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2 **History of Social Indicators and** 3 **Its Evolution**

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7 **Synonyms**

Au1 8 [Development of social indicators; Social](#)
9 [indicators movement](#)

10 **Definition**

11 A classical definition states that ► [social indica-](#)
12 [tors](#) are statistical time series “. . .used to monitor
13 the social system, helping to identify changes and
14 to guide intervention to alter the course of
15 ► [social change](#)” (Ferriss, 1988, p. 601).

16 Examples are ► [unemployment rates](#), ► [crime](#)
17 [rates](#), estimates of ► [life expectancy](#), ► [health](#)
18 [status indices](#) such as the average number of
19 “healthy” days (or days without activity limita-
20 tions) in the past month for a specific population,
21 ► [school enrollment rates](#), average achievement
22 scores on a standardized test, rates of ► [voting](#) in
23 elections, measures of ► [subjective well-being](#)
24 such as ► [satisfaction with life as a whole](#), and
25 ► [composite well-being/quality-of-life indices](#)
26 such as the ► [Human Development Index](#).

This entry describes the history of social indi- 27
cators and its evolution. It draws upon and 28
updates Land (2000). 29

Description 30

The Social Indicators Movement of the 1960s 31 **and 1970s and Its Aftermath in the 1980s** 32

The term “social indicators” was born and given 33
its initial meaning in an attempt undertaken in 34
the early 1960s by a scholarly panel appointed by 35
the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to 36
conduct a study for the United States National 37
Aeronautics and Space Administration the pur- 38
pose of which was to detect and anticipate the 39
nature and magnitude of the second-order conse- 40
quences of the space exploration program for the 41
American society (Land, 1983; Noll & Zapf, 42
1994). Frustrated by a lack of sufficient data to 43
detect such effects and the absence of 44
a systematic conceptual framework and method- 45
ology for analysis, some of those involved in the 46
Academy project attempted to develop a system 47
of social indicators – statistics, statistical series, 48
and other forms of evidence – with which to 49
detect and anticipate social change, as well as to 50
evaluate specific programs and determine their 51
impact. The results of this part of the Academy 52
project were published in an edited volume bear- 53
ing the name *Social Indicators* (Bauer, 1966). 54

The appearance of this volume was not an 55
isolated event. Several other influential publica- 56
tions commented on the lack of a system for 57

58 charting social change and advocated that the US
59 government establish a “▶ [system of social](#)
60 [accounts](#)” that would facilitate a cost-benefit
61 analysis of more than the market-related aspects
62 of society already indexed by the national income
63 and product accounts (see, e.g., National
64 Commission on Technology, Automation and
65 Economic Progress, 1966; Sheldon & Moore,
66 1968). The need for social indicators also was
67 emphasized by the publication of a 101-page
68 *Toward a Social Report* document on the last
69 day of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s admin-
70 istration in 1969. Conceived of as a prototypical
71 counterpart to the annual economic reports of the
72 president, each of its seven chapters addressed
73 major issues in an important area of social
74 concern (▶ [health and illness](#); ▶ [social mobility](#);
75 the physical ▶ [environment](#); ▶ [income](#) and
76 ▶ [poverty](#); public order and ▶ [safety](#); learning,
77 science, and ▶ [art](#); and ▶ [participation](#) and
78 ▶ [alienation](#)) and provided its readers with an
79 assessment of prevalent conditions. In addition,
80 the document firmly established the link of social
81 indicators to the idea of systematic ▶ [social](#)
82 [reporting](#) for the purpose of public
83 enlightenment.

84 Generally speaking, the sharp impulse of
85 interest in social indicators in the 1960s grew
86 out of the movement toward collection and orga-
87 nization of national social, economic, and demo-
88 graphic data that began in Western societies
89 during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries
90 and accelerated in the twentieth century (Carley,
91 1981). The work of sociologist William F.
92 Ogburn and his collaborators at the University
93 of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s on the theory
94 and measurement of social change is more prox-
95 imate (Land, 1975). As chairman of President
96 Herbert Hoover’s Research Committee on Social
97 Trends, Ogburn supervised production of the
98 two-volume *Recent Social Trends* (1933),
99 a pathbreaking contribution to social reporting.
100 Ogburn’s ideas about the measurement of
101 social change influenced several of his students –
102 notably Albert D. Biderman, Otis Dudley Dun-
103 can, Albert J. Reiss, Jr., and Eleanor Bernert
104 Sheldon – who played major roles in the

105 emergence and development of the field of social
106 indicators in the 1960s and 1970s.

107 At the end of the 1960s, the enthusiasm for
108 social indicators was sufficiently strong and
109 broad-based for Duncan (1969) to write of the
110 existence of a social indicators movement. In the
111 early 1970s, this led to numerous developments
112 in the United States, including the establishing in
113 1972, with National Science Foundation support,
114 of the Social Science Research Council Center
115 for Coordination of Research on Social Indicators
116 in Washington, D.C.; the publication of several
117 major efforts to define and develop
118 a methodology for the measurement of *indicators*
119 *of subjective well-being* (Andrews & Withey,
120 1976; Campbell & Converse, 1972; Campbell,
121 Converse, & Rodgers, 1976); the commencement
122 of a federal government series of comprehensive
123 social indicators books of charts, tables, and lim-
124 ited analyses (U.S. Department of Commerce,
125 1974, 1978, 1980); and the initiation of several
126 continuing data series based on periodic sample
127 surveys of the national population (such as
128 the annual National Opinion Research Center’s
129 General Social Survey and the Bureau of
130 Justice Statistics’ annual National Crime Victim-
131 ization Survey).

132 In addition, the concept of social indicators
133 spread internationally on large scale in the
134 1970s with the publication in 1974 of the first
135 volume of the journal ▶ [Social Indicators](#)
136 [Research](#) and the spread of social indicators/
137 social reporting concepts and programs to numer-
138 ous other nations and to international agencies,
139 such as the United Nations and the Organization
140 for Economic Cooperation and Development.
141 Institutionally, under the leadership of Wolfgang
142 Zapf, the German Sociological Association
143 appointed a Committee on Social Indicators in
144 1972, which was instrumental in the formation of
145 ▶ [Working Group 6 on Social Indicators and](#)
146 [Social Reporting of the International Sociologi-](#)
147 [cal Association](#) in 1988. This Working Group
148 promoted international attention to social indica-
149 tors by serving as a network to facilitate the
150 exchange of information and by organizing ses-
151 sions on social indicators and ▶ [quality-of-life](#)
152 topics at the meetings of the ISA held every

153 four years. By 2010, the Research Committee
 154 was sufficiently strong and well established to
 155 become Research Committee 55 of the ISA.

156 In contrast to the 1970s, however, social
 157 indicators activities generally slowed in the
 158 1980s, as funding cuts led to the closing of the
 159 Center for Coordination of Research on Social
 160 Indicators; the discontinuation of related work at
 161 several international agencies; the termination of
 162 government-sponsored social indicators reports
 163 in some countries, including the United States;
 164 and the reduction of statistical efforts to monitor
 165 various aspects of society. Several explanations
 166 have been cited for this turnabout (Andrews,
 167 1989; Bulmer, 1989; Innes, 1989; Johnston,
 168 1989; Rockwell, 1987). Certainly, politics and
 169 the state of national economies in the early
 170 1980s are among the most identifiable proximate
 171 causes. In addition to these immediate factors,
 172 however, there was a perceived lack of demon-
 173 strated usefulness of social indicators in public
 174 policymaking.

175 **Social Reporting in the 1990s**

176 As the decade of the 1990s unfolded, the model of
 177 a comprehensive national social report in the
 178 tradition pioneered by Ogburn and Olson clearly
 179 had faltered in the United States, at least in the
 180 sense of federal government sponsorship and/or
 181 production. But the key ideas of social monitor-
 182 ing, reporting, and forecasting were evident to
 183 greater or lesser extents in the production of con-
 184 tinuing, periodic subject-matter-specific publica-
 185 tions by various federal government agencies
 186 with specific portfolios of responsibilities in
 187 such areas as science, education, and crime and
 188 justice (Land, 2000). Special topics involving
 189 groups of federal agencies also receive attention
 190 from time to time. For instance, the Federal
 191 Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statis-
 192 tics began in 1997 an annual publication on
 193 *America's Children: Key National Indicators of*
 194 *Well-Being*. In addition, numerous private
 195 research organizations, policy institutes, and
 196 scholars in the United States continued to pro-
 197 duce reports, monographs, and books interpreting
 198 social trends and developments in various areas
 199 of social concern.

In contrast to the situation in the United States, 200
 comprehensive social reports/social indicators 201
 compendiums continued to be published period- 202
 ically in several other countries during the 1990s. 203
 Examples are the *Social Trends* series published 204
 annually since 1970 by the United Kingdom's 205
 Central Statistical Office, the *Social and Cultural* 206
Report published biannually by the Social 207
 and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands, 208
 and *Australian Social Trends* published annually 209
 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Citations 210
 and summary reviews of these and other social 211
 indicators/social reports publications can be 212
 found in the quarterly newsletter and review of 213
 social reports, *SINET: Social Indicators Network* 214
News (for access, see the World Wide Web 215
 Homepage: [http://www.soc.duke.edu/dept/sinet/](http://www.soc.duke.edu/dept/sinet/index.html/) 216
[index.html/](http://www.soc.duke.edu/dept/sinet/index.html/)). 217

Quality of Life as a Unifying Concept 218

Another development became vividly apparent 219
 in the 1990s (Land 1996): The widespread 220 Au2
 political, popular, and theoretical appeal of the 221
quality-of-life (QOL) concept. 222

As noted above, this concept emerged and 223
 became part of the social indicators movement 224
 in the late 1960s and early 1970s as doubts were 225
 raised in the highly developed Western industrial 226
 societies about economic growth as the major 227
 goal of societal progress (Noll & Zapf, 1994). 228
 The "social costs" of economic growth were 229
 cited, and there was increasing doubt about 230
 whether "more" should be equated with "better." 231

The QOL concept which resulted from this 232
 discussion was posed as an alternative to the 233
 more and more questionable concept of the afflu- 234
 ent society and entered discussions of social 235
 policy and politics as a new, but more complex, 236
 multidimensional goal. As a goal of social and 237
 economic policy, QOL encompasses all (or at 238
 least many) ► **domains of life** and subsumes, in 239
 addition to individual material and immaterial 240
 well-being, such collective values as ► **freedom**, 241
 ► **justice**, and the guarantee of natural conditions 242
 of life for present and future generations. 243
 The political use of the QOL notion is paralleled 244
 in the private sector by the widespread use and 245
 popularity of numerous rankings – based on 246

247 weighted scales of multiple domains of well-
 248 being –of the “best” places to live, work, do
 249 business, play, etc., be they cities, states, regions,
 250 or nations.

251 The theoretical appeal of the QOL concept as
 252 an integrating notion in the social sciences and
 253 related disciplines is, in part, due to the perceived
 254 *importance of measuring individuals’ subjective*
 255 *assessments of their satisfaction with various life*
 256 *domains and with life as a whole*, which builds on
 257 the pioneering work on the measurement of
 258 subjective well-being reviewed above (Land,
 259 Michalos, & Sirgy, 2012). For instance, in the
 260 1990s, QOL becomes a concept that bridges the
 261 discipline of marketing research and strategic
 262 business policy with social indicators. Marketing
 263 is an important social force – with far-reaching
 264 direct and indirect impacts on the prevailing QOL
 265 in a society – through consumer satisfaction
 266 (Samli, 1987; Sirgy & Samli, 1995) and its
 267 impact on satisfaction with life as a whole.

268 The intersection of marketing research with
 269 social indicators through the QOL concept led
 270 to the organization in the mid-1990s of the
 271 ► **International Society for Quality-of-Life**
 272 **Studies** (ISQOLS; for information about the
 273 Society and its activities, see the World Wide
 274 Web Homepage: [http://www.cob.vt.edu/market/](http://www.cob.vt.edu/market/isqols/)
 275 [isqols/](http://www.cob.vt.edu/market/isqols/)). ISQOLS sponsors periodic international
 276 conferences that bring together researchers from
 277 around the world who focus on the study of social
 278 indicators, well-being, and the quality of life.
 279 ISQOLS supports the *Social Indicators Research*
 280 journal, which, through the publication of as
 281 many as five volumes per year, now has over
 282 100 volumes in print.

283 The formation of ISQOLS was followed by
 284 a number of initiatives in the creation of publica-
 285 tion for research on social indicators and well-
 286 being/quality-of-life studies and the formation of
 287 related professional organizations with a focus on
 288 these topics. For instance, members of the society
 289 also were instrumental in initiating the publica-
 290 tion of the ► **Journal of Happiness Studies**, the
 291 first volume of which appeared in the year 2000,
 292 and ISQOLS sponsors the ► **Applied Research in**
 293 **Quality of Life** journal as its official journal, with
 294 its first volume published in 2006. Members of

ISQOLS also participated in the formation of the
 International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI)
 in 2006. Similar in purpose to ISQOLS but with
 a focus on the measurement and study of the well-
 being of children, ISCI also sponsors periodic
 international conferences and its official journal,
 ► **Child Indicators Research**, the first volume of
 which appeared in 2008. Another special focus
 group to which ISQOLS members have given
 impetus is the Community Indicators Consortium
 (CIC; www.communityindicators.net) which was
 conceived at community indicators conferences
 co-organized by ISQOLS in 2002 and 2004 and
 then formally organized in 2005. The CIC
 publishes special reports and special issues in
 journals. Most recently, ISOLS members partic-
 ipated in the organization of the Italian Associa-
 tion of Quality-of-Life Studies (AIQUAV)
 in 2011.

Social Reporting in the Early 2000s: 314
Composite Indices of the Quality of Life 315

As the early decades of the twenty-first century
 unfolded, it also was evident that the field of
 social indicators entered a new era of the *con-*
struction of summary or ► composite indices of
the quality of life. Often these indices attempt to
 summarize indicators (objective and/or objec-
 tive) of a number of domains of life into
 a single index of the quality of life. They thus
 attempt to answer the original questions motivat-
 ing the social indicators movement: How are we
 doing overall? With respect to our past? With
 respect to other comparable units (e.g., cities,
 states, regions, nations)? Many of the pioneers
 of the social indicators movement in the 1960s
 and 1970s backed away from the development of
 summary indices to concentrate on conducting
 basic research on social indicators and the mea-
 surement of the quality of life and the develop-
 ment of a richer social data base.

With the tremendous increase in the richness
 of social data available for many societies today
 as compared to a few decades ago, a new gener-
 ation of social indicators researchers has returned
 to the task of summary index construction. Some
 examples are as follows:

- 341 1. At the level of the broadest possible compar- 388
342 isons of nations with respect to the overall 389
343 quality of life, the ► [Human Development](#) 390
344 [Index](#) (United Nations Development Program, 391
345 2001), Diener’s (1995) Value-Based Index of 392
346 National Quality of Life, and Estes (1988, 393
347 1998) ► [Index of Social Progress](#) 394
- 348 2. At the level of comparisons at the national 395
349 level over time, the ► [Netherlands’ Life](#) 396
350 [Situation Index](#) (LSI; Boelhouwer, 2010), the 397
351 Australian Unity Well-Being Index (AUWBI; 398
352 Cummins, Woerner, Tomy, Gibson, & 399
353 Knapp, 2005), and the US Foundation for 400
354 Child Development ► [Child and Youth Well-](#) 401
355 [Being Index](#) (FCD-CWI; Land, Lamb, & 402
356 Mustillo, 2001; Land, Lamb, Meadows, & 403
357 Taylor, 2007) 404

358 The field of social indicators likely will see 405
359 several decades of such index construction and 406
360 competition among various indices – with 407
361 a corresponding need for careful assessments to 408
362 determine which indices have substantive 409
363 ► [validity](#) for which populations in the assess- 410
364 ment of the quality of life and its changes over 411
365 time and social space. 412

366 **Social Indicators and Social Report in 2010** 367 **and Beyond: Three Types of Indicators**

368 The field of social indicators research and social 413
369 reporting continues to be intellectually vibrant 414
370 and active in the production of knowledge of 415
371 societies, living conditions, and well-being. 416
372 In addition to the measurement of well-being/ 417
373 quality of life and composite indices themes 418
374 just described, there appears consensus on the 419
375 existence and need for three types of indicators – 420
376 *policy or criterion indicators*, *subjective* 421
377 *well-being indicators*, and *descriptive indicators* 422
378 (Land, 2000). 423

379 Based on the premise that social indicators 424
380 should relate directly to social policymaking con- 425
381 siderations, an early definition by economist 426
382 ► [Mancur Olson](#), the principal author of *Toward* 427
383 *a Social Report*, characterized a social indicator 428
384 as a “. . .statistic of direct normative interest 429
385 which facilitates concise, comprehensive and 430
386 balance judgements about the condition of 431
387 major aspects of a society” (U.S. Department of 432

433 Health, Education, and Welfare, 1969, p. 97). 388
Olson went on to state that such an indicator is, 389
in all cases, a direct measure of welfare and is 390
subject to the interpretation that if it changes in 391
the “right” direction, while other things remain 392
equal, things have gotten better or people are 393
better off. Accordingly, by this definition, statis- 394
tics on the number of doctors or police officers 395
could not be social indicators, whereas figures on 396
health or crime rates could be. 397

In the language of policy analysis (Fox, 1974), 398
social indicators are “target” or “output” or “out- 399
come” or “end-value” variables, toward changes 400
in which some public policy (program, project) is 401
directed. Such a use of social indicators requires 402
(Land, 1983) that (a) members of a society agree 403
about what needs improving; (b) it is possible to 404
decide unambiguously what “getting better” 405
means; and (c) it is meaningful to aggregate the 406
indicators to the level of aggregation at which the 407
policy is defined. 408

In recognition of the fact that various other 409
meanings have been attached to the term social 410
indicators, the tendency among recent authors is 411
to use a somewhat different terminology for the 412
class of indicators identified by Olson. Building 413
on the Olson approach, MacRae (1985) defined 414
policy indicators as “measures of those variables 415
that are to be included in a broadly policy- 416
relevant system of public statistics.” With 417
a meaning similar to that of MacRae, Ferriss 418
(1989) used the term *criterion indicators*. 419

Another class of social indicators has its roots 420
in the research on subjective well-being in the 421
1970s cited above. This initial research has 422
given birth to a huge literature on *subjective* 423
well-being, ► [life satisfaction](#), or ► [happiness](#) 424
indicators. These studies examine aspects of 425
human experiences or domains ranging from the 426
highly specific (house, family, etc.) to the global 427
(life as a whole). A large number of other studies 428
and applications of these concepts and techniques 429
have appeared (for reviews, see Diener, 1994; 430
Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener, 431
Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009) and con- 432
tinue to appear – one or more studies of subjec- 433
tive well-being indicators can be found in almost 434
any issue of the journal *Social Indicators* 435

436 *Research* and in many other social science
 437 journals. Early research on the related concept
 438 of happiness as an index of well-being was
 439 surveyed by Veenhoven (1984).

440 The connection of subjective well-being to
 441 income levels has been a particularly intriguing
 442 problem for social indicators researchers ever
 443 since Easterlin (1973) finding that income differ-
 444 ences between nations predicted national differ-
 445 ences in happiness but that the association of
 446 happiness with income within countries was
 447 much weaker. Recent research has focused on
 448 Diener’s disaggregation of high subjective well-
 449 being into “high life satisfaction, the presence of
 450 ▶ positive affect and the absence of ▶ negative
 451 affect.” From a different perspective, Kahneman
 452 and his collaborators distinguished life evalua-
 453 tion from ▶ experienced happiness, which is
 454 defined by positive and negative affect. And
 455 research by Diener and Kahneman (2009) using
 456 these conceptual refinements has led to the con-
 457 clusion that Easterlin was both right and wrong
 458 and that his finding needs to be revised in the
 459 sense that economic growth might have only
 460 a small impact on people’s average ongoing
 461 feelings of well-being (affect, experienced
 462 happiness) but may heighten people’s life evalua-
 463 tions. Studies of why income is differently asso-
 464 ciated with feelings versus life evaluations will
 465 no doubt continue to enliven this topic.

466 Building on the Ogburn legacy of research on
 467 social trends, a third approach to social indicators
 468 focuses on social measurements and analyses
 469 designed to improve our understanding of what
 470 the main features of society are, how they inter-
 471 relate, and how these features and their relation-
 472 ships change (Sheldon & Parke, 1975). This
 473 produces *descriptive social indicators* – indices
 474 of the state of society and changes taking place
 475 therein. Although descriptive social indicators
 476 may be more or less directly (causally) related
 477 to the well-being goals of public policies or pro-
 478 grams and thus include policy or criterion indi-
 479 cators, they are not limited to such uses. For
 480 instance, in the area of health, descriptive
 481 indicators might include preventive indicators
 482 such as the percent of the population that does
 483 not smoke cigarettes, as well as criterion

indicators such as the number of days of activity 484
 limitations in the past month or an index of self- 485
 reported satisfaction with health. 486

The various statistical forms that descriptive 487
 social indicators can take are described by Land 488
 (1983). These can be ordered by degree of 489
 abstraction from those that require only one or 490
 two data series and little processing (e.g., an age- 491
 specific death rate) to those that involve more 492
 complicated processing into a single summary 493
 index (e.g., years of life expectancy at age x, 494
 years of active or disability-free life expectancy 495
 at age x, years of happy life expectancy at age x). 496
 Descriptive social indicators can be formulated at 497
 any of these levels of abstraction. Moreover, as 498
 described in Juster and Land (1981), these indi- 499
 cators can, at least in principle, be organized into 500
 demographic- or time-budget-based systems of 501
 social accounts. 502

Even though these three types of social indi- 503
 cators can be distinguished conceptually, it 504
 should be emphasized that they are not exclusive. 505
 That is, any specific indicator can be both 506
 descriptive and criterion, both descriptive and 507
 subjective well-being, subjective and descriptive, 508
 or have all three attributes. It also is possible, 509
 however, for an indicator to be primarily 510
 a criterion, descriptive, or subjective well-being 511
 indicator. 512

**Social Indicators and Social Report in 2010 513
 and Beyond: Web-Based Social Reports 514**

In concluding this statement on the history and 515
 evolution of social indicators and social 516
 reporting, one final attribute of the field in the 517
 decades beyond 2010 is so evident that it almost 518
 escapes explicit notice – the permeation of the 519
 field by the Internet and the World Wide Web 520
 (WWW). 521

The notions of social indicators and programs 522
 of social reporting commenced long before the 523
 innovation and diffusion of the WWW in the 524
 1990s and early 2000s. However, the WWW 525
 and the associated availability of all types of 526
 information through computers and related 527
 high-speed electronic devices now is an ever- 528
 present aspect of many lives throughout the 529
 world. Social indicators and social reports are 530

Au3 531 no exception. Today, all of the periodic interna-
 532 tional and national social reports mentioned
 533 above and many others are published on the
 534 WWW as well as in printed volumes, and, indeed,
 535 some reports are published exclusively on the
 536 Web. This is associated with a change in the
 537 nature of human access to information and
 538 storage of that information that is likely to con-
 539 tinue indefinitely into the future. The implica-
 540 tions of this for social indicators and social
 541 reporting have yet to be fully described and
 542 studied.

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