

DID AVERAGE HAPPINESS IN NATIONS CHANGE OVER THE YEARS?

Findings from the World Database of Happiness

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ABSTRACT

Did average happiness in nations change over time, or did it remain stable as implied in trait theory and some variants of comparison theory? We assessed changes in average happiness in nations over the last decade. Happiness was conceptualized as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole, which can be measured using self-reports. We took stock of responses to questions on happiness in representative surveys of the general population in nations, drawing on findings gathered in the World Database of Happiness. We limited to time series that cover at least 20 years and 10 data-points, which yields 200 time series in 50 nations over the years 1946-2021. For only 1 nation (the USA) we have data on this entire period, most of the time series start in the 1990s or 2000. We focussed on change up to and including 2019. The years 200 and 2021 were considered separately because of the COVID 19 pandemic. Comparison between the first and last observation in 80 timeseries showed 50 cases of a rise and 30 cases of a decline. The average rise was 7%, the average decline 6%. Regression analysis over all 200 time-series showed an average yearly change to the better or worse of 1,6% and a yearly increase of 0,007%. Inspection of the COVID years 2020-2021 revealed declines in average happiness from 5 to 10%. The above changes are expressed as a percentage of the possible 0-10 range. They double when expressed on the actual range of 3.8 to 8, 2..These findings go against theories that imply that average happiness in nations will hardly change over time but fit well with livability theory.

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