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UNH Analysis Shows U.S. Ranks Low in Government Spending

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DURHAM, N.H.—The United States ranks 24th out of 29 countries in government spending as a share of GDP and last in social protection spending, according to new research (https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/government-spending) released by the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire that uses data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. In comparison, the U.S. ranks at or near the top in military, healthcare, education and law enforcement spending.

Spending just 7.6% of its GDP on social protection, the U.S. ranks at the bottom of countries for which recent comparable data are available; the median for all 29 countries compared is 16.2%. Government programs within social protection include non-health programs that support those with low incomes and the elderly and disabled, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) and Social Security. A country’s level of social protection spending is the primary driver of its rank in total spending.

The researchers also found that, relative to the 28 other countries, the U.S. spends over three times more than the average per resident on the military, trailing only Israel; 70% more per person on public order and safety, making it the highest spending country in that category; and almost two times more per person on health, also placing it at number one.

“The U.S. is a low-tax, low-spending country relative to other countries, particularly when compared to its fellow higher-income countries,” the researchers said. “The purpose of this report is to put these issues on the table in the context of the worldwide norms. No country has a monopoly on fiscal wisdom but looking to other countries offers the opportunity to assess the merits of different approaches to address the shared and distinctive challenges that all countries face.”

The research was conducted by Michael Ettlinger, founding director of the Carsey School; Jordan Hensley, policy analyst at the Carsey School; and Julia Vieira, a master’s student in public policy. The Carsey School of Public Policy is nationally recognized for research, policy education, and bringing people together for thoughtful dialogue to address important societal challenges. The school develops and facilitates innovative, responsive, and equitable solutions at all levels of government and in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

The University of New Hampshire inspires innovation and transforms lives in our state, nation and world. More than 16,000 students from all 50 states and 71 countries engage with an award-winning faculty in top-ranked programs in business, engineering, law, health and human services, liberal arts and the sciences across more than 200 programs of study. As one of the nation’s highest-performing research universities, UNH partners with NASA, NOAA, NSF and NIH, and



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