

The United States is No. 1 — But in What? Military Expenditure, Weapons Export and International Violence

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American politicians are fond of telling their audiences that the United States is the greatest country in the world. Is there any evidence for this claim?

Well, yes. When it comes to violence and preparations for violence, the United States is, indeed, No. 1. In 2013, according to [a report](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the U.S. government accounted for 37 percent of world military expenditures, putting it far ahead of all other nations. (The two closest competitors, China and Russia, accounted for 11 percent and 5 percent respectively.) From 2004 to 2013, the United States was also the [No. 1 weapons exporter](#) in the world. Moreover, given the U.S. government's almost continuous series of wars and acts of military intervention since 1941, it seems likely that it surpasses all rivals when it comes to international violence.

This record is paralleled on the domestic front, where the United States has more guns and gun-related deaths than any other country. A [study](#) released in late 2013 reported that the United States had 88 guns for every 100 people, and 40 gun-related deaths for every 400,000 people—the most of any of the 27 economically developed countries surveyed. By contrast, in Britain there were 6 guns per 100 people and 1 gun-related death per 400,000 people.

Yet, in a great many other areas, the United States is not No. 1 at all.

Take education. In late 2013, the [Program for International Student Assessment](#) released a report on how 15-year old students from 65 nations performed on its tests. The report showed that U.S. students ranked 17th in reading and 21st in math. An [international survey](#) a bit earlier that year by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that the ranking was slightly worse for American adults. In 2014, [Pearson](#), a multinational educational services company, placed the United States 20th in the world in “educational attainment”—well behind Poland and the Slovak Republic.

American healthcare and health fare even worse. In a [2014 study](#) of healthcare (including infant mortality, healthy life expectancy, and mortality from preventable conditions) in 11 advanced industrial countries, the Commonwealth Fund concluded that the United States ranked last among them. According to the [World Health Organization](#), the U.S. healthcare system ranks 30th in the world. [Other studies](#) reach somewhat different conclusions, but all are very unflattering to the United States, as are studies of American health. The United

States, for example, has one of the world's worst [cancer rates](#) (the seventh highest), and life expectancy is declining compared to other nations. [An article](#) in the *Washington Post* in late 2013 reported that the United States ranked 26th among nations in life expectancy, and that the average American lifespan had fallen a year behind the international average.

What about the environment? Specialists at Yale University have developed a highly sophisticated [Environmental Performance Index](#) to examine the behavior of nations. In the area of protection of human health from environmental harm, their 2014 index placed the United States 35th in health impacts, 36th in water and sanitation, and 38th in air quality. In the other area studied—protection of ecosystems—the United States ranked 32nd in water resources, 49th in climate and energy, 86th in biodiversity and habitat, 96th in fisheries, 107th in forests, and 109th in agriculture.

These and other areas of interest are dealt with by the [Social Progress Index](#), which was developed by [Michael Porter](#), an eminent professor of business (and a Republican) at Harvard. According to Porter and his team, in 2014 the United States ranked 23rd in access to information and communications, 24th in nutrition and basic medical care, 31st in personal safety, 34th in water and sanitation, 39th in access to basic knowledge, 69th in ecosystem sustainability, and 70th in health and wellness.

The widespread extent of poverty, especially among children, remains a disgrace in one of the world's wealthiest nations. A [2013 report](#) by the United Nations Children's Fund noted that, of the 35 economically advanced countries that had been studied, only Rumania had a higher percentage of children living in poverty than did the United States.

Of course, the United States is not locked into these dismal rankings and the sad situation they reveal about the health, education, and welfare of its citizens. It could do much better if its vast wealth, resources, and technology were employed differently than they are at present.

Ultimately, it's a matter of priorities. When [most U.S. government discretionary spending](#) goes for war and preparations for war, it should come as no surprise that the United States emerges No. 1 among nations in its capacity for violence and falls far behind other nations in providing for the well-being of its people.

Americans might want to keep this in mind as their nation embarks upon yet another costly military crusade.

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