

Resilience in trying times—a result of positive actions

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Communities that stick together and do good for others cope better with crises and are happier for it, according to a new study by John Helliwell, from the University of British Columbia in Canada, and colleagues¹. Their work suggests that part of the reason for this greater resilience is the fact that humans are more than simply social beings, they are so-called 'pro-social' beings. In other words, they get happiness not just from doing things with others, but from doing things both with and for others. The paper² is published online in Springer's *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

How does the social fabric of a community or nation affect its capacity to deal with crises and to develop resources that maintain and improve people's happiness during those difficult times? "Communities and nations with better social capital, in other words, quality social networks and [social norms](#) as well as high levels of trust, respond to crises and economic transitions more happily and effectively," Helliwell and his team conclude.

Their paper begins with an assessment of social capital and happiness during the recent years of economic crisis in 255 US [metropolitan areas](#). Overall, social capital has improved the nation's happiness during the period of [economic crisis](#), both directly and indirectly by mitigating the impact of rising unemployment.

Helliwell and colleagues then take a broader perspective by examining national average happiness in OECD countries after the 2008 financial

crisis. They group countries according to their levels of happiness:

- The group with rising happiness includes countries less directly affected by the crisis, with policies well chosen to enhance the well-being of their residents - as in [South Korea](#), for example.
- The group with falling happiness includes those countries worst hit by the original crisis, and by its subsequent spillovers in the Euro zone. In this group, social capital and other key supports for happiness were damaged during the crisis and its aftermath.

The study also digs deeper into the relative roles of social capital and income as determinants of happiness. Evidence from countries in economic transition demonstrates the power of social trust, i.e., the belief that generally speaking, most people can be trusted. Social trust is an indicator of the quality of a country's social capital, which increases happiness directly but also permits a softer landing in the face of external economic shocks.

The authors wrap up with a look at the power of human nature and the suggestion that the core goal of public policy should be to facilitate the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans - a view articulated by Elinor Ostrom, an American political economist and the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Economics.

More information: Helliwell, J.F., Huang, H., Wang, S. (2013). Social Capital and Well-Being in Times of Crisis. *Journal of Happiness Studies*; [DOI 10.1007/s10902-013-9441-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-013-9441-z)

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