REPORT · UNITED STATES

Suffering in the United States, 2000–2023

The world's largest economy has made little progress against suffering since 2000, and has fallen behind most rich countries. Here is where Americans suffer most, how that has changed, and what would reduce it.

Gross Domestic Suffering · Elton University · grossdomesticsuffering.org/reports/united-states/

KEY FINDINGS

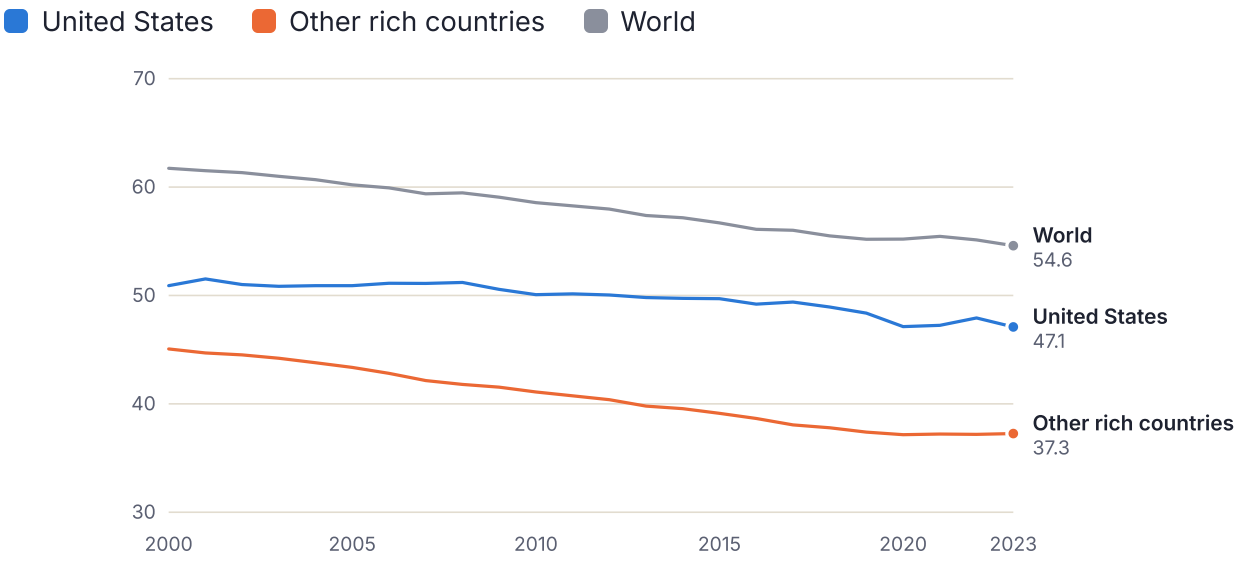
- Suffering in the United States fell only slightly, from a GDS score of 50.9 in 2000 to 47.1 in 2023. The rest of the world improved faster, so the US slipped from **43rd to 61st of 188 countries**.[1]
- The gap between the US and other rich countries widened from 5.8 to 9.8 points.
- Deaths from alcohol and drug use disorders rose **fivefold**, from 7.5 to 37.4 per 100,000, about ten times the typical rich country.[2]
- An American aged 15 is no more likely to reach 60 than in 2000, and violent deaths, mostly suicides, rose from 16.4 to 19.8 per 100,000.[3][4]
- The US made real progress on discrimination, incarceration and overwork, which shows that suffering responds to policy.

The United States is falling behind

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. The goalposts never move, so a score can be compared across countries and over time.[1]

In 2000 the United States scored 50.9 and ranked 43rd. By 2023 its score had improved to 47.1, but its rank had fallen to 61st. Other rich countries cut their average score from 45.1 to 37.3, more than twice the US improvement, and the world average fell from 61.7 to 54.6.

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

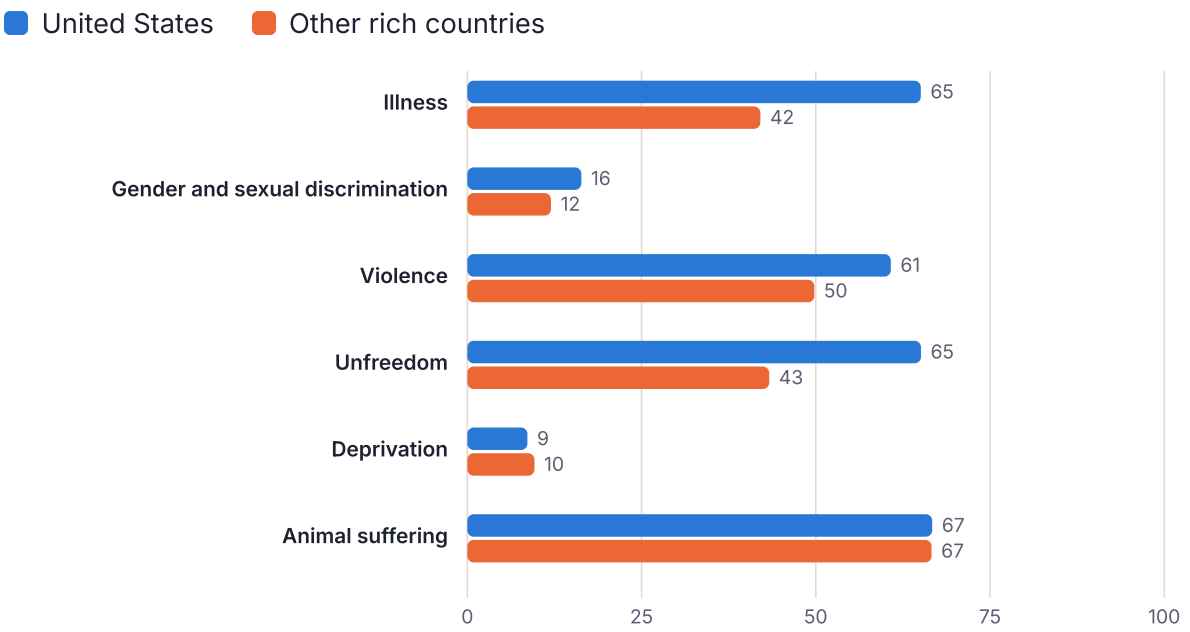


“Other rich countries” and “World” are population-weighted averages. Rich countries are the World Bank’s high-income group, excluding the United States.

Of 36 high-income countries with more than 5 million people, only Saudi Arabia, Costa Rica and Russia suffered more than the United States in 2023. The country with the world's largest economy now ranks behind China, Albania, Kazakhstan and Türkiye.

Where Americans suffer most

Pillar scores, 2023 (higher = more suffering)



Each pillar is scored from 0 to 100 against fixed goalposts. Other rich countries: population-weighted average.

The United States is worse than other rich countries on illness, violence and unfreedom, about level on animal suffering and deprivation, and slightly worse on discrimination. The table shows the indicators behind those pillars.

INDICATOR	US 2000	US 2023	OTHER RICH COUNTRIES, 2023 (MEDIAN)
Deaths from alcohol and drug use disorders, per 100,000	7.5	37.4*	3.6
Chance of dying between 15 and 60, per 1,000	113	113	65
Share of life lived in ill health	15.9%	17.7%	14.6%
Infant deaths per 1,000 live births	7.1	5.5	3.7
Violent deaths (homicide, war, suicide) per 100,000	16.4	19.8	14.3
Prisoners and people in modern slavery, per 100,000	1,013	872	570
Workers putting in 49+ hours a week	16.8%	11.8%	8.3%
Gender Inequality Index (0–1)	0.28	0.17	0.08

* Deaths from alcohol and drug use disorders are published to 2021; 2023 carries the 2021 figure forward.

1. Addiction deaths have exploded

In 2000, 7.5 Americans per 100,000 died of alcohol and drug use disorders. By 2021 the figure was 37.4, the highest of any high-income country and about ten times the median of other rich countries.[2] The rise accelerated after 2019, when the rate stood at 24.2.

2. Adults die young

An American aged 15 has an 11% chance of dying before 60, the same as in 2000 and nearly twice the risk in other rich countries.[3] The risk spiked to 14% in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Americans also spend a growing share of their lives in ill health: 17.7% in 2023, up from 15.9% in 2000. Infant mortality improved, from 7.1 to 5.5 deaths per 1,000 births, but remains about 50% above the rich-country median.

3. Violent deaths are rising, driven by suicide

Homicides, war deaths and suicides together killed 19.8 Americans per 100,000 in 2023, up from 16.4 in 2000. Most of the rise came from suicide, which climbed from 10.9 to 14.0 per 100,000.[4] The homicide rate, 5.8 per 100,000 in 2023, is more than five times the median of other rich countries.[5] Guns tie the two

together: more than half of the 44,000 firearm deaths in the United States in 2024 were suicides, and about a third were homicides.[6]

4. Mass incarceration is falling, but slowly

The share of Americans held in prison or modern slavery fell from 1,013 to 872 per 100,000. The prison rate fell from 683 to 542 per 100,000, still one of the five highest in the world, and Walk Free estimates another 330 per 100,000 live in modern slavery.[7][8] The rich-country median is 570.

5. Real progress on discrimination and overwork

The US Gender Inequality Index fell from 0.28 to 0.17, and protections for LGBTI people grew stronger, including marriage equality in 2015. Together they cut the discrimination pillar from 44 to 16, the largest improvement of any US pillar. The share of workers putting in 49 or more hours a week fell from 16.8% to 11.8%, though it remains above the rich-country median of 8.3%.

6. Farm animals have weak protection

World Animal Protection gives US farm-animal law an E on its A-to-G scale.[15] The federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act covers cattle, pigs, sheep and other livestock, but not chickens and turkeys, which are the great majority of animals slaughtered for food.[14]

Policy recommendations

Each recommendation targets a pillar where the United States trails other rich countries, and each rests on evidence that the policy reduces suffering.

1. **Treat addiction as the health emergency it is.** Make methadone and buprenorphine available to everyone with opioid use disorder. In a review of cohorts covering more than 120,000 people, those on methadone died at less than a third of the rate of those who had left treatment (11.3 versus 36.1 deaths per 1,000 people a year).[9] Distribute naloxone, now sold over the counter, wherever overdoses happen,[10] and use alcohol taxes and limits on sales to cut alcohol deaths.

2. **Limit access to the means of suicide.** The World Health Organization ranks limiting access to lethal means among the most effective ways to prevent suicide.[11] In the United States that means firearms: safe-storage laws, extreme risk protection orders and waiting periods, alongside the 988 crisis line.

3. **Reduce violence where it concentrates.** Fund community violence intervention and hospital-based programs in the neighborhoods with the highest homicide rates, and close gaps in background checks for gun sales.

4. **Keep cutting incarceration.** Prison rates have already fallen by a fifth since 2000. Sentencing reform, alternatives to prison for drug and low-level offenses, and parole reform can bring the US toward the rich-country median, without the crime rises critics fear: rich countries with far fewer prisoners also have far fewer homicides.

5. **Protect mothers and babies.** The United States has the highest maternal mortality of any high-income country, more than twice the rate of most.[12] Guarantee continuous health coverage through pregnancy and the first year after birth, and expand the midwife and obstetric workforce.

6. **Guarantee paid leave.** The United States is the only advanced economy that does not guarantee workers paid vacation or holidays.[13] A legal minimum of paid vacation, sick leave and parental leave would reduce overwork and the illness that comes with it.

7. **Protect farm animals.** Bring poultry under the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, and set national standards to end extreme confinement such as battery cages and gestation crates.[14]

8. **Measure what matters.** Publish a national suffering report alongside GDP each year, so that progress against addiction, early death, violence and incarceration is tracked as closely as growth.

About this report

This report uses the Gross Domestic Suffering index, 2023 edition. Pillar scores, ranks and trends come from the open dataset; outside figures are cited. Equal pillar weights are a judgment: under 1,000 random weightings, the US ranks between 48th and 85th in 2023. Read how the index is built, or see the global report.

Sources

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