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## Ellumination Newsletter

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**Have you ever heard of the World Happiness Report? Well, it shows that the USA is not so happy.**

March 25, 2024

The 2024 World Happiness Report was recently released. This is an annual report produced by a partnership of Gallup, the Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the WHR’s Editorial Board. Polling took place in 143 countries among young and old, men and women. Countries are ranked from most happy to least happy, as are specific demographic groups within them. Finland is the happiest country in the world and has been perennially. Afghanistan is the most unhappy. The report looks at key variables to help explain life evaluations, including GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom, generosity, perceptions of corruption, and trust in institutions. In the end it comes down to polling people.

Here are the 20 happiest countries in the world.

1. Finland
2. Denmark
3. Iceland
4. Sweden
5. Israel
6. Netherlands
7. Norway
8. Luxembourg
9. Switzerland
10. Australia
11. New Zealand
12. Costa Rica
13. Kuwait
14. Austria
15. Canada
16. Belgium
17. Ireland
18. Czechia
19. Lithuania
20. United Kingdom

It doesn't surprise me that Finland, Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden are in the top 4. It does surprise me that Israel, while at war, is #5, but it's been in the top 10 since 2022. What's most notable to me is that the United States is not among the top 20 for the first time since the survey started. We are ranked #23.

"The survey asks each participant to score their life as a whole, considering what they value", said John Helliwell, emeritus professor of economics at the Vancouver School of Economics, University of British Columbia, and a founding editor of the World Happiness Report. "You find out Finland's pretty rich in all of those things, like wallets being returned if they're dropped in the street, people helping each other day in and day out, very high quality and universally distributed health and education opportunities — so everyone more or less comes out of the starting gate the same." He also noted that Finland has happy immigrants, "so it's something that they're prepared to share with newcomers."

In the United States happiness scores from people under 30 were dramatically lower than those from people aged 60 and older. Among people under 30, the US ranked at No. 62, while for those 60 and older, it was No. 10.

Helliwell says the low scores among the young aren't a matter of less education or lower income or more ill health. "It's what they think about their lives. So it's a mood question." Helliwell attributes the drop in part to the information young people are consuming.

"They're hearing news that's making them unhappy and they may be sharing it and that may make them unhappy too."

"Almost whatever institution you're in, people in North America seem to be fighting over rights, responsibilities and who should be doing what to improve things and who is to blame for things not going well in the past," Helliwell said. Discussions seem to be about "who to blame and staking out rights and privileges, and not so much about breaking down barriers and working together to actually construct something, not by rules and lawsuits, but by simply working together to improve things."

This is the first year I've paid any attention to the World Happiness Report. I think seeing a headline that the U.S. had dropped out of the top 20 got me to read it. Given how polarized we are as a nation no one should be surprised by this. Given the amount of social media our younger citizens are exposed to, with strong biases, often complete misinformation, and overwhelming social pressures, no one should be surprised that they are unhappy. It makes me wonder if the younger generation will ever be happier, particularly since "life satisfaction" tends to be higher worldwide among those who are 15-24 years old than those who are 25+. The chart below shows the long term trends for both age groups. It applies around the world, not just in the United States. While it's good to see that the trend of satisfaction for both groups has been rising since 2014 it's clear there is a big drop off at age 25. There shouldn't be much mystery about that. By age 25 most people are fully engaged in the struggle of being an adult, there's no more living with mom and dad, education is complete (if they got it at all), they're possibly married, with kids, and with a very high probability of earning money in a less than satisfying occupation or career.

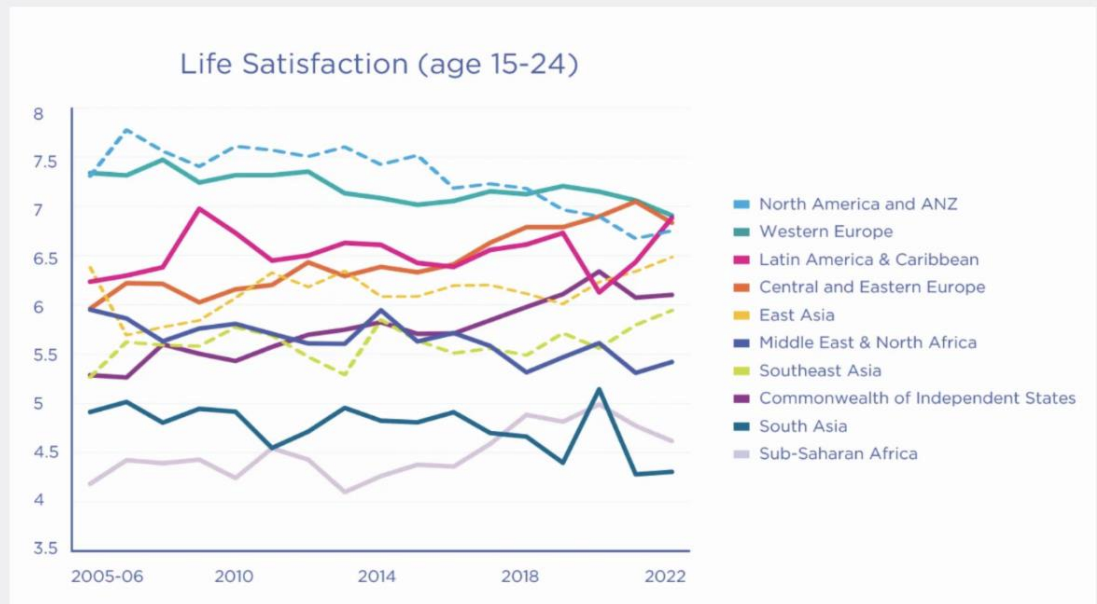
**Figure 3.1A: Global levels and trends in life satisfaction from 2006 through 2022. Gallup World Poll (age 15-24 vs. age 25+)**



Here is a conclusion that makes a lot of sense: *The best predictor for adult life satisfaction is subjective well-being and emotional health during childhood.* In other words, raise your children well. This may be harder now than ever before.

Another thing that stood out to me is that “life satisfaction” in North America and Western Europe has been in decline for several years, while its rising in much of the rest of the world. The chart below illustrates trends in “life satisfaction” among respondents around the world from 2006 through 2022. The top two lines are for North America and Western Europe. The trend has clearly been declining in both. On the other hand it’s been rising in Latin America and Caribbean, Southeast Asia, Central and East Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Commonwealth of Independent states, and even Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Figure 3.2A Regional levels and trends in life satisfaction from 2006 through 2022.**  
**Gallup World Poll (age 15-24)**



The study is long, with many chapters on lots of subjects. If you want to see the whole thing you can go here. <https://worldhappiness.report/about/>

My main takeaway is that our population under 30 is not happy! Every time I talk with parents who have young kids, 15 and under, the conversation always turns to the damage that social media is doing. I've had that conversation with two generations of parent now. I'm not sure what to do about all social media, but I am sure it's had more destructive force than positive force in many young lives. I'm also sure this statement is correct: *The best predictor for adult life satisfaction is subjective well-being and emotional health during childhood.* It's a challenge for all parents.

I'm drafting this letter while I'm on a plane to Costa Rica, the 12<sup>th</sup> happiest country in the world. Everyone around me is on a device of some kind, including all the kids. One of the flight attendants just described Costa Rica as "what you'd get if Mexico and Hawaii had a baby". I like that, particularly since I like Mexico and Hawaii. Those are the places we went most often before we discovered Costa Rica. I intend to be happy for the next several days!

All the best,

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Disclosure and Disclaimer - Updated last on March 20, 2024 by Paul Krsek:

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