

# **Effects of policy interventions on the happiness of targeted people: A research synthesis using an on-line findings-archive**

**Paper presented at the 30th NISPAcee annual conference, Bucharest, Romania June 2-4  
2022**

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## **Abstract**

In this presentation we present a research synthesis on the observed effects of public policies using World Database of Happiness (WDH) to introduce a practical solution for extracting evidence which could be used by policy makers and researchers. We first present an overview of the rising interest in happiness research during the last two decades and highlight the role of happiness as a policy aim. Then we explain the aims and structure of World Happiness Database as an evidence source. Using a simple summary table and links to relevant pages in the World Happiness Database, we present 35 correlational findings derived from 17 studies to overview effects of policy interventions on happiness in diverse policy areas and we discuss how these findings may be used by researchers and policy makers. The findings suggest that policy interventions should take influential contextual and demographic variables into account as evidenced by research findings, and increased individualization of programs may provide more effective results in increasing the happiness within the target groups.

## **Points for Practitioners**

The findings presented in this paper suggest that policy interventions should take influential contextual and demographic variables into account as evidenced by research findings, and increased individualization of programs may provide more effective in increasing the happiness within the target groups. World Happiness Database can be used as a source of scientific evidence by researchers and policy-makers.

**Keywords:** Happiness, policy intervention, subjective well-being, World Database of Happiness

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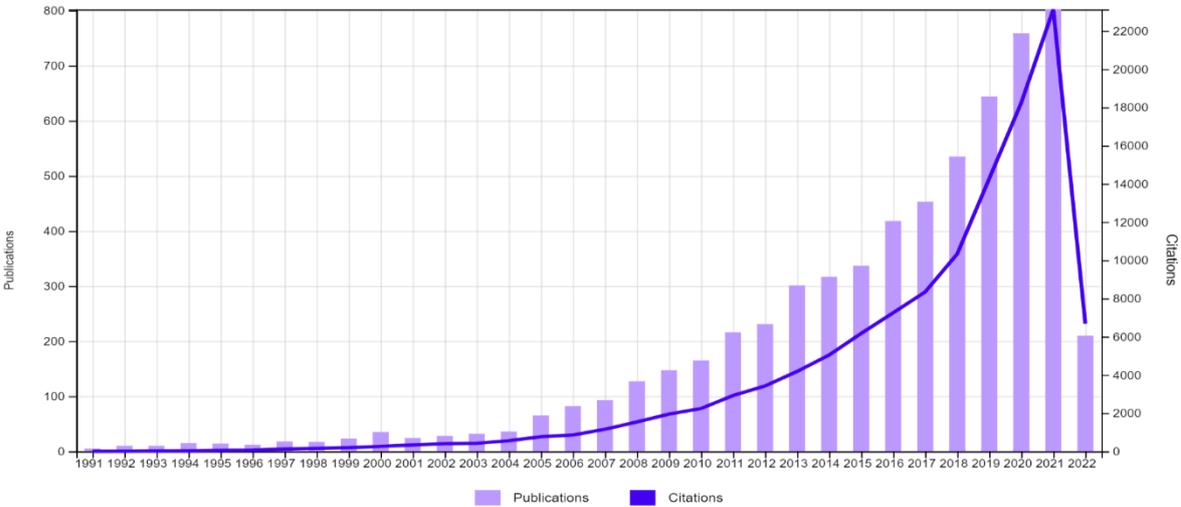
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# 1. Introduction

Happiness is a universal human feeling, and the quest for a happy life is deeply rooted in philosophical and political thought. For example in antiquity, Epicurus, Zeno, Aristotle, and Democritus have already developed sophisticated ideas about achieving a happy life (Geuss, 2002; Kesebir & Diener, 2009). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, pursuit of happiness, happiness of all, or *bonheur de commun* was considered a fundamental right and ultimate aim of the government, as manifested in the Federalist Papers, American Declaration of Independence, and the French Declaration of Human and Civic Rights. The centrality of happiness as a policy aim, which can be summarized as “greatest happiness for the greatest number”, was reconfirmed by Bentham’s utilitarianism, which forms the philosophical basis of liberal policy making (Veenhoven, 2010). Much later, The Beveridge Report, which is at the heart of welfare reforms in Britain, has boldly claimed that “...the object of government in peace and in war is not the glory of rulers or of races, but the happiness of the common man.” (Beveridge, 1942, p. 171).

Despite its recognition as a fundamental policy goal, direct measurements investigating the effects of policies on the experienced happiness of individuals and societies has remained limited in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since happiness was deemed to be subjective and non-measurable, utility of Bentham defined as “sum of pleasures and pains” was replaced by Samuelson’s observable “revealed preferences” on individual consumer level (Duncan, 2005), and then by measurable formulations of Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as ultimate policy goals (Oishi & Diener, 2014). Thus, proxy indicators of happiness, rather than happiness itself, were used by governments to guide policies through much of 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite early warnings pointing to the problematic relationship between income and happiness (Easterlin, 1974; Scitovsky, 1976) and availability of multiplicity of indexes and methods for measuring subjective happiness (Hagerty et al., 2001; Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006).

However, during the last two decades, the number of happiness studies in general, and in particular, studies that analytically explore the consequences of public policies on the happiness of people have sharply increased. This rising tide of happiness research can easily be seen on Figure 1, which shows the results of a search string “(happiness OR life satisfaction OR subjective well-being) AND policy” on Web Science (08/05/2022) from multiple disciplines, producing 6181 publications.



**Figure 1 Distribution of publications and citations between 1975 to 2022 (6181 publications)**

It could be argued that the reinvention of happiness as a policy goal was fuelled by theoretical and methodological advances in behavioural economics (Bruni & Porta, 2016; Easterlin, 2001; Frey & Stutzer, 2012; Layard, 2006), sociology (Veenhoven, 1991, 2004, 2010), and psychology (Diener & Ryan, 2009; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Oishi & Diener, 2014), and the criticisms of official statistics solely based on GDP in capturing the real well-being of the individuals and the societies (Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., & Fitoussi, 2009). Accordingly, the publications in happiness research is mainly dominated by afore mentioned disciplines.

This interest in happiness was also embraced by politicians, bureaucrats, and international organizations (O'donnell et al., 2014). For example, In parallel to the development of evidence based policy in the UK, the UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit prepared a review on happiness research in order to explore how this research may be used by policy makers in 2002 (Donovan & Halpern, 2002); it was French President Nicholas Sarkozy who asked Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean Paul Fitoussi to create a Commission to recommend a measure of progress that takes into account environmental degradation and quality of life, while Conservative leader David Cameron has argued that it was time to focus on general well-being rather than just GDP (Dolphin & Lewis, 2009; Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., & Fitoussi, 2009). In 2007, Beyond GDP initiative led by the European Council, European Parliament, Club of Rome, OECD and WWF held a high-level conference with 650 delegates from 50 countries to discuss appropriate measures of progress, true wealth, and well-being of nations which took environment and happiness of the citizens into account (OECD, 2007). In 2011, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution titled "Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development" defining pursuit of happiness as a fundamental human goal and invited members countries to "pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being in development with a view to guiding their public policies" (United Nations, 2011). A year later, a high-level meeting hosted by Royal Government of Bhutan was organized by the UN to "to create a new economic paradigm – one that has as its goal human happiness and the wellbeing of all life on earth" as declared by Jigmi Y. Thinley, the prime minister of Bhutan (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012). In a second resolution which declared the International Day of Happiness, the UN once again emphasized "the importance of their [happiness and well-being as universal goals] recognition in public policy objectives" (United Nations, 2012). First flagship report of OECD Better Life initiative titled *How's Life: Measuring Well-being* was published in 2011 (OECD, 2011), followed by guidelines for measuring well-being in 2013 (OECD, 2013).

Answering these calls for the recognition of happiness as a policy goal, many governments and statistics agencies around the world has launched initiatives to collect data on happiness. Today, there is a mounting pool of evidence supported by research findings across many disciplines and by rich data sets from across the globe, which could be used by the governmental agencies and the policy makers who aim to improve happiness of their respective populations. In this context there is a rising interest in effects of specific public policy interventions on subjective well-being and in particular on happiness of individuals and communities.

However, although the literature in this field is expanding rapidly, public policies are scattered around numerous policy fields and research syntheses on the effects of specific policy interventions on happiness is still scarce. Extracting concrete evidence to guide public policies to improve happiness is not an easy task. Aside from varying measurement instruments based on different conceptualizations of happiness, there are many variables related to happiness which may produce different results in different contextual settings, on both inter-personal level and

inter-temporal levels (O'donnell et al., 2014; Odermatt & Stutzer, 2017). In addition, it is hard to keep up with new research findings with traditional and static methods of policy reviews such as printed systematic reviews and meta-analysis (Veenhoven, 2020). Thus, it is important to seek evidence in multiple contexts and multiple research strategies including cross-sectional, comparative, longitudinal, and experimental studies.

Within this frame, our aim in this presentation is to present a research synthesis on the observed effects of public policies using World Database of Happiness (WDH) to introduce a practical solution for extracting evidence which could be used by policy makers and researchers. Hopefully, we also wish to stimulate public administration scholars to pay more attention to happiness research, since only 1,6% of the above-mentioned publications belonged to the field of public administration.

## **2. World Database of Happiness as an Evidence Source**

WDH is an on-line findings archive which collects happiness related studies from multiple disciplines. It dates back to 1980s with Ruut Veenhoven's earlier studies on happiness. The database is unique with its focus on happiness and its approach in presenting study results. The primary aim of the database is to provide empirical evidence to support policies. Access to the archive is freely available on the Internet, at <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>. The archive employs a particular definition of happiness described as "subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole", based on Veenhoven's prior distinctions on types of satisfaction and components of happiness (Veenhoven, 2004). The studies which use an acceptable measure of happiness are included in the database. The distributional and correlational findings of the papers are entered and classified based on geographical units, population, topics, methods, or variables. These findings are described in a standard format and terminology on electronic 'finding pages' in the WDH. Each finding page has a unique internet address, and the pages are sorted by subjects in collections. Findings may also be structured as reports, such as specific nations or topics. As of 2021, the database covered over 15.500 publications (including grey literature), 2880 measures of happiness, and over 23.000 distributional and correlational findings each. Detailed information about the construct and the architecture of the database can be found in Veenhoven (2020).

Using WDH offers a number of advantages. For example, the database employs specifically determined definitions and measurements of happiness which enables enhanced consistency and comparability among results. Second, the database provides fast, easily understandable, and distilled presentations of findings for screening, with a possibility to delve into more detail and information about the publications using links. Third, the database is based on a dynamic coding system which enable customized research; and fourth new findings can be easily added to the database, which is not an option in traditional reviews. These qualities of the database make it an alternative source of scientific evidence for researchers and policy makers. In the following sections, we provide an example of a research synthesis about the effects of policy interventions on happiness of target populations to show how the database can be used to derive evidence for policies.

## **3. Methodology**

In this research synthesis, we use available empirical research findings in the WDH about the effects of policy interventions on happiness. As of 2022, there are 80 studies about the policy effects on happiness in the corresponding bibliography section of the database. The policies include examples from various fields such as

economics, family policies, health care, and foreign aid. So far, 17 of these studies, which meet definitional and methodological requirements, were entered in the section on “policy interventions” in the correlational findings collection. 17 studies included in this study yields 35 correlational findings, since some of the studies report more than one correlational finding. The studies included in the synthesis are shown in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, these studies cover different types of policies, regions, and time periods which enable to see the consequences of policies in different temporal and spatial contexts. Some of the studies focus on singular countries such as Taiwan, Germany, Canada or the US, while some of them examine country groups from the EU, OECD, or selected countries around the world. The author names in the last column of the table are linked to study pages in the WDH. Detailed information about the method, measurement, and correlational findings of the studies can be found following these links.

**Table 1**  
**List of included studies**

<b>Population/Place/Time/N</b>	<b>Policy</b>	<b>Measure(s) of Happiness</b>	<b>Studies</b>
Elderly/Taiwan/ 1989-2003 N=4049	Change in insurances	Happiness	<a href="#">Keng &amp; Wu (2014)</a>
0-11 year old children of two-parent families/Quebec/ 1994-2003 N=14555	Change in child care policy	Happiness	<a href="#">Baker et al.(2008)</a>
General public/Canada/ 1998-2005/ N=29000	Change in child care policy	Overall Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Brodeur &amp; Connoly (2013)</a>
New parents/Germany/2003-2005 or 2008-2010 N=1113	Change in parental leave policy	Overall Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Myrskylä &amp; Margolis (2013)</a>
Low income home buyers/USA/1992-93 N=283	Homeownership support	Overall Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Rohe &amp; Stegman (1994)</a>
18+ aged unemployed single mothers/ UK/2003-2008 N=3320	In-work benefits	Overall Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Dorset &amp; Oswald (2014)</a>
General public/Canada/1985-1998/USA/1973-1998 N= 100663 CA N= 36421 USA	Tobacco taxation policy	Happiness	<a href="#">Gruber &amp; Mullainathan, CA (2006)</a>  <a href="#">Gruber &amp; Mullainathan, USA (2006)</a>
Earlier benefactors and non-benefactors of a welfare program/ Colombia/2010 N= 668	Poverty relief policy	Happiness Life satisfaction	<a href="#">Galama et al. (2017)</a>
General public/16 EU countries/1983-2013 N= 853482	Austerity policy	Overall life satisfaction	<a href="#">Brown et al. (2018)</a>
Working population/ Germany/ 2014-2016 N= 2944	Minimum wage policy	Overall life satisfaction	<a href="#">Gülal &amp; Adam (2018)</a>
General public/41 states in USA/2010-2013 N= 10000	Change in minimum wage	Happiness	<a href="#">Flavin &amp; Shufeldt (2017)</a>
Working age urban population/ China/ 2008 N= 1486	Job protection policy	Happiness	<a href="#">Akee et al. (2018)</a>

General public/ Germany/ 1992-2004 N= 6442	Workfare policy	Overall life satisfaction	<u>Crost (2016)</u>
Adult general public/OECD nations/2006-2008 N= 78972	Parental support policy	Happiness	<u>Glass et al. (2016)</u>
General public/ Germany/ 1984 – 2013 N= 4484400	Income redistribution	Overall life satisfaction	<u>Cheung (2018)</u>
Participants in a subsidized business start-up program and controls./Germany/ 2013-2016 N= 2452	Workfare policy	Overall life satisfaction	<u>Caliendo &amp; Tübbicke (2019)</u>
General public/ 33 nations/ 1989 – 2012 N= 112876	Income redistribution	Overall life satisfaction	<u>Cheung (2018a)</u>

#### 4. Effects of Policy Interventions on Happiness

The correlational findings are presented in Table 2 in this section. The table presents types of policy interventions and findings in terms of whether it is cross-sectional, longitudinal, or experimental. In this table, ‘+’ symbol represents positive correlations while negative correlations are signified by ‘-’ symbol. When statistically significant, plus and minus signs are given in bold style. The meanings of the symbols are given under Table 2. Each of the signs are linked to a finding page in the World Database of Happiness, where full details of the research finding can be found. This way of presentation allows us to condense the results of researches in a tabular format while allowing the readers to reach in depth details in a simple way.

**Table 2**  
**Findings on effects of policy interventions on the happiness of targeted people (35 findings)**

Type of policy/effected population	Research method		
	Cross-sectional	Longitudinal	Experimental
<b>Family</b>			
Child-care support		+ -	- +
Reduced working hours for parents	+ +		
Flexible work hours for parents	+ +		
Paid sick leave for mothers	+ +		
<b>Economy</b>			
Austerity	+ -		
Job protection	+		
Home ownership			+
Minimum wage		+ + +	+ +
Redistribution of incomes	+	+ - +	
Poverty relief	+ +		
In-work benefits			+ -
Workfare		+ -	+ -
<b>Health Care</b>			
Tobacco taxation	+ -		
General health insurance		+ -	

#### Meaning of signs-

- + = positive and significant
  - + = positive, non-significant
  - 0 = unrelated
  - = negative, not significant
  - = negative, significant
  
  - +|- = positive in one subgroup, negative in another
  - +/+ = positive on two measures of happiness
  - +|- = positive before control, negative after
- 

As seen in Table 2, the findings show that policies in diverse fields indeed affect happiness of the target populations. However, these effects may both be positive or negative among the sections within the target population. Looking at the table, one can spot that cross-sectional studies mainly report positive effects. But the long-term effects of some of the policies represent mixed results with both positive and negative effects. For example, in the case of child-care support and workfare policies, it appears the positive effects diminish or even turn to negative after a while, as found by longitudinal and experimental studies.

Using this table, interested researchers or policy makers may follow the links to correlational findings page to further examine the cause of positive/negative effects. As an example, a researcher may be interested in the effects of child-care support policies on the happiness of targeted populations. In the longitudinal column in Table 2, we notice that child-care support policies may have negative effects in the long term. The link in the longitudinal column is linked to the findings of Brodeur & Connolly's (2013) study which explores the effects of change in child-care support policy in Quebec. In 1997, Quebec has started a program in which parents were provided \$5 daily as child day-care support, enabling women to join the workforce. The program has been a success in terms of formal policy aim; mothers' participation in employment and household income has increased. However, it appears the effect was not unidirectional. Following the link, we can see that although there is a non-significant positive effect, highly educated men and women were adversely and significantly affected by this policy. The authors argue that although increased income has boosted satisfaction among low-income families, the negative outcomes for the children had outweighed income effects in well-off families. Likewise, if one follows the link in the experimental column which reports the findings of Baker et al. (2008) about the same policy in Quebec, one can see that eligible children were also negatively affected according to pre and post-tests. In their paper, the authors have concluded that the program has led to "more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships" (Baker et al., 2008, p. 1).

Two other examples of policy interventions which have had unintended consequences in the long term can be found in the work benefits and workfare policy sections of Table 2. The experimental study in the workfare section belongs to Caliendo & Tübbicke (2019). In this study the authors have examined the effects of a subsidized business start-up program in Germany, in which unemployed people could apply with their business plan and, if successful, received a subsidy around 10.000 Euros. Their analysis reveals that the risks of running a business and lower social security protection causes diminished happiness especially in the long term, and the effect considerably varies across genders, age groups and skill levels. The second example is about temporary in-work benefits programs. In their study, Dorset & Oswald (2014) has examined the effects of an governmental

experimental program (known as ERA) in the UK among single parents. In this program, the participants were provided job coaching, training opportunities and financial incentives to stay in work. The authors have found that the results of second year assessment showed a non-significant positive effect, but in the fifth year the effect turned negative. According to them, this could be because the amount of reduction of well-being due to removal of temporary state benefits has been more than the initial gain from those benefits. The authors claims that the consequences of the program were seriously troubling with treated participants having substantially lower psychological well-being, being worried more about money, and becoming increasingly prone to debt (Dorsett & Oswald, 2014, pp. 1, 3).

Of course, the examples we have provided do not mean all policy interventions are prone to failure. For example, if we check the findings about minimum wages, we can see that longitudinal and experimental findings have been positive in different settings and time intervals. On the other hand, it is apparent that cross-sectional studies mostly report positive effects. Looking at the table, we can also see what types of studies are mostly missing with respect to policy areas. It seems there is need for longitudinal and experimental studies about the effects of different family policies on happiness of parents and children. As the number of studies about the effects of policy interventions on happiness increase, we may have clearer picture of their consequences and develop suitable responses to, at least, decrease unintended negative outcomes.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

During the last two decades the theoretical and methodological debates about reliability and usability of happiness data both as scientific evidence and a policy goal seem to have been resolved. As explained in the introduction part, happiness is now widely recognised as a policy aim by scientists, politicians, and international organizations. This recognition leads to many under-explored issues and challenges for the scholars of public policy and public administration who are more familiar with proxy measures of happiness and well-being (like GDP and objective measures) rather than directly measured happiness itself. First of all, defining happiness as an aim is related to the normative basis of policies, and the normative basis shapes subsequent policy processes such as problem definition, formal policy formulation, and policy evaluation. For example, the negative signs in the table we have presented do not mean that these policies were unsuccessful, since these policies actually had different success indicators and they were not formally designed to “increase happiness” of target populations. In the case of day-care support, the intention seems to be to enable mothers to join the work force, increase household income, and thereby increase the well-being and utility of the household. Clearly this reflects a neo-classical understanding of utility which is dominant in policy making circles. Thus, there is need to investigate how a subjective definition of happiness should be integrated into policy processes. Second, although happiness research has soared across many disciplines, there is still a huge gap in the public policy and public administration literature about the effects of specific policies on happiness. Furthermore, the findings of the studies we have presented in our paper reveals that the consequences of policy interventions may substantially differ across groups based on age, gender, skill levels etc. These findings require a revision of policy interventions and greater individualization of policy designs. In sum, to revise and align policies that aim to increase happiness of individuals and communities, we need more scientific evidence about the consequences of policy interventions. Within this frame, we also demonstrated how

a database (WHD) which is dedicated to happiness research can be used as a source of scientific evidence by researchers and policy-makers.

## Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank Kayseri Yüksek Öğrenim ve Yardım Vakfı for financially supporting conference costs.

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