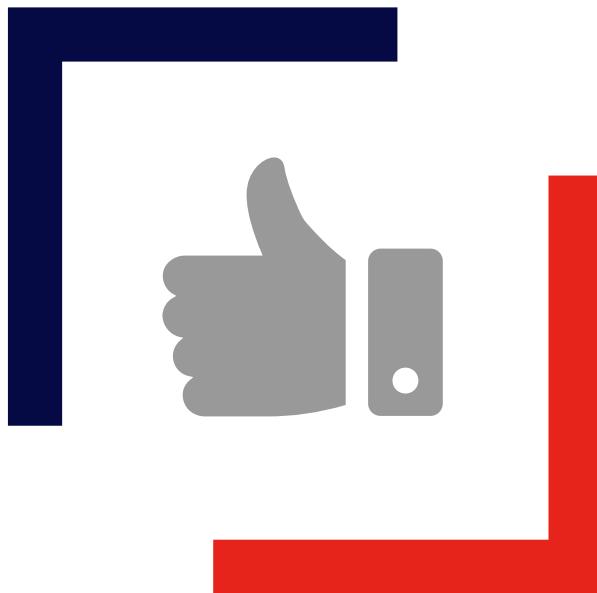


08

Section



Life Satisfaction



STATE OF THE NATION



Life Satisfaction

Introduction. Many of the measures in this report—economic output, employment, greenhouse gas emissions, and life expectancy—are not matters of opinion. They go up or down regardless of what we think about them. But how people view the world is also important. The nation’s founders wrote in the Declaration of Independence about “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” So, it is worth asking: Are we actually happy or satisfied with our lives? The answers to this question are useful in part because of everything the other measures miss. We might have good jobs and incomes, but does that material prosperity actually make us feel better off? If we are not satisfied with our lives, then we might be passing on more discontent, or a reduced sense of hope, to our children.

Summary of Results. We included two measures for this topic: satisfaction with our current lives and social isolation—whether people have friends and family members they can count on. We are in the top half of countries on both of these measures, but not in the very top tier, and our international standing is declining over time.



Satisfaction with Current Life

Specific measure: Average evaluation of the population's current life with 10 being the best possible life today and zero being the worst possible life today. (Source: Analysis of Gallup World Poll data by Carol Graham and coauthors).

National Trend  % of countries the US outperforms 70% Intl. Rank Trend 

Why did we include this measure? Perhaps more than any other measure, this one tells us how Americans feel about their own current state of affairs. This measure is about how we feel about our own lives.

Figure 18: Satisfaction with Current Life (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 70% (out of 44 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? On a scale of 0–10, we rate ourselves about 6.7 in the most recent data. This means that, on average, we are closer to our best lives than our worst, but also that most people are not living their best lives now. We rank just below Slovenia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. (Finland ranks first.) Our satisfaction with our current lives has also been steadily declining since 2006, the first year we can measure, and declining relative to other nations.

What might explain these patterns? Current life satisfaction worsened abruptly in the 2007–2009 range in ways that have persisted. Two major events happened around this time. The first was the 2008 Great Recession when people lost their jobs and lost their homes to foreclosure, forcing many to move to other neighborhoods. But the fact that the numbers did not bounce back after the recession suggests that a second factor was at work. The rise of smartphones, which first became widespread in 2007, is one possible explanation. Isolating the effects of smartphones is difficult, however, and researchers are still exploring this and whether any other factors suddenly changed at the same time.



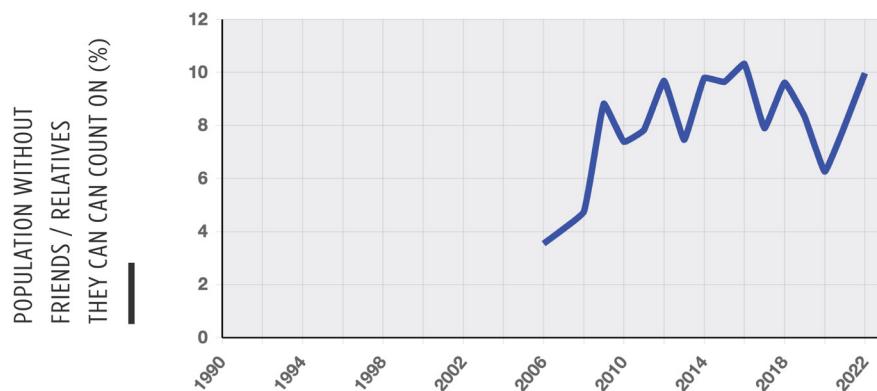
Social Isolation

Specific measure: Percentage of people who do not have friends or relatives they can count on to help whenever they need. (Source: Analysis of Gallup World Poll data by Carol Graham and coauthors).

▼ National Trend
66% % of countries the US outperforms
▼ Intl. Rank Trend

Why did we include this measure? Humans are naturally social. Our sense of happiness, purpose, and security depends heavily on our friends and family members. When life gets difficult, we need people we can count on to lift us back up.

Figure 19: Social Isolation (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- Specific Measure: (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 66% (out of 44 countries)
- International Rank Trend: ↓

What do the data show? About one in 10 Americans say they do not have friends or family members they can count on. The US ranks just below Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Ireland. As with the satisfaction measure above, Finland ranks first. Like the decline in current life satisfaction above, this also seems to have taken a turn for the worse in the mid-2000s. Other evidence reinforces that Americans have fewer close friends and family members than in the past and that people are spending less time with friends in person.

What might explain these patterns? As with current life satisfaction, we see a sharp turn for the worse around 2007. The separation of people from their jobs and neighbors in the wake of the Great Recession is one possible explanation. Also, the introduction of smartphones at about the same time may have increased social isolation because these devices take our time and attention away from in-person interaction with other people.

Unlike current life satisfaction, however, this was not the start of a persistent decline in social isolation. It is unclear why social isolation largely stabilized (with some seemingly random fluctuations from year to year) and current life satisfaction continued to decline.

Perhaps surprisingly, COVID did not immediately produce negative effects on social isolation. In fact, social isolation actually diminished in the early months of the pandemic, perhaps because many Americans spent more time at home with family members and roommates, or because people banded together to help each other get through the crisis. Social isolation spiked back up in later years to an all-time high.



Still, the trends in current life satisfaction and social isolation may be partially intertwined: people may be less satisfied with their current lives because they are more socially isolated, and they are more isolated because they have a more negative outlook that pushes them away from friends and family. The increased pressure we place on ourselves to excel in life could explain both patterns: raising expectations about some areas of our lives and leading us to put less effort into our relationships.

Related Topics: It may be that the smartphone effect was compounded by other harmful trends. Life satisfaction is related to all the other subjective measures, including youth depression (see Children and Families), trust in people generally (see Social Capital), and all of the trust-in-institution measures (see Trust). Finally, social isolation is a widely accepted cause of suicide (see the Mental Health section).

For more information about data sources and treatments, see the Data Notes section.



Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	<i>Support from Board</i>	<i>Support from Public</i>
<i>Life Satisfaction (as topic)</i>	100%	70%
<i>Life Satisfaction</i>	92%	67%
<i>Social Isolation</i>	85%	63%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered but did not include other measures, including hope (i.e., how you would rate your life in five years, with 10 being the best possible and zero being the worst possible). The public also did not support this measure.