

Money can make life more satisfying, survey shows

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Money may not buy happiness, but it can help make life more satisfying,

a new U.S. government survey shows.

In 2021, just under 5% of U.S. adults said they were "dissatisfied" with their lives. And researchers found those feelings were more common in households making less than 200% of the [federal poverty level](#)—or about \$55,000 a year for a family of four.

Among those relatively lower-income Americans, 8% were dissatisfied with their lives—more than double the rate (3.6%) among people with [higher incomes](#).

That dividing line is not surprising, as past studies have found clear relationships between income and [life satisfaction](#).

But lead researcher Amanda Ng said another finding was intriguing: There were some disparities in life [satisfaction](#), based on factors like age and race—but only among lower-income Americans.

Within that group, white and Black Americans were less happy than Hispanic and Asian Americans. Meanwhile, middle-aged adults (aged 45 to 64) reported more dissatisfaction than either younger or older adults. And people born in the United States were less happy than their counterparts born elsewhere.

None of those disparities existed, however, among Americans with relatively higher incomes.

"It was pretty striking that we saw none of those differences," said Ng, a researcher with the National Center for Health Statistics, which is part of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The survey doesn't answer why, Ng said.

But the income findings are in line with plenty of past research, according to James Maddux, a senior scholar with the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va.

Maddux said that global studies have found that people living in low-income countries tend to have lower life satisfaction than those living in wealthier ones. As populations have better access to the basics of life—clean water, stable housing, [food security](#), [health care](#)—satisfaction goes up.

"The same thing holds true for individuals," Maddux said.

If people are worried about paying the rent, putting food on the table or affording [health](#) care, it's hard to think life is good. But when they have enough financial security to take care of the basics, life satisfaction typically goes up.

Beyond that point, Maddux said, satisfaction does, on average, tick up with income—but at a slower pace. And eventually, the rise levels off.

Then there's the matter of what people do with their discretionary income.

"Spending money on [conspicuous consumption](#) actually tends to make people less happy," Maddux said.

The big house, the flashy car—anything bought to impress or compete—is unlikely to be fulfilling.

"Someone will always have a bigger house or a nicer car," Maddux noted.

But, he said, if people invest in things that are meaningful—education, charity, travel for the sake of self-enrichment—that could enhance life satisfaction.

The [new findings](#)—published Nov. 2 in *National Health Statistics Reports*—come from a long-running CDC health survey. Each year, researchers interview a nationally representative sample of U.S. households about their health and well-being.

Ng's team focused on responses to the life satisfaction portion of the survey in 2021.

Life satisfaction is closely connected to health, on a "two-way street," Ng said. When people are in poor health, it's harder to feel good about life. Conversely, people who are unhappy may have less motivation, or fewer resources, to take care of their health.

So improving "subjective well-being" has become a public health goal, Ng said.

Based on the 2021 survey, most Americans are satisfied with their lives. In fact, Maddux said that if there's a surprise in the findings, it's that only 4.8% of adults overall reported dissatisfaction with life.

"I've seen higher figures in other surveys," he noted.

But things were not uniform, at least among Americans with lower incomes: Both Black adults and white adults were less happy (around 9% reporting dissatisfaction) than Asian adults and Hispanic adults (around 5%). There was a nearly identical difference between U.S.-born and foreign-born adults.

Meanwhile, among those with lower incomes, men were more

dissatisfied than women (around 9%, versus 7%). And while 11% of middle-aged Americans were dissatisfied, only 7% of both younger and older adults felt that way.

Yet among relatively higher-income Americans, no such differences emerged. But when researchers looked at the data—by age, race, sex or place of birth—between 3% and 4% of respondents were dissatisfied with their lives.

There's no ready explanation, Ng said.

One thing that is clear, from past research, is that life satisfaction depends on much more than [income](#).

Maddux pointed to such factors as having strong relationships with family and friends, feeling a sense of purpose, not comparing yourself to others, and appreciating what you already have.

And of course, he said, studies can only paint "broad strokes," while individual people vary. A wealthy person can be perfectly miserable, he noted, and more money won't help.

More information: The University of California, Berkeley, has more on [life satisfaction](#).

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