

Study: Some happy states have high suicide rates

April 25 2011, By RANDOLPH E. SCHMID , AP Science Writer

Does misery really love company? An intriguing new study suggests that may be the case.

Researchers who study how people's sense of well-being varies from place to place decided to compare their findings with suicide rates.

The surprising result: The happiest places sometimes also have the highest suicide rates.

"Discontented people in a happy place may feel particularly harshly treated by life," suggested Andrew Oswald of the University of Warwick in England.

Or, put another way by co-author Stephen Wu of Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., those surrounded by unhappy people may not feel so bad for themselves.

But Wu urged caution in drawing conclusions, saying: "I don't think that means if you are unhappy you should be around others who are unhappy."

Their study ranked Utah as the No. 1 state for residents' sense of well-being, but it also scored a high No. 9 in suicide rate. By contrast New York State ranked a low 45th in well-being, but an even lower 50th in suicides.

The researchers came up with their rankings from a federal survey of behavioral risk factors and U.S. Census Bureau numbers on suicide rates.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside, who wasn't involved in the research, agreed that living around people who are, on average, pretty satisfied with their lives, when you are not, can make you feel more miserable.

In an interview by email, she said the findings remind her of an effect researchers have discussed in cases where a city with a reputation for being a good place to live also has a high suicide rate.

The idea is, "If you're unhappy there, you conclude, 'something must be really wrong with me,' or 'nothing will make me happy,' so you're more likely to get depressed and take your life," said Lyubomirsky, who researches happiness and well-being.

However, she added, other things may also be at play.

She suggested there may be other factors that states with high [life satisfaction](#) have in common that could be associated with high suicide rates. For example, if they are more likely to be rural, that could mean people also are more isolated. Religious beliefs that vary among states may also have an effect, she said.

John F. Helliwell of the University of British Columbia, who has studied well-being and suicide rates internationally, said suicides tend to peak when days are longer, "not as you might have thought, when days are shortest." Researchers have suggested that when people who are unhappy see others in happy, social situations such as picnics, that may bring their own crisis to a head.

The new study, which has been accepted for publication in the Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, looked at the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

It lists the top 10 states for well-being as Utah, Louisiana, Colorado, Minnesota, Wyoming, Hawaii, Arizona, Delaware, Florida and Nevada.

Four of those states also are in the top 10 for suicide rates, with Nevada ranked 3rd, Wyoming, 5th; Colorado, 6th; and Utah, 9th. Among the others, Arizona was 11th and Florida, 15th.

The 10 states with the lowest well-being ratings are: Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, Michigan and Rhode Island.

Just one of those states, West Virginia, is among the top 10 for [suicides](#), ranking No. 8. The only other state in the top 20 was Kentucky at 16th.

Wu noted that international studies have found that Scandinavian countries also display high satisfaction levels and high [suicide rates](#).

But the researchers said that because of variations in culture and suicide-reporting systems, it's hard to make comparisons from one country to another.

To develop their data, Wu and colleagues used information collected by the federal government in the Behavioral Risk-Factor Surveillance System, a monthly survey designed to gather health data and identify emerging problems. One survey question asks people how satisfied they are with their life and the responses to that from people aged 18 to 85 formed the basis for the well-being assessment. The survey interviews more than 350,000 people each year. The suicide rankings are based on mortality data reported by the Census Bureau in 2008.

More information:

Behavioral Risk-Factor Surveillance System: <http://www.cdc.gov/brfss>

Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov>

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