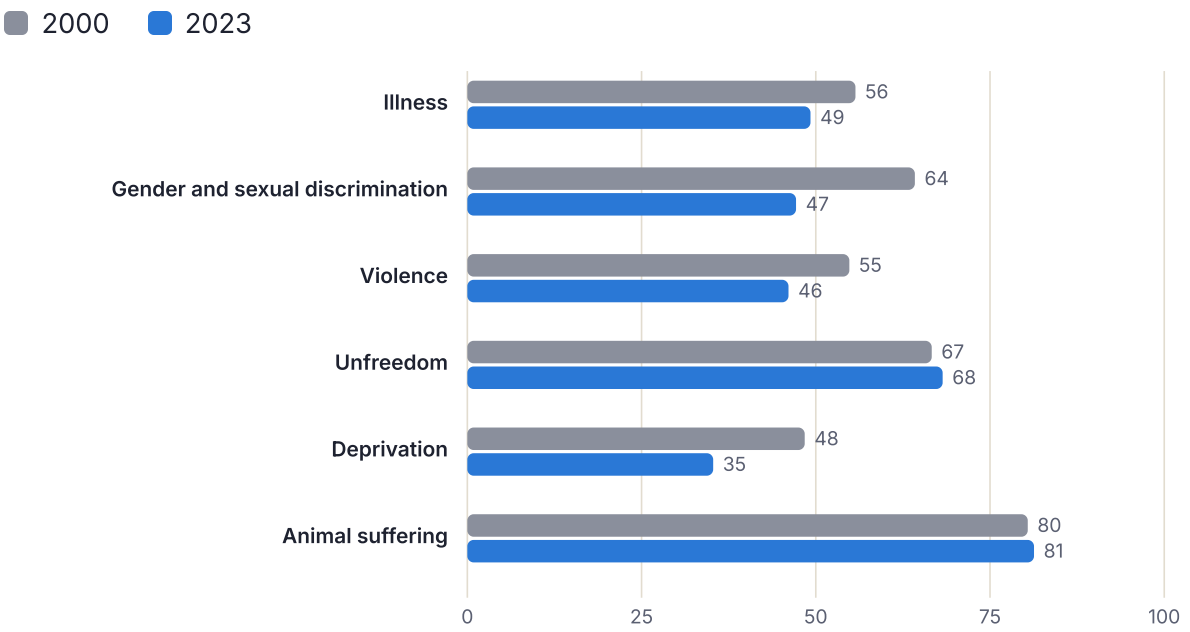
Population-weighted average of all ranked countries.

Most of the gain came from three changes. Extreme poverty fell from 36% to 10% of people in the countries we score. Infant mortality more than halved, from 41 to 20 deaths per 1,000 births. And the chance of dying between 15 and 60 fell by a quarter, from 188 to 139 per 1,000.

INDICATOR (POPULATION-WEIGHTED)	2000	2019	2023
Extreme poverty (% under $3 a day)	36.1%	11.3%	9.8%
Undernourishment (% of people)	13.1%	8.3%	8.8%
Infant deaths per 1,000 live births	41.1	21.3	19.6
Chance of dying between 15 and 60, per 1,000	188	138	139
Gender Inequality Index (0–1)	0.45	0.35	0.33
Violent deaths (homicide, war, suicide) per 100,000	20.0	15.6	16.2
Forcibly displaced people per 100,000	253	915	1,331
Prisoners and people in modern slavery, per 100,000	728	738	738

Which kinds of suffering fell, and which did not

World pillar scores, 2000 and 2023 (higher = more suffering)



Population-weighted averages. Farm-animal grades are from 2020 and apply to every year, so the animal pillar changes only as populations shift.

- **Deprivation fell most**, from 48 to 35, driven by falling poverty and hunger. But hunger has risen since 2019: the UN estimates that 733 million people faced hunger in 2023, about 152 million more than in 2019.[2]
- **Discrimination fell sharply**, from 64 to 47, as the Gender Inequality Index fell from 0.45 to 0.33 and more countries protected LGBTI people.
- **Illness and violence fell**, but progress has stopped since 2019: illness rose with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the violent death rate climbed from 15.6 to 16.2 per 100,000 with new wars in Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza.
- **Unfreedom did not improve.** Prisoners and people in modern slavery hold steady at about 738 per 100,000. Walk Free estimates that 50 million people lived in modern slavery on any given day in 2021, 10 million more than in 2016.[4]
- **Forced displacement exploded**, from 253 to 1,331 people per 100,000. UNHCR counted 117.3 million people forcibly displaced at the end of 2023, one in every 69 people on Earth.[3]
- **Animal suffering is the highest pillar of all**, at 81. Of the 50 countries graded by World Animal Protection, 17 received the lowest grade, G, for protecting farm animals.[9]

Where suffering is falling, and where it is not

Every region improved, but at very different speeds. East Asia and South Asia cut suffering by more than 10 points. Sub-Saharan Africa improved by less than 2 and now suffers most of any region.

REGION	2000	2023	CHANGE
Europe and Central Asia	49.3	39.5	-9.7
East Asia and Pacific	57.9	44.7	-13.2
North America	49.5	45.5	-4.0
Latin America and Caribbean	62.8	57.8	-5.0
South Asia	70.4	59.8	-10.6
Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan	67.2	63.5	-3.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	74.1	72.4	-1.7

The same split runs by income. Upper-middle-income countries such as China, Kazakhstan and Türkiye improved fastest. Low-income countries barely moved, so the gap between the poorest countries and everyone else has widened.

INCOME GROUP	2000	2023	CHANGE
High income	46.4	39.7	-6.7
Upper middle income	60.5	48.7	-11.7
Lower middle income	70.4	63.0	-7.4
Low income	75.8	74.9	-0.9

Among countries with more than 20 million people, the largest improvements came in Kazakhstan (-27.7), Sri Lanka (-18.1), Uzbekistan (-17.3), China (-16.5). The large countries that got worse the most were all at war or in deep security crises: Syria (+16.8), Yemen (+12.9), Burkina Faso (+9.2), Mali (+8.1), Ukraine (+6.1), Sudan (+5.6).

Policy recommendations

Each recommendation addresses a finding above, and each rests on evidence that the policy reduces suffering.

1. **Prevent and end wars, and protect the people they uproot.** War drives every large reversal in the index, and displacement is the fastest-growing kind of suffering we measure. Fund diplomacy, peacekeeping and humanitarian response, and give refugees and displaced people the right to work, study and move.[3]

2. **Put the poorest countries first.** Low-income countries have gained almost nothing since 2000. Direct aid to them, and give cash where it can reach people: in rural Kenya, cash transfers of about $1,000 raised local economic activity by about 2.5 times the amount given, with minimal inflation.[5]

3. **Restart the fight against hunger.** The progress of 2000–2019 has reversed. Protect food supplies in conflicts, fund emergency nutrition and invest in smallholder farming.[2]

4. **Prevent suicide by limiting access to lethal means.** The World Health Organization advises national bans on highly hazardous pesticides.[6] Sri Lanka banned the most lethal pesticides and has cut its suicide rate by almost two-thirds since 2000.[7] It is also one of the five most improved large countries in the index.

5. **Decriminalize LGBT people.** 65 jurisdictions still criminalise private, consensual same-sex activity.[8] Repealing these laws costs nothing and removes a direct source of fear, violence and imprisonment.

6. **Free the captive.** Enforce laws against forced labour and forced marriage, require companies to remove modern slavery from their supply chains, and cut the use of prison for low-level and drug offences.[4]

7. **Protect farm animals.** Adopt and enforce farm-animal welfare laws, beginning with bans on extreme confinement, so that the animals raised for food live without severe suffering.[9]

8. **Measure suffering, not just growth.** Governments and international agencies should report suffering alongside GDP, and invest in the death registration, surveys and prison statistics that make it measurable everywhere.

About this report

This report uses the Gross Domestic Suffering index, 2023 edition, covering 188 countries. World and regional figures are population-weighted averages of ranked countries. Equal pillar weights are a judgment; we publish rank ranges under 1,000 random weightings. Read how the index is built, or see the United States report.

Sources

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