

Experts urge US to measure, pursue our happiness

December 7 2013, by Seth Borenstein



A smiley face balloon floats over Revere Beach in Revere, Mass. as beachgoers head for the water on Sunday, July 16, 2006. According to a report released in December 2013 from the National Academy of Sciences, which advises the U.S. government, by gauging happiness, there'd be more to consider than cold hard cash when deciding matters that affect daily lives. The panel of economists, psychologists and other experts assembled by the academy recommended that federal statistics and surveys, which normally deal with income, spending, health and housing, should include a few extra questions on happiness. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)

A panel of experts thinks the U.S. government should be more in touch with Americans' feelings.

By gauging happiness, there'd be more to consider than cold hard cash when deciding matters that affect daily lives, according to a report this week from the National Academy of Sciences, which advises the government.

The panel of economists, psychologists and other experts assembled by the academy recommended that federal statistics and surveys, which normally deal with income, spending, health and housing, include a few extra questions on happiness.

"You want to know how people are doing?" said panel chairman Arthur Stone, a professor of psychology at New York's Stony Brook University. "One of things you may want to do is ask them."

Asking how people feel can be as important as how much they are spending, Stone said.

For example, economists have something they call the "misery index" which adds the unemployment and inflation rates, but doesn't include how people feel. If you want to know misery, the question to ask is "how much suffering is going on," he said.

The panel suggests a series of questions to measure daily happiness and general well-being, asking how often you smiled, were stressed, laughed or were in pain. Example questions ranged from a simple yes-no "Yesterday, did you spend time with friends or family?" to a more complex 1-10 rating for "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?"

Over the past decade, these types of questions have shown to be valid

scientifically, said Carol Graham, a Brookings Institution [economist](#) who was on the panel.

The report said the answers can help governments shape policy on basic benefits, such as retirement age and pensions, care for the chronic and terminally ill, unemployment and working conditions. It cited a study by one of the Nobel Prize-winning panelists that showed people's feelings about commuting problems helped officials decided whether or not to create commuter toll lanes on highways.



People laugh as they take part in performing a group exercise during a laughter yoga class in St. Albans, England on Sunday, June 9, 2013. Laughter Yoga was started in India in 1995 by medical doctor Madan Kataria, in response to a body of scientific research which shows that laughter is extremely good for physical, emotional and mental well being. According to a report released in December 2013 from the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, which advises the U.S. government, by gauging happiness, there'd be more to consider than cold hard cash when deciding matters that affect daily lives. The panel of economists,

psychologists and other experts assembled by the academy recommended that federal statistics and surveys, which normally deal with income, spending, health and housing, should include a few extra questions on happiness. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

In terms of collecting happiness data, the United States government "is a bit of a laggard" behind other industrial nations, said John Helliwell, an economist who co-directs an institute that studies well-being at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

In one of the few surveys where the government does ask, the U.S. is a pretty happy nation. Last year, about 87 percent of Americans considered themselves very happy or pretty happy.

But it's far behind No. 1 Denmark, a host of northern European countries, Canada, Israel and Mexico. The United States ranked 17th in a world happiness ranking report directed by Helliwell, which was based on international surveys and came out in September.

When governments and academics study happiness they find that money isn't everything. Many of the richest countries, including the United States, weren't in the Top 10 in self-reported happiness in the report.

"Having no money is terrible for everything," said Graham, author of several books on the economics and measuring of happiness. But after people make "a comfortable amount of money," it doesn't add too much to happiness, she said.

That's what a study last week in the journal *PLoS One* found. It used worldwide surveys and found that as people made more money worldwide they got happier—but only to a point. That point is just shy

of \$36,000 a year per person, or \$144,000 for a family of four.

Once people reached that point, [happiness](#) measurements level off and even go down ever so slightly, said study lead author, Eugenio Proto, an economist at the University of Warwick. According to the study, in general, people in the U.S. passed that "bliss point" a few years ago, however federal income figures don't show nearly that high a household wealth level.

Happiness studies, Helliwell said, "keep reminding you that there is much more to life than income and housing."

More information: National Academy report: bit.ly/18JeagO
World Happiness report: bit.ly/18oZb8X
PLoS One study: bit.ly/1blYY38

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