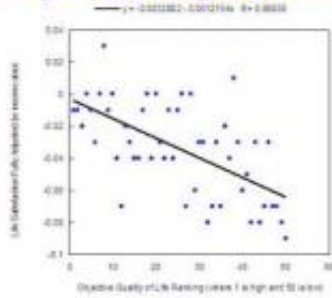


# Research finds happiest US States match a million Americans' own happiness states

17 December 2009

One Million Americans' Life Satisfaction and Objective Quality-of-Life in 50 States



This is a graph for the Oswald/Wu research. Credit: Oswald / Wu University of Warwick

New research by the UK's University of Warwick and Hamilton College in the US into the happiness levels of a million individual US citizens have revealed their personal happiness levels closely correlate with earlier research that ranked the quality of life available in the US's 50 states plus the District of Columbia. This research provides a unique external validation of people's self reported levels of happiness and will be of great value to future economic and clinical research in this field.

The new research published in the journal *Science* on 17th December 2009 is by Professor Andrew Oswald of the UK's University of Warwick and Stephen Wu of Hamilton College in the US.

The researchers examined a 2005- 2008 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System random sample of 1.3 million United States citizens in which Life-satisfaction in each U.S. state is measured. This provided a league table of [happiness](#) by US State reproduced below.

This is the first large scale analysis of happiness levels in the US but the researchers were content

with simply having this large data set and ranking. They decided to use the data to try and resolve one of the most significant issues facing economists and clinical scientists carrying out research into happiness.

Researchers have to rely on people's self declared levels of happiness - not how can you rely on those self declarations. There have been useful studies trying to match those levels of happiness to clinical signs of happiness and stress such as blood pressure. That has been useful but one cannot know for sure whether those clinical signs are themselves driving happiness or whether the reverse is true. Researchers have longed for a more clearly external set of data to test their results.

On this occasion the researchers found another parallel data set that might for the first time provide that external validation or challenge their findings. They discovered research by Stuart Gabriel published in 2003 which considered objective indicators for each individual State of the USA such as: precipitation; temperature; wind speed; sunshine; coastal land; inland water; public land; National Parks; hazardous waste sites; environmental 'greenness'; commuting time; violent crime; air quality; student-teacher ratio; local taxes; local spending on education and highways; cost of living. This essentially allowed the creation of a rank order of US states showing which should provide the happiest living experience. This then was a truly external data set that could be used to check against the self declared levels of happiness

When the two tables were compared they found a very close correlation between people's subjective life-satisfaction scores and objectively estimated quality of life.

The lead researcher on the study, Professor Andrew Oswald from the University of Warwick said:

"The beauty of our statistical method is that we are able to look below the surface of American life -- to identify the deep patterns in people's underlying happiness from Alabama to Wyoming. This type of study has been done for a few European countries but it is new to the United States. We are the first to be able to do this calculation -- partly because we are fortunate enough to have a random anonymized sample of 1.3 million Americans."

"The state-by-state pattern seems interesting in itself. But it also matters scientifically. We wanted to study whether people's feelings of satisfaction with their own lives are reliable, that is, whether they match up to reality -- of sunshine hours, congestion, air quality, etc -- in their own state. And they do match. When human beings give you an answer on a numerical scale about how satisfied they are with their lives, it is best to pay attention. Their answers are reliable. This suggests that [life-satisfaction](#) survey data might be very useful for governments to use in the design of economic and social policies."

Professor Oswald expressed some caution in how the results should be interpreted for the state of Louisiana in the survey following the disruption caused by Hurricane Katrina but was confident that the data on the other states was a true reflection of happiness levels saying:

"We have been asked a lot whether we expected that states like New York and California would do so badly in the happiness ranking. Having visited and lived in various parts of the US, I am only a little surprised. Many people think these states would be marvellous places to live in. The problem is that if too many individuals think that way, they move into those states, and the resulting congestion and house prices make it a non-fulfilling prophecy. In a way, it is like the stock market. If everyone thinks it would be great to buy stock X, that stock is generally already overvalued. Bargains in life are usually found outside the spotlight. It may be that exactly the same is true of the best places to live."

Andrew Oswald/ Wu ranking of happiness levels by US State

1. Louisiana
2. Hawaii
3. Florida
4. Tennessee
5. Arizona
6. Mississippi
7. Montana
8. South Carolina
9. Alabama
10. Maine
11. Alaska
12. North Carolina
13. Wyoming
14. Idaho
15. South Dakota
16. Texas
17. Arkansas
18. Vermont
19. Georgia
20. Oklahoma
21. Colorado
22. Delaware
23. Utah
24. New Mexico
25. North Dakota

26. Minnesota

51. New York

27. New Hampshire

Provided by University of Warwick

28. Virginia

29. Wisconsin

30. Oregon

31. Iowa

32. Kansas

33. Nebraska

34. West Virginia

35. Kentucky

36. Washington

37. District of Columbia

38. Missouri

39. Nevada

40. Maryland

41. Pennsylvania

42. Rhode Island

43. Massachusetts

44. Ohio

45. Illinois

46. California

47. Indiana

48. Michigan

49. New Jersey

50. Connecticut

APA citation: Research finds happiest US States match a million Americans' own happiness states (2009, December 17) retrieved 23 June 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-12-happiest-states-million-americans-happiness.html>

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