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World Happiness Report 2025

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Chapter 1

Executive summary

John F. Helliwell
Vancouver School of Economics,
University of British Columbia

Richard Layard
Centre for Economic Performance,
London School of Economics and Political Science

Jeffrey D. Sachs
Center for Sustainable Development,
Columbia University

Jan-Emmanuel De Neve
Wellbeing Research Centre,
University of Oxford

Lara B. Aknin
Department of Psychology,
Simon Fraser University

Shun Wang
International Business School Suzhou,
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

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Like ‘mercy’ in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, caring is “twice-blessed” — it blesses those who give and those who receive.

In this year's issue, we focus on the impact of caring and sharing on people's happiness. Like 'mercy' in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, caring is "twice-blessed" – it blesses those who give and those who receive. In this report, we investigate both of these effects: the benefits to the recipients of caring behaviour and the benefits to those who care for others.

There is a wealth of evidence about the extent of caring behaviour around the world. In the Gallup World Poll, people are asked if, in the last month, they gave money to charity, if they volunteered, and if they helped a stranger. They were also asked, in 2019, if they think other people would help them by returning their lost wallet.

Some key findings jump out of the data.

First, people are much too pessimistic about the benevolence of others. For example, when wallets were dropped in the street by researchers, the proportion of returned wallets was far higher than people expected. This is hugely encouraging.

Second, our wellbeing depends on our *perceptions* of others' benevolence, as well as their actual benevolence. Since we underestimate the kindness of others, our wellbeing can be improved by receiving information about their true benevolence (see Chapter 5).

Third, when society is more benevolent, the people who benefit most are those who are least happy. As a result, happiness is more equally distributed in countries with higher levels of expected benevolence (see Chapter 2).

Finally, benevolence increased during COVID-19 in every region of the world. People needed more help and others responded. This 'benevolence bump' has been sustained since then. Despite a fall from 2023 to 2024, benevolent acts are still about 10% above their pre-pandemic levels (see Chapter 2).

Benevolence also brings benefits to those doing the caring and sharing. This works best if the motivation is to help others (rather than to feel good yourself), if the act is voluntary, and if it has an obvious positive impact on the beneficiary. All this is shown in Chapter 2, where the usual country rankings of happiness are supplemented by rankings for benevolent acts and expected wallet return.

There are many ways in which we care and share with each other. Perhaps the most universal example is sharing meals. As Chapter 3 shows, dining alone is not good for your wellbeing. People who eat frequently with others are a lot happier and this effect holds even taking into account household size. The increasing number of people who eat alone is one reason for declining wellbeing in the United States.

Another important form of caring and sharing is the family. Latin American societies, characterised by larger household sizes and strong family bonds, offer valuable lessons for other societies that seek higher and sustainable wellbeing. In Chapter 4, we see that happiness rises with household size up to four people, but above that happiness declines. Notably, people living alone are much less happy than people who live with others.

Trends towards increased loneliness are most evident among young people. In 2023, 19% of young adults across the world reported having no one they could count on for social support, a 39% increase compared to 2006. However, as we have said, they often underestimate the benevolence of other people. After a powerful intervention, students at Stanford University became much happier when given evidence of the kindness of their peers (see Chapter 5).

The opposite of happiness is despair, which can lead to death by suicide or substance abuse – also known as 'deaths of despair'. Fortunately, deaths of this kind are falling in the majority of countries, though not in the United States or Republic of Korea. As Chapter 6 shows, deaths of despair are significantly lower in countries when more people report donating, volunteering, or helping strangers.

The degree of benevolence in a country also has a profound impact on its politics (see Chapter 7). Populism is largely due to unhappiness. But whether populists are on the left or the right depends on trust. People who trust others veer to the left, those who do not veer to the right.

For many people, how to express their benevolence is a serious question. Where should you donate your money? The logical answer is to generate as much extra happiness (or reduced unhappiness)

as possible. This means choosing charities that yield the most happiness per dollar. Chapter 8 explains this method and illustrates it across a range of interventions. Even in low-income countries, mental health treatments emerge as an especially effective way of spending money.

In what follows, we summarise the key insights from each chapter and encourage you to dig deeper into this year's report.

Chapter 2
Caring and sharing: global analysis of happiness and kindness

- People are too pessimistic about the kindness of their communities. The return rate of lost wallets is far more than people expect.
- In 2024, benevolent acts continue to be 10% more frequent than in 2017–19 in all generations and almost all global regions, despite evidence of a return towards pre-COVID levels.
- Benevolent acts and expected kindness both matter for individual happiness levels (Figure 2.4).
- Within-country inequality of happiness has been growing over the past 15 years, while international inequality of happiness has remained roughly constant (Figure 2.5).
- Expected and actual kindness both reduce the inequality of wellbeing (Figure 2.6).
- The wellbeing benefits of benevolent acts depend on why and how people engage in them. Both helpers and recipients experience greater happiness from caring and sharing when they do so in the context of caring connections, choice, and clear positive impact.
- Untied foreign aid is positively related to national happiness in the donor countries. But, on average, countries with high refugee shares are less happy, since refugee flows are more often based on location than invitation.

Chapter 3
Sharing meals with others: how sharing meals supports happiness and social connections

- This chapter presents new Gallup evidence on an understudied measure of social connection – sharing meals. Given the relatively objective way in which it is measured, sharing meals is uniquely comparable across countries and cultures, between individuals, and over time, unlike many other social indicators.
- There are stark differences in rates of meal sharing around the world. While residents of some countries share almost all of their meals with other people, residents of other countries eat almost all of their meals alone. These differences are not fully explained by differences in income, education, or employment.
- Sharing meals has a strong impact on subjective wellbeing – on par with the influence of income and unemployment. Those who share more meals with others report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect, and lower levels of negative affect. This is true across ages, genders, countries, cultures, and regions.
- In the United States, using data from the American Time Use Survey, the authors find clear evidence that Americans are spending more and more time dining alone. In 2023, roughly 1 in 4 Americans reported eating all of their meals alone the previous day – an increase of 53% since 2003. Dining alone has become more prevalent for every age group, but especially for young people.
- Meal sharing also appears to be closely related to some, but not all, measures of social connectedness. Most notably, countries where people share relatively more meals tend to display higher levels of social support and positive reciprocity, and lower levels of loneliness.
- Nevertheless, there remain vast gaps in our understanding of the causal dynamics of meal sharing, subjective wellbeing, and social connections. The authors point to a number of promising avenues for future research.

Chapter 4

Living with others: how household size and family bonds relate to happiness

- For most people in the world, family is a source of joy and support. This chapter explores how the size and configuration of households affect people's happiness.
- In Mexico and Europe, a household size of four to five predicts the highest levels of happiness. Couples who live with at least one child, or couples who live with children and members of their extended family, have especially high average life satisfaction.
- People living on their own often experience lower levels of happiness. People in very large households can also experience lower happiness, probably linked to diminished economic satisfaction.
- Latin American societies, characterised by larger household sizes and strong family bonds, offer valuable lessons for other societies that seek to enrich relational satisfaction and improve overall happiness metrics and research approaches.
- Understanding the drivers of family happiness requires surveys that measure their dynamics, interactions, processes, and outcomes. National statistical offices should prioritise the development of metrics that assess the quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships and the bonds that underpin them.
- Public policies should consider how economic decisions may have secondary effects on relationships, hence affecting the wellbeing of families.

Chapter 5
Connecting with others: how social connections improve the happiness of young adults

- Social connections are vital for the wellbeing of young adults as they provide a buffer from the toxic effects of stress.
- However, social disconnection is quite prevalent among young adults. In 2023, 19% of young adults across the world reported having no one that they could count on for social support, representing a 39% increase compared to 2006.
- Early social ties during young adulthood have long-lasting effects. For university students, friendships formed in the first few weeks of college increase the likelihood of flourishing and reduce the likelihood of developing depressive symptoms over the subsequent years.
- Many young adults underestimate their peers' empathy, leading them to avoid connecting with others and missing out on opportunities for meaningful relationships.
- Fortunately, there are interventions that can bridge this 'empathy perception gap' by informing young adults about the empathy of their peers. Undergraduate students who were exposed to these interventions saw others as more empathic and were more likely to make new connections and build larger social networks.

Chapter 6
Supporting others: how prosocial behaviour reduces deaths of despair

- Increasing prosocial behaviour (donating, volunteering, and helping strangers) is connected to decreasing deaths of despair around the world. Regression results indicate that a ten percentage-point increase in the share of people engaging in prosocial behaviour is associated with approximately 1 fewer death per year per 100,000.
- Deaths of despair have declined since 2000 in 75% of 59 countries. The largest declines occurred in northeastern Europe, from very high initial levels, but deaths of despair are still high and rising in a few countries including the United States and Republic of Korea. In 2019, Slovenia had the highest level, with more than 50 deaths per 100,000.
- Deaths of despair are nearly four times higher among men than women, and more than double among those aged 60+ compared with those aged 15–29. Three-quarters are due to suicide, followed by deaths due to alcohol and drug abuse.
- Previous research indicates that prosocial behaviour contributes to individual wellbeing. This chapter further demonstrates that increasing prosocial behaviour is reliably connected to decreasing deaths of despair. Societies could benefit from investing in the conditions supporting prosocial behaviour.

Chapter 7

Trusting others: how unhappiness and social distrust explain populism

- Subjective experiences like life satisfaction and trust play a much greater role in shaping values and voting behaviour than traditional ideologies or class struggle.
- In Europe and the United States, the decline in happiness and social trust explains a large share of the rise in political polarisation and votes against 'the system'.
- The decline in life satisfaction explains the overall rise in anti-system votes but trust in others then comes into play. Among unhappy people attracted by the extremes of the political spectrum, low-trust people are more often found on the far right, whereas high-trust people are more inclined to vote for the far left.

Chapter 8

Giving to others: how to convert your money into greater happiness for others

- The authors estimate how much happiness per dollar is created by specific forms of charitable expenditure. Happiness is measured in well-being-years (WELLBYs).
- They find that the wellbeing cost-effectiveness of charities varies dramatically. The best charities in their sample are hundreds of times better at increasing happiness than others. This implies that donors can multiply their impact, *at no extra cost*, by funding the most cost-effective charities.
- A key gap in the evidence is the lack of well-being evaluations for large, well-known charities. The authors discuss the challenges in evaluating large charities and explain why they have questions about the impact of these organisations.
- To conclude, the authors set out directions for how to improve the new discipline of wellbeing cost-effectiveness analysis.

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This year, thanks to support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), we ran our first-ever open call for chapter proposals and convened the authors in Rome for a productive workshop which helped to improve the report and build the scholarly community. RWJF also funded the development of our new data dashboard to bring Gallup's data to life and improve people's understanding of how their country is doing compared to others.

All of these contributions together are what makes the World Happiness Report the go-to source for so many people around the world who seek the latest evidence and analysis on the global state of happiness.

John Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Lara B. Aknin, and Shun Wang.