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History of Social Indicators and Its Evolution

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Synonyms
Development of social indicators; Social indicators movement

Definition
A classical definition states that social indicators are statistical time series "... used to monitor the social system, helping to identify changes and to guide intervention to alter the course of social change" (Ferriss, 1988, p. 601).

Examples are unemployment rates, crime rates, estimates of life expectancy, health status indices such as the average number of "healthy" days (or days without activity limitations) in the past month for a specific population, school enrollment rates, average achievement scores on a standardized test, rates of voting in elections, measures of subjective well-being such as satisfaction with life as a whole, and composite well-being/quality-of-life indices such as the Human Development Index.

This entry describes the history of social indicators and its evolution. It draws upon and updates Land (2000).

Description
The Social Indicators Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and Its Aftermath in the 1980s
The term “social indicators” was born and given its initial meaning in an attempt undertaken in the early 1960s by a scholarly panel appointed by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to conduct a study for the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration the purpose of which was to detect and anticipate the nature and magnitude of the second-order consequences of the space exploration program for the American society (Land, 1983; Noll & Zapf, 1994). Frustrated by a lack of sufficient data to detect such effects and the absence of a systematic conceptual framework and methodology for analysis, some of those involved in the Academy project attempted to develop a system of social indicators – statistics, statistical series, and other forms of evidence – with which to detect and anticipate social change, as well as to evaluate specific programs and determine their impact. The results of this part of the Academy project were published in an edited volume bearing the name Social Indicators (Bauer, 1966).

The appearance of this volume was not an isolated event. Several other influential publications commented on the lack of a system for...
charting social change and advocated that the US government establish a “system of social accounts” that would facilitate a cost-benefit analysis of more than the market-related aspects of society already indexed by the national income and product accounts (see, e.g., National Commission on Technology, Automation and Economic Progress, 1966; Sheldon & Moore, 1968). The need for social indicators also was emphasized by the publication of a 101-page Toward a Social Report document on the last day of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration in 1969. Conceived of as a prototypical counterpart to the annual economic reports of the president, each of its seven chapters addressed major issues in an important area of social concern (health and illness; social mobility; the physical environment; income and poverty; public order and safety; learning, science, and art; and participation and alienation) and provided its readers with an assessment of prevalent conditions. In addition, the document firmly established the link of social indicators to the idea of systematic social reporting for the purpose of public enlightenment.

Generally speaking, the sharp impulse of interest in social indicators in the 1960s grew out of the movement toward collection and organization of national social, economic, and demographic data that began in Western societies during the seventeenth and eighteen centuries and accelerated in the twentieth century (Carley, 1981). The work of sociologist William F. Ogburn and his collaborators at the University of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s on the theory and measurement of social change is more proximate (Lund, 1975). As chairman of President Herbert Hoover’s Research Committee on Social Trends, Ogburn supervised production of the two-volume Recent Social Trends (1933), a pathbreaking contribution to social reporting. Ogburn’s ideas about the measurement of social change influenced several of his students – notably Albert D. Biderman, Otis Dudley Duncan, Albert J. Reiss, Jr., and Eleanor Bernert Sheldon – who played major roles in the emergence and development of the field of social indicators in the 1960s and 1970s.

At the end of the 1960s, the enthusiasm for social indicators was sufficiently strong and broad-based for Duncan (1969) to write of the existence of a social indicators movement. In the early 1970s, this led to numerous developments in the United States, including the establishing in 1972, with National Science Foundation support, of the Social Science Research Council Center for Coordination of Research on Social Indicators in Washington, D.C.; the publication of several major efforts to define and develop a methodology for the measurement of indicators of subjective well-being (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell & Converse, 1972; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976); the commencement of a federal government series of comprehensive social indicators books of charts, tables, and limited analyses (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1974, 1978, 1980); and the initiation of several continuing data series based on periodic sample surveys of the national population (such as the annual National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey and the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ annual National Crime Victimization Survey).

In addition, the concept of social indicators spread internationally on large scale in the 1970s with the publication in 1974 of the first volume of the journal Social Indicators Research and the spread of social indicators/ social reporting concepts and programs to numerous other nations and to international agencies, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Institutionally, under the leadership of Wolfgang Zapf, the German Sociological Association appointed a Committee on Social Indicators in 1972, which was instrumental in the formation of Working Group 6 on Social Indicators and Social Reporting of the International Sociological Association in 1988. This Working Group promoted international attention to social indicators by serving as a network to facilitate the exchange of information and by organizing sessions on social indicators and quality-of-life topics at the meetings of the ISA held every...
four years. By 2010, the Research Committee
was sufficiently strong and well established to
become Research Committee 55 of the ISA.

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

Social Reporting in the 1990s
As the decade of the 1990s unfolded, the model of
a comprehensive national social report in the
tradition pioneered by Ogburn and Olson clearly
had faltered in the United States, at least in the
sense of federal government sponsorship and/or
production. But the key ideas of social monitoring,
reporting, and forecasting were evident to
greater or lesser extents in the production of con-
tinuing, periodic subject-matter-specific publica-
tions by various federal government agencies
with specific portfolios of responsibilities in
such areas as science, education, and crime and
justice (Land, 2000). Special topics involving
groups of federal agencies also receive attention
from time to time. For instance, the Federal
Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics
began in 1997 an annual publication on
America’s Children: Key National Indicators of
Well-Being. In addition, numerous private
research organizations, policy institutes, and
scholars in the United States continued to pro-
duce reports, monographs, and books interpreting
social trends and developments in various areas
of social concern.

In contrast to the situation in the United States,
comprehensive social reports/social indicators
compendiums continued to be published period-
ically in several other countries during the 1990s.
Examples are the Social Trends series published
annually since 1970 by the United Kingdom’s
Central Statistical Office, the Social and Cultural
Report published biannually by the Social
and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands,
and Australian Social Trends published annually
by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Citations
and summary reviews of these and other social
indicators/social reports publications can be
found in the quarterly newsletter and review of
social reports, SINET: Social Indicators Network
News (for access, see the World Wide Web
Homepage: http://www.soc.duke.edu/dept/sinet/
index.html/).

Quality of Life as a Unifying Concept
Another development became vividly apparent
in the 1990s (Land 1996): The widespread
political, popular, and theoretical appeal of the
quality-of-life (QOL) concept.

As noted above, this concept emerged and
came part of the social indicators movement
in the late 1960s and early 1970s as doubts were
raised in the highly developed Western industrial
societies about economic growth as the major
goal of societal progress (Noll & Zapf, 1994).
The “social costs” of economic growth were
cited, and there was increasing doubt about
whether “more” should be equated with “better.”
The QOL concept which resulted from this
discussion was posed as an alternative to the
more and more questionable concept of the affluent
society and entered discussions of social
policy and politics as a new, but more complex,
 multidimensional goal. As a goal of social and
economic policy, QOL encompasses all (or at least many) domains of life and subsumes, in
addition to individual material and immaterial
well-being, such collective values as freedom,
justice, and the guarantee of natural conditions
of life for present and future generations. The
political use of the QOL notion is paralleled in
the private sector by the widespread use and
popularity of numerous rankings – based on
weighted scales of multiple domains of well-being of the “best” places to live, work, do business, play, etc., be they cities, states, regions, or nations.

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

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

The formation of ISQOLS was followed by a number of initiatives in the creation of publication for research on social indicators and well-being/quality-of-life studies and the formation of related professional organizations with a focus on these topics. For instance, members of the society also were instrumental in initiating the publication of the Journal of Happiness Studies, the first volume of which appeared in the year 2000, and ISQOLS sponsors the Applied Research in Quality of Life journal as its official journal, with 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 participated in the organization of the Italian Association of Quality-of-Life Studies (AIQUAV) in 2011.

Social Reporting in the Early 2000s:

Composite Indices of the Quality of Life

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 construction of summary or composite indices of the quality of life. Often these indices attempt to summarize indicators (objective and/or subjective) of a number of domains of life into a single index of the quality of life. They thus attempt to answer the original questions motivating 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 measurement of the quality of life and the development 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 generation of social indicators researchers has returned to the task of summary index construction. Some examples are as follows:
1. At the level of the broadest possible comparisons of nations with respect to the overall quality of life, the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program, 2001), Diener’s (1995) Value-Based Index of National Quality of Life, and Estes (1988, 1998) Index of Social Progress

2. At the level of comparisons at the national level over time, the Netherlands’ Life Situation Index (LSI; Boelhouwer, 2010), the Australian Unity Well-Being Index (AUWBI; Cummins, Woerner, Tomyn, Gibson, & Knapp, 2005), and the US Foundation for Child Development Child and Youth Well-Being Index (FCD-CWI; Land, Lamb, & Mustillo, 2001; Land, Lamb, Meadows, & Taylor, 2007)

The field of social indicators likely will see several decades of such index construction and competition among various indices – with a corresponding need for careful assessments to determine which indices have substantive validity for which populations in the assessment of the quality of life and its changes over time and social space.

Social Indicators and Social Report in 2010 and Beyond: Three Types of Indicators

The field of social indicators research and social reporting continues to be intellectually vibrant and active in the production of knowledge of societies, living conditions, and well-being. In addition to the measurement of well-being quality of life and composite indices themes just described, there appears consensus on the existence and need for three types of indicators – policy or criterion indicators, subjective well-being indicators, and descriptive indicators (Land, 2000).

Based on the premise that social indicators should relate directly to social policymaking considerations, an early definition by economist Mancur Olson, the principal author of Toward a Social Report, characterized a social indicator as "...statistic of direct normative interest which facilitates concise, comprehensive and balance judgements about the condition of major aspects of a society” (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1969, p. 97).

Olson went on to state that such an indicator is, in all cases, a direct measure of welfare and is subject to the interpretation that if it changes in the “right” direction, while other things remain equal, things have gotten better or people are better off. Accordingly, by this definition, statistics on the number of doctors or police officers could not be social indicators, whereas figures on health or crime rates could be.

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

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

Another class of social indicators has its roots in the research on subjective well-being in the 1970s cited above. This initial research has given birth to a huge literature on subjective well-being, life satisfaction, or happiness indicators. These studies examine aspects of human experiences or domains ranging from the highly specific (house, family, etc.) to the global (life as a whole). A large number of other studies and applications of these concepts and techniques have appeared (for reviews, see Diener, 1994; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009) and continue to appear – one or more studies of subjective well-being indicators can be found in almost any issue of the journal Social Indicators
Research and in many other social science journals. Early research on the related concept of happiness as an index of well-being was surveyed by Veenhoven (1984).

The connection of subjective well-being to income levels has been a particularly intriguing problem for social indicators researchers ever since Easterlin (1973) finding that income differences between nations predicted national differences in happiness but that the association of happiness with income within countries was much weaker. Recent research has focused on Diener's disaggregation of high subjective well-being into “high life satisfaction, the presence of positive affect and the absence of negative affect.” From a different perspective, Kahneman and his collaborators distinguished life evaluation from experienced happiness, which is defined by positive and negative affect. And research by Diener and Kahneman (2009) using these conceptual refinements has led to the conclusion that Easterlin was both right and wrong and that his finding needs to be revised in the sense that economic growth might have only a small impact on people’s average ongoing feelings of well-being (affect, experienced happiness) but may heighten people’s life evaluations. Studies of why income is differently associated with feelings versus life evaluations will no doubt continue to enliven this topic.

Building on the Ogburn legacy of research on social trends, a third approach to social indicators focuses on social measurements and analyses designed to improve our understanding of what the main features of society are, how they inter-relate, and how these features and their relationships change (Sheldon & Parke, 1975). This produces descriptive social indicators – indices of the state of society and changes taking place therein. Although descriptive social indicators may be more or less directly (causally) related to the well-being goals of public policies or programs and thus include policy or criterion indicators, they are not limited to such uses. For instance, in the area of health, descriptive indicators might include preventive indicators such as the percent of the population that does not smoke cigarettes, as well as criterion indicators such as the number of days of activity limitations in the past month or an index of self-reported satisfaction with health.

The various statistical forms that descriptive social indicators can take are described by Land (1983). These can be ordered by degree of abstraction from those that require only one or two data series and little processing (e.g., an age-specific death rate) to those that involve more complicated processing into a single summary index (e.g., years of life expectancy at age x, years of active or disability-free life expectancy at age x, years of happy life expectancy at age x).

Descriptive social indicators can be formulated at any of these levels of abstraction. Moreover, as described in Juster and Land (1981), these indicators can, at least in principle, be organized into demographic- or time-budget-based systems of social accounts.

Even though these three types of social indicators can be distinguished conceptually, it should be emphasized that they are not exclusive. That is, any specific indicator can be both descriptive and criterion, both descriptive and subjective well-being, subjective and descriptive, or have all three attributes. It also is possible, however, for an indicator to be primarily a criterion, descriptive, or subjective well-being indicator.

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

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

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


References

For all the periodic international and national social reports mentioned above and many others are published on the WWW as well as in printed volumes, and, indeed, some reports are published exclusively on the Web. This is associated with a change in the nature of human access to information and storage of that information that is likely to continue indefinitely into the future. The implications of this for social indicators and social reporting have yet to be fully described and studied.

References


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