QUALITY OF LIFE

It is a well-known fact that the "quality of life" varies tremendously throughout the world. Much is made of the distinction between the developed ("rich") nations, and the developing (or Third World) nations, and the wide differences between education, income, equality, technology, and a host of other factors that exist between them. Less reported, though no less true, are the differences between "quality of life" that exist between various parts of the United States, particularly in the distribution of wealth and education. Marked differences exist between regions, states, and urban and non-urban areas. The reasons why these differences exist is difficult to answer, but ideas can be gleaned from studying history and current statistical information from some of these areas.

First of all, what exactly is "quality of life"? It is doubtful two people would completely agree on a definition, but the United Nations Development Program defines "quality of life" as the Human Development Index, which is a scale based upon a nation's education level, per capita income, and life expectancy at birth (Kidron and Segal 1995: 34). While that definition does not cover everything – food supply or gender or racial equality, for instance – it does present three factors that "privileged, Western-educated intellectuals steeped in world affairs" (Kidron and Segal 1995: 136) would likely agree are important to one's well-being. (As the quote indicates, using one set of statistics, averages, and ratings to rank and compare vastly differing nations and cultures is not something easily done nor agreed upon, but are widely used as seeing
how each and every individual in the world lives out his or her life is obviously an impossible task.)

That United Nations definition is used by that organization to rate the countries of the world. The same definition can also apply to the United States in itself, as a study of its various regions and states. However, to simplify, only education and income levels will be studied here, and only in terms of statistics (the U.N. indexing scale will not be utilized); the life expectancy in the United States is not as major a variable between different locations in the country as it is between two different nations (Kidron and Segal 1995: 32). As stated before, this data set does omit various other factors, but it will provide a basic overview of the differences this country has, since these two facets both touch upon many others.

The quality of life a nation, state, or city has is a reflection of who lives there and their opportunities to change their lives — by education and employment, for example. Before discussing those opportunities, a brief look at the people who currently make up this nation is in order; relevant historical data will be discussed within the later sections.

The 1990 United States Census recorded a total population of slightly under 250 million people (Roberts 1993: 3), which had grown to slightly under 270 million by 1998 (Census 1998: Internet). The most populous region was the South (as defined by the Census), and California was the largest state (Famighelli 1997: 381). Thirteen percent of all Americans were black, 11 percent considered themselves Hispanic (they can be of any race), 4 percent were Asian, and 73 percent classed themselves non-Hispanic white (Famighelli 1997: 376). And lastly, three-quarters of all Americans live in urbanized areas, which includes center cities and the suburban rings (Ibid.).
The educational level of the United States shall be discussed first, since the amount of schooling one has, especially in recent decades, has been a critical factor in what jobs are available to that person and, hence, how much money they can make (Roberts 1993: 215). Overall, 96 percent of all Americans are considered literate (Famighelli 1997: 877), though only 82 percent hold a high school diploma or its equivalent (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 140), and just under one-quarter of all citizens held bachelor’s degrees or higher (Fonseca and Andrews 1993: 18).

Plotted on a map, it can be seen that there is a noticeable unequal distribution of all these factors throughout the nation. Concerning high school graduates, the states with the highest percentage (80 percent and over) of those holding diplomas are located in the Great Plains and New England, as well as Utah and Hawaii (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 140). The states with the lowest amount of high school graduates – those with less than 65 percent of their populations having diplomas – are located predominantly in the southern tier of states, from California and Arizona across to Georgia and South Carolina (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 141). Why is there such a marked difference between the northern and southern halves of the country on this issue?

There is no one easy answer, and those answers will vary depending on which part of the nation one looks at. States such as Florida and North Carolina have had a large influx of retirees during the last few decades; many of the older residents of this country do not hold high school diplomas, since neither it nor any higher education was considered as essential as it is today when they were growing up; this may help explain why those states have relatively low schooling rates (Andrews and Fonseca 1995:
In the Southwest, a dominant factor in the lack of a high school diploma may be the "language barrier": many people of Hispanic descent live in states such as California, Texas, and New Mexico (and southern Florida as well), and many do not speak English well. The lack of opportunities or desire to learn English, or insensitivity on the part of those instructed to educate Spanish-speaking youths, occasionally causes frustration or lack of interest in the educational system among some Spanish-speaking people of high school age; many of them may choose to drop out of school instead of completing their secondary educations (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 139).

History also plays a role in determining these differences. While not isolated to the South by any means, racism may play a part in many of the Southern states with low rates of high school completion that also have large numbers of African-Americans, such as Alabama and Mississippi; dropout rates are almost invariably higher for blacks than whites in the United States (Roberts 1993: 214). Conversely, Utah's Mormon heritage, which stresses education, and the historic attention given to children's education in the New England states may be reasons why high school completion rates are higher than the national average there.

Public primary and secondary high schools are free of cost, and attendance is mandatory in most states until about the age of 16. Education beyond the twelfth grade, however, was only taken advantage of by a few until recently, when college educations (and possibly beyond) became mandatory for certain types of work, mainly in highly scientific or technical fields. Despite college enrollments getting larger every year, it is an expensive investment, and those who partake in it generally come from middle and upper class families (Roberts 1993: 225). A look at the distribution of people who have
college educations must be compared with income distribution data, since the former is usually very closely related to the latter.

Distribution maps displaying income data for the United States show a very similar pattern to that found on a high school graduation map. The West Coast states, including Alaska and Hawaii, and the "Megalopolis" states – the urban northeastern corridor stretching from New Hampshire and Massachusetts down to Virginia – have the highest levels of income, while the interior South and New Mexico have low levels, similar to the graduation map (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 50).

One notable difference is the high graduation levels found in the northern Plains states, such as North Dakota and Nebraska, were quite high; their household income levels, however, are fairly low – about $26,000 per year in 1992, as opposed to in excess of $40,000 in parts of New England (Morgan et al. 1994: 105). Though the plains are "America's Heartland" and the schooling of children may be a traditional value that is well-adhered to, upon graduation in high school many of these people leave these states to enter college or to find work (three of the four states that lost population between the 1980 and 1990 censuses were in this area: North Dakota, Wyoming, and Iowa (Roberts 1993: 134)), as these states are largely rural and agrarian, and do not offer much in the way of highly-skilled jobs requiring higher education, which are commonly found in the major urban areas of the West Coast and the Northeast, such as Washington, DC, Boston, Seattle, and San Francisco (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 50).

High-paying jobs, since they generally require a larger amount of skill and education to do, are clustered in urban areas such as those mentioned above. Families
living in these areas generate more money than their counterparts in the upper Plains and rural South (where income levels are lowest), and so they can better afford to send their children to college, from which many will get degrees and skills to get other high-paying jobs, which in turn will lead to their children being able to attend college, and so on. States such as North Dakota and Wyoming that lack these high-paying opportunities lose their citizens to other states that do offer them, and therefore they do not participate in the education-high paying job-education for children-high paying job for children cycle that other states enjoy. Several Southern states that have low incomes, such as West Virginia and Kentucky, also have high levels of high school dropouts, who generally will not be able to get jobs with large salaries, lowering the state's average household income levels (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 138).

Higher education rates are also dependent upon the availability of institutions that can grant degrees. Again, the northern plains present a good example; while exemplary in high school educations, there is a dearth of higher education options in this region. Wyoming has only one public four-year university, and no private institutions (Famighelli 1997: 237); South Dakota has no two-year community colleges (Fonseca and Andrews 1993: 48). It is possible that the agrarian-based economy has historically had little higher education requirements, although this is most likely changing as new farming and agricultural techniques and technologies are introduced. Indeed, most of the nation lying west of the Mississippi River is rather lacking in higher education opportunities, exceptions being states such as California, Texas, Washington, Minnesota, and Missouri (Fonseca and Andrews 1993: 26). The nation was settled (by Europeans, at least) from east to west, and much of the western half
remains very sparsely populated; the majority of colleges and universities in the United States lie in its eastern half. Historically, the first colleges were in eastern states such as Massachusetts, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the following century saw many colleges open in such places as North Carolina, Ohio, Alabama, Missouri, and Illinois (Fonseca and Andrews 1993: 21). These states hold the old, prestigious universities; California also has several large universities of national prominence. Because of the nature of these institutions, they are a popular draw from not just their home state but nationwide, and many graduates of these colleges remain in the college's state, or another nearby (such as many students who travel to college in the District of Columbia often end up residing in Virginia or Maryland, two states with very high percentages of population holding a bachelor's degree or higher, both over 23 percent (Andrews and Fonseca 1995: 154)).

There are many more reasons why wealth and educational attainment rates vary so much between regions and states, and most of the major points that have been mentioned touch upon various other factors. The subject of regional variability is extremely complex; differences exist within states and cities, not just regions and states themselves, but the brief overview presented here should give at least a starting point on items to consider when considering why the "quality of life" in one part of the nation is seemingly quite a bit different from another.


U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Pop Clocks." Internet: