



IRLE WORKING PAPER  
#216-10  
April 2010

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Cite as: Jerome Karabel. (2010). "American Exceptionalism and the Quality of Life in the United States: Some Preliminary Statistical Observations." IRLE Working Paper No. 216-10.  
<http://irle.berkeley.edu/workingpapers/216-10.pdf>



 **Peer Reviewed**

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**Publication Date:**

04-30-2010

**Series:**

[Working Paper Series](#)

**Publication Info:**

Working Paper Series, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, UC Berkeley

**Permalink:**

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4bv3k5hw>



**American Exceptionalism and the Quality of Life in the United States:  
Some Preliminary Statistical Observations**

Jerome Karabel

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This paper is a preliminary investigation into the question of “American Exceptionalism and the Quality of Life in the United States.” For the purpose of this study, which compares the United States to 19 other wealthy democratic countries, American exceptionalism refers to the distinctive social, political, and economic character of the United States in comparison to other wealthy democracies. Specifically, it implies that the United States is something of an “outlier” -- that it tends to be located towards the extreme on various key dimensions that distinguish societies from one another. Note, by the way, that the claim is *not* that the United States is better or worse than other countries, but that it is *different*. Unlike some contemporary uses of the concept of “American exceptionalism,” this definition in no way implies American superiority.

In recent decades, however, the concept of American exceptionalism has come under increasing criticism from historians and social scientists. This is not the place to review these criticisms in detail, but I want to take a moment to note the key factor that has, as one historian put it, placed the concept of American exceptionalism in “ill repute”. According to the historian Dorothy Ross, the fundamental flaw of scholars who use the framework of American exceptionalism is that they “believe, against all odds, that inquiries into American uniqueness can be pursued apart from ideology.” The claim, in short, is that the idea of American exceptionalism is inherently ideological; more specifically, that it is part of what C. Wright called “the great American celebration.”

This interpretation of the political meaning of American exceptionalism is not without foundation and in fact has a very long pedigree dating back to 1630 when John Winthrop famously said, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city up on a hill.

The eyes of all people are upon us.” Other well-known usages of this conception of American exceptionalism include a speech given by John Fitzgerald Kennedy in January 1961, eleven days before his inauguration and Ronald Reagan’s Farewell Address, 28 years later, delivered on January 11, 1989. And in recent times, during the 2008 presidential election, Sarah Palin repeatedly referred to the United States as an “exceptional nation.”

To determine whether the United States is in fact an exceptional nation, we have gathered data on a variety of domains. The results are presented graphically and include sections on:

I. Political Economy (1-6)

II. Elements of American Exceptionalism

A. Religion (7-10)

B. Law (11-13)

C. Marriage, Family, and Sex (14-18)

III. American Exceptionalism and the Quality of Life: Some Problem Arenas

A. Incarceration and Homicide (19-20)

B. Health (21-24)

C. Paid Vacations (25)

IV. Arenas Where the United States is Functioning Well

A. GDP per Capita (26)

B. Research Universities (27)

C. Nobel Laureates (28)

## V. The United States in the International System

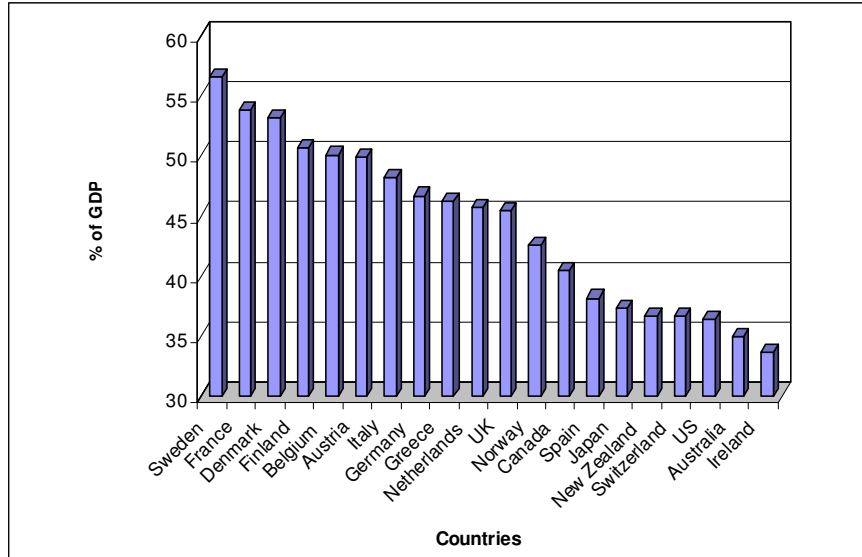
A. Defense (29-30)

B. National Pride (31)

C. International Treaties (32-33)

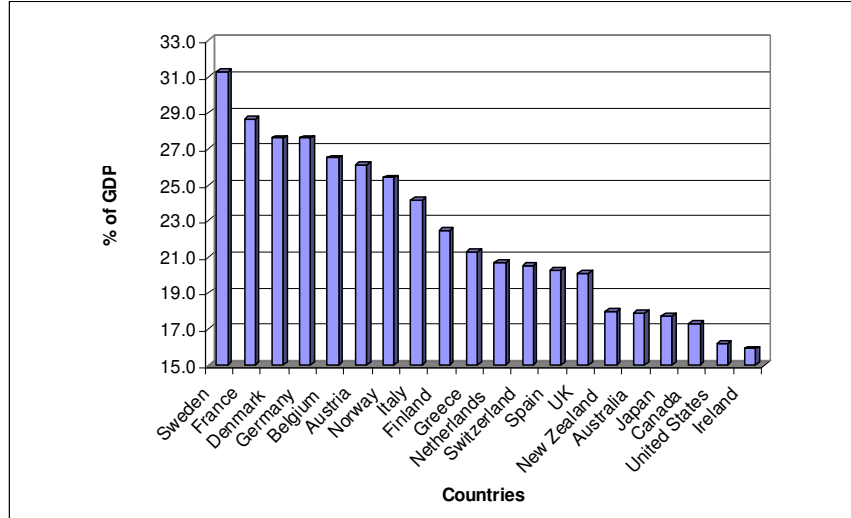
Following the graphic presentation of statistical data, the paper concludes with a brief discussion. This section includes a summary of some of the main findings and identifies some key areas for future research.

**Figure 1. Total General Government Expenditure as Percent of GDP (2005)**



Source: OECD National Accounts, 2006

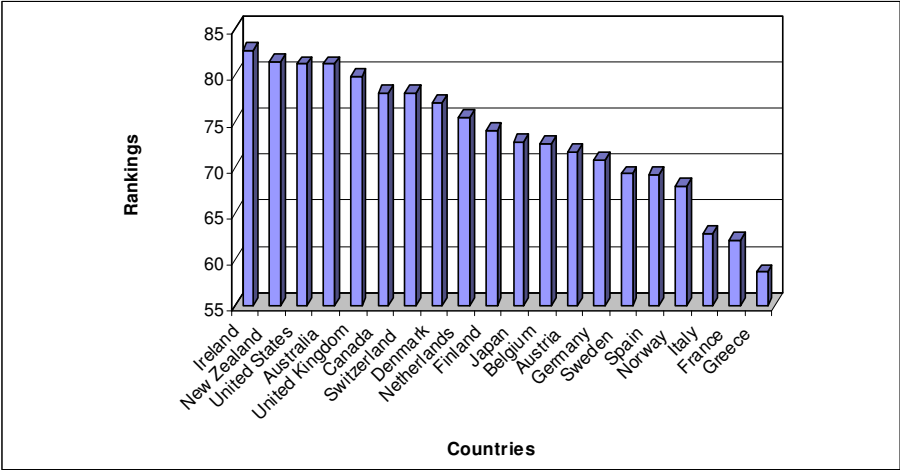
**Figure 2. Public Social Expenditure as Percent of GDP (2003)**



Source: OECD Factbook 2007, p 193

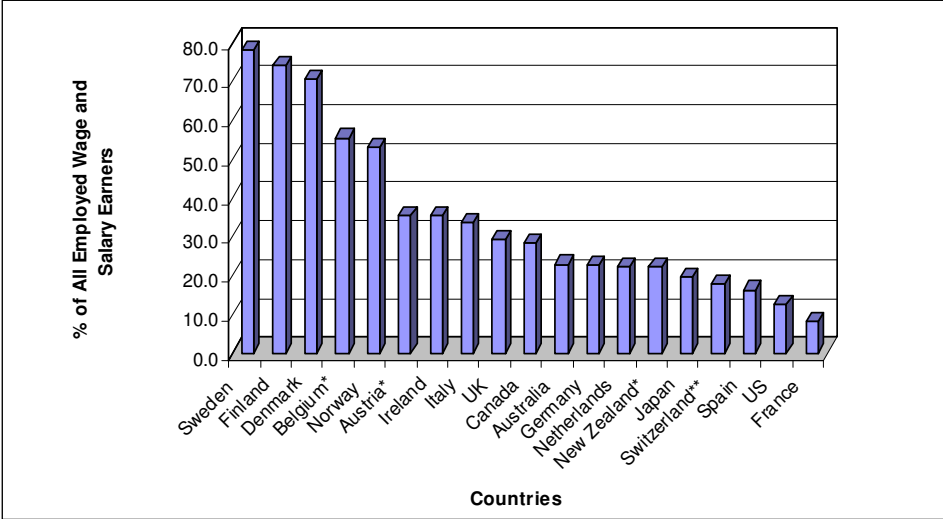


**Figure 3. Economic Freedom Rankings (2007)**



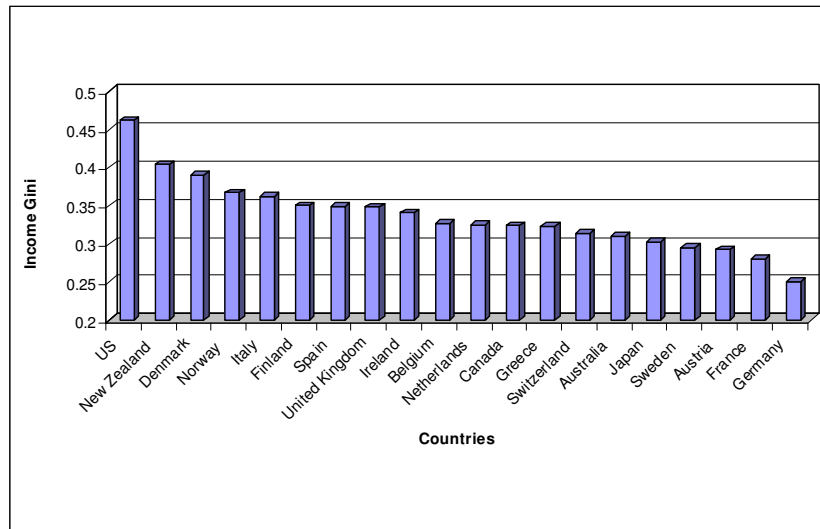
Org: Wall St. Journal and Heritage Foundation <http://www.heritage.org/index/> 2007

**Figure 4. Union Membership (2003)**



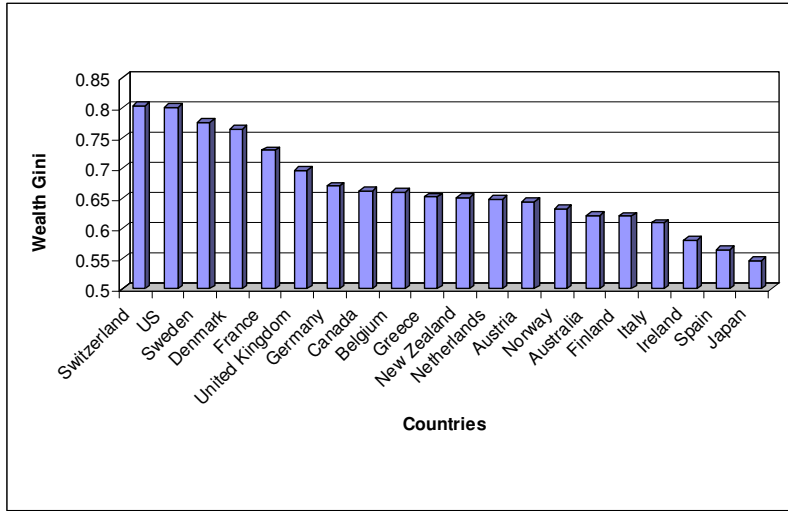
\*2002 Data  
 \*\*2001 Data  
 Source: Jelle Visser, "Union membership statistics in 24 countries," *Monthly Labor Review*, January 2006, Table 3 (Page 45)

**Figure 5. Income Inequality**



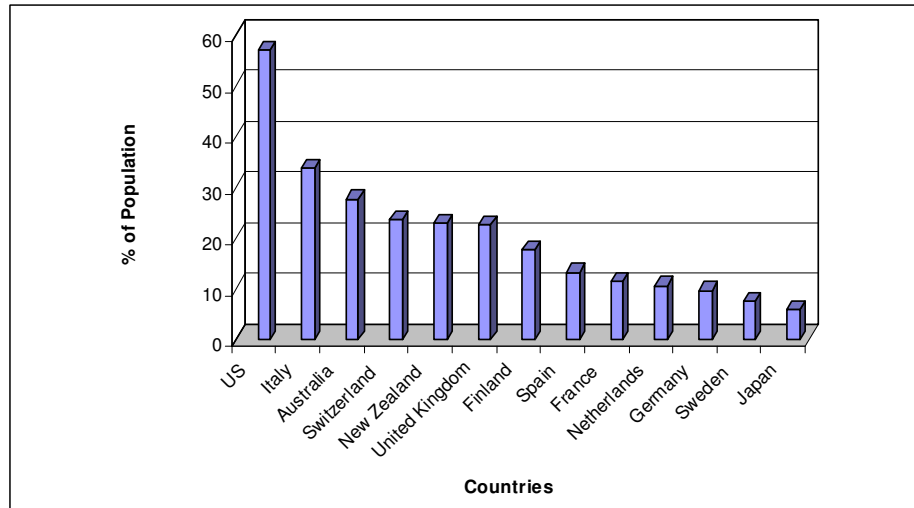
Source: World Income Inequality Database 2005 V 2.0a <http://www.wider.unu.edu/wiid/WIID2a.zip>

**Figure 6. Wealth Inequality**



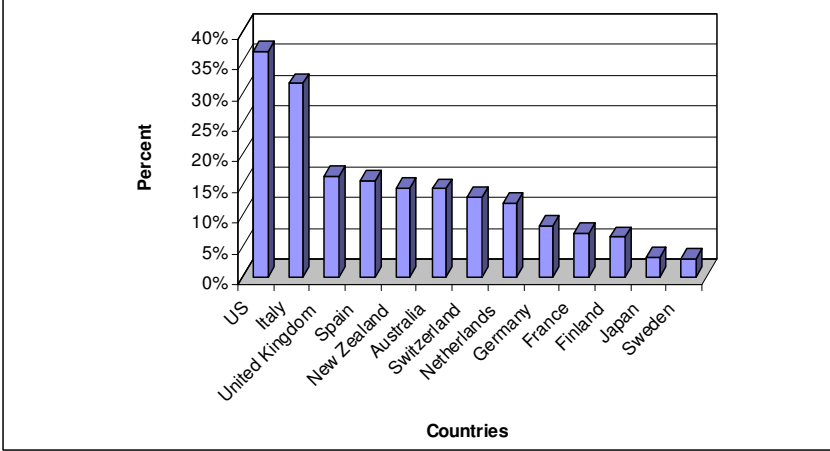
Source: Davies, James B., Susanna Sandstrom, Anthony Shorrocks, and Edward N. Wolff.  
"The World Distribution of Household Wealth", 5 December 2006  
<http://www.wider.unu.edu/research/2006-2007/2006-2007-1/wider-wdhw-launch-5-12-2006/wider-wdhw-report-5-12-2006.pdf>

**Figure 7. Percent of Population that Believes God is Very Important (2007)**



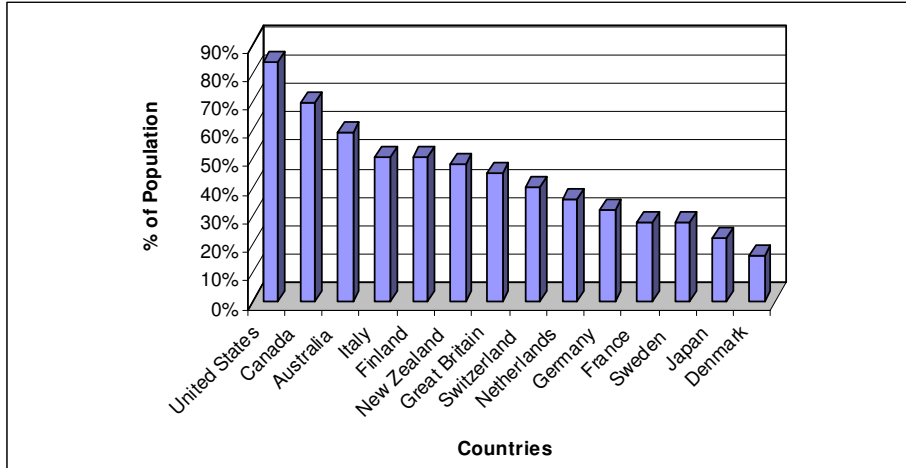
Source: World Values Survey (2007) Question #V192

**Figure 8. Percent of Population that Attends Church Once a Week (2007)**



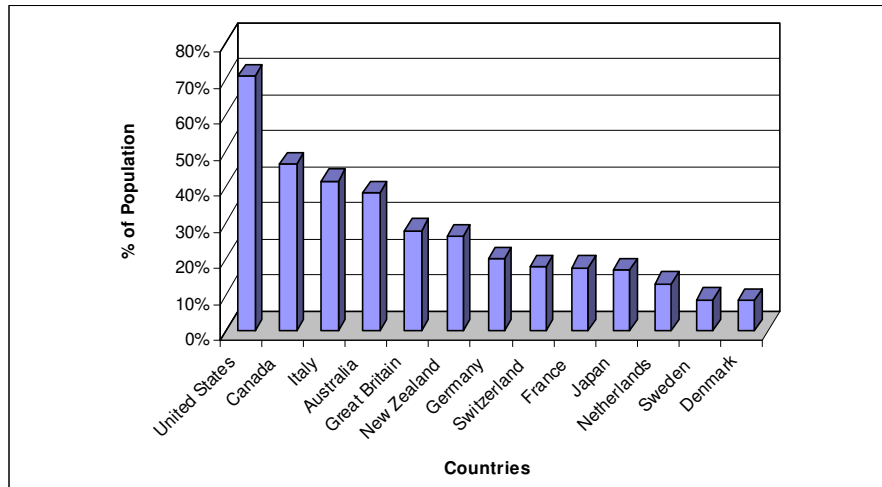
Source: World Values Survey (2007) Question #V186

**Figure 9. Percent of Population that Believes in Heaven (1999)**



Source: World Values Survey (1999)

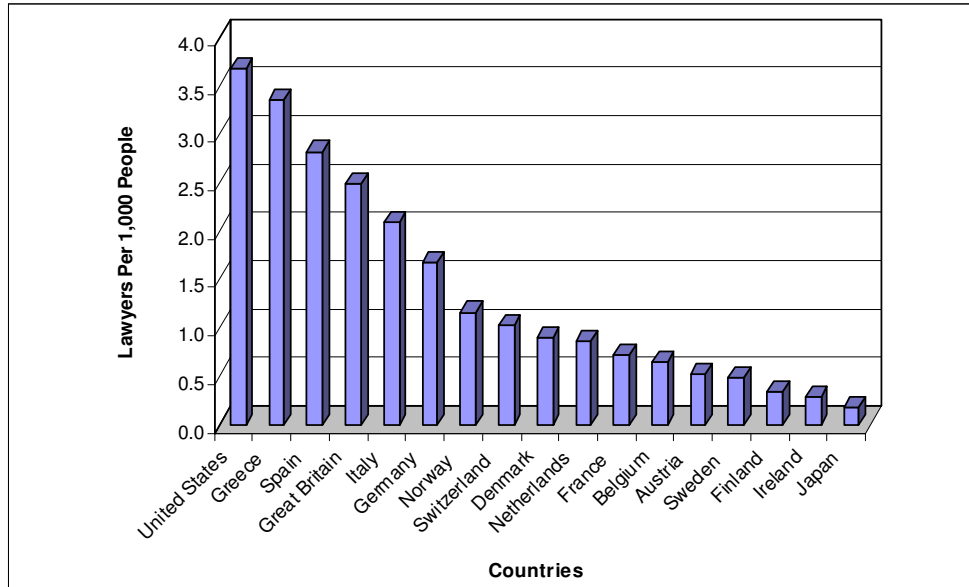
**Figure 10. Percent of Population that Believes in Hell (1999)**



Source: World Values Survey (1999)

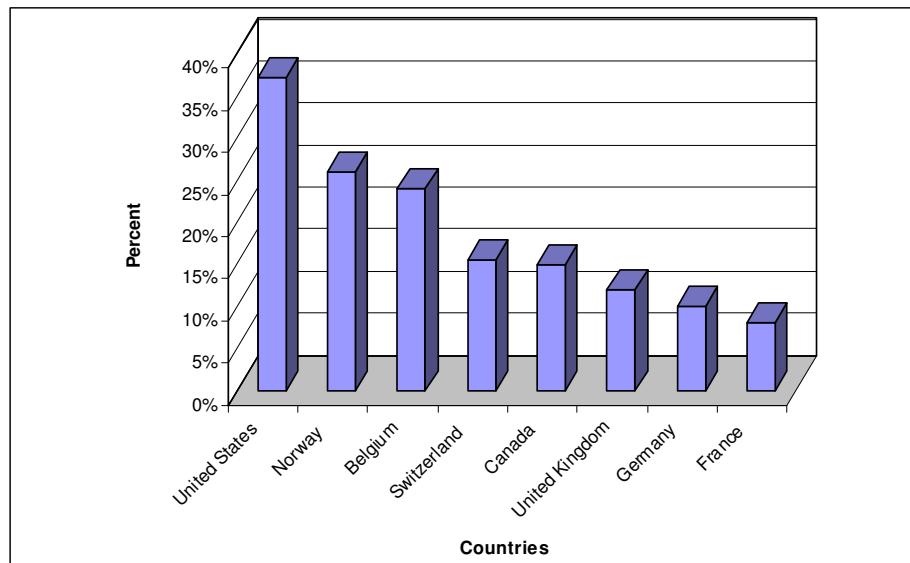


**Figure 11. Lawyers Per Capita**



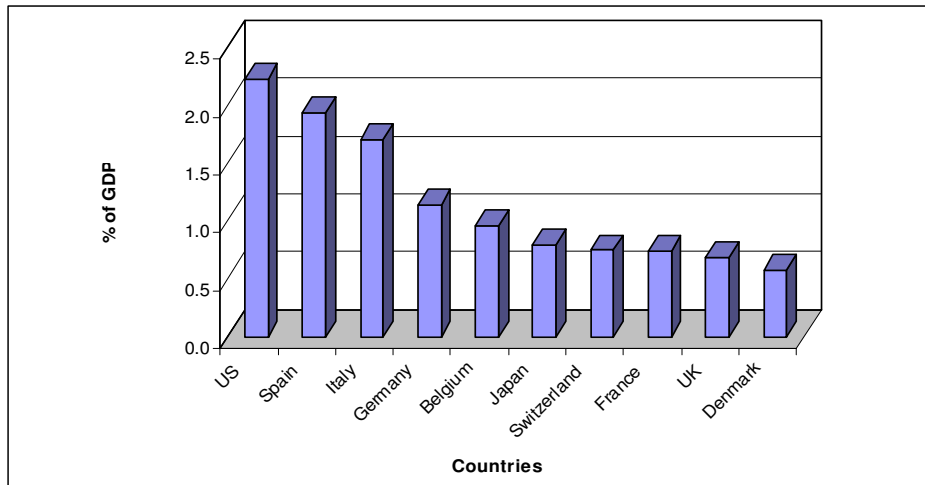
Source: Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe, American Bar Association, Japan Times, CIA's World Factbook

**Figure 12. Percent of National Legislature Comprised of Lawyers**



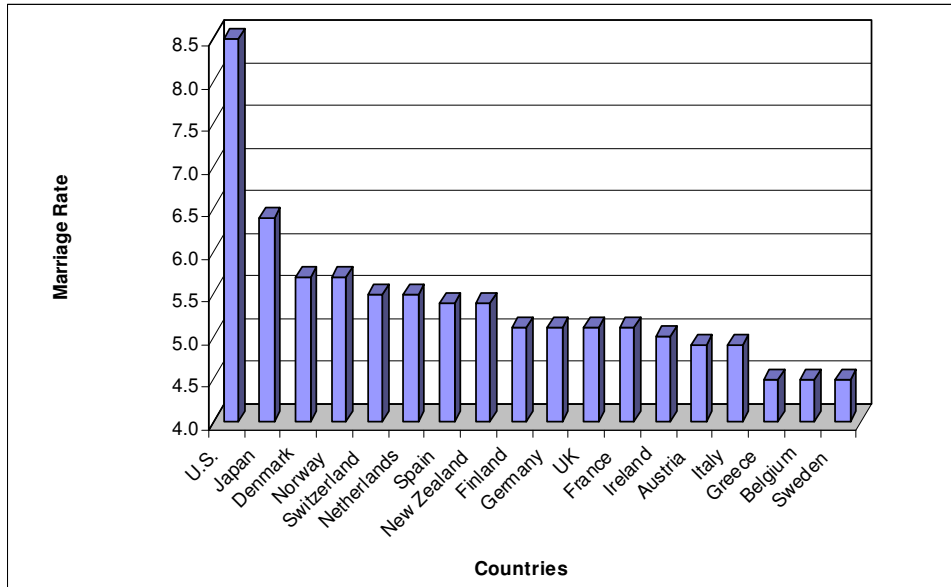
Source: *The American Legal System* by Albert P. Melone and Allan Karnes

**Figure 13. Tort Costs as Percent of GDP (2003)**



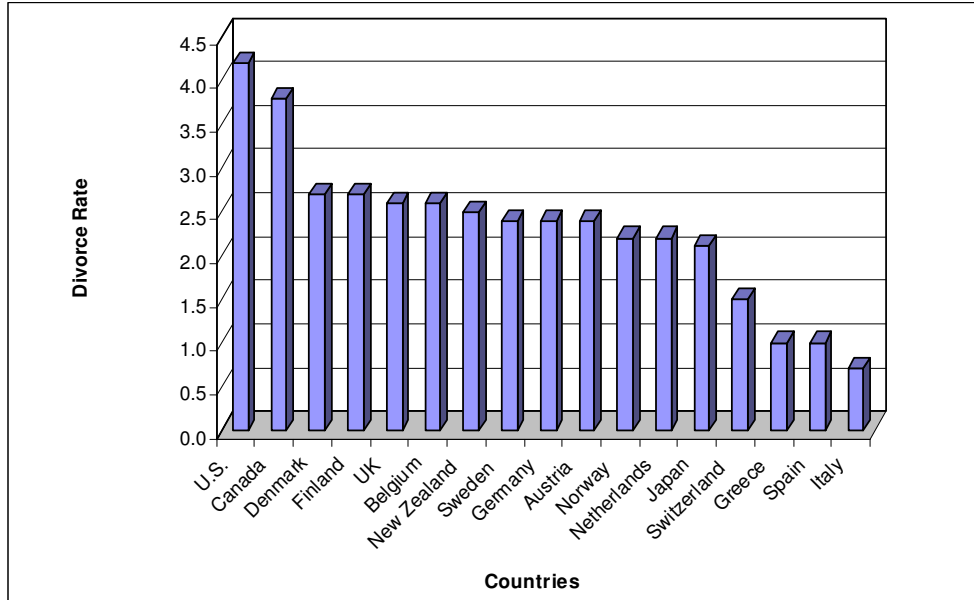
Source: U.S. Tort Costs and Cross-Border Perspectives: 2005 Update, Tillinghast-Towers Perin page 13  
[https://www.towersperrin.com/tillinghast/publications/reports/2005\\_Tort\\_Cost/2005\\_Tort.pdf](https://www.towersperrin.com/tillinghast/publications/reports/2005_Tort_Cost/2005_Tort.pdf)

**Figure 14. Marriage Rate (2000)**



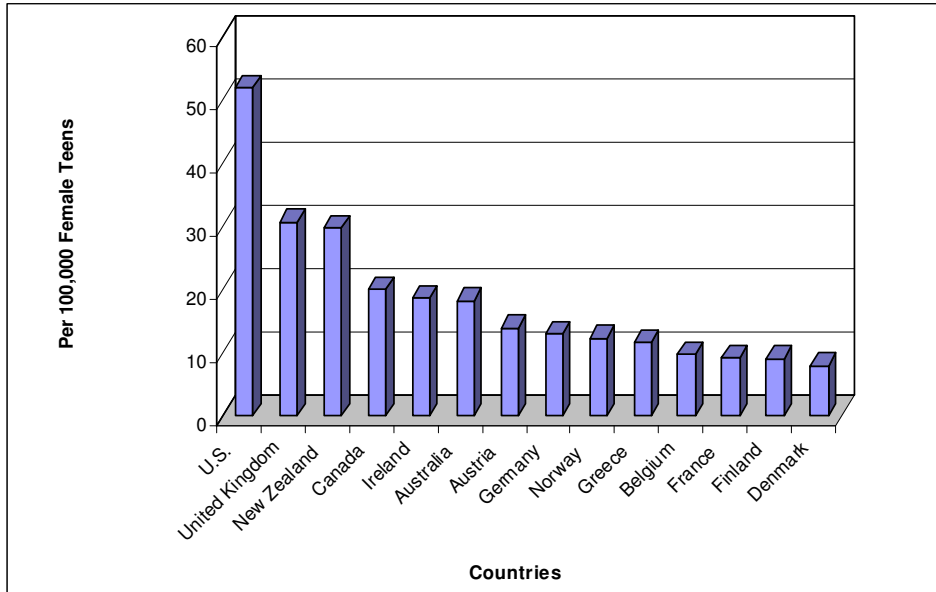
Source: US Census Statistical Abstract: Vital Statistics (1950-2004)  
[http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/vital\\_statistics](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/vital_statistics)

**Figure 15. Divorce Rate (2000)**



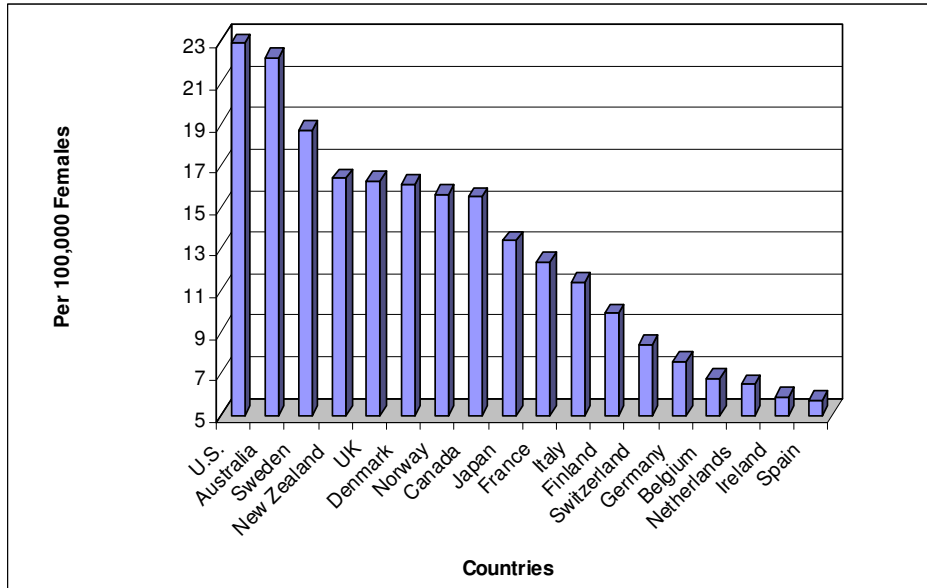
Source: US Census Statistical Abstract: Vital Statistics (1950-2004)  
[http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/vital\\_statistics](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/vital_statistics)

**Figure 16. Teen Birth Rate (2000)**



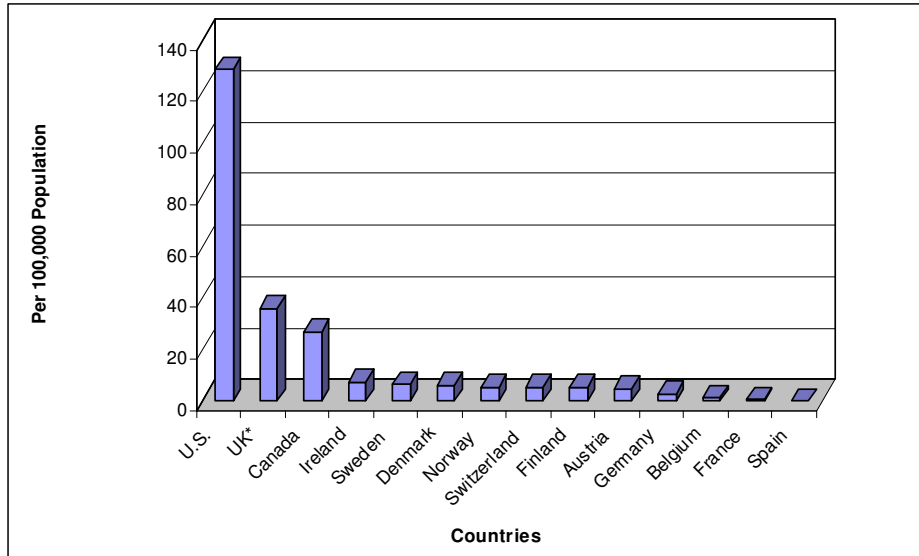
Source: US Census Statistical Abstract: Vital Statistics (1950-2004)  
[http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/vital\\_statistics](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/vital_statistics)

**Figure 17. Abortion Rate (1995)**



Source: United Nations Statistics Division (1999) <http://un.org/esa/population/publications/abt/fabt.htm>

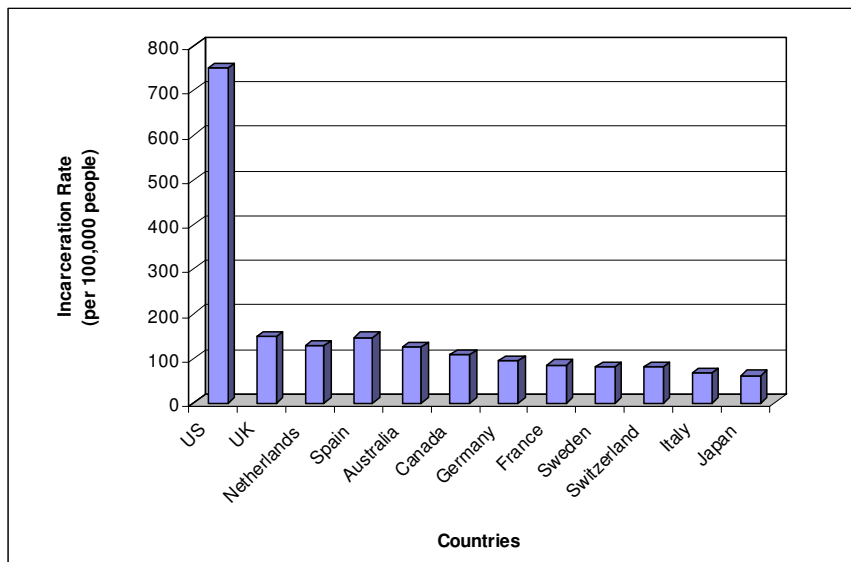
**Figure 18. Reported Cases of Gonorrhea (2000)**



Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2003) <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats02/tables/table.htm>

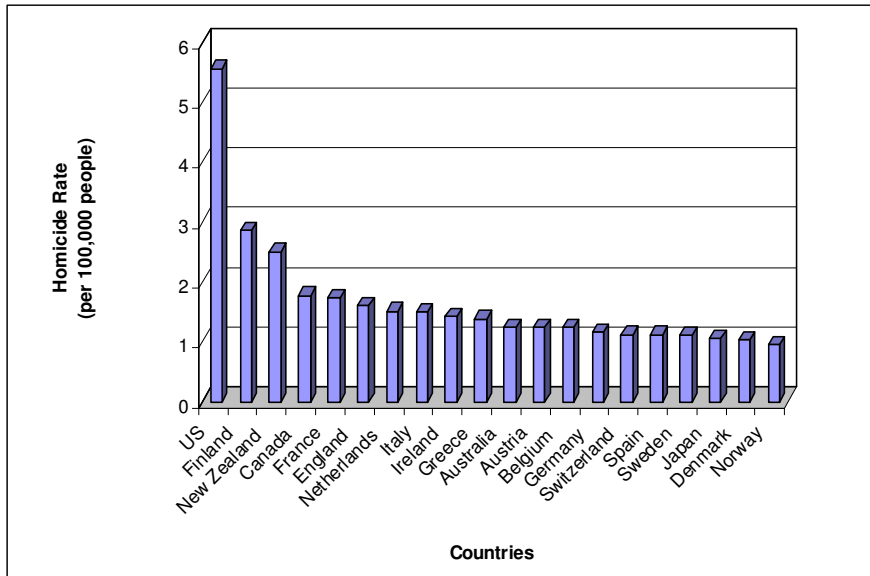


**Figure 19. Incarceration Rates (2005)**



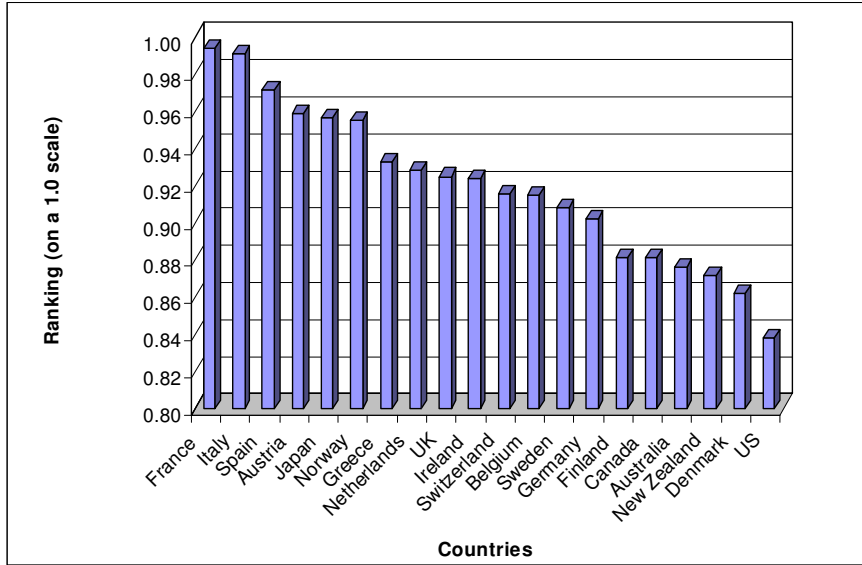
Source: International Centre for Prison Studies 2005 <http://www.prisonstudies.org/>

**Figure 20. Homicide Rates (2001)**



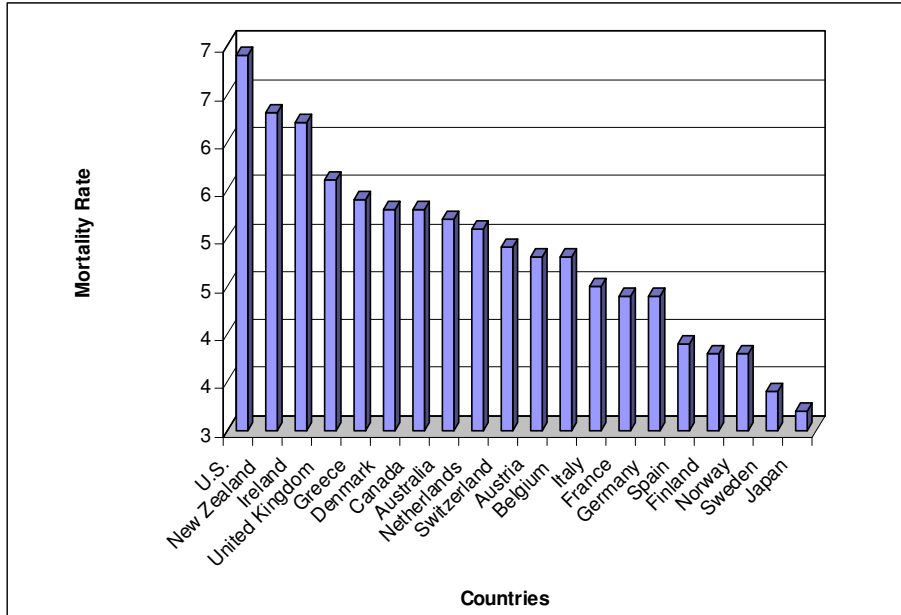
Source: International Comparisons of Criminal Justice Statistics 2001 by Gordon Barclay & Cynthia Tavares with Salley Kenny, Arsalan Siddique & Emma Wilby Issue 12/03 24 October 2003

**Figure 21. Overall Health Performance Ranking**



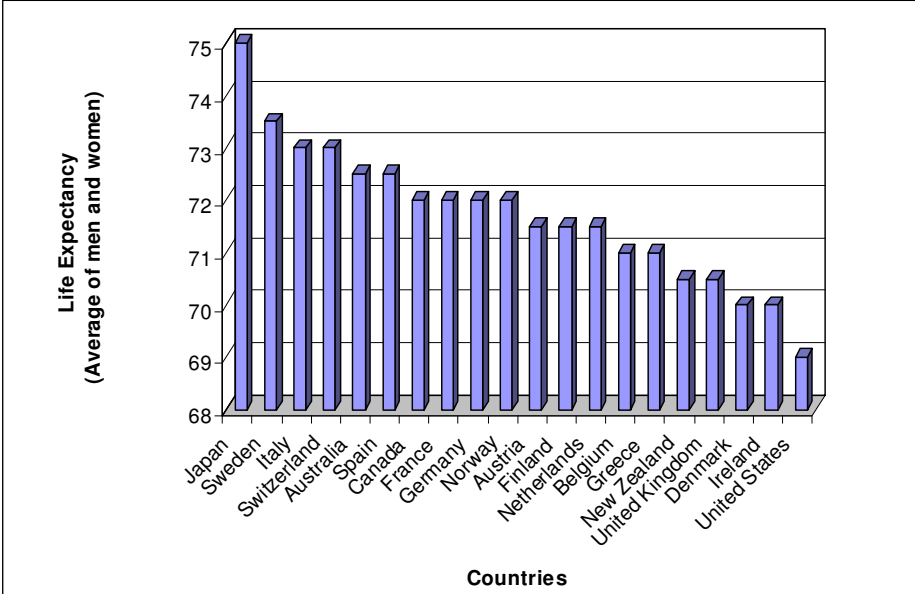
Source: WHO 2000 report: Musgrove, Philip et. al. The World Health Report, 2000: Health Systems, Improving Performance. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2000.

**Figure 22. Infant Mortality Rate**



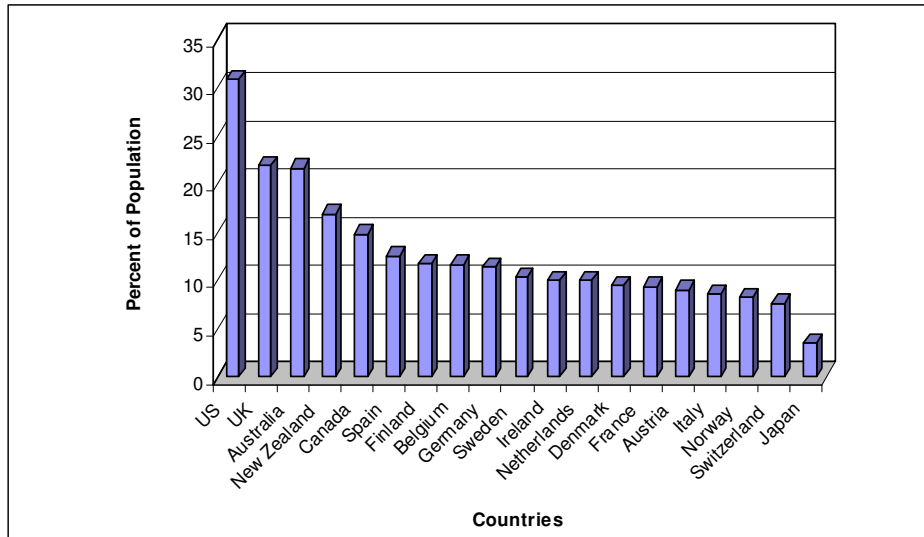
Source: US Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbagg>

**Figure 23. Healthy Life Expectancy**



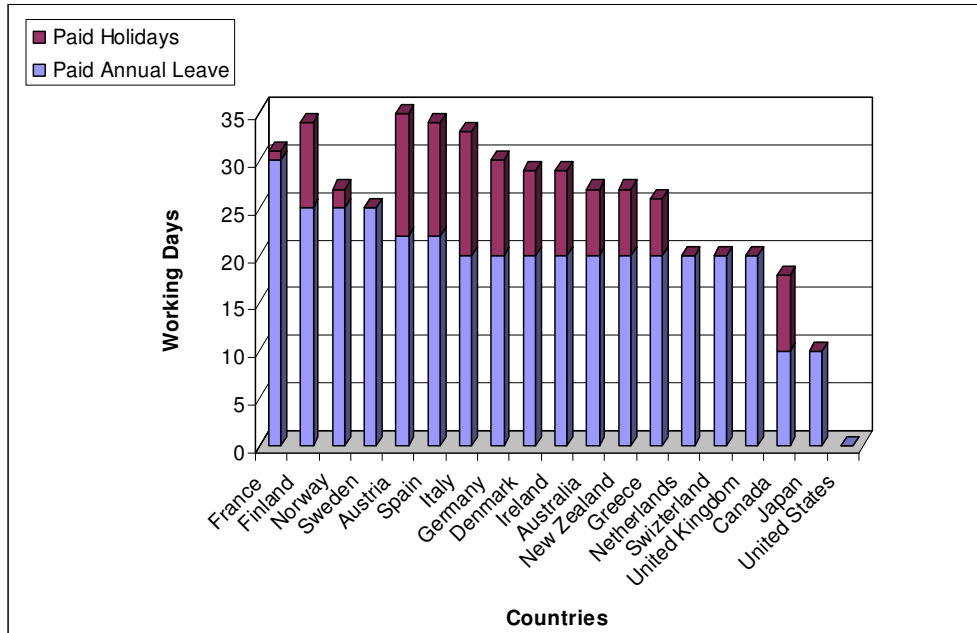
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## 24. Percent of Population Obese (2004)



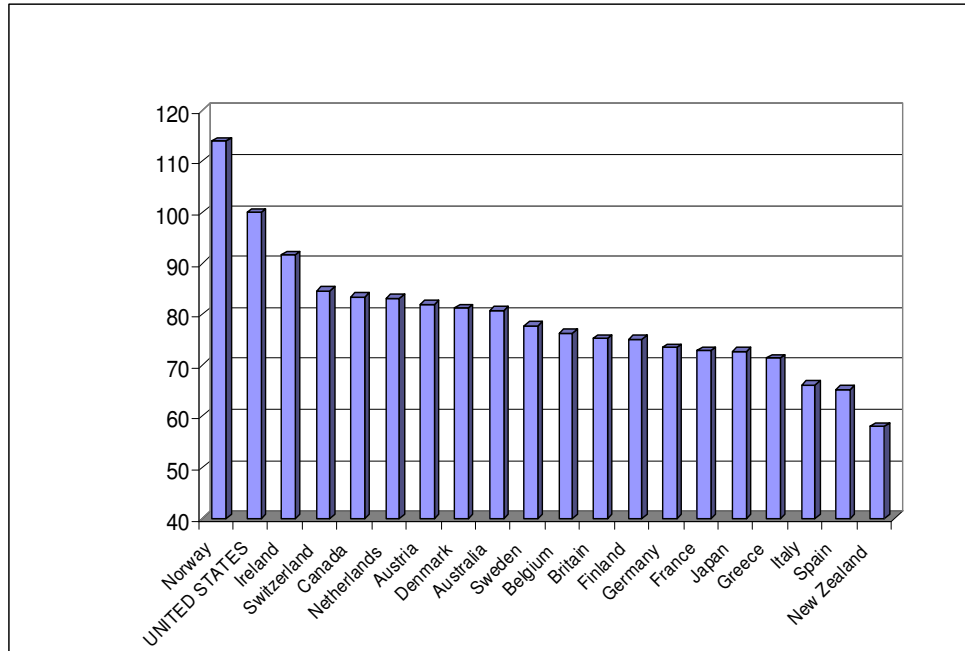
Source: OECD Health Statistics (2004)

**Figure 25. Paid Annual Leave and Holidays by Working Days (2007)**



Source: Rebecca Ray and John Schmitt, "No Vacation Nation," May 2007, Center for Economic and Policy Research, pp.2-3  
[http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/NoVacationNation\\_asofSeptember07.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/NoVacationNation_asofSeptember07.pdf)

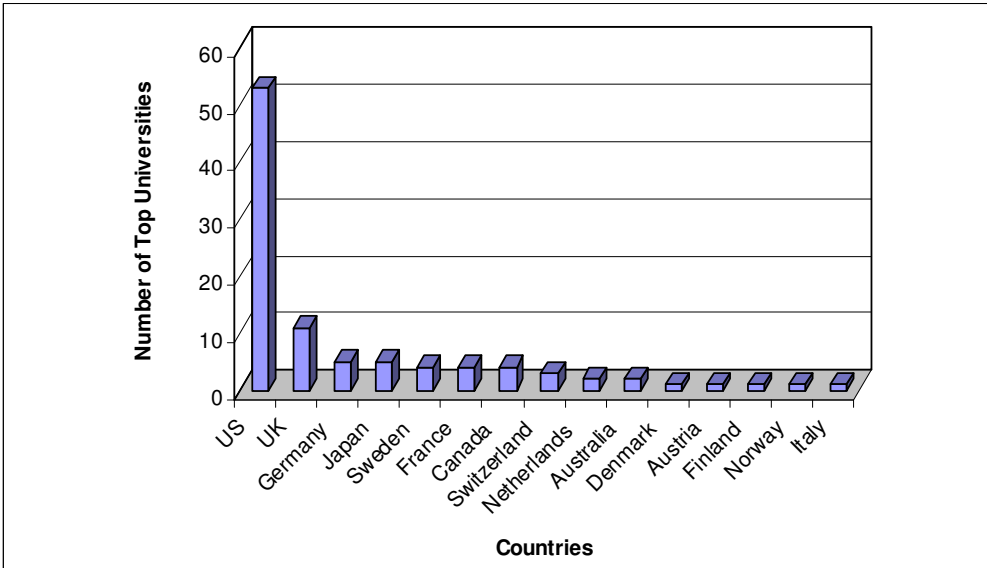
**Figure 26. GDP Per Capita in Purchasing Power Parity (2006)**



Source: Economist "Pocket World in Figures 2009," based on 2006 data from the World Bank, CIA World Factbook, IMF, Taiwan Statistical Data Book and Economist Intelligence Unit

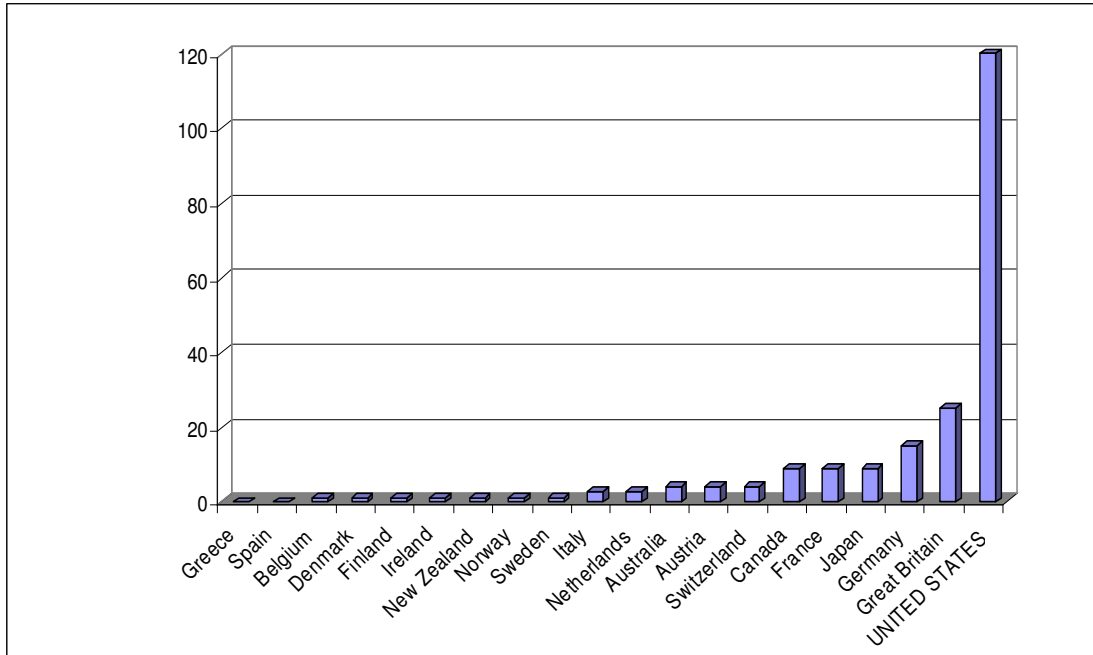


**Figure 27. Number of Top Universities (2005)**



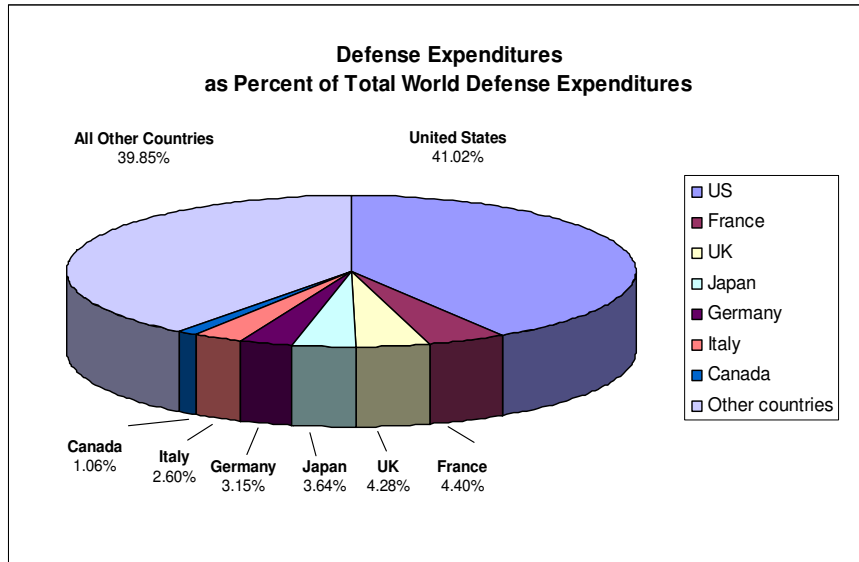
Source: Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (2005)  
[http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/rank/2005/ARWU2005\\_Top100.htm](http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/rank/2005/ARWU2005_Top100.htm)

**Figure 28. Nobel Laureates by Country (1990-2009)**



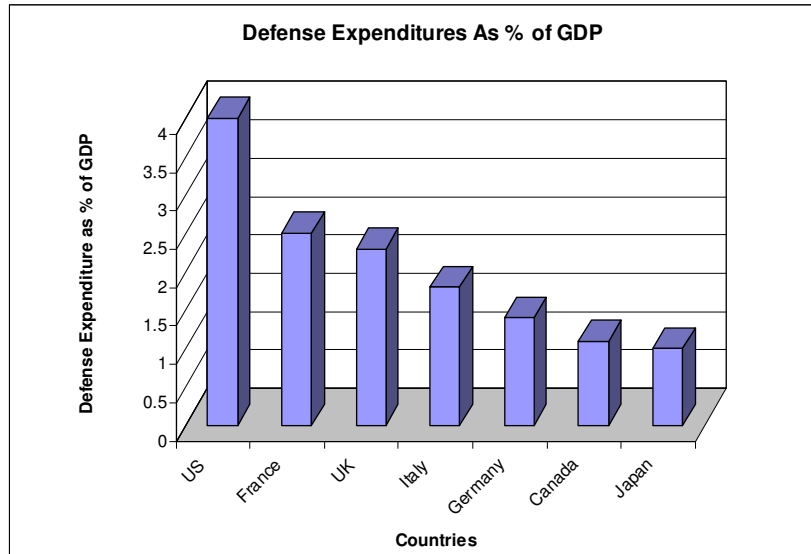
Source: Data compiled from the official website of the Nobel Prize Committee ([http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/lists/all/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/lists/all/))

**Figure 29. Defense Expenditure as Percent of Total World Defense Expenditure**



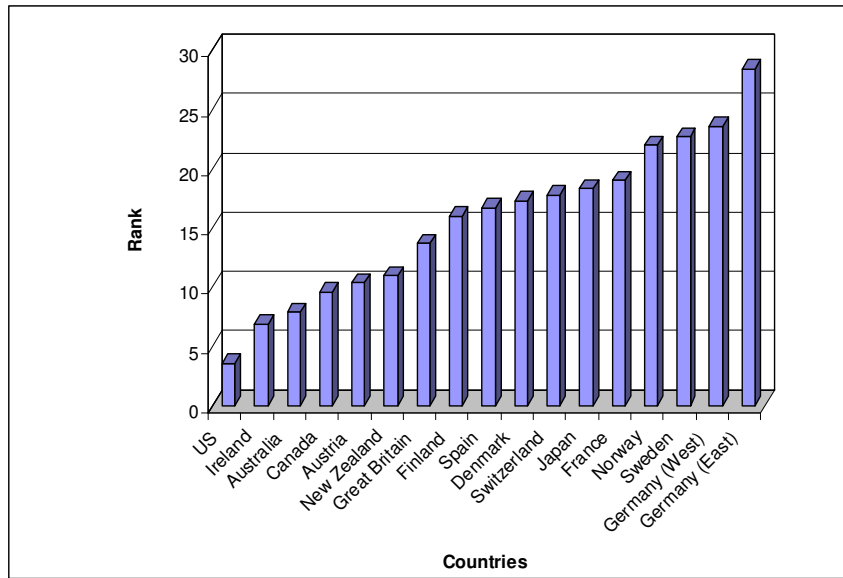
Source: "Comparative Defense Expenditure and Military Manpower, 2003-2005", pg. 406-411, IISS The Military Balance (2007)

**Figure 30. Defense Expenditure as Percent of GDP**



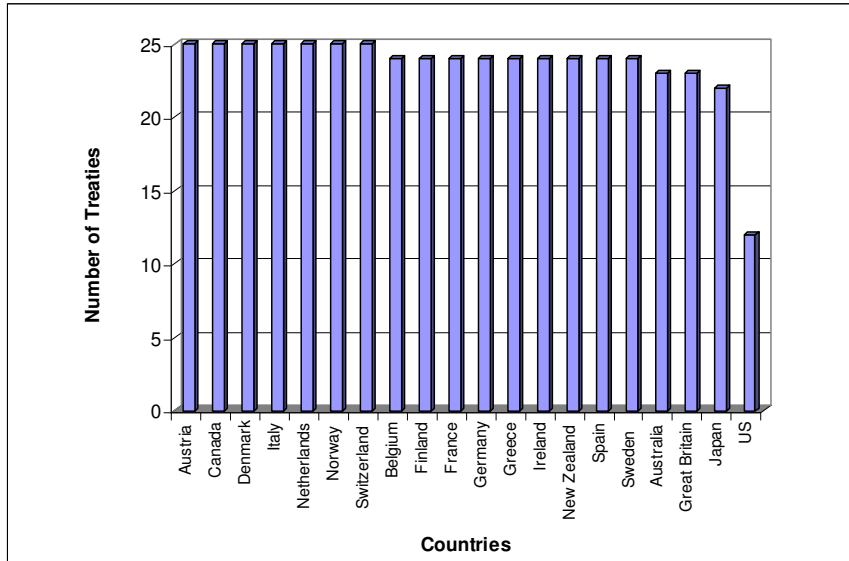
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**Figure 31. Overall Rank of Countries on Domain-Specific National Pride**



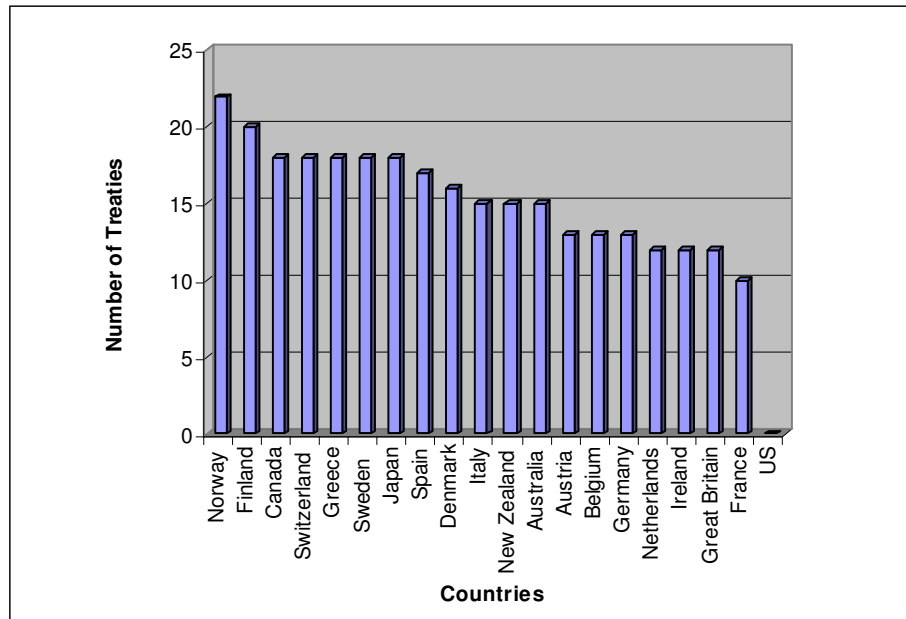
Source: National Pride in Specific Domains by Tom W. Smith, NORC/University of Chicago June 27, 2006. National Opinion Research Center GSS Cross-National Report No. 27

**Figure 32. Number of Treaties Signed Out of 25 Important International Treaties**



Source: "Multilateral Treaties Deposited with the UN Secretary-General."  
<http://treaties.un.org/Pages/Home.aspx?lang=en>

**Figure 33. Number of Treaties Signed Out of 25 Important International Treaties Without Qualifying Clauses**



Source: "Multilateral Treaties Deposited with the UN Secretary-General."  
<http://treaties.un.org/Pages/Home.aspx?lang=en>

## Discussion

From the patterns visible in the tables, several conclusions seem in order:

1. That the United States, compared to 19 other wealthy democratic countries, remains an “exceptional” nation in many fundamental ways.
2. That the United States is among the lowest ranking countries on a number of standard measures of well-being, including health, incarceration, and family stability.
3. That the American social order has a number of strikingly distinctive features, including high levels of religiosity, an unusually prominent role for lawyers and the law, and exceptionally high levels of national pride.
4. That the United States occupies a distinct and, in many ways, unique role in international relations; of the 20 countries under examination, the United States has signed by far the fewest of the 25 international treaties designated by the United Nations of particular import.
5. That the United States, despite its low ranking on many measures of social well-being, exhibits great strength in some critical areas, including scientific innovation and the quality of its research universities.

With research on how to measure social well-being and quality of life a dynamic and growing field, now is a promising time to rethink our conception of what constitutes a healthy and well-functioning society and what types of institutional arrangements best serve human needs. Key questions for future research include the roots of American exceptionalism and the consequences of the distinctive social and economic order of the



United States for its inhabitants. One hypothesis that definitely warrants further investigation is whether some of the very qualities that make the United States exceptional – the relatively weak role of the state, the powerful and relatively unregulated role of the market, and a political system carefully designed to make major state-sponsored social change difficult – may also be causally connected to the generally weak performance of the United States on measures of social well-being and quality of life.

## Bibliography for IRLE Charts

### I. Political Economy (1-6)

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Figure 2. Public Social Expenditure as Percent of GDP (2003)

Source: OECD Factbook 2007, p 193

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Source: World Values Survey (2007) Question #V192

Figure 8. Percent of Population that Attends Church Once a Week (2007)

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Source: *The American Legal System* by Albert P. Melone and Allan Karnes

Figure 13. Tort Costs as Percent of GDP (2003)

Source: U.S. Tort Costs and Cross-Border Perspectives: 2005 Update, Tillinghast-Towers Perin page 13

[https://www.towersperrin.com/tillinghast/publications/reports/2005\\_Tort\\_Cost/2005\\_Tort.pdf](https://www.towersperrin.com/tillinghast/publications/reports/2005_Tort_Cost/2005_Tort.pdf)

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## **III. American Exceptionalism and the Quality of Life: Some Problem Arenas**

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Source: WHO 2000 report: Musgrove, Philip et. al. The World Health Report, 2000: Health Systems, Improving Performance. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2000.

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Source: US Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbagg>

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Sources: Economist "Pocket World in Figures," based on 2006 data from the World Bank, IMF, Taiwan Statistical Data Book and Economist Intelligence Unit.

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