

'Happiness gap' in the US narrows

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Happiness inequality in the U.S. has decreased since the 1970s, according to research published this month in the *Journal of Legal Studies*.

The study, by University of Pennsylvania economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, found that the American population as a whole is no happier than it was three decades ago. But happiness inequality—the gap between the happy and the not-so-happy—has narrowed significantly.

"Americans are becoming more similar to each other in terms of reported happiness," says Stevenson. "It's an interesting finding because other research shows increasing gaps in income, consumption and leisure time."

The happiness gap between whites and non-whites has narrowed by two-thirds, the study found. Non-whites report being significantly happier than they were in the early 1970s, while whites are slightly less happy. The happiness gap between men and women closed as well. Women have become less happy, while men are a little more cheerful.

One demographic area where the happiness gap increased was in educational attainment. People with a college diploma have gotten happier, while those with a high school education or less report lower happiness levels.

Stevenson and Wolfers used data collected from 1972 to 2006 through the University of Chicago's General Social Survey. Each year,

participants were asked, "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?"

The proportion of people choosing "pretty happy" has increased from 49 percent in 1972 to 56 percent in 2006. Responses of "very happy" and "not too happy" decreased in relatively equal amounts. This convergence toward the middle response closed happiness gaps in nearly all the demographic groups examined.

"The U.S. population as a whole is not getting happier," Stevenson said. "For every unhappy person who became happier, there's someone on the other side coming down."

The authors say that it's hard to pin down what exactly is causing the narrowing happiness gap. But they suggest that money probably is not the answer.

"That these trends differ from trends in both income growth and income inequality suggests that a useful explanation may lie in the nonpecuniary domain," Stevenson and Wolfers write.

Paper: Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, "Happiness Inequality in the United States," *Journal of Legal Studies*, 37:S2

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