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World's Happiest Countries? Social Democracies

By Craig Brown

[A new report](#) released by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) shows that happiness levels are highest in northern European countries. Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands rated at the top of the list, ranking first, second and third, respectively.

The US? As expected, the United States failed to make the top 10 but ranked among the highest for obesity and child poverty. Americans spend less than half the amount of time eating as the French, but have three times the obesity rate. "This tells us something about slow food, I think," Simon Chappele, editor of the report said in an interview with NPR.

The report also showed the United States has the lowest mean age for women when they first gave birth, at 25.1 years old.

Also, the United States still ranks among the highest for child poverty rates, with one in five children living in poverty. This was only exceeded in Poland, Mexico and Turkey.

And Forbes Magazine [reports](#):

World's Happiest Places

A new report reveals where people feel most positive about their lives

By Lauren Sherman

Where in the world do people feel most content with their lives?

According to [a new report](#) released by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), a Paris-based group of 30 countries with democratic governments that provides economic and social statistics and data, happiness levels are highest in northern European countries.

Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands rated at the top of the list, ranking first, second and third, respectively. Outside Europe, New Zealand and Canada landed at Nos. 8 and 6, respectively. The U.S. did not crack the top 10. Switzerland placed seventh and Belgium placed tenth.

The report looked at subjective well-being, defined as life satisfaction. Did people feel like their lives were dominated by positive experiences and feelings, or negative ones?

To answer that question, the OECD used data from a Gallup World Poll conducted in 140 countries around the world last year. The poll asked respondents whether they had experienced six different forms of positive or negative feelings within the last day.

Some sample questions: Did you enjoy something you did yesterday? Were you proud of something you did yesterday? Did you learn something yesterday? Were you treated with respect yesterday? In each country, a representative sample of no more than 1,000 people, age 15 or older, were surveyed. The poll was scored numerically on a scale of 1-100. The average score was 62.4.

Why did the northern European countries come out looking so good? Overall economic health played a powerful role, says Simon Chapple, senior economist from the Social Policy Division of the OECD, which put together the report.

While the global economic crisis has taken a toll on every nation, the countries that scored at the top still boast some of the highest gross domestic product per capita in the world. Denmark, which got the highest score, is not only a wealthy country, it's also highly productive, with a 2009 GDP per capita of \$68,000, according to the International Monetary Fund. The United States' GDP per capita, by contrast, is \$47,335. Though the U.S. got an above-average score of 74, it did not break the top 10.

Wealth alone does not bring the greatest degree of happiness. Norway has the highest GDP per capita on the list--\$98,822--yet it ranked ninth, not first. On the other hand, New Zealand's happiness level is 76.7 out of 100 on the OECD list, but its 2009 GDP per capita is just \$30,556.

According to a 2005 editorial, published in the British Medical Journal and authored by Dr. Tony Delamothe, research done in Mexico, Ghana, Sweden, the U.S. and the U.K. shows that individuals typically get richer during their lifetimes, but not happier. It is family, social and community networks that bring joy to one's life, according to Delamothe.

The OECD data shows that another important factor is work-life balance. While Scandinavian countries boast a high GDP per capita, the average workweek in that part of the world is no more than 37 hours. In China, which got a low score of just 14.8, the workweek is 47 hours and the GDP per capita is just \$3,600.

Low unemployment also contributes to happiness. "One thing we know for sure," says the OECD's Chapple, "not having a job makes one substantially less satisfied." Denmark's unemployment rate is just 2%, according the C.I.A.'s World Factbook. Norway's is just 2.6%. The Netherlands: just 4.5%. Many economists concur that a 4% unemployment rate reflects a stable economy. The U.S. unemployment rate is currently 9%.