

Measuring North Carolina's Quality of Life

by Tom Murray

The quality of life has always been an issue in North Carolina, even before there was a state by that name. An early English explorer called what was to become North Carolina "the goodliest land under the cope of heaven," and colonial visitors routinely praised the state's air and fields, its forests and rivers. The area's "quality of life" became known across the ocean, even as European settlements were first springing up.

There is some dispute now about whether North Carolina is still "the goodliest land," but in many ways, the state still has that reputation even today. Vacationers, visitors, lifelong residents, and northern transplants all extol the state's climate and beaches, its scattered towns and friendly people. But at the same time, some North Carolinians know that their average wage is the lowest in the nation and that the state's per capita spending on public education ranks North Carolina in the bottom 20 percent of the nation. Economic and social measurements suggest that North Carolina is a poor state, one in which people would not want to live. Yet the state's population is growing.

What is the quality of life in North Carolina? Why do people seem to like living in a state that ranks low in economic indicators? And how does an investigator measure these factors so as to explain the differences?

In 1968, the Comparative State Elections Project (CSEP) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill polled 7600 people across the country about their political attitudes. At the same time, the CSEP targeted 13 states for an in-depth analysis of persons' opinions towards the state in which they resided. The overall study, considered a landmark survey among social scientists, found that North Carolinians liked where they lived more than people in any other state. In the nationwide sample, 63 percent of the persons polled said they liked their state, but in North Carolina, 82 percent of those questioned liked their home. This percentage ranked North Carolina at the top of the 13 targeted states.

But another type of study, also recognized by social scientists as a definitive report, came to an opposite conclusion. In 1970, Dr. Ben-Chieh Liu used a wide range of quantitative measurements, such as census data, newspaper readership, and state expenditures, to rank the 50 states in a variety of categories such as economic status, education, health, and welfare. He built on the work of earlier analysts of economic and social conditions, including President Eisenhower's

Commission on National Goals and journalist H.L. Mencken's survey, *The Worst American State*. In Liu's cumulative ranking, North Carolina placed 45th among the 50 states.

At first glance, these two studies seem to indicate an inexplicable paradox: a happy and contented population lives in a state that is very poor. But a closer analysis reveals less a paradox than a two-pronged viewpoint of the state's "quality of life." Using different methodologies for quite different purposes, social scientists reached opposite conclusions. When seeking to assess the degree to which an individual is satisfied with his or her condition of life, analysts use public opinion polls. They attempt to quantify feelings and beliefs, such as degree of happiness, rather than economic or social indicators. When trying to determine if a state is rich or poor, investigators measure and compare social conditions. They quantify things or services, such as number of physicians per capita or state expenditure on education, rather than feelings or beliefs.

Policy analysts now base many of their planning decisions on numbers, quantifying the various "qualities of life" with charts and rankings. North Carolina consistently shows up low in economic and social indicators but high in degree of personal satisfaction. Because such a contrast is not easy to understand, a planner might pick one type of study—an attitudinal survey or an economic report—to support a particular viewpoint, rather than incorporating both types of reports into planning decisions. But doing so can skew the policy-making decision process towards a single set of assumptions, and hence a narrowly focused conclusion.

In a 1974 address at a symposium on the changing South, University of North Carolina sociologist John Shelton Reed offered a suggestion for utilizing information from both types of studies. A pro-South commentator, Reed defended the region against the social scientists who have focused only on the poverty indicators. "In my own work with a series of Gallup polls dating back to 1939, I've found...when Americans are asked where they would most like to live, if they could live anywhere, a constant finding is that Southerners like it where they are better than any other Americans, except possibly Californians."¹ Reed went on to explain that things that make individuals happy—climate, clean air, unspoiled forests, wildlife, small town manners, and friendly people—have not been included in the studies focusing on economic and social indicators. Then,

leaving his preference for opinion polls aside, he gave a clue to policy analysts who depend on quantitative assessments for making decisions.

"If we can recognize that workers in what we can call the 'Menckonian' (and Liu) tradition are measuring one thing, and that the people who talk about 'satisfaction' are measuring another," Reed explained to the 1974 gathering at Sweet Briar College in Virginia, "we've gone a long way toward explaining the apparent discrepancies."

An American Tradition

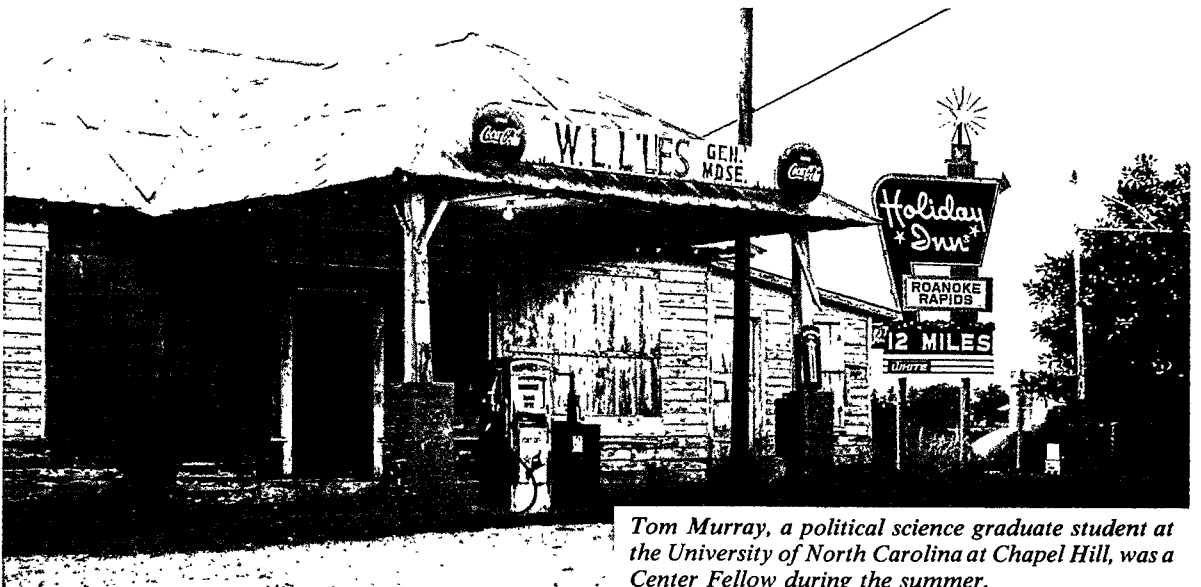
In 1787, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution established a tone for the detailed document that followed. A central purpose for the country, as expressed in that preamble, is a phrase to which presidents and speechmakers have returned for 200 years: "to promote the general welfare." An illusive phrase, "the general welfare" has always fascinated American writers and social scientists, who have searched for ways to divide the concept into more manageable subsets. And this ambition—to categorize and to comment on American life—has been an ongoing enterprise. For some compelling reason, we Americans want to identify and measure our "quality of life."

Examining American life in the 18th and 19th centuries, writers used diaries, letters, essays, and novels rather than quantitative reports. Thomas Jefferson (*Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787), Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy in America*, 1835), and others offered social commentary. Henry David Thoreau and Edith Wharton depicted life in New England; Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser recorded experiences in the Midwest. Novelists George W. Cable and Walter Hines Page rooted their work in the Old South, as did the former slaves who recounted their life stories to the Federal Writers

Project during the Depression (*The Slave Narratives*, 1970). The classics of the American literary tradition might well be considered forerunners to the 20th century's statistically-based examinations of social circumstances.

In this century, as the concept and discipline of sociology took shape, American commentators began considering statistical comparisons in gauging social conditions. The first effort at measuring "quality of life" from this perspective came in 1931 when journalists H.L. Mencken and Charles Angoff used data from such sources as *Statistical Abstract of the U.S. in 1930* and *World Almanac 1931* to evaluate the 48 states and the nation's capital. They grouped the raw data into four categories: 1) wealth (tangible and taxable property per capita, percentage of population paying income tax, average income tax paid, etc.); 2) education (illiteracy, public school enrollment, days of school session, etc.); 3) health (deaths from malaria, infant death rate, supply of dentists and physicians, etc.); and 4) public order (lynchings, death rate from homicides, etc.). They did not use sophisticated mathematical computations to interpret the data. The Northern and Western states got the highest ratings; the ten "worst" states were Southern. North Carolina ranked as high as 31st on the public order scale, but poor showings in the other categories (wealth, 43rd; education, 43rd; and health, 46th) resulted in the state placing 43rd overall.²

While the Mencken/Angoff research design was crude by modern social science standards, their overall conception anticipated the next major effort to establish quality of life criteria. In his 1959 State of the Union message, President Eisenhower proposed establishing a Commission on National Goals to define the proper standards for a national well-being. "If progress is to be steady we must have long-term guides," President Eisenhower said. "The establishment of national goals...would not only spur



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us on to our finest efforts but would meet the stern test of practicality." The President's Commission recommended measuring quality of life on the basis of individual equality, living conditions, agriculture, technology, economic status, education, health and welfare, and state and local government—groupings similar to those used by Mencken/Angoff.

Despite the innovations of the Mencken/Angoff study and recommendations of the Eisenhower Commission, few social scientists went beyond such obvious sources as census data, per capita income, and Gross National Product (GNP) for evaluating American life. Through the early 1960s, the Mencken/Angoff study remained the only significant multi-dimensional comparison of social conditions in different parts of the country.

The tumult of the 1960s, combined with the gradual expansion of American higher education, stimulated a new emphasis in American research and self-examination. Leading scholars echoed the civil rights and anti-war protests with a new wave of studies and books. John Kenneth Galbraith, for example, criticized the prevailing practice of evaluating national well-being from such indicators as the GNP, and social commentators like Michael Harrington attempted to develop new methods of assessing social and-economic discrimination. As political events were influencing academic directions, university disciplines were becoming more specialized and more skewed towards quantitative analysis. A new generation of sociologists, psychologists, economists, statisticians, and even historians were turning to computers as a primary research tool.

Working within this intellectual and social climate, in 1970, Dr. Ben-Chieh Liu produced the first significant comparison of the states since the Mencken/Angoff report. Liu used sophisticated methods of data collection and analysis, including computer technologies, and drew on the Eisenhower

Commission's criteria design to establish the standard for subsequent quality of life studies. As in the Mencken/Angoff report, the Liu study found the Southern states in the bottom ten positions and New England and Western states in the top ten spots. North Carolina achieved its highest ranking, an "average" score, in the "technology" and "individual equality" categories. For the technology rating, Liu calculated the number of scientists per 100,000 people, expenditures on industrial research and development, and other measurements. Individual equality included comparisons of racial and sexual differences in income, unemployment, and education. Liu found the state "substandard" in all other categories, ranking North Carolina (and West Virginia) last in agriculture (median income of farmers and farm managers, number of motor vehicles per farm, acreage value of land, number of tractors per farm, etc.) and 49th in state and local government (population subscribing to newspapers, percentage of voting age population registered and voting, government employee salaries, etc.). Combining all the categories, Liu ranked North Carolina as having the 45th best quality of life in the country.³

As research techniques became more sophisticated, the purposes for the studies become more important. Federal and state governments began to base more kinds of appropriations on the results of such studies. Journalists learned to utilize quality of life survey results. And policy groups started commissioning quality of life studies to assist them in the planning process.⁴

Many of the quality of life studies which compare social conditions began to concentrate on urban areas rather than on states.⁵ These studies rated North Carolina cities both as excellent and as poor places to live. In a 1977 study, for example, urbanologist Ralph H. Todd, using modern data analysis techniques and the traditional Mencken/Angoff categories, examined Charlotte, Greensboro, and 98 other American cities. In his overall results, Todd ranked Greensboro number 5 out of all the cities studied, the only Southern city in the top 9. Charlotte placed in the upper half in most categories and had an overall rating of 19.

Liu, in a metropolitan area analysis similar to his state design, found some North Carolina cities as better places to live than others. The Greensboro/Winston-Salem/High Point area, considered in the "large" category (over 500,000 persons), rated "substandard" overall, 59th out of 65. In the "medium" group (200,000 - 499,999), Liu judged Charlotte "adequate," Raleigh "good," and Fayetteville "substandard," 78th out of 83. In the "small" category (fewer than 200,000), Asheville and Durham ranked "above average," but Wilmington ranked "poor," 85th out of 93.

Greensboro's exceptional performance in Todd's survey and low rating in the Liu study indicate how research design and choice of data components can

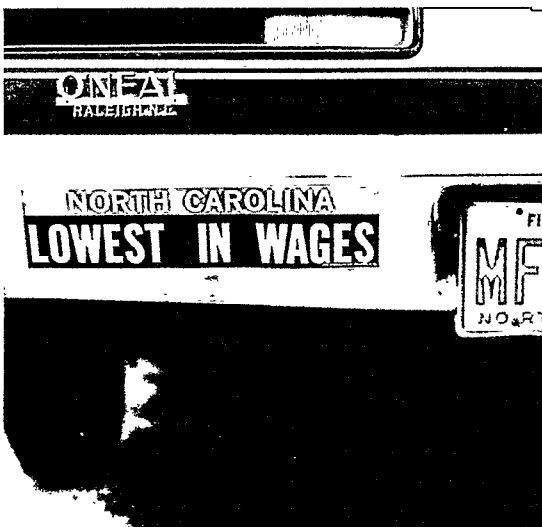


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affect a study's conclusion. Todd studied Greensboro as a separate city, while Liu grouped it with Winston-Salem and High Point. In addition, Todd and Liu looked at different data. For example, in measuring the environment, Todd included the number of days of sunshine while Liu compiled water pollution, noise, and visual pollution factors.

In 1975, another type of study brought out the extreme differences that can emerge from variations in research design, particularly when applied to an area of controversy.

UNC Professor of City and Regional Planning Emil Malizia, in a study for the North Carolina Department of Administration, linked North Carolina's average weekly wages (consistently ranking 50th) to the predominance of labor-intensive industry and to the low percentage of union members in the state (ranking 49th or 50th consistently). Richard F. Pothoff, a research analyst for Burlington Industries, challenged Malizia's conclusions, arguing that other indicators such as the cost of living and the low educational level of workers accounted for North Carolina's low wages, not the number of union members or capital-intensive industries.⁶

Since the 1931 Mencken/Angoff study, then, most of the reports utilizing quantitative analysis techniques have ranked North Carolina and other Southern states low. A 1979 study examined North Carolina exclusively to see how the state may have changed. North Carolina State sociologists Robert L. Moxley and Ronald C. Wimberly, grouping data in the traditional categories of economics, education, health, and social life, compared the state's counties according to size (metropolitan, over 50,000 population; urban, 20,000 to 49,999; semi-rural, 2500 to 19,999; and rural, below 2500). Moxley and Wimberly concluded that quality of life in North Carolina was low relative to other states but had improved faster than rural and semi-rural areas, widening the disparities between city and country living.

A Future Quality of Life

If the economic indicators show that North Carolina is poorer than most other states, why do people like to live here? Reed and others who have analyzed opinion polls suggest that intangibles like small town manners, climate, and family structure tend to compensate for low wages, spending on health and education and other economic and social variables. Economists and planners, on the other hand, tend to favor more growth as a prerequisite for improving North Carolina's low economic factors.

The quality of life studies reveal a certain mystery within the state, a very real set of social conditions that are worse than in many other parts of the country but also a genuine affection for the state as "home." Past

studies, however, cannot anticipate the prospects for improving economic and social conditions without harming the things that cause contentment. The task for policy makers, then, is to understand the validity of both types of polls. A single-minded determination to raise wages is an admirable goal, for example, so long as the long-term effect on the "contentment" factors is also considered. Conversely, nurturing decentralized social structures and cultural opportunities will enhance a love for the state so long as education, health, wages, and the economic factors are also improved.

Alfred Stuart, professor of geography and earth sciences at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, identifies a central question for the future. "Can we have more income, urbanization and government without creating more alienation and dislocation?" A sincere effort to understand both types of quality of life studies may help in formulating some useful answers. □

Footnotes

1. John Shelton Reed, "Summertime and the Livin' Is Easy: The Quality of Life in the South," *The University of North Carolina Newsletter*, 59 (December 1974) and also *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1974.
2. Charles Angoff and H.L. Mencken, "The Worst American State," *The American Mercury*, 24 (September, October, November 1931), pp. 1-16, 177-188, 355-371. It is reprinted in *Democracy in the Fifty States*, edited by Charles Peters and Oliver P. Williams, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971, pp. 7-32.
3. Ben-Chieh Liu, *The Quality of Life in the United States 1970*, Kansas City: Midwest Research Institute, 1973.
4. See Environmental Protection Agency, *The Quality of Life Concept: A Potential New Tool for Decision Makers*, Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973; Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, and Willard L. Rodgers, *The Quality of American Life: Perceptions, Evaluations, and Satisfaction*, New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1976.
5. The four most important studies of urban areas are: Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 1978 HUD Survey on the Quality of Community Life: A Data Book*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978; Michael J. Flax, *A Study in Comparative Urban Indicators: Conditions on 18 Large Metropolitan Areas*, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1972; Ben-Chieh Liu, *Quality of Life Indicators in U.S. Metropolitan Areas: A Statistical Analysis*, New York: Praeger, 1976; Ralph H. Todd, "A City Index: A Measurement of a City's Attractiveness," *Review of Applied Urban Research*, Vol. 5, July, 1977.
6. Emil Malizia, "The Earnings of North Carolinians," Raleigh: The Office of State Planning, Department of Administration, 1975; Richard Pothoff, "A Study of the Determinants of Geographical Earnings Differentials," unpublished paper, a speech delivered at Chapel Hill, 1977.
7. Robert L. Moxley and Ronald C. Wimberly, *Changing Social Structure and Quality of Life in North Carolina*, Raleigh: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, North Carolina State University, 1979.