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Why More People in the World Are Feeling Hopeful (Except Us)

Aug. 7, 2025



By David Brooks

Opinion Columnist

I hope you don't mind if I pierce the general gloom with a piece of wonderful news. More people around the world report that they are living better lives than before. Plus they are becoming more hopeful about the future. In a new survey, the Gallup organization interviewed people across 142 countries and asked them a series of questions to determine whether they felt they were thriving in their lives or struggling or, worst of all, suffering.

The number of people who say they are thriving has been rising steadily for a decade. The number of people who say they are suffering is down to 7 percent globally, tying with the lowest level since 2007. This trend is truly worldwide, with strong gains in well-being in countries as far-flung as Kosovo, Vietnam, Kazakhstan and Paraguay.

Unfortunately, there is a little bad news. Some people reported sharp declines in well-being. That would be us. The share of the population that is thriving is falling in America, Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand. In 2007, 67 percent of Americans and Canadians said they were thriving. Now it's down to 49 percent.

To put it another way, the nations with some of the highest standards of living are seeing the greatest declines in well-being. We still enjoy higher absolute levels of well-being than nations in the developing world do, but the trend lines are terrible.

This should not be a surprise. I would say the most important social trend over the past decade has been the disconnect between our nation's economic health and its social health. Over these years the American G.D.P. has surged, wages have risen, unemployment has been low, income inequality has gone down. At the same time, the suicide rate has surged, social isolation has surged, social trust is near rock bottom. According to a Gallup survey from January, the share of Americans who say they are "very satisfied" with their lives has hit a new low. According to the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer report, only 30 percent of Americans feel optimistic for the next generation.

What's going on here?

People thrive when they live in societies with rising standards of living and dense networks of relationships, and where they feel their lives have a clear sense of purpose and meaning. That holy trinity undergirds any healthy society. It's economic, social and spiritual.

I spoke with Dan Witters of Gallup, who broke down some of the contributors to social and spiritual health. People who are thriving are more likely to feel a strong attachment to their community. They feel proud of where they live. People are more likely to experience greater well-being when they join congregations and regularly attend religious services. Feeling your life has purpose and meaning, he adds, is a strong driver of where you think you are going to be five years from now.

The most comprehensive study of well-being is probably the Global Flourishing Study, led by Tyler J. VanderWeele of Harvard and Byron Johnson of Baylor. Their group has interviewed 200,000 people across 22 countries beginning in 2022. They found that a few countries do well across material, social and spiritual measures, notably Israel and Poland. A lot of countries score well materially, but the people who live in them are less likely to have a sense of clear purpose and meaning, like Japan and the Scandinavian nations.

Other countries don't do as well economically, but do very well socially and spiritually, like Indonesia, Mexico and the Philippines.

I'd say that the nations that are doing well in that Gallup thriving survey are those that are experiencing rising living standards while preserving their traditional social arrangements and value systems. The nations like America that are seeing declining well-being are fine economically, but their social and spiritual environments are deteriorating.

Why have rich nations lagged behind in this way? VanderWeele theorizes that maybe it's a question of priorities. "I tend to think you end up getting what you value most," he told me. "When a society is oriented toward economic gain, you will be moderately successful, but not if it's done at the expense of meaning and community."

I'd add that we in the West have aggressively embraced values that when taken to excess are poisonous to our well-being. Over the past several decades, according to the World Values Survey, North America, Western Europe and the Englishspeaking nations have split off culturally from the rest of the world. Since the 1960s we have adopted values that are more secular, more individualistic and more oriented around self-expression than the values that prevail in the Eastern Orthodox European countries such as Serbia, the Confucian countries like South Korea and the mostly Catholic Latin countries like Mexico.

The countries that made this values shift are seeing their well-being decline, according to that Gallup thriving survey. The countries that resisted this shift are seeing their well-being improve. The master trend in recent Western culture has been to emancipate the individual from the group, and now we are paying the social and spiritual price.

Two groups are particularly hard hit. First, young people. Those of us who are older can at least remember the pre-Bowling Alone era. But young people now have to grow up in a more distrustful and atomized world. It used to be that people's happiness levels followed a U-shaped curve. People felt happier when young, then it dipped in middle age (it's called having teenage children), and then happiness levels rose again around retirement. Now the curve looks more like a slope. People are more miserable when young, doing OK in middle age and happiest in their senior years. Young Americans are the worst off of all age

groups in that Global Flourishing Study, as are young people in Australia, Brazil, Germany, Sweden, Britain and other Western countries.

Progressives, and especially young progressives, are the other group that is suffering. Since researchers started measuring these things in 1972, conservatives have almost always been happier than progressives because conservatives are more likely to do the things that correlate with happiness, like get married, go to church, give to charity, feel patriotic, have more sex and feel their life has meaning.

But around 2011 something changed. Lower happiness levels transmogrified into higher levels of depression and mental illness, a related but different thing. That year, young progressives began reporting a significant rise in depression rates. A few years later, conservatives began reporting a similar rise, but not to the same degree. A 2024 survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression found that 35 percent of “very conservative” college students said they suffer from poor mental health at least half the time, which is terrible, but 57 percent of “very liberal” students did, which is horrendous.

There’s a lot going on to explain these depression rates, but one of them has got to be that progressives are more likely to embrace the autonomy and social freedom ethos described in that World Values Survey, and this hyper-individualistic ethos is not good for your social and spiritual health.

Let’s be clear about what’s happened here: greed. Americans have become so obsessed with economic success that we’ve neglected the social and moral conditions that undergird human flourishing. Schools spend more time teaching professional knowledge than they do social and spiritual knowledge. The prevailing values worship individual choice and undermine the core commitments that precede choice — our love for family, neighborhood, nation and the truth.

There’s a lot of cultural work to do.

From the comments



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In this piece I offer a cultural explanation for why more people in poorer countries feel like they are thriving while fewer people in rich countries feel like they are - that we care less about and are less versed in social and spiritual knowledge. Of course there are many alternative explanations. One is about momentum: Many poorer countries feel like they are moving up, while richer ones feel like they are stagnating.

Another, coming from Brink Lindsey, whose book "The Permanent Problem" will be coming out soon, is that affluence changes expectations: Affluent people want government and society to provide basic physical security as well as meaning and purpose and friendship. When they can't deliver, people get angry and disillusioned.

Do these alternate explanations seem plausible? Are there others? Thanks for reading the piece!

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 22 of the New York edition with the headline: More People in the World Are Feeling Hopeful (Except Us)