

# Greek crisis has biological health effects

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Young adults in Greece suffer more from stress and mental health problems and are less optimistic about the future than Swedes of the same age. The grave financial problems in Greece have brought on a social crisis that has probably affected people's health, according to a study from Linköping University.

In the study, recently published in the scientific journal *PLOS One*, groups of students at Athens University and Linköping University replied to questions about their health and perceived stress.

The results show that in every respect, the Greek students reported poorer health than the Swedish students. On the other hand, the biologically measured levels of the [stress hormone cortisol](#) were higher amongst the Greeks – the opposite to what was expected.

"This should not be interpreted as saying that the students in Athens were less stressed than those in Linköping. We know from other studies that people who are depressed or are "burned out", or suffer from [chronic stress](#) syndrome actually have lower [cortisol levels](#). People can handle shorter periods of stress quite well, but after some time the body cannot manage the high stress levels and the cortisol levels start to fall. If the stress factors remain, it can also lead a [weakened immune system](#)", says Tomas Faresjö, professor of [medical sociology](#) and chief investigator for the study.

The differences in participants' health and quality of life were very clear. For instance, 42% of the Greek students (52 of 124) had experienced

serious life events, compared to 23% of the Swedish students. 47% of the Greeks reported stress compared 21% of the Swedes. 24% of the Greeks had no hope for the future, a view shared by just 5% of the Swedes.

"The study shows that the health of young Greeks is considerably worse than that of young Swedes. One can suspect that the social crisis in Greece is beginning to have biological effects on the residents of the country", says Dr Faresjö.

Biological stress levels were measured using hair. This is a completely new method that has been further developed by the research group in Linköping. It makes it possible to measure the release of cortisol backward in time. The levels leave their mark in the hair, and since hair grows about one centimetre a month it is possible to see how stressed the person has been in recent months.

**More information:** Higher perceived stress but lower cortisol levels found among young Greek adults living in a stressful social environment in comparison with Swedish young adults. By Å. Faresjö, E Theodorsson, M Chatziarsenis, V Sapouna, H-P Claesson, J Koppner and T Faresjö. *PLOS ONE*, 8(9), 16 September 2013.

Provided by Linköping University

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