



INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS OF HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Where does the UK stand?

- *The UK ranks mid-table for many of the subjective and objective wellbeing indicators used in international surveys.*
- *The UK ranks above average for self-reported health among adults, but below average on the same indicator for children. Recently, the UK performed relatively poorly on a mental wellbeing index, ranking 20th of 27 EU countries.*
- *In contrast with the European trend of decreasing happiness with age, UK seniors report higher levels of happiness than the national average.*
- *Compared with international survey overall, the UK consistently shows a weaker association with the relationship between objective and subjective wellbeing.*
- *Greece and Ireland perform well on objective wellbeing indicators; Denmark and the Netherlands perform well on subjective wellbeing indicators.*
- *Greece and Spain perform well on both objective and subjective wellbeing indicators among children; Switzerland performs well on both objective and subjective wellbeing indicators among adults.*

Subjective Wellbeing

1. Life satisfaction

Where is the UK?

In the most recent adult data available (2013)¹, the UK ranked **18th of 36 OECD countries** for life satisfaction, with a mean score of **6.8 out of 10**.

86% of UK children rated their life satisfaction highly (over 6 out of 10) in a comparison of 29 OECD countries², placing the UK **14th** in this assessment.

Where is everyone else?

The UK is **above the OECD average**, 6.6 out of 10, for adult life satisfaction. **Switzerland** ranks highest in the 2013 data, with a score of 7.8¹.

For children's life satisfaction, **The Netherlands** was the top ranking country, with 94% of children reporting high life satisfaction².

How does this compare historically?

In 2011, the UK ranked 15th of 36 for adult life satisfaction in the same OECD data¹, with a mean score of 7 out of 10. In 2012, the UK ranked 18th, with a mean score of 6.9.

- These figures potentially suggest a slight decline in life satisfaction in the UK
- **Denmark** was the highest ranking country in both 2011 and 2012, with a mean score of 7.8; the OECD average in both years was 6.7, lower than the UK.

The UK's 14th placing in the children's rankings represents an **improvement** from the previous UNICEF report card comparing children's wellbeing (2007)³, where the UK was placed lowest out of the OECD countries assessed (20th) for child life satisfaction.

Social Inequality in Life Satisfaction

The UK has the **13th smallest difference** (of 36 countries) in adult life satisfaction between the top 20% of earners and the bottom 20% in the 2013 OECD data¹.

In the children's data, England has the **25th smallest effect of family affluence** on life satisfaction, of 38 OECD countries⁴.

- 87% of children from the most affluent families reported high life satisfaction, compared with 76% of children from the least affluent⁵
- **Ireland** has the smallest effect of family affluence on life satisfaction

2. Meaning in Life

Where is the UK?

In a 2012 European survey⁶, the UK ranked **9th of 27 EU countries** for people who agreed that their life had meaning and was worthwhile. **82%** of UK respondents agreed with this statement.

Where is everyone else?

The UK is **above the EU-27 average** of 79% of respondents agreeing that their life had meaning. **The Netherlands** and **Denmark** ranked highest, with 91% agreeing that their life had meaning.

3. Happiness

Where is the UK?

In a European survey in 2012⁶, the UK placed **10th of 27 EU countries** in people's ratings of how happy they are out of 10, with a mean score of **7.6**.

Where is everyone else?

The UK happiness rating is above the EU27 average (7.4 out of 10). **Denmark** ranked highest, with a mean score of 8.2.

Across the EU, happiness tended to decline across age groups: however, the UK data contrasted this trend, with an increase in happiness in later years

- The average happiness score for UK respondents in the 65+ group is 0.6 points above the national mean
- This relationship was also evident in Ireland, Sweden and Cyprus

How does this compare historically?

Compared with the previous wave of this survey (2007), there has been a **significant drop in happiness** for people in the UK (7.8 to 7.6). This drop is evident across the EU.

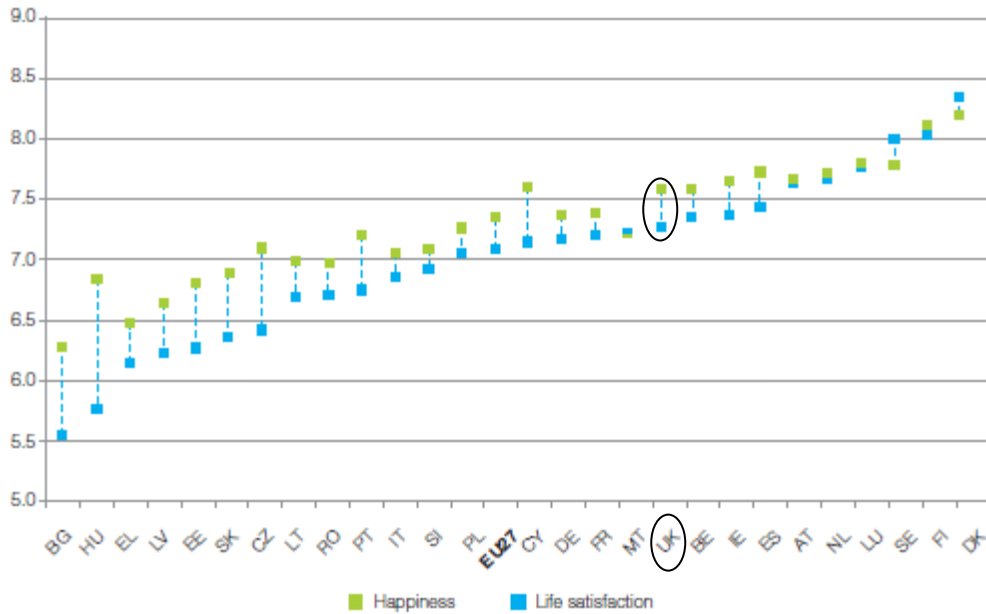


Figure 1: Happiness and Life Satisfaction in the EU-27 (Source: European Quality of Life Survey, 2012)

4. Mental wellbeing

Where is the UK?

In 2012, the UK ranked **20th of 27 EU countries** on the WHO-5 mental wellbeing indexⁱ, with a mean score of 59 out of 100⁶. A higher score on this measure indicates *better* mental wellbeing.

In a 2010 survey including 3 of the 5 WHO items⁹, the UK had relatively low levels of people reporting that they had felt **active and vigorous** more than half of the time in the past two weeks (**57%, 25th of 27**). The UK had the **13th** highest percentage of people reporting feeling **calm (72%)** and **12th** highest percentage of people feeling **cheerful (80%)** more than half of the time in the last two weeks.

Where is everyone else?

In the 2012 survey⁶, the UK scored **below the EU-27 average** of 62 out of 100. **Denmark** had the highest score on 70; Latvia was lowest, on 56. In 2010⁹, Denmark and **Switzerland** ranked highest on the three indicators reported. The UK scored above the EU-27 average on feeling calm and feeling cheerful, but below average on feeling active.

ⁱ The WHO-5 mental wellbeing index comprises five positively worded items answered on a six-point scale. Items included cheerfulness, calm, active, rested and interest.

Objective Wellbeing

5. Life expectancy

Where is the UK?

In a recent OECD dataset¹, the UK ranked **13th of 36** for life expectancy with a life expectancy of **81 years** (83 years for women, 79 years for men).

Where is everyone else?

UK life expectancy is **higher than the OECD average** of 80 years. **Switzerland** ranks highest in this dataset, with a life expectancy of 83 years.

How does this compare historically?

The UK's life expectancy has **increased** on average by 0.3% each year since 1960, the same as the average OECD yearly change. South Korea has increased most rapidly, with an average annual increase of 0.9% since 1960.

6. Self-reported health status

Where is the UK?

In a 2013 comparison of OECD countries¹, the UK ranked **10th of 36** for the percentage of people reporting good or very good health (**77%**).

In 2010, **84%** of English children (11-15 years) reported that their health was good or excellent, ranking **24th of 38** OECD countries⁴.

Where is everyone else?

The UK is **above the OECD average** of 69% of adults reporting good or very good health. **The United States** is ranked highest on this indicator, with 90% of adults reporting good or very good health¹.

For children's health, England is **below the average for the 38 OECD countries**, where 85% of children reporting excellent or good health⁴. **The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** scored highest on this indicator, with 96% of children rating their health as excellent or good.

How does this compare historically?

A different European survey of adults, using the same measure, in 2008⁸, ranked the UK 15th of 47, with 71% reporting good or very health, suggesting an **increase in feelings of good health** within the population.

In the previous round of the children's health survey (2006), 81% of English children reported good or excellent health (ranking 33rd of 40)⁷, suggesting **children's feelings** of good health have **also increased**.

Social Inequalities in Self-Reported Health

The UK ranks **16th** (of 36) for social inequalities in adult's self-reported health in the OECD 2013 data¹.

- 88% of the top 20% of earners report good or very good health; 68% of the bottom 20% of earners report this positive health status.

England has the **13th smallest effect of family affluence** on children's self-reported health among 38 OECD countries⁴.

- 85% of children from the most affluent families reported good or excellent health, compared with 79% of children from the least affluent⁵
- **The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** has the smallest effect of family affluence on self-reported health in children.

The relationship between objective and subjective wellbeing

In all of the international surveys, people who rated their health more highly tended to have higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction.

- This was a statistically significant association (r between 0.3 and 0.4)ⁱⁱ
- This relationship was present for the overall datasets and for the UK samples

Across four European surveys^{8,9,10,11}, the UK reports a **slightly weaker association** between subjective wellbeing and objective wellbeing than the association over all countries within the sample.

- In the most recent correlational data available (2010):
 - The overall correlation between life satisfaction and self-reported health¹¹ was $r = 0.42$, compared $r = 0.32$ for the UK
 - The overall correlation between happiness and self-reported health⁹ was $r = 0.36$, compared with $r = 0.24$ for the UK
- This finding persisted in an international survey¹², but there was a smaller difference here between the UK and the overall correlation (UK $r = 0.35$; overall $r = 0.37$)

Cross-National Research: Some Important Considerations

Consistency between surveys. Although surveys may measure the same construct (eg. happiness), they often vary in how they measure it: the EQLS⁷ asks respondents to rate how happy they are on a scale from 1 to 10, whereas the Eurobarometer¹⁰ offers 4 response options, from 'very happy' to 'not at all happy'. Data collection methods also vary, further limiting the comparisons we can make between surveys.

ⁱⁱ r is the correlation coefficient. A positive correlation means that as one variable increases, so does the other. The closer the r is to 1, the stronger the correlation. A correlation coefficient of 0.1-0.3 is classified as a weak correlation; 0.4-0.7 is classified as a moderate correlation, 0.8 and over is classified as a strong correlation.

Cultural differences in questionnaire response. Residents of different countries may have different expectations or respond to questions in systematically different ways, meaning the international rankings in particular should be viewed with some caution. For example, apparent differences in self-reported health could result from differences between two countries in understandings of what ‘fair’ health, as opposed to ‘good’ health, is. There is also the issue of cultural and linguistic differences in the way people conceive of, and interpret questions on, conceptions like happiness and wellbeing.

Intervals between surveys. Many of the surveys have substantial intervals between rounds of data collection, making it difficult to assess change over smaller periods of time. The OECD adult data¹ is the only data which is available year on year, but this index only dates back to 2011.

Delays in data release. In addition to long intervals between data collections, there are delays between data being collected and it being widely available, either in report form or for online data analysis. This means that for some surveys we are restricted to older data and reports.

Health Improvement Analytical Team
Department of Health
January 2014

¹ OECD Your Better Life Index (2013). Data access: <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=BLI> Index website: <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>

² UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 11 (2011). Report accessed at <http://www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/Publications/Report-Card-11-Child-well-being-in-rich-countries/>

³ UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 7 (2007). Report accessed at http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf

⁴ Currie et al (2012). Health Behaviours of School Age Children 2009-2010, World Report: Social determinants of health and well-being among young people. Report accessed at <http://www.hbsc.org/publications/international/>

⁵ Brooks et al (2011). Health Behaviours of School-Aged Children 2009-2010, England. www.hbscengland.com

⁶ European Quality of Life Survey (2012). Survey Report: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1264.htm> Online data analysis: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/smt/3eqsl/index.EF.php?locale=EN>

⁷ Currie et al (2008). Health Behaviours of School-Aged Children 2005-2006, World Report: Inequalities in Young People’s Health. Report accessed at <http://www.hbsc.org/publications/international/>

⁸ European Values Survey (2008). Data accessed at <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp>

⁹ European Social Survey (2010). Data accessed at <http://nesstar.ess.nsd.uib.no/webview/>

¹⁰ Eurobarometer 66.3 (2006). Data accessed at <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp>

¹¹ Eurobarometer 74.1 (2010). Data accessed at <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp>

¹² International Social Survey Programme – Health Module (2011). Data accessed at <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp>