

5 Culture Trends We Should All Be Watching

Why do we follow the news? To be informed, of course. We naturally want to be aware of what's happening at home and around the world. In one sense, we've never been better equipped to do that. News is available 24/7/365. We read it, listen to it and watch it. And we do so with ease, from the most crowded city street to the most remote mountaintop. But while this constant stream of information is certainly handy, it can also make it difficult to see the big picture. We're always on the ground, seeing what's right in front of us. We have only a vague sense of what's already happened—and what to expect. What we lack is a bird's-eye view, something that will help us spot trends both helpful and harmful, information that will enable us to adjust our policies accordingly. That's the intention behind the 2015 Index of Culture and Opportunity. Recently published by the Heritage Foundation, it's subtitled "The Social and Economic Trends that Shape America." It gives what you could call the "news behind the news" on topics ranging from marriage, drug use and welfare to crime, education and religious attendance. Consider marijuana. We're all aware that laws legalizing its use in certain states and under certain conditions have been passed. Unreported is the fact that teen drug use—not only of marijuana, but of substances such as cocaine, LSD and heroin—is on the rise. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of 12th-graders reporting drug use went up 0.3 percent. That's a small amount, to be sure, but still it's moving in the wrong direction. So is the marriage rate. From 2002 to 2012, it dropped by nine marriages per 1,000 unmarried women ages 15 and older. And if you look at the chart included in the 2015 Index, you'll see that the marriage rate has been declining steady from the 1970s. With so much emphasis on same-sex marriage in the news, it's easier than ever to miss this. Or take Planned Parenthood. It's been

dominating the headlines lately. But how many people are aware of what the abortion rate is? Surprisingly, the data hasn't been updated since 2011. But it had long been moving in the right direction: From 2001 to 2011, the rate declined by four abortions per 1,000 women ages 15-44, down from a much higher peak that occurred in the early 1980s. What else is down, and deservedly so? Violent crime. From 2003 to 2013, the rate dropped by 107.9 violent crimes per 100,000. Considering the way our daily news feed is filled with reports of shootings, stabbings and other attacks, this is obviously good news. Why pay attention to such trends? Do they really matter? I'll answer with one last statistic reported in the 2015 Index: the unwed birthrate. It's up yet again. From 2003 to 2013, the percentage of children born outside marriage rose 6 percent. That's not just another dry statistic. It's something that affects all of us. "Children in households without a father tend to fare worse than their peers in intact families on measures like emotional well-being, drug use, academic performance, and poverty," writes Heritage President Jim DeMint in the preface to the latest Index. And unless we're willing to look at how the various cultural trends intersect and affect one another, we can't hope to make any kind of effective and lasting change. When I wrote about the debut edition of the Index last year, I called it "the nation's GPS." That's because we can't change public policy for the better unless we know where we are. And we can't steer in a better direction unless we know where we're going. If we're willing to put it to good use, the Index can help us do that. *This article originally appeared on **The Daily Signal**.*