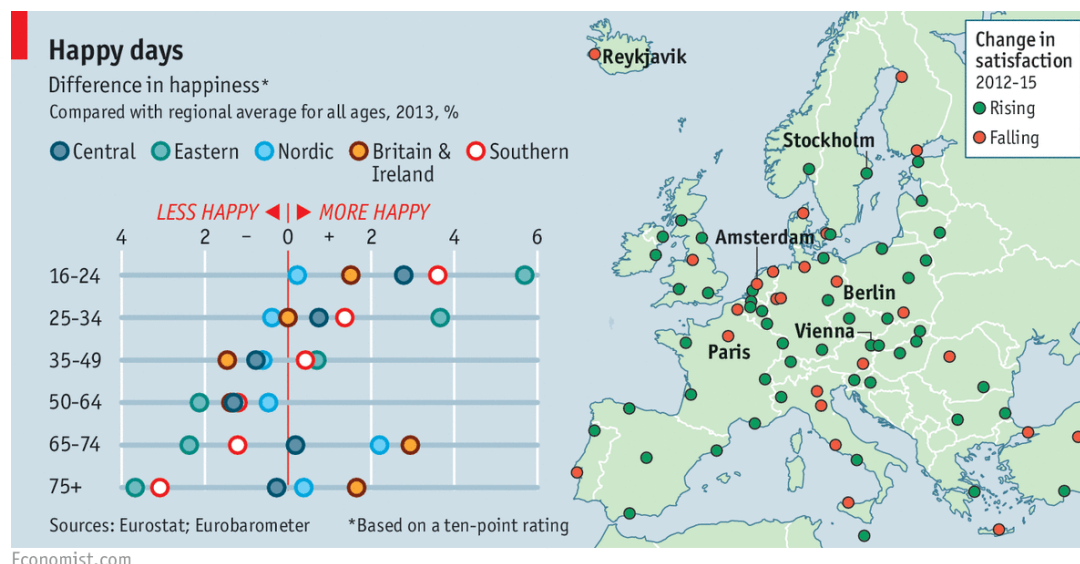


Happiness in Europe

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The happier are the richer, the younger, the inhabitants of big cities, who live on their own



EUROPEANS can sometimes seem like a miserable bunch. The continent has produced downbeat writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (“hell is other people”) and philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek (“What does love feel like? Like a great misfortune”). But although there are many reasons for Europeans to feel gloomy at present—from a migration crisis stretching from Greece to Germany to the possibility that Britain, one of the fastest-growing economies in Europe, may leave the European Union—many, instead, seem to be becoming ever cheerier.

Most Europeans are, on average, at their happiest since the financial crisis. In 2008 76% of EU citizens said they were satisfied with their lives. That number is now 80%, according to the Eurobarometer survey, which has tracked self-reported happiness for over four decades. Those in northern European countries, such as Denmark and Sweden, are consistently the most content. But some countries have bucked the trend. According to Ruut Veenhoven, a professor at Erasmus University in Rotterdam who has been analysing data on happiness for decades, people in Greece and Portugal have become gloomier over the past three decades (although they have started to perk up over the past few years).

Some general themes stand out. According to Eurostat, the EU’s statistical office, the only metric consistently correlated with European happiness is relative income. Moving one step up the income ladder increases happiness in every country in the EU; the difference in happiness between the bottom quintile and the second quintile is the largest. European men tend to be slightly happier than women, though not in Britain or Denmark. Those who go to university tend to be happier (not controlling for income).

But some big differences also emerge. Europeans are generally happier when they are younger. However, richer countries see an uptick of joyfulness in old age: Germans are happier when they are over 75 years old than when they are between 25 and 34, and the Swiss are happier when they are over 75 than when they are teenagers. (Britons, Swedes and Danes are happiest when they are between 65 and 74.) The Portuguese seem to have the worst mid-life crises, whereas Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians and Slovenians all become glummer as they get older.

Where and how Europeans live also determines their happiness. In all countries, people are least happy if they live on their own. By the same token, in most countries those with children tend to be happier,

with the exception of Britain, Denmark, Ireland and Switzerland, where people tend to be happier when childless. Overall, Europeans tend to be most content if they live in towns or suburbs as opposed to cities or rural areas. Northern Europeans tend to be cheerier the farther they are from cities (and hence from other people). In most parts of southern and eastern Europe, however, the opposite is true.

What makes city-dwellers happier varies from one city to the next. According to the most recent data from Eurobarometer, most city-dwellers have become slightly happier (see map). The highest correlation with life satisfaction in cities is a feeling of safety. But in Stockholm, Amsterdam and Vienna it is those who think foreigners are well integrated who tend to be happiest. Parisians and Berliners who rate their cities' cleanliness highly are the most content. In Reykjavik, curiously, the telltale sign of happiness is being satisfied with the public transport system.

Those places which are happiest appear to have good governance. This may suggest a lesson to politicians: reducing unemployment and boosting wages will undoubtedly increase happiness. But clean pavements are important, too.