Chapter 3

Sharing meals with others

How sharing meals supports happiness and social connections

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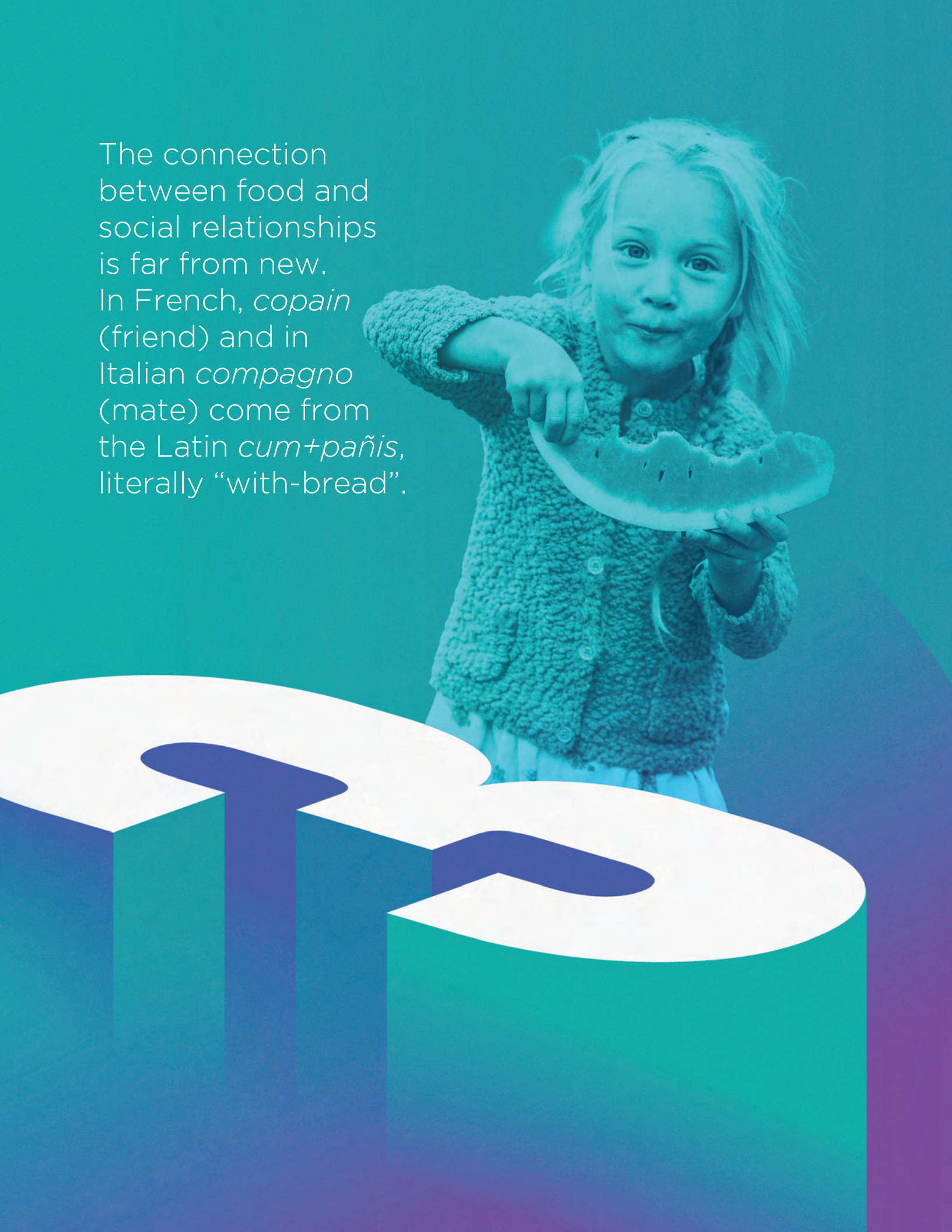

Key Insights

For over a decade, the *World Happiness Report* has shown that social connections are important drivers of happiness, both at the individual and national level, and across cultures.

In this chapter, we present new 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.

Using novel data for 142 countries and territories collected by Gallup in 2022 and 2023, we find 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 proves to be an exceptionally strong indicator of subjective wellbeing – on par with 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, we 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 more meals have 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. We point to a number of promising avenues for future research and discuss implications for policy.

Introduction

Social connections are critically important for human health, happiness, and prosperity. People who are more socially connected tend to be happier, less stressed, more satisfied with their lives, less prone to depression, more engaged in their communities, and less likely to suffer from disease or disability.[1] In their professional lives, people with more social connections are more creative, cooperative, trusting, and likely to be promoted.[2] They are less likely to commit crimes, earn higher levels of income, and live longer lives.[3]

At the same time, social isolation and loneliness are strongly associated with negative life outcomes. The absence of social ties has been linked to higher rates of disease, shorter life expectancies, lower levels of subjective wellbeing, higher rates of criminality, and greater support for authoritarianism.[4] One widely cited meta-analysis estimated that the negative health consequences of loneliness and isolation were roughly equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[5] In short, to paraphrase Dr. Chris Peterson, one of the founding fathers of positive psychology – other people matter.

Social connections are not only important for individual health and happiness, but also for societal health and happiness writ large. People who are more connected to each other are more trusting of others and have more faith in institutions.[6] They are more likely to donate to charity, be more politically engaged, and report higher levels of pride in their communities.[7] They tend to be more considerate and compassionate, not only towards friends and family, but also towards strangers. They are more likely to volunteer time to help those in need and share resources with others.[8]

In this chapter, we explore links between sharing meals, social connections, and wellbeing. Although the topic of sharing meals has remained relatively understudied in the academic literature, the connection between food and social relationships is far from new. In French, *copain* (friend) and in Italian *compagno* (mate) come from the Latin *cum+pa–nis*, literally "with-bread". The Chinese term for companion/partner, 伙伴, stems from a similar term (火伴) which literally translates to "fire mate", a reference to sharing meals over a campfire.

Recently, an emerging body of empirical evidence has begun to point to potential links between sharing meals and a range of social benefits. One review of the literature found that adolescents who ate more meals with family members had better diet and nutritional habits, lower levels of obesity, fewer eating disorders, and greater academic achievement.[9] Another experiment found strong links between meal sharing and positive affect, although these effects were diminished with increased smartphone use during meal times.[10] Yet another study of roughly 9,000 older adults in China found that sharing meals with others was associated with lower rates of depression.[11]

In this chapter, we extend this body of work by looking at the relationship between sharing meals and wellbeing using novel data collected on a global scale. We present evidence from the first-ever global dataset on social eating, collected in 2022 as part of the Ajinomoto module on the Gallup World Poll. In 2023, Gallup asked these questions again in 17 countries. More than 150,000 people from around the world answered the following two questions: "Thinking about the last 7 days … (i) On how many days did you eat lunch with someone you know? (ii) On how many days did you eat dinner with someone you know?" In addition to this new dataset, we present new evidence from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) in the United States on the association between sharing meals, social connections, and wellbeing over time.

Our aim is twofold. First, we explore the extent to which sharing meals can serve as an indicator of social connectedness. In this respect, the number of meals shared with others has a number of advantages compared to existing proxies. The act of sharing a meal is relatively objective and straightforward to report. Even if it is self-reported (as are all survey questions), the number of shared meals is an observable and objective aspect of people's lives. Conversely, many other measures of social connectedness rely on more subjective assessments. For example, survey

respondents may be asked to report how close they feel to friends and family, how many close relationships they have in general, or how often they feel isolated or left out.

While undeniably valuable, these sorts of questions present a series of challenges for researchers studying the relationship between subjective measures of wellbeing and subjective indicators of social connection. For one, statistical correlations between all subjective measures tend to be artificially high to begin with. This can make it seem like subjectively reported variables are more closely related to each other than they really are. Moreover, it is often difficult to assess whether one person's self-report of a close social connection is directly comparable to someone else's. These problems are exacerbated when trying to make comparisons across countries and cultures, or over long periods of time.

A metric based on the number of shared meals is poised to address these issues. Sharing meals is a cross-cultural social ritual, practiced every day by millions of people. It is a universal practice. This is particularly useful when studying social connections and wellbeing on a global scale as it allows for relatively reliable international and intercultural comparisons. The number of meals shared with others is also much more objectively comparable over time than related measures of social engagement. While interpretations of closeness or belonging may evolve and change over time, the number of meals shared with others is not expected to. In this way, our approach is operationally similar to other well-established questions to measure related aspects of human capital. For example, the question "How many books were there in your home when you were 16?" is routinely used by international surveys to measure parental cultural capital.[12]

Our second aim in this chapter is to consider the relationship between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing. Given the strong link between wellbeing and social connections, sharing meals with others may be an important indicator of positive wellbeing. This indeed turns out to be the case. We present the largest and most robust evidence to date showing that sharing meals with others is strongly predictive of greater life evaluations, increased positive affect, and decreased negative affect. We also find that dining alone is at least as (if not even more) strongly associated with low levels of wellbeing.

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However, studying the correlation between sharing meals and wellbeing raises an important issue of causality. Does sharing meals make people happier? Or do people who are happy to begin with share more meals? Or, perhaps even more likely, is the relationship bi-directional? These are important questions with significant implications for research and policy. We do not conclusively resolve them here. While we discuss preliminary evidence and efforts to get at the underlying causal dynamics of meal sharing and subjective wellbeing, arriving at a full answer to this question is a task that remains open to future research.

To begin, we present new global evidence on the variation in meal sharing and dining alone around the world. We then turn to the relationship between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing. Specifically, we consider the extent to which sharing meals with others is associated with life evaluations, positive affect, and negative affect. Next, we generate novel indicators of meal sharing and dining alone using data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) to take a closer look at links between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing over time in the United States. Finally, we consider associations between meal sharing and a range of related social indicators. We conclude with a discussion of policy implications and point to a number of promising avenues for future research.

Sharing meals around the world

In 2022 and 2023, the Gallup World Poll asked representative samples in 142 countries and territories how often they ate lunch or dinner with family, friends, or anyone else they knew.[13] In Figure 3.1, we present regional differences in meal sharing, broken down by lunches and dinners. Additional regional descriptive statistics are provided in Table A1 of the online appendix.

Overall, we find stark differences in the frequency of dining with others and dining alone around the world. Latin America and the Caribbean emerges as the global leader in meal sharing. On average, residents of these countries share approximately 9 meals with other people per week. At the bottom of the list is South Asia, where people report eating fewer than 4 meals with others per week.

The relatively low levels of meal sharing in both South and East Asian countries is particularly notable. Past research has found that dining alone is on the rise in East Asian countries, most notably in Japan and the Republic of Korea.[14] Two of the most commonly cited explanations are the rise of single-person households and demographic ageing. However, differences in the interpretation of the survey items used to measure meal sharing may also play a role. There are some indications that East and South Asian respondents may be less likely to consider family members or other members of their household as "someone you know."[15] Whatever the underlying explanation, the considerably low rates of meal sharing in these regions clearly warrant further investigation.

However, these regional differences also mask significant variation across countries. In Figure 3.2, we present rates of meal sharing for all countries. Full country rankings are provided in Table A2 of the online appendix. Senegal tops the list, where residents report sharing 11.7 meals with others per week on average. Gambia, Malaysia, and Paraguay come next, where residents report sharing approximately 11 meals with others per

Figure 3.1: Meal sharing by region
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)

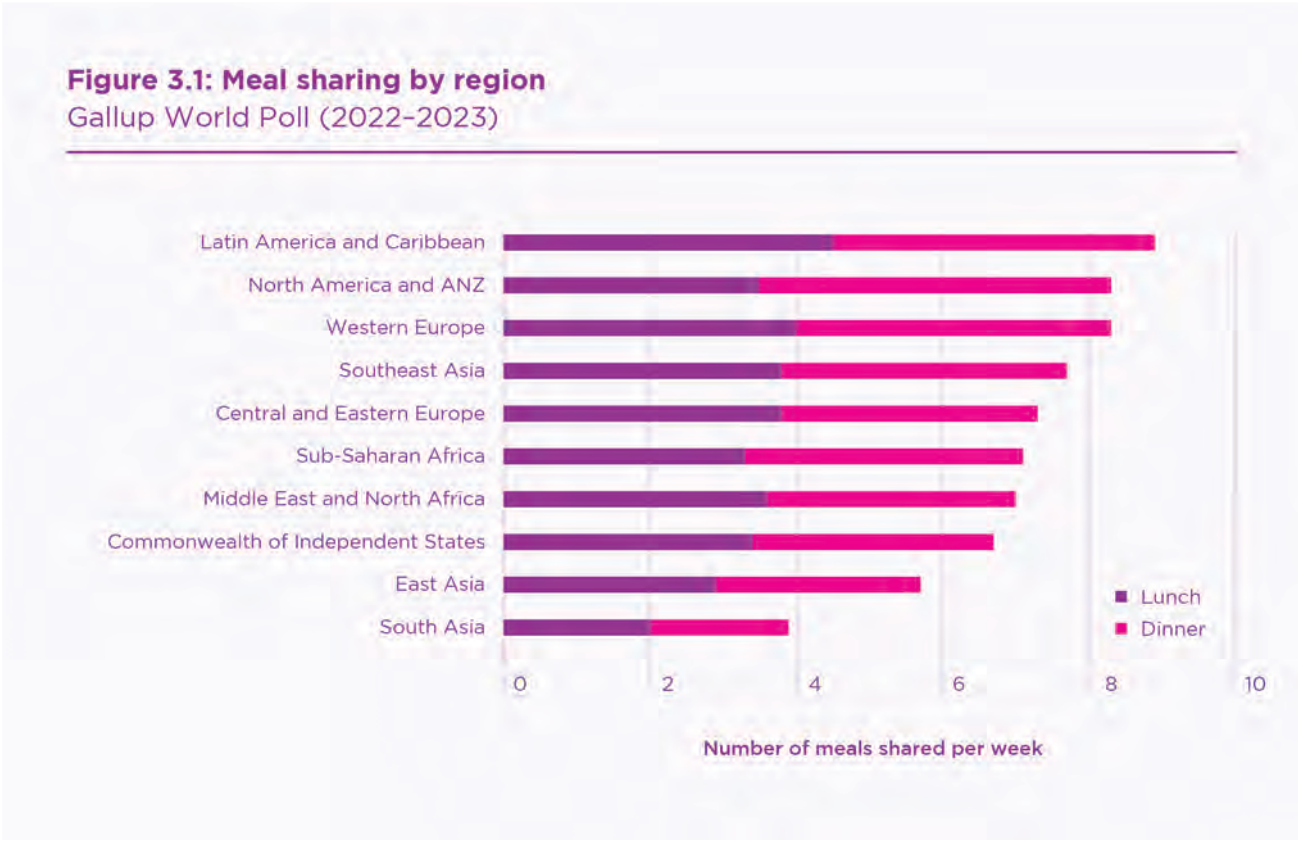
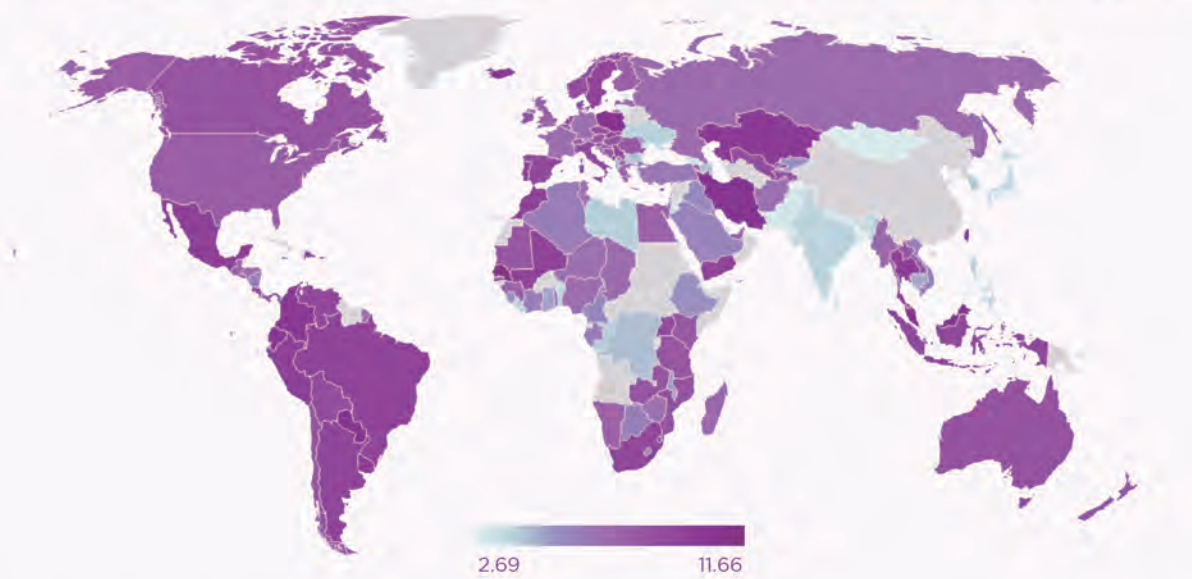


Figure 3.2: Meal sharing by country
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)



Note: Grey regions denote places for which there is no data

week. Iceland is the only country from Europe or North America represented in the top 10 with an average of 10 meals shared per week. Canada ranks 53rd with 8.4 meals shared per week, the United States ranks 69th, and the United Kingdom ranks 81st. Germany appears in 91st place, while India ranks 132nd with 4 meals shared per week. At the very bottom of the list are Bangladesh and Estonia, where residents report sharing only 2.7 meals per week.

We present additional maps with lunches and dinners considered separately in Figures A1 and A2 of the online appendix. Overall, the dynamics are broadly consistent with Figure 3.2. Senegal and Gambia continue to rank highly in both categories, Iceland jumps to second place for shared dinners, and Middle Eastern countries including Iran and Morocco move closer to the top for shared lunches. Residents in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia are much more likely to eat dinner with others than they are to share lunches. On average, residents of these countries share roughly 5 dinners per week – more than twice as much as residents in the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Mongolia where respondents report sharing just 1 to 2 dinners per week.

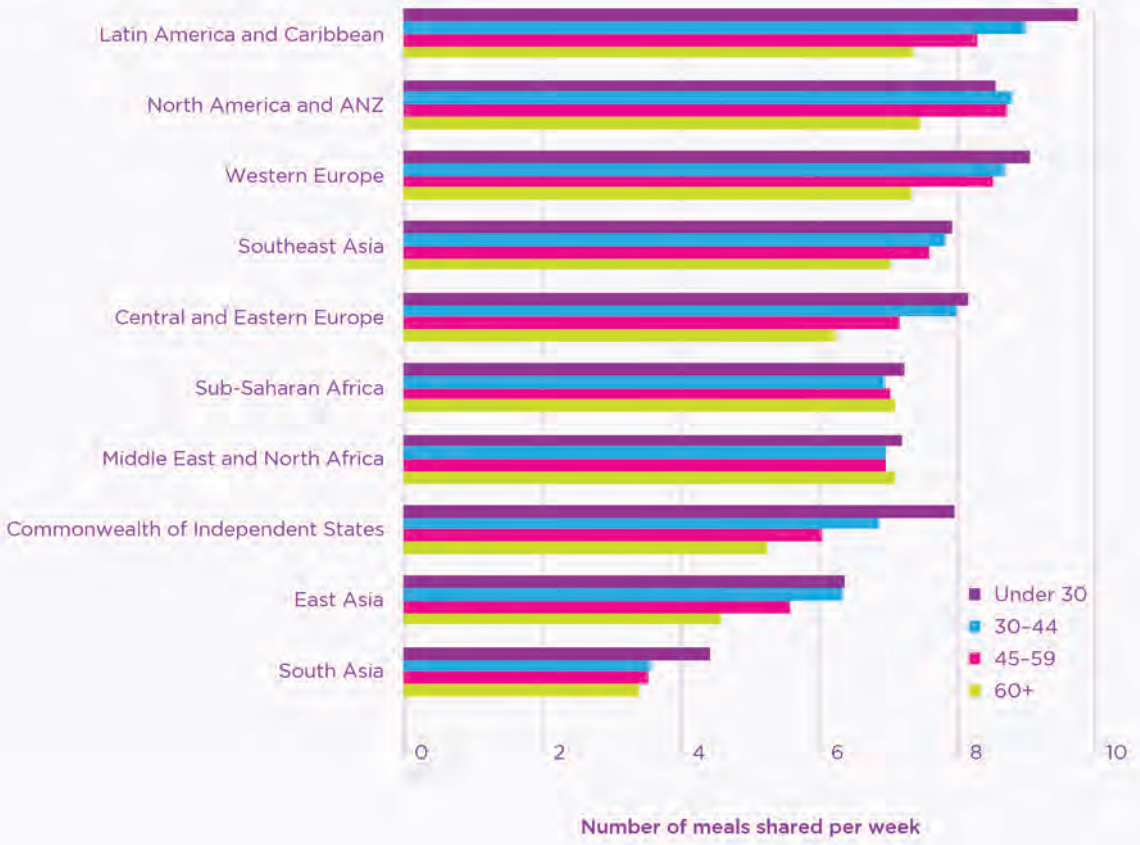
The underlying explanations for these differences are sure to be complex and multifaceted. Nevertheless, explanations that appeal to differences in income alone seem unlikely. For example, one potential interpretation of our results could be that people who eat more meals overall also share more meals with other people. If so, one might expect that residents of high-income countries would eat more meals overall, and therefore eat more meals with other people than residents of low-income countries.

However, the fact that low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America report such high levels of meal sharing casts doubt on the assumption that more meals eaten with others is simply a function of more meals eaten overall. Although we do observe a moderate and statistically significant correlation of 0.2 between income and meal sharing at the country level, this association explains only 4.6% of the global variation in meal sharing.[16] Explaining the other 95.4% represents a rich opportunity for future research.

In Figure 3.3, we extend our analysis by plotting the number of shared meals for all regions broken down by age. In almost every region, younger people share more meals with others. This is an important difference worth further study. If meal sharing is a strong proxy for (and potentially a causal contributor to) subjective wellbeing, then age-related differences in meal sharing may shed new light on differences and changes in wellbeing across the lifespan, and over time.

Considering gender, men and women report similar numbers of meals shared per week around the world. Across all regions, we find that gender

Figure 3.3: Meal sharing by region and age
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)



differences in meal sharing are statistically insignificant. These results are presented in Figure A3 in the online appendix.

Sharing meals and wellbeing

In the previous section, we documented considerable differences in meal sharing around the world. In this section, we consider what, if anything, these variations can tell us about corresponding differences in subjective wellbeing. Our focus throughout this section will be specifically on life evaluations, positive affect, and negative affect. Once again, we rely on survey responses from the Gallup World Poll in 2022 and 2023.

In Figure 3.4, we present the overall relationship between life evaluations measured using the Cantril Ladder[17] and the total number of meals shared with others in the previous week. We calculate country averages for both variables so that each point on the graph represents a different country.

Overall, we find a positive relationship between sharing meals and life evaluations. Across countries, sharing one more meal per week is associated with an average increase of roughly 0.2 points on a scale from 0 to 10. This difference is both statistically significant and practically meaningful. A difference of 0.2 points is roughly equivalent to a difference of five places in the global happiness rankings presented in Chapter 2 of this report.

However, to better understand the relationship between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing, it is worth diving deeper into the data to consider differences in meal sharing and subjective wellbeing across individuals.

Fig. 3.4: Meal sharing and life evaluations around the world
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)

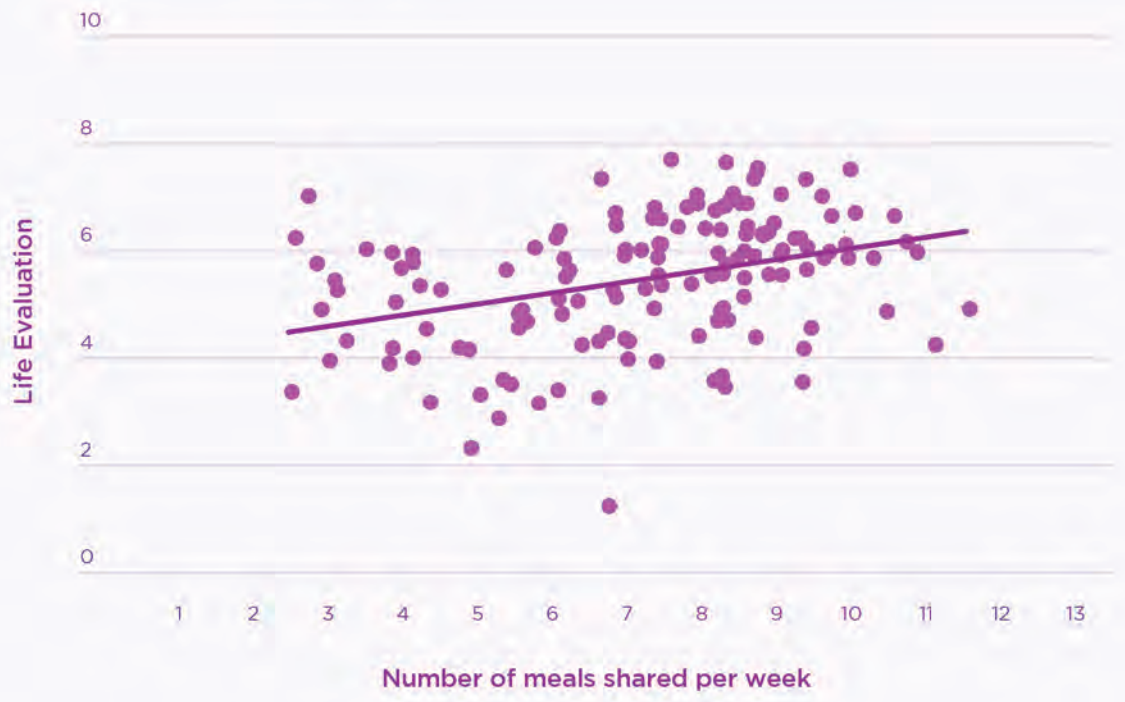


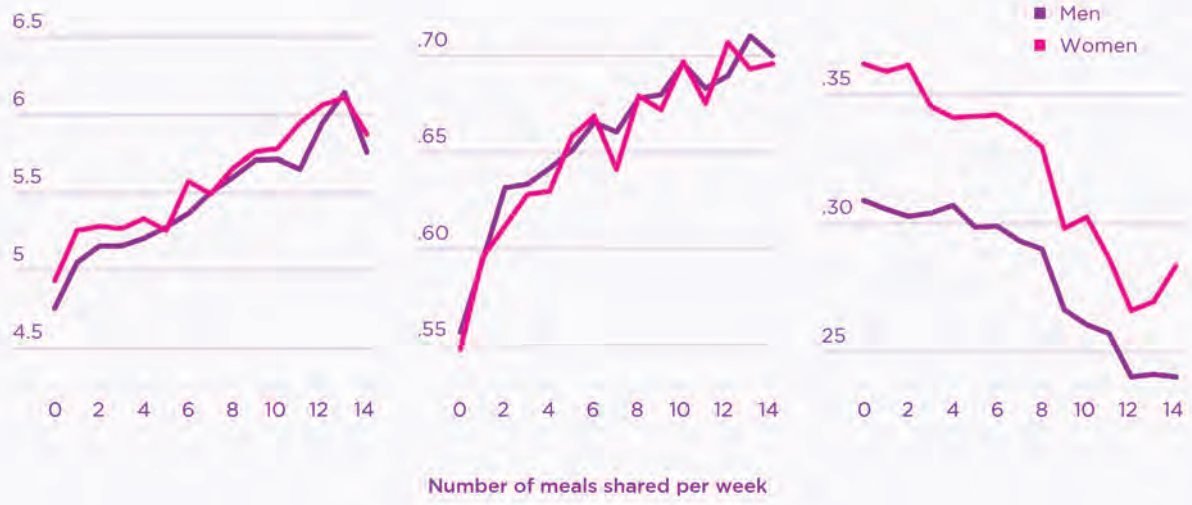
Figure 3.5 shows average life evaluations by the number of meals shared per week based on individual comparisons rather than country or regional averages. In general, we see an upward trend – albeit a subtle, uneven one – in average life evaluations as the number of shared meals increases. The largest difference in life evaluations is between those who eat all meals alone and those who eat one meal with someone else. People who shared just one meal in the past week have notably higher life evaluations (5.2) than those who ate all meals alone (4.9). This 0.3-point difference is again statistically and practically significant. For context, it is about half as large as the decline in life evaluation associated with unemployment, which is consistently found to be one of the largest effects documented in the wellbeing literature.[18]

From there, life evaluations tend to increase as the number of shared meals increases.[19] Life evaluations are broadly constant (5.2 to 5.3) for people who shared 1–5 meals in the past week and uptick slightly (5.5 to 5.6) for those who ate 5–8 meals with others. People who shared 9–10 meals reported average life evaluations of 5.7, which increases to 5.8 for those who shared 11 meals per week. The peak occurs for those who shared 13 meals with others in the previous week, reporting average life evaluations of 6.1.

In Figures 3.6 and 3.7, we plot relationships between meal sharing and wellbeing by gender and age. Even at this fine-grained level of analysis, we find strong and significant associations between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing. Sharing meals not only predicts more positive life evaluations, but also higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect. The relationship between sharing meals and positive affect is particularly strong – even stronger than the relationship between sharing meals and life evaluations. Overall, we estimate the correlation between positive affect and meal sharing to be 0.44. Correlations for life evaluations and negative affect are 0.34 and -0.21, respectively.

Figure 3.5: Life evaluations by number of meals shared per week
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)

Figure 3.6: Shared meals and subjective wellbeing by gender
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)



When we consider men and women separately in Figure 3.6, we find no statistically significant difference in the link between sharing meals and life evaluation by gender, nor do we find strong evidence of gender differences in the association between positive affect and meal sharing. In other words, sharing meals appears to be just as important for men and women in terms of how they evaluate their lives and how often they experience positive emotions.

However, when we consider negative emotions, the story begins to change. First, it is worth noting that men report considerably lower levels of negative affect than women overall. This is consistent with evidence presented in this and previous editions of the *World Happiness Report*. Second, we also find that sharing meals appears to be more closely related to negative emotions for women than for men. Women who spend more time dining alone report much higher levels of negative affect than women who spend more time dining with others. This is also true for men, but the difference is smaller than it is for women. This is indicated by the steeper slope of the line for women in the third panel of Figure 3.6.

In Figure 3.7, we present the relationship between sharing meals and wellbeing for younger (age 16–24) and older (age 65+) adults. Results for all age groups are presented in Figure A4 of the online appendix. There are two clear takeaways.

The first is the overall difference in subjective wellbeing across the two age groups, represented by the gap between the purple (16–24) and pink (65+) lines. Older adults report higher life evaluations than young people overall, but lower levels of positive affect. In other words, they are more likely to report being satisfied with their lives as a whole but less likely to report feeling happy the previous day. We observe no significant differences in levels of negative affect between younger and older adults.

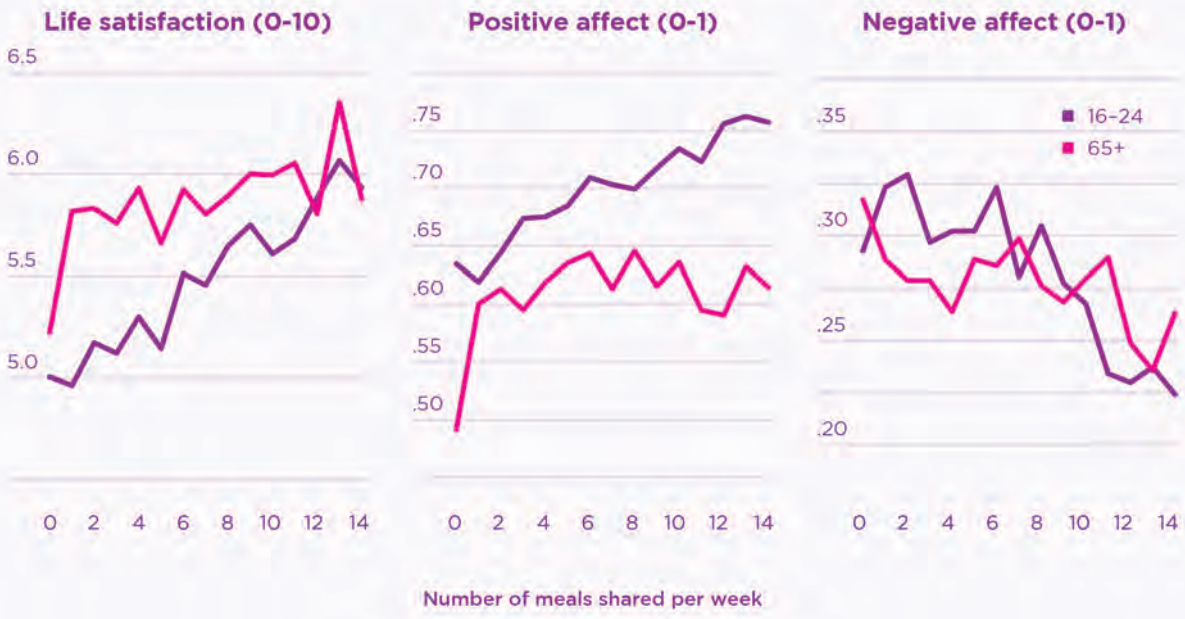
The second feature – perhaps more relevant for this chapter – is the difference in the slope of the lines, where steeper lines represent stronger relationships between meal sharing and subjective wellbeing. Overall, we find the relationship between sharing meals and life evaluations, as well as the relationship between sharing meals and positive affect, to be stronger for younger people than for older people. When we compare young people who dine alone to young people who share meals, we find much greater differences in life evaluations and positive affect than we do for older adults. We do not observe similar patterns for negative affect – for both young and old, eating more meals alone is equally predictive of higher levels of negative affect.

As a final note, not only do people who share more meals report more positive emotions overall, they also seem to enjoy their food more. In Figure 3.8, we plot average levels of reported enjoyment while cooking and eating for those dining alone compared to those dining with others. We find a clear positive trend in both cases. The more meals we share with other people, the more we seem to enjoy them.

Put simply, across regions, countries, and cultures, for men and women, young and old, sharing more meals is associated with greater subjective wellbeing.

Recent research has also suggested that individuals who feel more positively about different aspects of their eating experience tend to have higher life evaluations and experience more positive emotions.[20] Taken together, this may suggest that dining experiences are an

Figure 3.7: Shared meals and subjective wellbeing by age
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)



important, if sometimes overlooked, ingredient in shaping overall wellbeing.

To briefly summarise, in the previous section, we observed sizable differences in rates of meal sharing around the world. This was true across regions, countries, and individuals. While we did not find significant differences in rates of meal sharing for men and women, younger people appear to eat more of their meals with others in almost every region of the world.

In this section, we found that differences in sharing meals are also closely related to differences in subjective wellbeing. This is true across multiple levels of analysis. At the country level, countries where residents share more meals report greater average life evaluations. At the individual level, men and women who eat more meals with others report greater life evaluations, increased positive affect, and decreased negative affect – although the relationship between meal sharing and negative affect appears to be stronger for women than it is for men. We observed similar dynamics across age cohorts. Both younger and older adults who share more meals report higher levels of wellbeing, but these links are stronger for the young than the old. Finally, we noted that sharing meals is particularly important for positive affect, more so than for life evaluations or negative affect. Put simply, across regions, countries, and cultures, for men and women, young and old, sharing more meals is associated with greater subjective wellbeing.

Testing possible explanations

A key question to emerge from these results is whether sharing meals with others is merely an indicator of wellbeing, or a direct causal contributor to it. While we cannot conclusively answer this

question here, we can begin to consider some potential explanations.

For example, eating alone may simply be more affordable than eating with others. This seems particularly likely in high-income countries, where sharing meals with others may be more common in restaurants. If so, perhaps the reason we find such a strong relationship between happiness and sharing meals is simply because people who share more meals have more money.

Or consider the related case of (un)employment. It is plausible to imagine that employed adults who eat at work are more likely to share meals than those who are unemployed. If so, then the link between sharing meals and wellbeing may be partially, or even substantially, reducible to differences in employment.

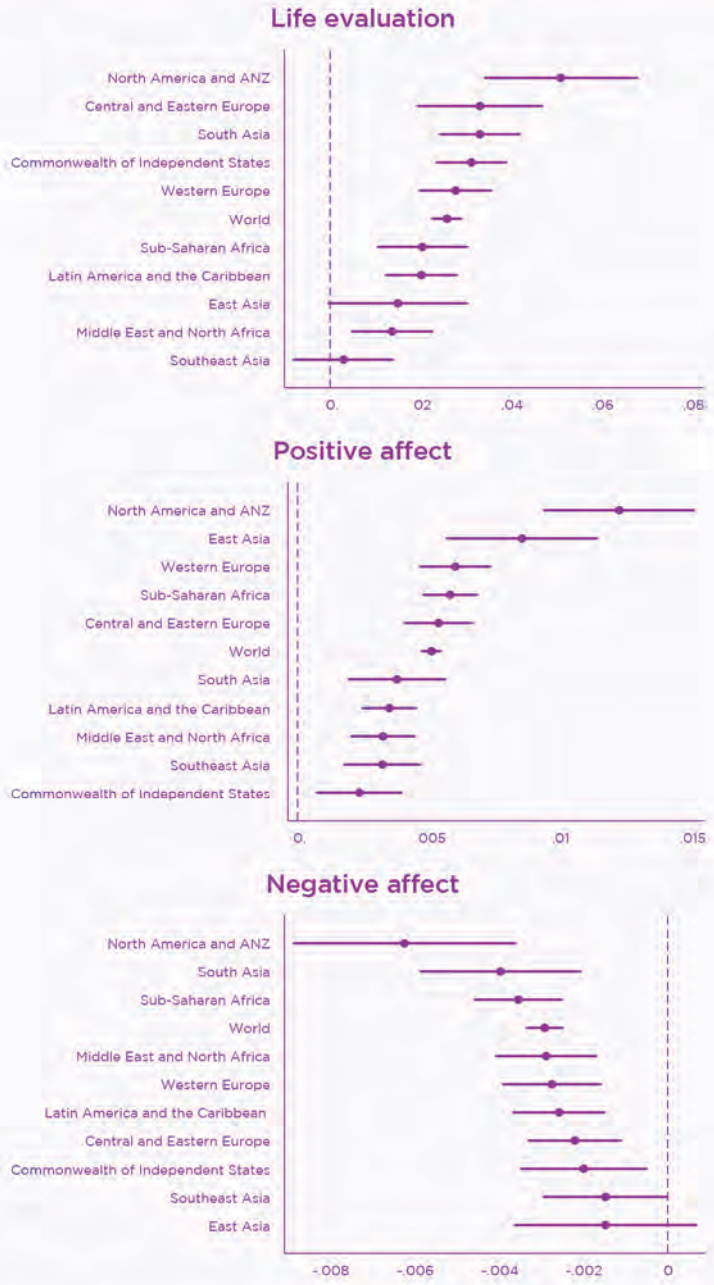
To address these concerns, Figure 3.9 presents the results of multivariate linear regressions which estimate the relationships between meal sharing, life evaluation, positive affect, and negative affect for all regions while controlling for a variety of other potentially relevant factors. Specifically, we control for gender, age, education, employment, income, household size, and country fixed effects. We also control for people's ability to meet basic needs for food, as measured by the question "Have there been times in the past 12 months where you did not have enough money to buy the food that you or your family needed?" With these controls included, if we continue to observe a significant relationship between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing, we can be more confident that this relationship is important in its own right, and not merely attributable to other factors.

In fact, this is precisely what we observe. Even after accounting for income, education, employment, and other key indicators, we continue to find strong and robust relationships between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing around the world. In almost all regions, sharing more meals with others proves to be highly predictive of higher life evaluations, more positive affect, and less negative affect.

However, there are notable differences in the magnitude of these relationships across regions. The relationship between sharing meals and wellbeing appears to be particularly strong in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. In these countries, the differences in wellbeing between those who eat more or fewer meals alone is greater than for any other region. One potential interpretation of this result is that the importance of sharing meals with others may be driving the relatively high levels of meal sharing we observe in this region (Figure 3.1). However, we do not observe similar dynamics for Latin America and the Caribbean. While meal sharing is most common in this region, it does not appear particularly important for wellbeing relative to other parts of the world.

We find similarly complex relationships between levels of meal sharing and its importance for wellbeing at the opposite end of the spectrum. In East Asia – where meal sharing is relatively rare (Figure 3.1) – we find strong links between sharing meals and negative affect, but weak links when it comes to life evaluation or positive affect. At the same time, sharing meals with others appears to be particularly important for life evaluations and negative affect in South Asia – another region with relatively low levels of meal sharing overall – but less so for positive affect. Here again, all of these effects are estimated after controlling for age, gender, income, education, and employment. Taken together, the relationship between how often meals are shared and how important meal sharing is for wellbeing is clearly neither simple nor straightforward. Examining and identifying

Figure 3.9: The link between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing by region
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)



Note: Coefficients plotted from 11 separate regressions per image. N ≈ 150,000. Controls: country fixed effects, ncome quintile, household size, gender, age, age-squared, education group, employment group, people's ability to meet basic needs for food. Life evaluation is expressed on a 0–10 scale, positive and negative affect on a 0–1 scale. Data includes the 2023 sample. Predictive effect of the number of shared meals is assumed to be linear. Regressions use country-level survey weights.

potential explanations for these differences can provide a rich opportunity for future research.

Nevertheless, although the magnitude of these relationships may differ across regions, their direction does not. Even after controlling for a wide variety of other factors, sharing meals continues to be strongly and consistently associated with better life evaluations, increased positive affect, and decreased negative affect around the world.

Assessing practical significance

The fact that we observe such strong and consistent links between sharing meals and wellbeing is striking. But how significant are these relationships practically? Given the impressive size and scope of our dataset, it is certainly possible to find statistically significant relationships that are nonetheless relatively small, and therefore perhaps not useful for real-world applications or matters of policy.

One way to assess the practical significance of meal sharing is to consider how much this variable reveals about wellbeing compared to other important social indicators. To that end, we briefly return to income and employment. Decades of research has found strong and sizable links between income, unemployment, and subjective wellbeing.[18] In particular, the dramatic decline in life evaluation associated with unemployment is one of the largest and most consistent effects to emerge from empirical wellbeing research. If we compare the significance of these associations with sharing meals, how do they stack up?

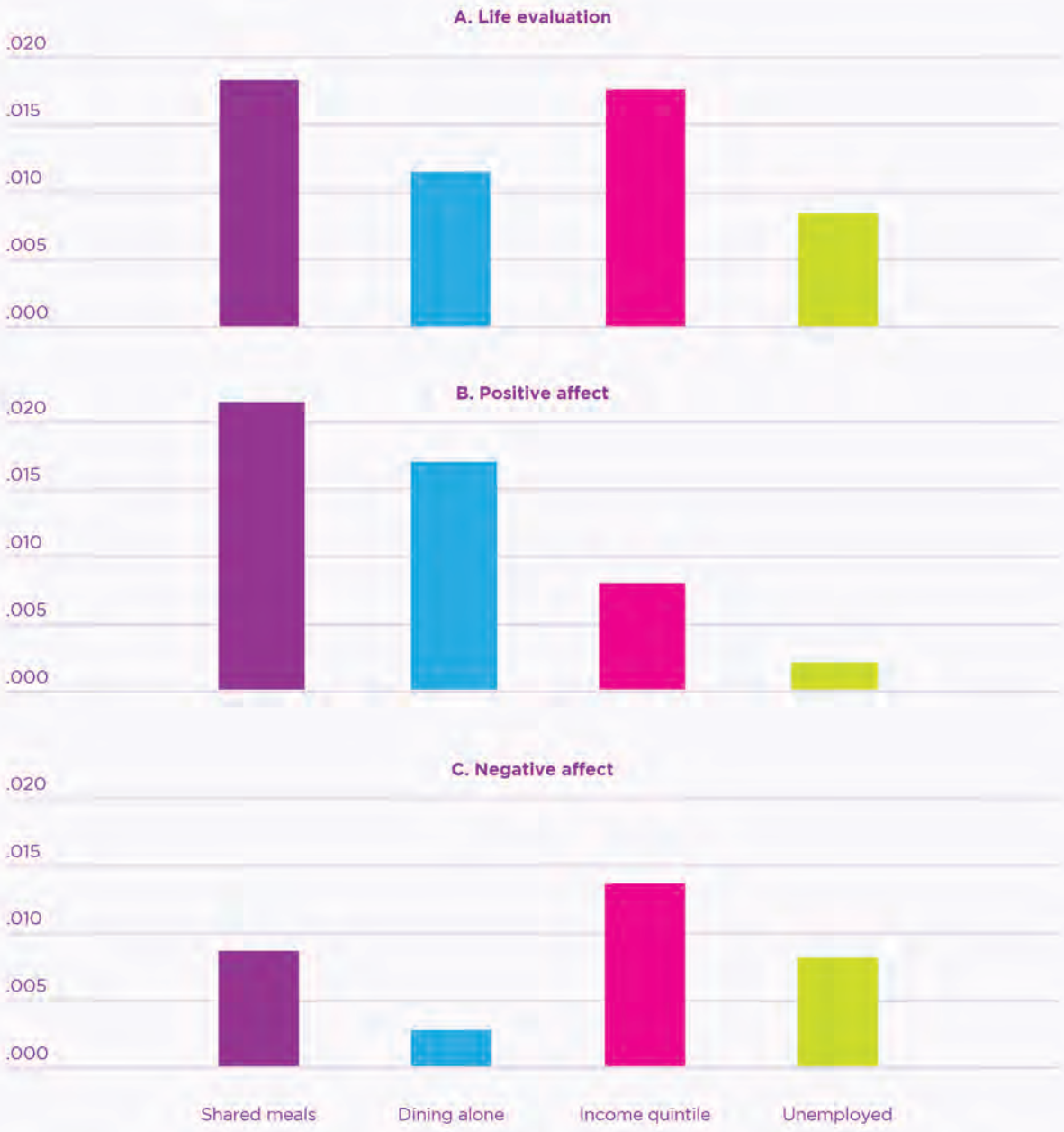
In Figure 3.10, we present the results of a series of regression analyses testing the extent to which income, unemployment, dining alone, and sharing meals explain variation in subjective wellbeing around the world. In each panel, we estimate four separate regressions in which we relate differences in subjective wellbeing (considered as the dependent variable) to differences in sharing meals, dining alone, income quintile, and unemployment (considered as independent variables). In Panel A, we consider relationships with life evaluation, Panel B with positive affect, and Panel C with negative affect. In each case, we measure the extent to which differences in the independent variable of interest can explain differences in the dependent variable of interest. This is estimated empirically by the R-squared value produced by each regression. By implication, the size of the bars in each figure represent the extent to which differences in e.g., shared meals can explain differences in e.g., life evaluation.

In our view, the results of these analyses are the most striking so far. Not only do we find sharing meals and dining alone to be important predictors of wellbeing compared to income and employment, but in many cases, they seem to be even more so. That is, asking people if they shared at least one meal last week can tell us more about their overall life evaluation than knowing if they are unemployed. Or relatedly, knowing how many meals someone shared last week can tell us more about their positive emotions than their income.[21]

Again, the links with positive affect are particularly notable. When explaining variation in positive emotions, the extent to which people share meals with others is a more important predictor than both income and unemployment combined. At the same time, sharing meals also does a better job explaining variation in life evaluations around the world than income or unemployment. Dining alone is a more important predictor of differences in life evaluations than unemployment, but not income. For negative affect, income continues to be a crucially important indicator, yet sharing meals and dining alone are not far behind. Indeed, both prove to be more powerful predictors of negative emotions than unemployment.

Not only do we find sharing meals and dining alone to be important predictors of wellbeing compared to income and employment, but in many cases, they seem to be even more so.

Figure 3.10: Explaining differences in subjective wellbeing around the world
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)



Note: Bars represent R^2 estimates from four separate regressions per image (N ≈ 150,000). No controls. Dependent variables are all expressed on a 0–100 scale and sharing meals is measured using five categories for comparability (0–2; 3–5; 6–8; 9–11; 12–14). Data includes the 2023 sample. The predictive effect of the number of shared meals is not assumed to be linear. Regressions use country-level survey weights.

Taken together, these results underscore the importance and usefulness of sharing meals as an indicator of subjective wellbeing. The fact that we observe such strong links between sharing meals, life evaluations, positive affect, and negative affect suggests that meal sharing should be given much more weight and attention by researchers and policymakers around the world.

However, our discussion in this section is not intended to resolve the thorny matter of causation. While we find strong and significant associations between sharing meals and wellbeing, this could indicate that sharing meals itself causes people to be happy, or that happy people are more likely to share meals with others. Even after controlling for a range of related variables, we cannot conclusively rule out either explanation. In all likelihood, both dynamics are probably true, at least to some extent. The question of which pathway is stronger is nevertheless important and we will return to it in the final section. Before that, we turn to the United States to take a deeper look at changes in meal sharing over time.

Meal sharing over time: a case study of the United States

So far, our analysis has been based on data from the Gallup World Poll, collected from over 150,000 survey respondents in more than 140 countries. The size and scope of this data allowed us, for the first time, to compare differences in meal sharing and its relationship to subjective wellbeing for more people and more countries than ever before.

However, this survey module was only introduced in 2022, so we are unable to examine how meal sharing has changed over time. Given the close association between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing, this is an important perspective to consider as it may provide an objective yardstick for thinking about longitudinal changes in subjective wellbeing.

To this end, this section turns to data collected by the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) in the United States from 2003 to 2023. Each year, the ATUS asks a representative sample of roughly

12,000 Americans how they spend their time on a day-to-day basis. Survey respondents fill out long and detailed questionnaires about what they did the day before, who they did it with, and how they felt while doing it.[22] This data has been used and referenced extensively in research, media, and policy circles. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, the extent to which Americans spend time eating and cooking alone or with others has remained relatively unexplored.

Longitudinal trends in meal sharing are particularly important when considered against the backdrop of declining social capital and connection in the United States. These trends were starkly documented by Robert Putnam in his landmark 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*. Drawing on a truly expansive array of datasets, Putnam found that Americans were spending more and more time alone, while civic institutions and social organisations including religious groups, labour unions, veterans' associations, and even dinner parties were declining. These declines were occurring alongside similar declines in political participation, voting rates, trust in other people, faith in institutions, indicators of physical and mental health, rates of educational achievement, social mobility, and economic opportunity.

More recent studies have reinforced this general story of social decline in the United States and found evidence of similar trends in other countries.[23] One large-scale study looking at data from 1990 to 2012 in 30 European countries found that participation in social groups was falling while distrust in political institutions was rising.[24]

Meal sharing over time in the United States

With this context in mind, we begin our analysis by plotting the number of people dining alone in the United States over time in Figure 3.11. Each dot represents the percentage of survey respondents who reported eating all of their meals alone the previous day. Our sample includes approximately 235,000 American adults from 2003 to 2023 and is weighted to be representative of the general population. Importantly, this measure of meals shared the previous day is also distinct from prior sections in which we considered meal sharing over the course of an entire week.

The trendline is unmistakable. There has been a sharp rise in the number of Americans dining alone since 2003. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the highest levels of dining alone were recorded in 2019 and 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, rates of dining alone were increasing long before the pandemic, and they have not come down since. In 2023, the most recent year for which data is available, rates of dining alone in the United States were even higher than they were during the pandemic. Roughly 1 in 4 American adults (26%) now report eating all of their daily meals alone – an overall increase of more than 50% since 2003.

In Figure A5 of the appendix, we present a series of robustness checks which expand our definition of dining to include cooking and food preparation, and consider the percentage of total meals eaten alone, rather than a binary indicator of every meal eaten alone. In each case, the results all point in the same direction. In one of the most reliable, reputable, and widely used time-use datasets in

Figure 3.11: Dining alone in the United States
ATUS (2003–2023)

Note: Data from the American Time Use Survey weighted to be representative of the general population (n = 234,185 individuals). 95% confidence intervals displayed. Dining alone measured as the share of respondents in each survey year reporting eating all meals alone in the previous day.

the world, we find clear and consistent evidence that, with every passing year, Americans are spending more and more time dining alone.

At this point, it is worth considering one obvious potential explanation for these trends – the rise in living alone. It is well-documented that Americans have become increasingly likely to live by themselves.[25] In Chapter 4 of this report, we see similar results for European countries. There are many reasons for this. Some of the most widely cited explanations are declines in family size, delays in marriage and parenthood, and increased economic opportunity for women. These, and related dynamics, have led to a considerable rise in the share of one-person households in the United States – a trend that we confirm using ATUS data in Figure A6 of the online appendix.

In one of the most reliable, reputable, and widely used time-use datasets in the world, we find clear and consistent evidence that, with every passing year, Americans are spending more and more time dining alone.

We conducted a series of analyses to see if the rise in living alone can explain the rise in dining alone in the US. In Figure A7, we find that people who live alone are considerably more likely to eat alone. This was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet has barely come down in the years since. In 2023, roughly 70% of those living alone reported eating all of their meals alone the previous day, compared to 20% of those who live with others.

However, when it comes to *changes* in dining alone, there has been a greater relative increase in dining alone among those who live with others (Figure A8). To be specific, in 2023, roughly 18% of Americans who live with others ate all of their

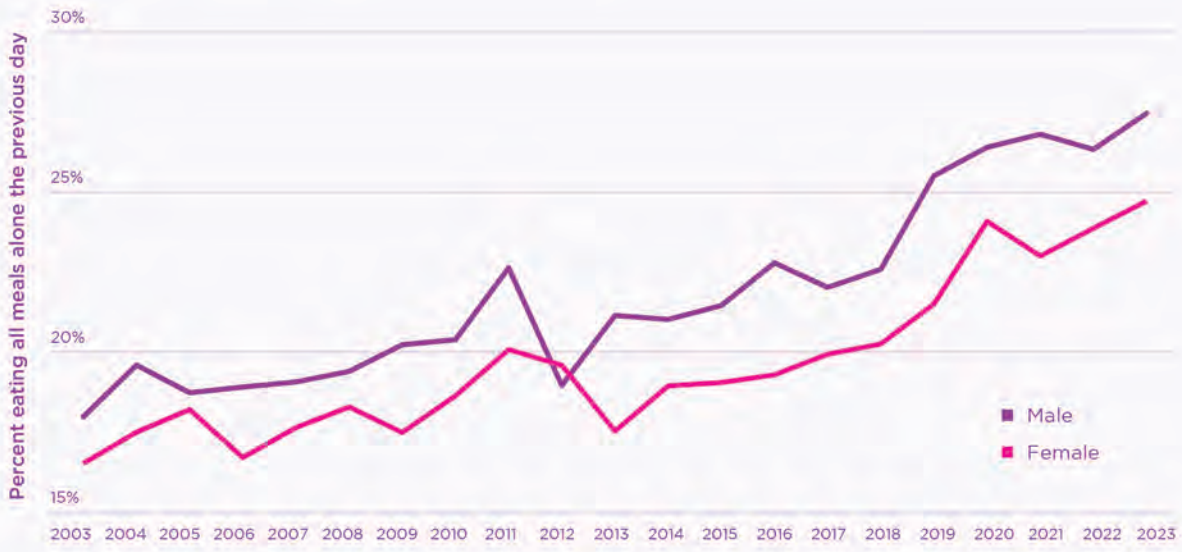
meals alone the previous day, compared to 12% in 2003 – an increase of 50%. Among people who live alone, the corresponding figures are 69% in 2023 and 55% in 2003 – an increase of 25%.

So, does living alone explain dining alone? To some extent it does. In regression analyses, we estimate that recent increases in living alone explain 15–20% of associated increases in dining alone (Figure A9).[26] Nevertheless, even after controlling for household size, we continue to find sizable and significant increases in dining alone since 2003. This remains true even after controlling for age, sex, gender, and income. By implication, while we do find evidence that the rise in living alone is, at least partly, to blame for the rise in dining alone, there is clearly much more to the story.

In Figures 3.12 and 3.13, we present similar trends in dining alone broken down by gender and age. We find that men have generally been more likely to eat all of their meals alone on the previous day than women since 2003. However, we observe sharp and similar increases in dining alone for both genders. Today, both men and women are eating more meals alone than ever before.

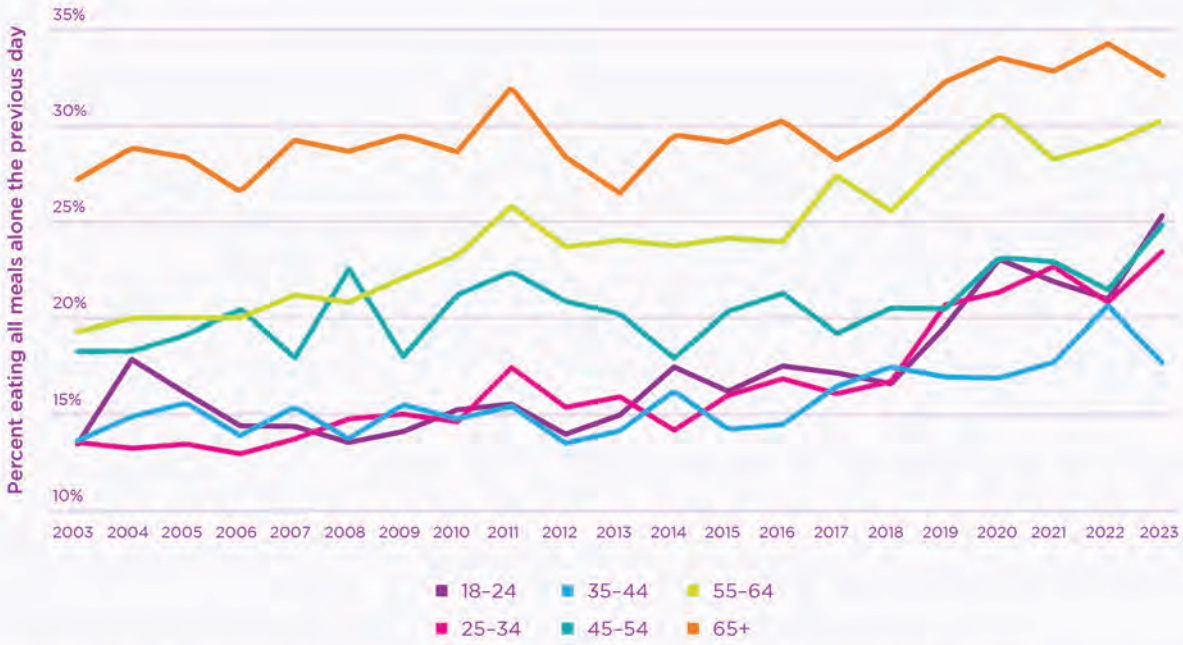
Results for different age groups are another story entirely (Figure 3.13). As we observed in Gallup's global data, older people are much more likely to spend time dining alone than younger people. In this case, we present results for 10-year age cohorts from 18-year-olds to over-65s. In every year since 2003, over-65s report eating more meals alone than their younger counterparts. Rates of dining alone for those under the age of

Figure 3.12: Dining alone in the United States by gender
ATUS (2003–2023)



Note: Data from the American Time Use Survey weighted to be representative of the general population (n = 234,185). Dining alone measured as the share of respondents in each survey year reporting eating all meals alone in the previous day.

Figure 3.13: Dining alone in the United States by age
ATUS (2003–2023)



Note: Data from the American Time Use Survey weighted to be representative of the general population (n = 234,185). Dining alone measured as the share of respondents in each survey year reporting eating all meals alone on the previous day.

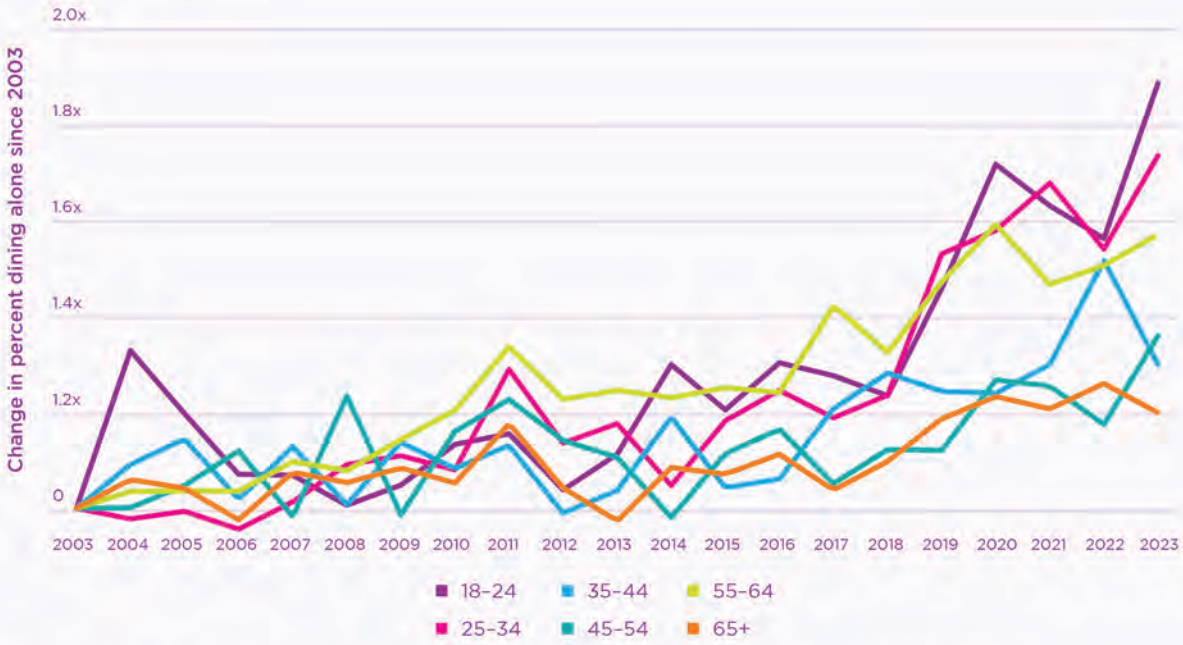
45 are among the lowest recorded and remained largely consistent and comparable – that is, until 2018. Beginning in 2018, we observe sharp increases in dining alone for almost every age group. The trendlines for those under 35 are particularly stark.

In Figure 3.14, we normalise rates of dining alone for all age groups to their 2003 levels and plot the overall changes for each cohort in the years since. We see that levels of dining alone have increased for every age group since 2003, even among older cohorts who were already much more likely to dine alone 20 years ago. Nevertheless, the largest and most dramatic changes are for those under 35. The extent to which 25- to 34-year-olds report eating all of their meals alone on the previous day has increased by more than 180% in two decades. We observe a similarly dramatic increase for 18- to 24-year-olds.

Such sizable increases in rates of dining alone among young adults in the US clearly and urgently warrant further research and policy attention. We are not the first to document concerning levels of

Such sizable increases in rates of dining alone among young adults in the US clearly and urgently warrant further research and policy attention.

Figure 3.14: Changes in dining alone in the United States by age
ATUS (2003–2023)



Note: Data from the American Time Use Survey weighted to be representative of the general population (n = 234,185). Dining alone measured as the share of respondents in each survey year reporting eating all meals alone on the previous day.

isolation among young people,[27] but many of the explanations emanating from public discourse and academic literature are somewhat unsatisfying in the present context.

Most notably, the rise of smartphones and social media is often credited with observable declines in young people's wellbeing. However, when it comes to dining alone, the timelines do not line up as neatly as one might expect. With the launch of Facebook in 2004 and the introduction of the iPhone in 2007, you might expect that the sharpest increases in dining alone would emerge around these times. Instead, we observe a relatively steady and consistent rise in young people dining alone from 2003 to 2015, followed by increasingly steeper inclines in the years since.

Another common explanation for (or at least contributor to) the decline in young people's mental health has been the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, we do see some of the highest recorded rates of dining alone during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. However, rates of dining alone were increasing long before the pandemic began to spread in the United States. During the pandemic, rates of dining alone among young people even appear to have declined slightly – potentially reflecting more meals eaten at home with family members. If the pandemic was the whole story, we may also expect rates of dining alone among young adults to have declined in more recent years. In fact, we observe the highest levels of dining alone among those under 35 in 2023.

While we certainly do not reject the notion that COVID-19 may have contributed to higher levels of isolation among young adults, the timing suggests that it has not been the primary driver of increases in dining alone.

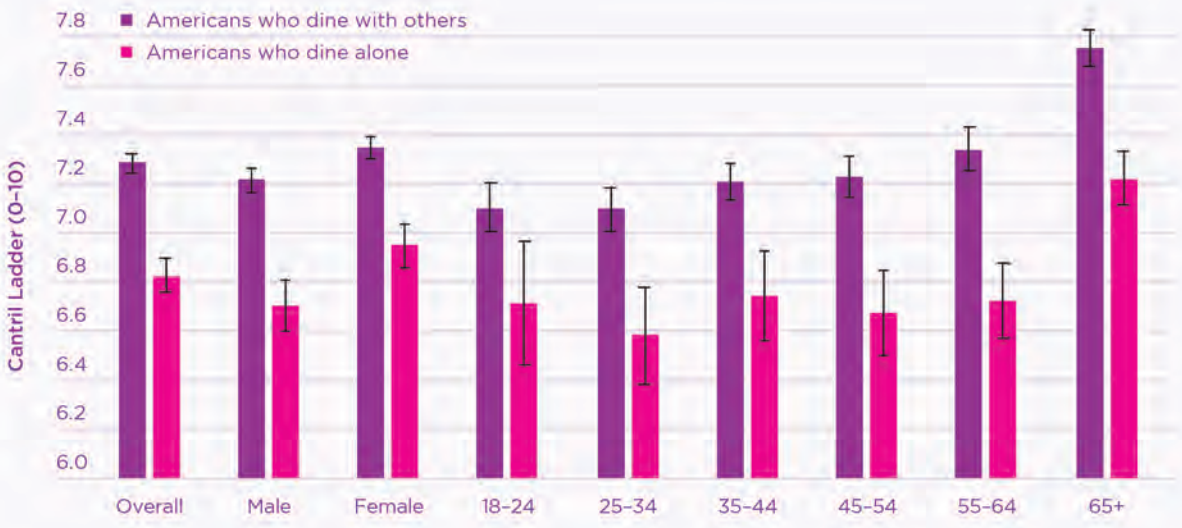
Meal sharing and subjective wellbeing in the United States

For the remainder of this section, we turn from the overall levels and trends in meal sharing to the relationship between meal sharing and subjective wellbeing. In 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2021, the American Time Use Survey included a special wellbeing module in which all respondents were asked about their daily emotions and their overall satisfaction with life (using the Cantril Ladder). In Figure 3.15, we use this data to compare average differences in life evaluation between Americans who reported eating all of their meals alone in the previous day relative to those who shared meals.

We find that Americans who dine alone reported life evaluations that are, on average, 0.5 points lower than those who dine with others. We observe similarly large differences in life evaluations when we split our sample by age cohorts and gender. Dining alone is strongly associated with substantial differences in subjective wellbeing for both men and women, young and old alike.

In Figure 3.16, we present analogous results for happiness, tiredness, stress, pain, and sadness. Again, we split our sample by Americans who reported eating all meals alone on the previous day compared to those who ate at least one meal with someone else and plot the average levels of daily emotions for each group.

Figure 3.15: Meal sharing and life evaluation in the United States
ATUS (2010, 2012, 2013, 2021)



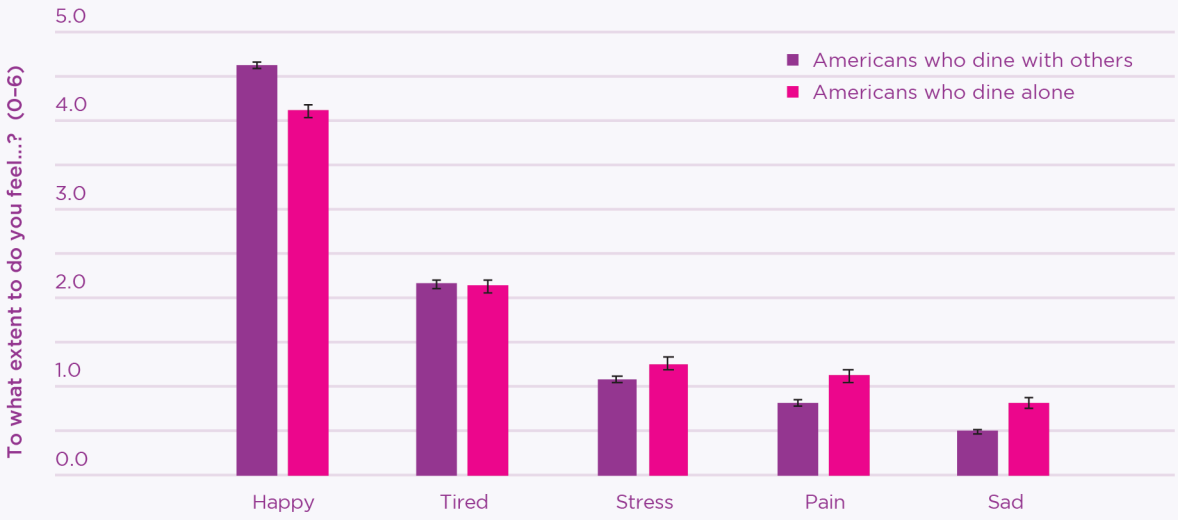
Note: Bars represent average life evaluations of those who reported eating all meals alone on the previous day relative to those who shared at least one meal. Data weighted to be representative of the general population. 95% confidence intervals (n = 28,811).

In line with prior results, we observe notable differences in emotions between those who share meals and those who dine alone. Differences in happiness, pain, and sadness are particularly large, although we also find slight differences in self-reported levels of stress. In each case, Americans who eat more meals with others report higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect than those who dine alone. We find no significant differences for tiredness.[28]

In Tables A3, A4, and A5 of the online appendix, we conduct a series of robustness checks to estimate the size and strength of the relationship between dining alone and subjective wellbeing using linear regressions. In every instance, we find that differences in life evaluations, positive affect, and negative affect between Americans who dine alone and Americans who share meals are statistically significant at a 99% confidence level. This is true even when controlling for age, sex, geographic location, marital status, and race. In an echo of earlier results, relationships with positive affect are strongest. In Table A5, using standardised measures of all wellbeing outcomes, we find that gaps in happiness, in particular, are larger than those estimated for life evaluations or any other affect measure under consideration.

Taken together, our results in this section point to concerning declines in how often Americans share meals with each other. Unlike other social indicators, such as loneliness or depression, the relatively objective nature of sharing meals makes it a uniquely reliable metric by which to compare differences over time. The fact that fewer Americans report sharing meals with others is particularly concerning given the close relationship

Figure 3.16: Meal sharing and emotions in the United States
ATUS (2010, 2012, 2013, 2021)



Note: Bars represent average levels of daily affect reported by those who ate all meals alone the previous day vs. those who ate at least one meal with someone else. Data weighted to be representative of the general population. 95% confidence intervals (n = 28,811).


Photo Yiru Wang, Tandemmm, Dip18 AA School

between meal sharing and subjective wellbeing – a relationship that we have now confirmed in two separate large-scale representative datasets. In the final section of this chapter, we take one last look at the link between sharing meals and social connections, and what this link may tell us about societal health and stability writ large.

Sharing meals and social connections

In this final section, we turn our gaze to the relationship between sharing meals and social connections. One plausible interpretation of the importance of sharing meals is that it promotes and sustains social ties. Given the widely documented, well-established links between positive social relationships and subjective wellbeing,[29] this could help to explain our results in previous sections.

Moreover, if sharing meals really does help to build and sustain social ties, it is not only academically interesting but politically important. As decades of social science research has demonstrated – and this year's *World Happiness Report* highlights – social connections are not only important for individual health and happiness, but for societal health and happiness writ large.[30]

With this backdrop in mind, we return to the country-level data provided by the Gallup World Poll (GWP) and incorporate additional data from the Global Preferences Survey (GPS) administered by Gallup in 2012. The GPS captured detailed information regarding risk and time preferences, positive and negative reciprocity, altruism, and trust from a large sample of roughly 80,000 individuals in 76 countries, representing more than 90% of the world's population. It remains one of the most reliable, robust, and expansive datasets on political and economic opinions to date.[31] Additional details and variable descriptions for GPS and GWP data are provided in Table A7 of the online appendix.

In Figure 3.17, we present country-level correlations between GPS indicators of trust and reciprocity in 2012 with rates of meal sharing collected by

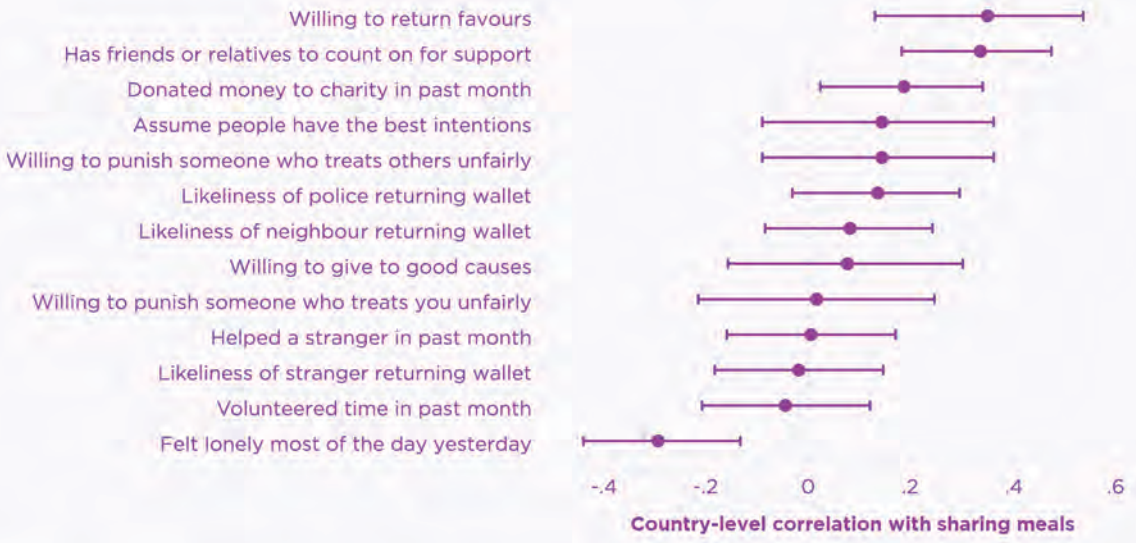
Gallup in 2022 and 2023. These are presented numerically in Table A6 of the online appendix. Overall, we find positive relationships between levels of meal sharing, trust, and reciprocity. We observe the strongest relationships for indicators of positive reciprocity, social support, and loneliness. Associations with measures of negative reciprocity, trust, and altruism tend to be more modest.

In Figure 3.18, we plot analogous associations for dining alone. In this case, relationships between dining alone and indicators of social connectedness appear stronger. Dining alone is negatively correlated with all measures of social capital under consideration, except for loneliness, where we find a positive correlation. Links with trust, social support, and reciprocity again seem to be the most robust. Many of these relationships – calculated at the country level, rather than respondent level – are also statistically significant. We find significantly negative correlations between dining alone and various measures of reciprocity, trust, and altruism.

Why is sharing meals so strongly predictive of subjective wellbeing but only moderately related to indicators of social trust, reciprocity, and altruism?

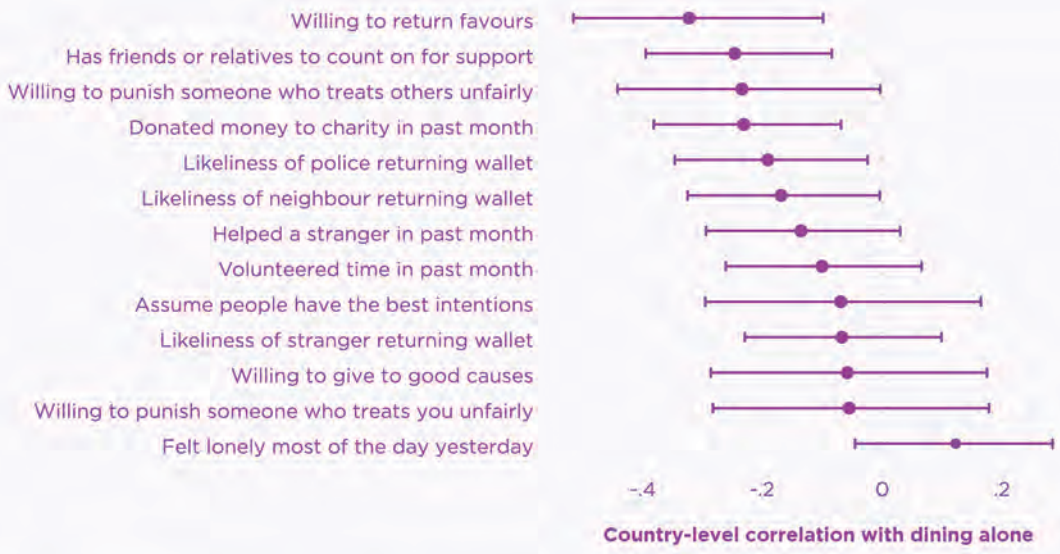
Nevertheless, it is worth noting that relationships between sharing meals and dining alone with many of the social indicators under consideration are relatively weak and, in some cases, statistically insignificant. This is surprising when evaluated in the context of the results presented in previous

Figure 3.17: Sharing meals, trust, altruism, and reciprocity
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023), Global Preferences Survey (2012)



Note: Pearson correlation coefficient is calculated using the weighted country-level results for each indicator. Number of observations (countries) ranges between 71–141.

Figure 3.18: Dining alone, trust, altruism, and reciprocity
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023), Global Preferences Survey (2012)



Note: Pearson correlation coefficient is calculated using the weighted country-level results for each indicator. Number of observations (countries) ranges between 71–141.

sections of this chapter and raises an important question. Why is sharing meals so strongly predictive of subjective wellbeing but only moderately related to indicators of social trust, reciprocity, and altruism?

One answer to this question is somewhat technical. Although our analysis is based on data collected from individual survey respondents, Figures 3.17 and 3.18 compare averages across countries. This is unavoidable as several of the indicators under consideration were measured using different surveys at different times. As the survey respondents did not respond to every question, we're unable to make individual-level comparisons. However, this higher level of analysis comes at a cost. Most notably, the number of observations is now much smaller as we are considering countries rather than individuals. This smaller sample size could help to explain the large confidence intervals we observe in the figures above.

Many of these indicators are also measured using different time scales. For example, sharing meals and loneliness are asked in terms of the past week or previous day, but questions on trust and reciprocity are asked in much broader terms e.g., time spent helping strangers or volunteering in the past month. This too could help to explain why we find relatively weak relationships between sharing meals and some indicators of social connectedness.

Another potential explanation is that the positive benefits of sharing meals may operate through channels that have little or less to do with social connections than one might expect. We have already commented on this dynamic with regard to income, education, and living alone. While we found some supportive evidence of all three

channels – that is, people who share more meals are more likely to be employed, more likely to earn higher levels of income, and more likely to live with others – none could fully account for the differences in rates of meal sharing we observe around the world, nor could they fully explain the relationship between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing.

Nevertheless, these may not be the only mechanisms at play. People who share more meals with others may also be more likely to eat healthily, be more physically active, spend more time outdoors, spend less time behind screens, live in more densely populated areas, and so forth. Any or all of these factors could help to explain why sharing meals is so strongly related to subjective wellbeing without needing to appeal to any role it may or may not play in promoting social connections.

Yet another potential explanation is even more subtle. While social connections, broadly construed, are generally taken to be a good thing for individuals and societies writ large, recent research has begun to add a few important asterisks to the story. Not all social attitudes and behaviours are equally important for wellbeing, nor are they necessarily related to each other.

It is entirely plausible to imagine that people who have others to rely on in times of need may still lack trust in societal institutions. People who feel strongly connected to their communities may, nevertheless, spend little time volunteering or helping strangers in need. Those who donate money to charity may still strongly believe that people who treat others unfairly ought to be punished. Even more importantly, not all of these social attitudes and behaviours are likely to be equally important for subjective wellbeing.

To draw this point out, consider the case of social support and loneliness. Fortunately, in the 2022 and 2023 waves of the Gallup World Poll, many of the same survey respondents were asked how often they shared meals with others, how often they felt lonely, and if they had others to count on in times of need. In Figure 3.19, we group these individuals into five categories depending on how often they share meals and present average levels of loneliness and social support for each group.

We find clear evidence that individuals who share more meals with others are significantly less likely to feel lonely (Panel A) and significantly more likely to experience social support (Panel B). Now that we can analyse individual-level responses, as opposed to country averages, our sample size is considerably larger and our resulting estimates are much more precise. This analysis suggests that sharing meals may indeed strengthen and support social ties. Even so, it may still suggest little to nothing at all about levels of trust.

To return to our earlier question, the fact that we find such strong relationships between sharing meals and wellbeing, while simultaneously finding modest or even mixed links between sharing meals and trust or reciprocity, may simply suggest that meal sharing is more conducive or supportive of certain types of social attitudes and behaviours than others. This interpretation could explain why sharing meals is so closely related to social support and loneliness – both of which have consistently been shown to be strong predictors of subjective wellbeing in their own right. Nevertheless, there is clearly much more to be explored in future research regarding the correlational and causal relationships between sharing meals, dining alone, and social connections.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented new evidence on the global variation in meal sharing and what it implies for subjective wellbeing and social connections. Unlike most indicators of social relationships, and all indicators of subjective wellbeing, the number of meals shared with others is relatively objective and directly comparable across individuals, between countries, and over time. This feature makes sharing meals (and its counterpart, dining alone) uniquely valuable and well-positioned to reveal new insights into the nature and dynamics of human wellbeing.

Overall, we find stark differences in meal sharing around the world. These differences prove to be closely tied to age – on average, younger people share more meals with others than older adults – but mostly unrelated to gender. Global

Figure 3.19: Differences in loneliness and social support by number of meals shared
Gallup World Poll (2022–2023)

Note: Loneliness and social support measured on scale from 0 to 1. Social support is measured as having someone to count on in times of need. Individual-level data for Panel A from 13 countries in 2023 (n=6,375). Individual-level data for Panel B from 142 countries and territories in 2022–2023 (n = 147,678). See the online appendix for additional details regarding variable descriptions and coverage.

differences in meal sharing are also not fully explained by regional or individual characteristics such as income, employment, or household size.

When we examine the link between sharing meals and subjective wellbeing, we find that individuals who share more meals with others report higher levels of life satisfaction, lower levels of negative affect, and especially higher levels of positive affect.

In the United States, rates of meal sharing appear to be in stark decline, while rates of dining alone are on the rise. This is true for both genders and all ages, but particularly for young adults. Finally, we find rates of meal sharing to be closely tied with a handful of related social indicators – most notably, social support and loneliness – while being only modestly related to others including reciprocity and trust.

However, our analysis also has some limitations. First, and most importantly, we are unable to answer the key question of causation. There is already considerable evidence that social connections contribute to greater wellbeing,[32] and early suggestive evidence that sharing meals with others may promote social connection.[33] However, more research is clearly warranted. Second, in our analysis of Gallup World Poll data, we are unable to properly control for the fact that some respondents might skip either lunch or dinner. This element might be particularly relevant in countries where many citizens are exposed to food insecurity. Third, although our analyses converge in highlighting the association between meal sharing and wellbeing, they do not delve deeply into the mechanisms driving this relationship. Factors such as the quality of social interactions, the type of meal, or other confounding variables (e.g., work schedules and working from home) may play a significant role but are not explored.

Despite these limitations, the strong and robust relationships between sharing meals, wellbeing, and social connections that we have documented in this chapter cry out for future research and exploration. One of the most fruitful avenues for future research relates to the key question of causation. At present, it remains unclear whether sharing meals leads to greater wellbeing or whether greater wellbeing leads to more shared meals. In all likelihood, both are probably true, at least to some extent. Large-scale experiments such as the Health and Happiness Study, which will administer daily surveys and collect real-time smartphone and smartwatch data from a global sample population, may help shed new light on the underlying causal dynamics of sharing meals, social connection, and wellbeing.[34] Small-scale experiments conducted in more controlled environments may also help to pin down the causal nature of these relationships and would represent a meaningful and important contribution to research.

As a final point, it is worth commenting on the possible policy implications of these findings. While researchers and policymakers have long lamented declines in social connectedness across modern societies, isolating the key contributing factors and identifying solutions has proven frustratingly difficult. If sharing meals is just as important for promoting social ties and subjective wellbeing as the evidence in this chapter suggests, it may serve as a uniquely valuable, actionable, and cost-effective policy tool by which to facilitate and promote societal welfare. Several initiatives including Project Gather in the United States have already begun to chart exciting new pathways along these lines by providing financial support for shared meals.[35] As Dr. Vivek Murthy, the sponsor of the program and former US Surgeon General eloquently put it, “When we gather with others around food, we not only feed our bodies but also nourish our spirits.”

Endnotes

1 Barger (2013); Chetty et al. (2016); Diener et al. (2018b); Kawachi and Berkman (2014); Rodríguez-Pose and von Berlepsch (2014).

2 Diener et al. (2018a); Kansky (2017); Lauricella et al. (2022); Sözbilir (2018); Tenney et al. (2016).

3 Chetty et al. (2016); Diener et al. (2018a); Diener et al. (2018b); Diener and Chan (2011); Johnson et al. (2018); Robison and Siles (1999); Shen and Bian (2018).

4 Diener et al. (2018a); Diener and Chan (2011); Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015); Johnson et al. (2018); Knapp (1976); Leigh-Hunt et al. (2017); Osborne et al. (2023); Robison and Siles (1999); Roßteutscher (2010); Tung et al. (2019).

5 Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023).

6 Glanville et al. (2013); Sønderskov and Dinesen (2016).

7 Austin and Baba (1990); Brehm and Rahn (1997); Brown and Ferris (2007); Forrest and Kearns (2001); Glanville et al. (2016); Lyubomirsky et al. (2005a); McClurg (2003); Wang and Graddy (2008).

8 Brown and Ferris (2007); Glanville et al. (2016); Liang and Meng (2023); Lyubomirsky et al. (2005a); Wang and Graddy (2008); Wilson and Musick (1998).

9 Dwyer et al. (2018).

10 Glanz et al. (2021).

11 Wang et al. (2016).

12 For example, the World Inequality Study, the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), and the Life in Transition Survey (LITS) run by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development all employ versions of this question.

13 In 2023, respondents were asked: "Thinking about the past 7 days, on how many days did you eat LUNCH/DINNER with someone you know; including family, friends, or anyone else you know." In 2022, the question wording did not include the language "including family, friends, or anyone else you know." Countries surveyed in 2023 include: Albania, Cambodia, Czechia, Denmark, Egypt, El Salvador, Germany, Japan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Paraguay, Republic of Moldova, Sénégal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Tunisia, and Zambia. The approximate sample size in each country is 500.

14 Kimura et al. (2020); Lee et al. (2020).

15 Following the revised wording in 2023 (see Footnote 13), in two countries – Japan and Cambodia – the average number of meals shared rose by a substantial and statistically significant margin. However, even in this case, Japan's rate of meal sharing remained well below average. At the same time, in other countries including Malaysia, the average number of meals shared was essentially static in 2023 compared to 2022.

16 This is the estimated R^2 value in a binary OLS linear regression with the number of shared meals eaten per week as the dependent variable and log GDP per capita as the independent variable.

17 The specific question wording is as follows: "Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?"

18 For thorough discussions, see Layard & Ward (2020), Clark et al. (2018), and Chapter 6 of the 2017 edition of the *World Happiness Report* (De Neve and Ward, 2017).

19 It is perhaps also worth noting that we observe slight declines in life evaluations and increases in negative affect for those who eat 14 meals with others per week. One potential explanation for this result is that individuals who report sharing all of their weekly meals with others may be uniquely different from other groups. They may, for example, be more likely to live with children or in group settings. They could also be younger or more prone to financial difficulties than those with more flexibility in the number of meals they share with others. Alternatively, this may also be due to measurement error or rounding issues as it represents the upper bound of the scale. We cannot conclusively distinguish between these explanations. A full investigation of this dynamic remains open to future research.

20 This research comes from the Ando Foundation/Nissin Food Products Satisfaction With Food Enjoyment and Variety Survey. See Gallup (2024).

21 This accords with prior work suggesting that more volitional activities (e.g., eating with others or dining alone) matter more than life circumstances (e.g., income or age) in predicting wellbeing (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005b).

22 A module to capture subjective wellbeing was introduced in the *American Time Use Survey* in 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2021. When we consider relationships between meal sharing and subjective wellbeing, we focus on these years in particular.

23 Iglič et al. (2021); Sarracino (2010).

24 Sarracino and Mikucka (2017).

25 U.S. Census Bureau (2023).

26 Estimated as the difference in coefficients predicting the increase in dining alone across two separate regression models in which we include and exclude a control variable for household size. These coefficients are plotted in Figure A9.

27 For relevant discussions, see Kirwan et al. (2024) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023).

28 In an echo of earlier results using Gallup data, here again, we find that differences in negative affect – specifically sadness and pain – between those who report eating all meals alone the previous day and those who shared meals are slightly larger for women than for men. However, we do not observe similar gender differences for happiness, stress, or tiredness when comparing men and women who eat alone to those who share meals.

29 See Chapter 2.

30 For discussions, see Joshanloo et al. (2018), Siedlecki et al. (2014), and Waldinger and Shultz (2023).

31 For more information, see: Falk et al. (2018).

32 Diener et al. (2018a, 2018b); Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010); Howick et al. (2019); Kawachi and Berkman (2014).

33 Putnam (2000); Dwyer et al. (2018); Glanz et al. (2021); Wang et al. (2016).

34 For more information, see: www.healthandhappinessstudy.com.

35 For more information, see: www.projectgather.org.

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