

3

Building Academic Reading Skills

In this section, you will practice distinguishing facts from opinions and evaluating information presented to support a position.

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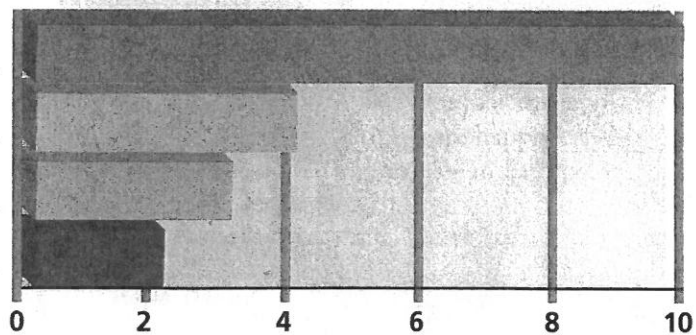
Before You Read

1. Work in small groups. Look at the bar graph. It shows some social trends from the text you will read. Guess where the words from the box go on the graph. Write them on the lines.

depression divorce teenage suicide violent crime

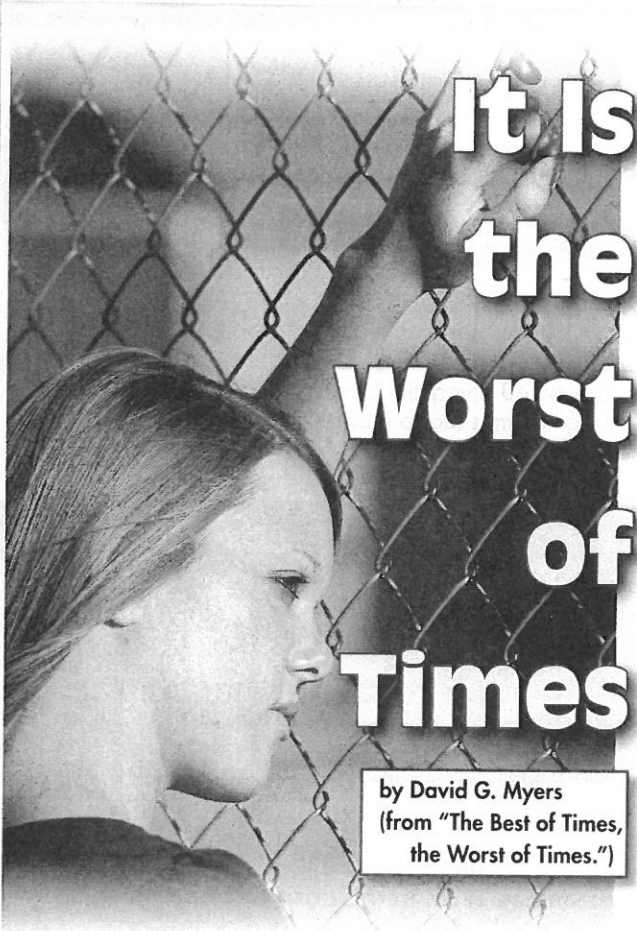
Social Change in the USA

Crime
Suicide
depression
divorce



Times increase since 1960
(since 1930, in the case of depression)





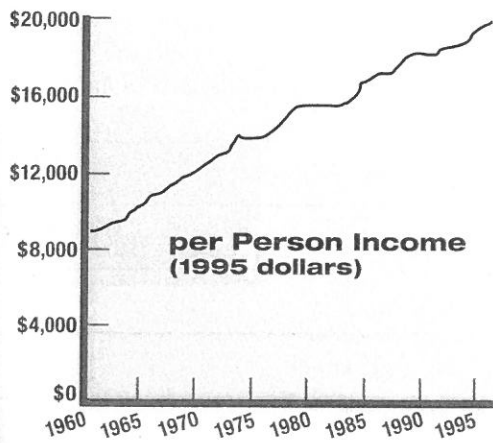
It Is the Worst of Times

by David G. Myers
(from "The Best of Times,
the Worst of Times.")

1 We earn more money, we eat better food, we live in better houses, we have better education, and we are healthier than ever before. We also have faster communication and more convenient transportation. However, for more than 30 years, many developed countries went into a very deep social recession.¹ This recession made the economic recessions look very small in comparison, even though our news and politics focused on the economy. If you fell asleep in 1960 and woke up in the 1990s, would you feel pleased with the cultural change? Here are some other facts that would greet you. As we will see, since 1960:

- Twice as many people are getting divorced.
- Three times as many teenagers are committing suicide.
- There are four times as many violent crimes.
- Five times as many people are in prison.
- Up to ten times more people suffer from depression now than in the 1930s.

¹ recession *n* decline, slowing down



- 2 The National Commission on Civic Renewal put together trends such as these in an index. This index is called the "Index of National Civic Health." It has fallen steadily since 1960. These figures are for the United States, but many other Western countries have experienced similar trends.
- 3 Behind these numbers, this index, are real people with real problems. As Bertrand Russell once said, a person is civilized² when he or she can look at some statistics and cry. Can we cry for all the damaged lives behind these numbers? We have more material goods than ever before, but there are also more people with emptiness in their lives.
- 4 At the center of the social recession are children and young people. Elizabeth Gilman and Yale University psychologist Edward Zigler found that other researchers agree with each other about this. They looked at statistics for child well-being over the last 30 years. They found that the current statistics were the worst ever. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a respected psychologist, described the trends simply. She said that

the situation of children and families in the United States is the greatest internal problem in the country's history. American Psychological Association president Martin Seligman was struck by an interesting fact: He said that every statistic about the material well-being of young Americans is getting better, but that every statistic about their mental well-being is getting worse.

- 5 Can we make the negative social forces clear to people, and then renew our society? And what are the negative forces? How can things have gone so well materially and so poor socially? In other words, these are not the best of times. Robert Frank, an economist at Cornell University, notes that North Americans are spending more hours at work, fewer hours sleeping, and fewer hours with friends and family. Roads are much more busy, people are saving much less money and feeling worried that their jobs might disappear. Similar patterns are happening in other developed countries—in Europe, Australia, and Japan.

Thoughts?

civilized *adj* polite and reasonable, suited to modern, well-organized society

Source: Adapted from Myers, D.G. (2001). The best of times, the worst of times. In *The American paradox: Spiritual hunger in an age of plenty* (pp. 1–12). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

