

Trends in Well-being, 1972-2010

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March, 2011

Psychological well-being has been among the most stable of topics measured by the General Social Survey (GSS) over the last four decades. Questions about general and marital happiness and satisfaction with finances and jobs have varied little over time. But in 2010 general happiness slipped to an all-time low with less than 29% saying that they were “very happy,” a drop of 5 percentage points since 2004 (See Table 1). Likewise, the proportion saying they were “not too happy” climbed to 14% in 2010 from 10% in 2000. The decline in general happiness results mostly from an even sharper drop in financial satisfaction.

As Table 2 shows, typically around 30% of Americans have been “pretty satisfied” with their financial situation with an additional 45% being “more or less satisfied.” On average, only about a quarter have said that they are “not at all satisfied” financially. But financial satisfaction began to decrease after 2004 with “pretty satisfied” falling from 33% in 2004 to 29% in 2008 and then to 23% in 2010. Likewise, those “not at all satisfied” climbed from 25% in 2004 to 31.5% in 2010. For the only time since the start of the time series in 1972, the share “not at all satisfied” (31.5%) notably outnumbered those “pretty satisfied” (23.4%), for a negative edge of - 8.1 percentage points. This compares on an average positive edge of + 4.5 percentage points and a record positive balance of + 14.2 percentage points in 1977.

But not all aspects of well-being fell during the recent economic downturn. While general happiness settled into a record low, marital happiness has been more resilient. As Table 3 indicates, marital happiness actually marginally increased. In 2000-2006, 60-62% said their marriages were “very happy” while in 2010 63% had “very happy” marriages. The 2010 level matched the long-term, 1973-2010 average of 63%.

Job satisfaction has also been stable during the great recession. As Table 4 shows, there has been little change in the level of job satisfaction over time. The long-term average has been for 86% to be satisfied with their work and this same level was reported in 2010.

The data in this report are from the GSSs. The GSSs are full probability, in-person samples of adults living in households in the United States. Data has been collected by NORC at the University of Chicago. Core support for the GSS comes from the National Science Foundation. Information on the GSS and the GSS data files are available at <http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website>.

Table 1

Trends in General Happiness

Taken all together, how would you say things were these days – would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1980	1982	1983	1984
Very Happy	29.7%	36.8%	38.3%	33.4%	34.8%	35.7%	35.5%	35.3%	34.8%	31.7%	36.3%
Pretty Happy	53.0	51.0	49.2	53.6	52.9	53.3	56.2	52.6	53.5	56.2	52.1
Not Too Happy	17.3	12.3	12.5	12.9	12.2	11.0	8.4	12.1	11.7	12.1	11.6
	1605	1501	1480	1484	1498	1528	1520	1462	1505	1570	1447
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998
Very Happy	29.7%	33.2%	33.5%	36.1%	34.5%	35.8%	32.5%	33.4%	30.5%	32.1%	33.2%
Pretty Happy	59.9	56.6	55.0	55.7	56.7	56.5	58.0	56.9	58.2	57.4	55.9
Not Too Happy	10.5	10.2	11.5	8.2	8.8	7.7	9.5	9.7	11.3	10.5	10.9
	1531	1451	1438	1470	1528	1359	1507	1602	2978	2887	2807
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010					
Very Happy	33.9%	32.8%	33.6%	32.4%	31.7%	28.8%					
Pretty Happy	56.4	55.9	54.7	55.9	54.4	57.0					
Not Too Happy	9.7	11.3	11.7	11.7	13.9	14.2					
	2786	1364	1327	2990	2015	2038					

Source: General Social Surveys, NORC/University of Chicago

Table 2

Trends in Financial Satisfaction

We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. So far as you and your family are concerned, would you say that you are pretty well satisfied with your present financial situation, more or less satisfied, or not satisfied at all?

	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1980	1982	1983	1984
Pretty Well	32.2%	31.7%	31.2%	31.4%	30.9%	34.9%	34.4%	28.2%	26.6%	29.0%	28.4%
More or Less	45.2	45.3	45.8	42.8	45.7	44.4	41.8	45.4	46.6	41.5	46.6
Not at All	22.6	23.0	23.0	25.8	23.4	20.7	23.9	26.4	26.8	29.6	25.0
	1610	1502	1479	1480	1493	1520	1530	1461	1499	1592	1462
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998
Pretty Well	29.9%	31.4%	30.1%	30.8%	30.7%	30.3%	28.1%	27.3%	28.6%	27.9%	30.6%
More or Less	44.7	42.7	48.5	46.3	44.6	42.8%	46.9	45.5	46.4	44.6	44.3
Not at All	25.4	25.9	21.4	22.9	24.6	26.9	25.0	27.2	24.9	27.5	25.1
	1524	1467	1463	1473	1532	1366	1507	1596	2976	2898	2824
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010					
Pretty Well	30.6%	30.6%	33.1%	30.1%	28.9%	23.4%					
More or Less	45.4	42.2	42.3	45.5	41.7	45.2					
Not at All	24.0	27.1	24.6	24.5	29.4	31.5					
	2804	1364	1323	2984	2016	2038					

Source: General Social Surveys, NORC/University of Chicago

Table 3

Trends in Marital Happiness

Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1980	1982	1983	1984	
Very Happy	67.1%	68.8%	67.5%	66.1%	65.3%	65.5%	67.4%	66.3%	62.5%	66.3%	
Pretty Happy	30.0	27.2	29.7	31.2	31.1	31.8	29.7	30.7	34.3	30.9	
Not too Happy	2.9	4.0	2.8	2.7	3.6	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.2	2.8	
	1108	1107	1060	1044	1052	1071	980	965	1067	933	
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998
Very Happy	55.9%	63.2%	65.3%	62.0%	60.3%	64.6%	63.5%	61.3%	60.5%	61.9%	63.6%
Pretty Happy	40.7	33.3	32.4	34.5	37.5	33.3	33.2	36.0	36.8	36.1	33.7
Not too Happy	3.4	3.5	2.3	3.5	2.2	2.2	3.3	2.7	2.7	2.0	2.7
	985	917	886	885	939	830	921	977	1793	1633	1577
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010					
Very Happy	62.4%	60.2%	61.9%	60.7%	62.0%	63.0%					
Pretty Happy	34.4	37.2	35.0	37.1	35.3	34.3					
Not too Happy	3.2	2.7	3.1	2.3	2.6	2.7					
	1499	713	777	1657	1138	1049					

Source: General Social Surveys, NORC/University of Chicago

Table 4

Trends in Satisfaction with Work

On the whole, how satisfied are you with the work you do – would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?

	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1980	1982	1983	1984
Very Satisfied	48.4%	49.2%	47.6%	53.7%	50.7%	47.1%	51.2%	47.1%	46.7%	49.0%	46.7%
Moderately Satisfied	36.5	39.0	38.1	33.1	35.4	39.7	35.7	36.2	38.2	37.7	34.8
A Little Dissatisfied	11.8	7.5	9.7	9.2	9.6	10.5	8.5	12.1	10.1	8.7	11.9
Very Dissatisfied	3.4	4.3	4.5	3.9	4.4	2.8	4.5	4.6	5.0	4.6	6.6
	951	1143	1231	1174	1193	1268	1299	1263	1242	1346	1221
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998
Very Satisfied	47.4%	49.1%	43.9%	46.1%	46.3%	46.2%	44.9%	43.4%	45.6%	44.9%	48.4%
Moderately Satisfied	38.5	39.2	38.8	39.6	39.3	39.8	41.7	40.8	40.5	40.4	38.7
A Little Dissatisfied	9.8	8.9	12.7	10.3	10.4	10.4	9.5	10.8	10.6	10.5	9.7
Very Dissatisfied	4.2	2.8	4.5	4.0	4.1	3.6	4.0	4.9	3.3	4.1	3.2
	1253	1193	1193	1174	1228	1074	1183	1259	2386	2370	2278

Table 4 (continued)

	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Very Satisfied	45.5%	50.8%	50.8%	49.4%	51.5%	49.8%
Moderately Satisfied	43.2	36.5	36.1	38.3	36.3	36.2
A Little Dissatisfied	8.2	9.2	8.7	8.2	9.1	10.3
Very Dissatisfied	3.1	3.5	4.4	4.0	3.1	3.7
	2209	1065	1420	2251	1599	1567

Source: General Social Survey, NORC/University of Chicago