

The New York Times

Led by Its Youth, U.S. Sinks in World Happiness Report

For the first time since the first World Happiness Report was issued 2012, the United States was not ranked among the world's Top 20 happiest countries. The drop was driven by people under 30.



Among 143 countries surveyed, the United States ranks 62nd in happiness for people under 30. Credit...Rebecca Noble for The New York Times



By [Sopan Deb](#), March 20, 2024 Updated 8:05 p.m. ET

Each year, it's no surprise that Finland tops the annual World Happiness Report. And this year was no different, marking the country's seventh consecutive year doing so — though some Finns [have bristled at the title](#).

But the 2024 report, [released on Wednesday](#), had a note of alarm that was less about who was at the top of the rankings and more about who wasn't: Americans — particularly those under 30 —

have become drastically less happy in recent years.

The report, compiled annually by a consortium of groups including the United Nations and Gallup, was the latest data point in what some researchers have described as a crisis among America's youth.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/20/us/world-happiness-report-finland-us.html>

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For the first time since the first World Happiness Report was published in 2012, the United States fell out of the Top 20 and dropped to 23rd, pushed down by cratering attitudes of Americans under 30.

Americans have long been an unhappy bunch. They have never ranked in the Top 10 of the World Happiness Report, which is based on how respondents in different countries rate their own happiness.

But this was the first time that the consortium separated results by age, finding disparities in the views of younger and older Americans. Among the 143 [countries surveyed](#), the United States ranked 10th for people 60 and older, but 62nd for people under 30. The happiest young people are in Lithuania, while the unhappiest are in Afghanistan.

“I have never seen such an extreme change,” John Helliwell, an economist and a co-author of the report, said in an interview, referring to the drop in happiness among younger people. “This has all happened in the last 10 years, and it’s mainly in the English-language countries. There isn’t this drop in the world as a whole.”

To collect the data, Dr. Helliwell and his collaborators interviewed about 1,000 people in each of the more than 130 countries surveyed annually from 2021 to 2023. Respondents were asked — among other prompts — to think of their life as a ladder and to rate it on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the best possible life.

Dr. Lorenzo Norris, an associate professor of psychiatry at George Washington University, who was not part of the World Happiness study, cited the disruptions to life brought about by the coronavirus pandemic as a chief cause of mental health challenges among younger Americans.

“The literature is clear in practice — the effect that this had on socialization, pro-social behavior, if you will, and the ability for people to feel connected and have a community,” Dr. Norris said of the pandemic. “Many of the things

that would have normally taken place for people, particularly high school young adults, did not take place,” he added. “And that is still occurring.”

Jade Song, a [27-year-old novelist](#), counted herself among those who had become increasingly unhappy in recent years.

“It’s mostly because as an adult you suddenly become aware of all the world news and you pay attention more to what you can control, and you realize that there is so little you can control,” Ms. Song, who was not part of the study, said in an interview. “Even if you’re going to protests or paying your rent and bills all on time, it’s so difficult, especially now, to break free from how you’re living your life when you realize how little impact your actions actually have on a broader level.”

In 2022, a Harvard University study showed that [well-being](#) among young adults in the United States had declined in the previous 20 years. Young people — those between the ages of 18 and 25 — [reported the lowest levels of happiness](#) compared with other age groups, as well as the poorest mental and physical health, sense of purpose, character, virtue, close social relationships and financial stability. Similar findings have emerged [in Britain](#) and Canada.

“One factor, which we’re all thinking about, is social media,” said Dr. Robert Waldinger, the director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development. “Because there’s been some research that shows that depending on how we use social media, it lowers well-being, it increases rates of depression and anxiety, particularly among young girls and women, teenage girls.”

In addition, Dr. Waldinger said, the negative feedback loop from news consumption has become a contributing factor.

“There’s also a lot of anxiety about the state of the world,” he said. “About climate change. About all of the polarization that we’re seeing.”

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Of course, the United States is not the only country dealing with the pandemic, social media and climate change. But in some other countries, such as Croatia, Switzerland and Austria, the World Happiness Report shows that young people are becoming happier.

Happiness has long been an object of fascination in the United States. The right to the “pursuit of happiness,” of course, appears early in the Declaration of Independence as a self-evident truth. Exploring it as a concept has been a mainstay of American pop culture. Think of the earworm hits “Happy” by [Pharrell Williams](#) or “Don’t Worry Be Happy” by Bobby McFerrin. In the television show “Mad Men,” Don Draper laments: “What is happiness? It’s a moment before [you need more happiness](#).”

“Part of the problem is that we have this huge expectation of happiness in America,” said Eric Weiner, the author of [“The Geography of Bliss.”](#) and so we suffer partly from the unhappiness of not being happy and the expectation that we should be happy. And not every country in the world has that.”

For that book, Mr. Weiner, a former foreign correspondent for National Public Radio,

traveled to several countries ranked among the world’s happiest places.

“There’s an assumption that if you’re American, you’re wealthy and you’re high tech and you’re successful; you should be happy,” he said. “There’s a lot of data that shows that the greater your expectations, the less you’re happy.”

The expectations for young people like Ms. Song, the novelist, said have shifted.

“We have less to look forward to,” she said. “Because in the future, there’s going to be climate change that will affect the way we live. I think there’s less of a clear-cut trajectory for our life paths, because for so long, it was so easy just to know that you could go get married and have your 2.5 kids, and then pay for your house. But now that path is a lot more closed.”

There is a silver lining, though, for the report released on Wednesday, Dr. Helliwell said.

“A, this angst is very local and, B, it’s very recent, which means, C, it’s not fundamental and going to last forever,” he said. “If it has been created that quickly, it could be removed that quickly.”

[Sopan Deb](#) is a Times reporter covering breaking news and culture. [More about Sopan Deb](#)

World Happiness Report

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[Norway Is No. 1 in Happiness. The U.S., Sadly, Is No. 14. March 20, 2017](#)