

The World of Happiness

by [Petr Chylek](#) (May 2025)



The Happy Accidents of the Swing (Jean-Honoré Fragonard, 1767–8)

The [World Happiness Report 2025](#) was published by the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford in collaboration with Gallup and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network in March of this year. Fig. 1 depicts the top 20 happiest countries according to the Report. Finland has been the happiest country in the world for the eighth consecutive year, and for the first time, Costa Rica and Mexico are ranked among the top ten happiest countries.

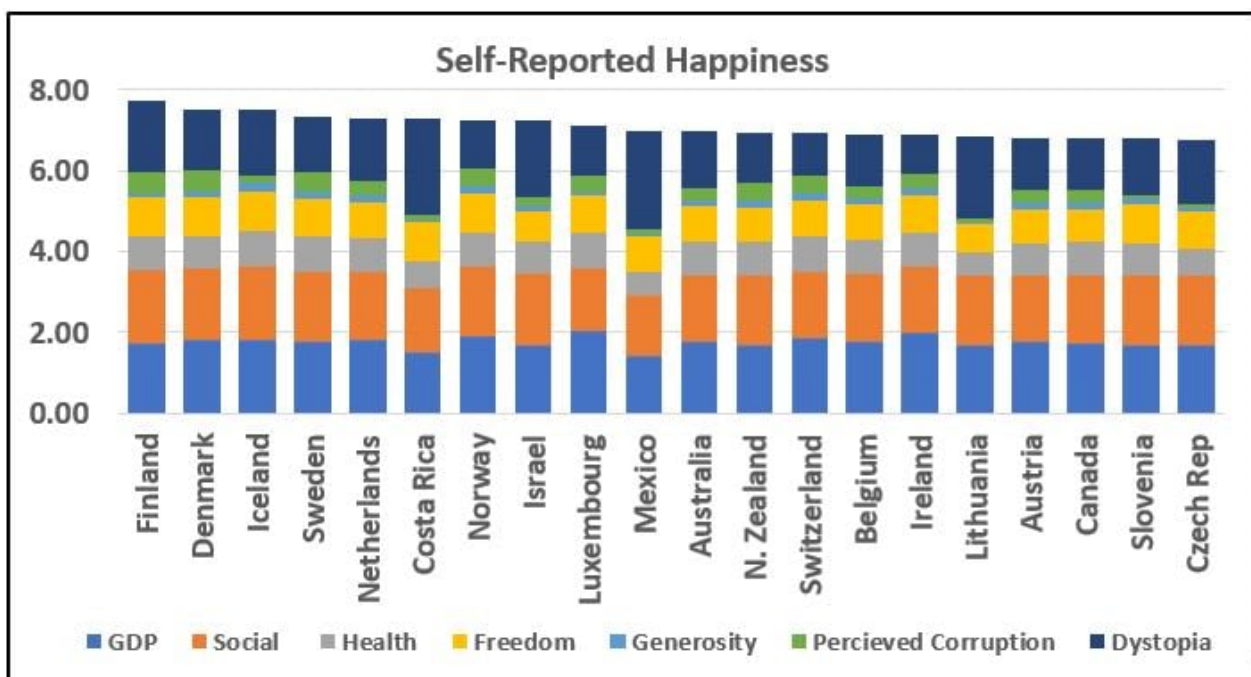


Fig. 1: The twenty countries with the highest self-reported happiness, according to the World Happiness Report 2025. The total height of each column indicates the happiness value reported by each country. The six lower sub-columns, ranging from blue to green, represent the estimated contributions of six selected key variables. The top dark blue column illustrates the difference between self-reported happiness and happiness estimated as the sum of these six key variables.

The authors of the Report repeatedly emphasized that the total

length of each column and each country's rating in their report are based on each country's self-reported happiness, not on the contributions of six selected key variables (GDP, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perception of corruption).

In the Gallup World Poll data, approximately one thousand residents from various countries were asked to rate their happiness on a scale from zero to ten. The average of their evaluations was used to determine each country's happiness. The score assigned as the 2025 happiness value was the average of self-reported ratings over the three preceding years, 2022-2024. They evaluated a total of 147 countries.

What caught my attention is that out of 147 rated countries, Mexico is the 10th happiest country in the world, while the US holds the 24th position. Is this correct? If the happiness index reflects reality, then the crowd at the US southern border should have aimed to leave the US and go to Mexico in search of happiness. Why were they all moving in the opposite direction, from Mexico to the US? Were they confused?

The country's happiness in the report is the self-reported happiness of each individual country and is not based on its estimated achievements. People's impression of their own happiness can be highly subjective. The six lower parts of the columns in Fig. 1 represent the estimated values of the six key variables contributing to happiness. Researchers estimate the contribution of individual categories based on publicly available data and experiments conducted.

The seventh sub-column in Fig. 1, titled 'Dystopia and residual' in the original Report, pertains to the prediction error, defined as the difference between self-reported happiness and estimated happiness based on the contributions of the six key variables. Venezuela, Mexico, and Costa Rica have the largest prediction errors in the Report. A significant prediction error illustrates how a country like

Mexico achieved an exceptional overall rating in the Happiness 2025 Report.

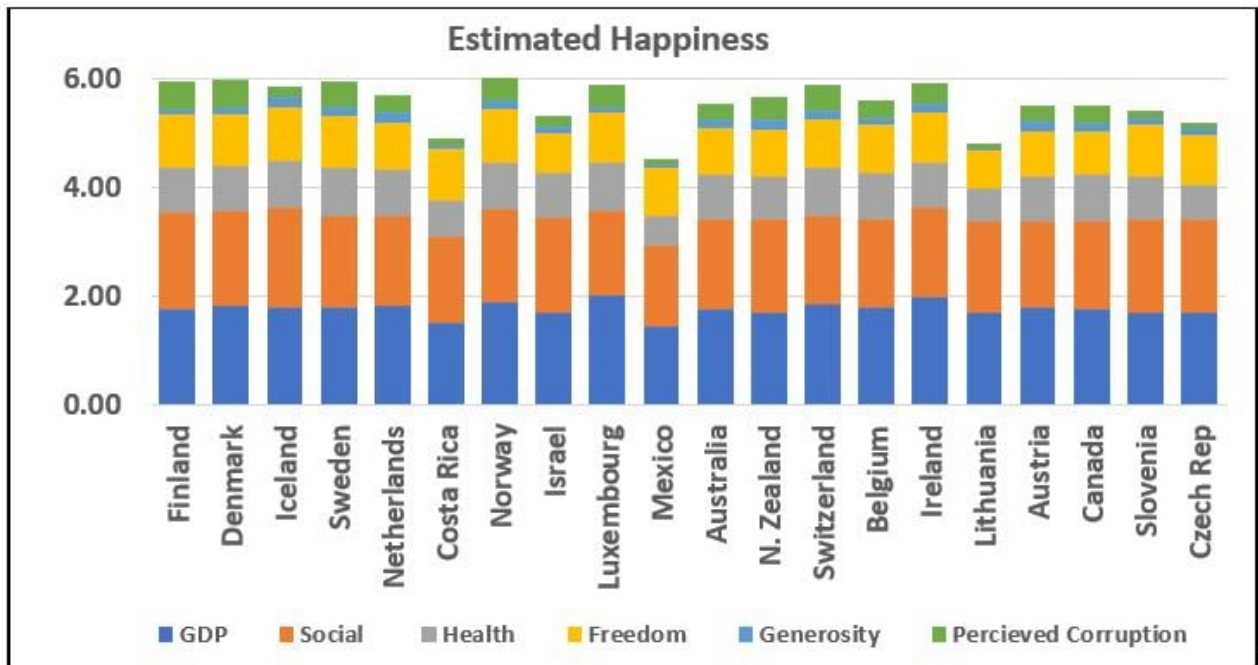


Fig. 2: Estimated happiness is defined as the sum of the contributions of the six key variables, as listed in the 2025 World Happiness Report. Costa Rica, Mexico, and Lithuania are the countries most affected by the change from self-reported happiness (Fig. 1) to estimated happiness (Fig. 2).

We define Estimated Happiness as the sum of the contributions of the six key variables presented in the World Happiness Report 2025. Fig. 2 illustrates the estimated happiness of the top 20 countries in the Report. The rankings of all countries have now changed. Fig. 3 depicts the population and the happiness of the top 12 countries rated by estimated happiness.

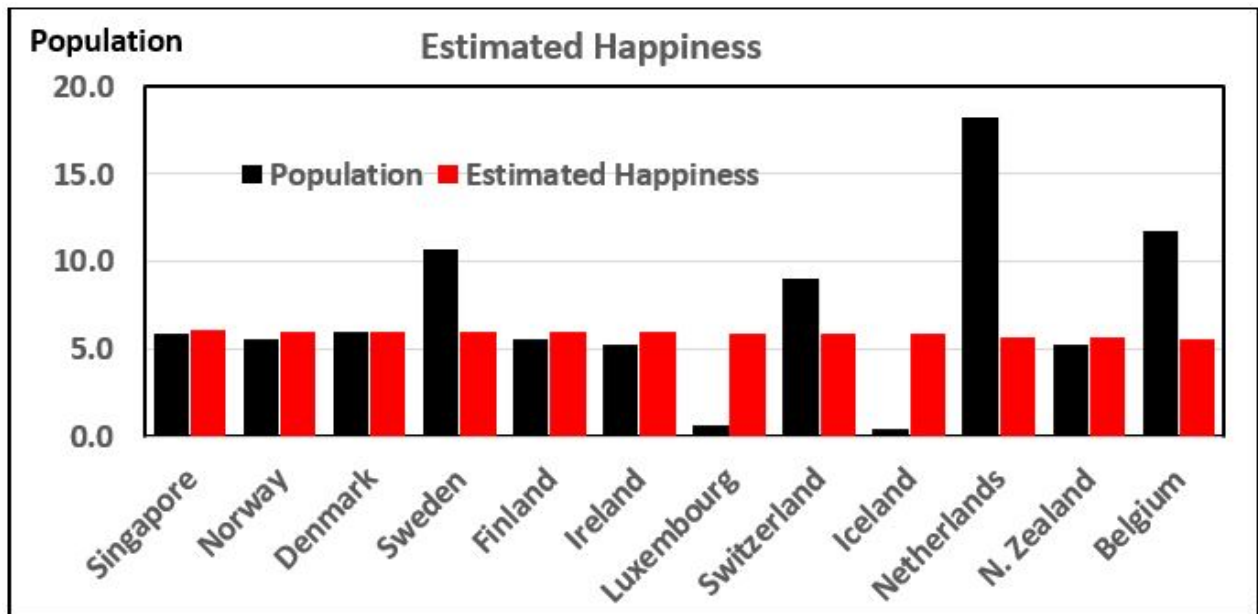


Fig.3: The top 12 countries with the highest Estimated Happiness (in red) and their population (black) in a million.

We obtain a new order of countries based on estimates derived from the sum of the report's six predictors. We use the term "estimated happiness" to differentiate this modified happiness from the report's original self-reported happiness. With the transition from self-reported to estimated happiness, Mexico's rating has shifted from 10th to 62nd, while the US maintains 31st place.

The top 12 countries, from Singapore to Belgium, as shown in Fig. 3, have the highest estimated happiness. The difference between the first country, Singapore, and the ninth country, Iceland, is less than 5%. This difference is likely smaller than the uncertainty in the sum of contributions from the six key variables of the Report. Therefore, all countries, from Singapore to Ireland, should be considered equally happy.

We note (Fig. 3) that eleven countries out of the top 12 have less than 12 million populations. The population of the Netherlands is about 18 million. A small country's population seems to be a characteristic feature of happiness. If you want

to live in the country with the highest happiness in the world and do not wish to move to Scandinavia, you still have several options. Some countries with large populations may possess significant military and economic power. However, their happiness is lacking compared to that of smaller countries.

Although we may be able to identify some of the factors associated with happiness, it is less straightforward to uncover factors associated with how people act. Investigators conducted an intriguing experiment to determine the percentage of strangers who would return a wallet found on the street. Norway, Iran, and Algeria had the highest percentage of returned wallets in descending order. The US was in the 52nd place.

There are hardly two countries that are more different than Norway and Iran. Norway is a small country in northern Scandinavia. Officially, the Kingdom of Norway is a constitutional monarchy with a population of about five million, a universal health care and social security system, and a Christian background. In contrast, Iran is a large country in West Asia, officially an Islamic Republic, with a population of over 86 million, a Muslim majority, and limited freedom. Finding any commonality between the two that can be quantified is challenging. The honesty of the people living in these two countries must be traced to something our intellect and senses cannot easily recognize.

Another interesting feature is the death toll from drug addiction. Here, the United States is the undisputed leader with over 105,000 deaths in 2023. Regarding deaths per capita, the US is followed by Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Apparently, wealth is directly connected to addiction. Suicide in the US claimed over 49,000 lives in 2023. Again, the US leads the world, with males exhibiting a rate about four times that of females. As far as I know, nobody has satisfactorily explained this disparity, and I do not even want to try.

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Petr Chylek

is a theoretical physicist who held professorships at several universities in the United States and Canada. He has authored over 150 publications in scientific journals. He was elected a Fellow of the American Geophysical Union and a Fellow of the Optical Society of America for his significant scientific contributions. He thanks his daughter, Lily A. Chylek, for her comments and suggestions regarding the early version of this article.

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