

3. Positive and negative experiences

Definition and measurement

Data on positive and negative experiences are drawn from the *Gallup World Poll*. The Gallup World Poll is conducted in over 140 countries around the world based on a common questionnaire, translated into the predominant languages of each country. With few exceptions, all samples are probability based and nationally representative of the resident population aged 15 years and over in the entire country, including rural areas. While this ensures a high degree of comparability across countries, results may be affected by sampling and non-sampling error. Sample sizes vary between around 1 000 and 4 000, depending on the country. The “positive experience index” is a measure of respondents’ experienced well-being on the day before the survey in terms of feeling well-rested, being treated with respect all day, smiling or laughing a lot, learning or doing something interesting, and experiencing enjoyment. The “negative experience index” is a measure of respondents’ experienced well-being on the day before the survey in terms of physical pain, worry, sadness, stress and depression. Positive and negative experiences are likely to be less influenced by country-specific cultural factors than is life satisfaction. EQLS data comes from Anderson *et al.* (2009).

Measures of experiences like smiling and stress provide a broad, population-wide indicator of psychological well-being across the OECD. Positive experiences – like reported laughing – indicate positive psychological states and negative experiences – like reported depression – indicate largely the contrary (there is one question in the index on physical pain. The remainder are psychological variables).

Iceland had the highest rate of positive experience in the OECD in 2006-09 (Panel A, HE3.1). Mexicans, who often rank well on self-assessed subjective measures given their economic development, and Canadians also ranked high in positive experiences. Anglophone and Nordic countries also performed above average in terms of positive experiences. The bottom half of the OECD was dominated by continental western and central European countries. Japan and Korea also reported low positive experiences.

Denmark had the lowest rate of negative experiences, an experience was shared with its Nordic neighbours (Panel B, HE3.1). The Anglophone countries were at or above average. High rates of negative experiences were reported in Israel, Spain, Portugal and France. While countries with high positive experiences scores tended to have low negative experience scores, this relationship was weak. Canada, Chile and the United States were all countries sharing a combination of relatively high positive as well as high negative experiences. The reasons for this pattern are not clear. It could be that individuals in those countries reported more positive *and* negative experiences, or that those who reported either negative or positive experiences in those countries were more likely to report *more* of such experiences.

Two checks suggest the data is meaningful. Because the data asked people their previous day experiences, such aggregate data may simply provide fast changing perceptions experienced only on the day of the survey. Alternatively the sample sizes could be too small to provide any precision. There was a strong relationship between Positive Experiences and the 2007 *European Quality of Life Survey* positive mental health index (HE3.2). As these surveys were different samples, on different days, with different questions, the strong relationship at a country level provides reassurance of data validity. Countries where positive experiences were high one year also tended to be high in the next survey (HE3.3). Again, this strong relationship shows that the data are not just random sample error or fickle swings of day-to-day mood at a country level.

Further reading

Anderson, R., B. Mikulić, G. Vermeylen, M. Lyly-Yrjanainen and V. Zigante (2009), *Second European Quality of Life Survey*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg.

Figure notes

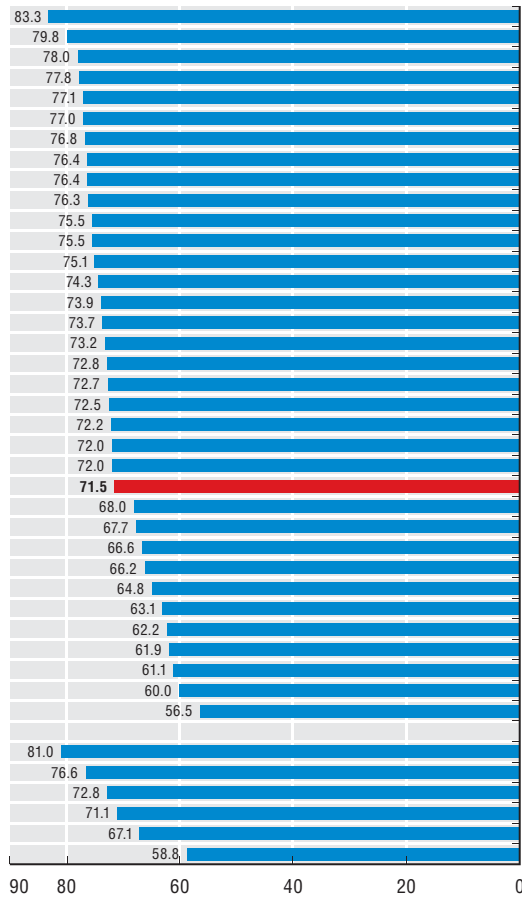
All data for HE3.1 from 2009 except the Slovak Republic and Switzerland 2006, the Czech Republic 2007 and Australia, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Turkey, all 2008.

Gallup data for HE3.2 are from the closest year to 2007, if there is no 2007 data. If there was Gallup data in 2006 and 2008 and not 2007, the more recent (2008) data was used.

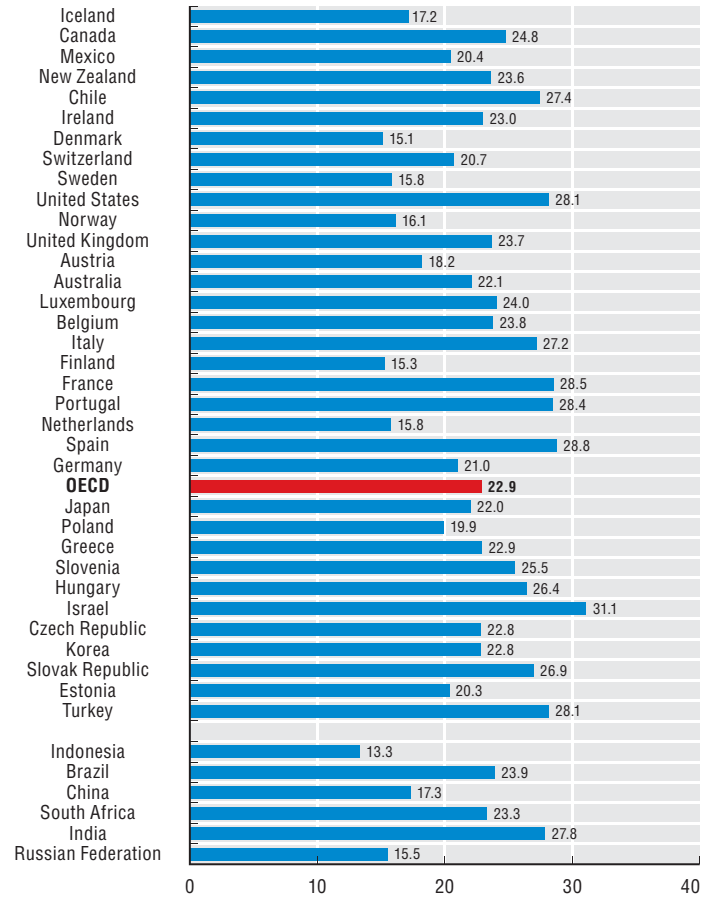
Information on data for Israel: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

HE3.1. Highest levels of positive experience in Iceland, Canada and Mexico, highest levels of negative ones in Israel, Spain and France

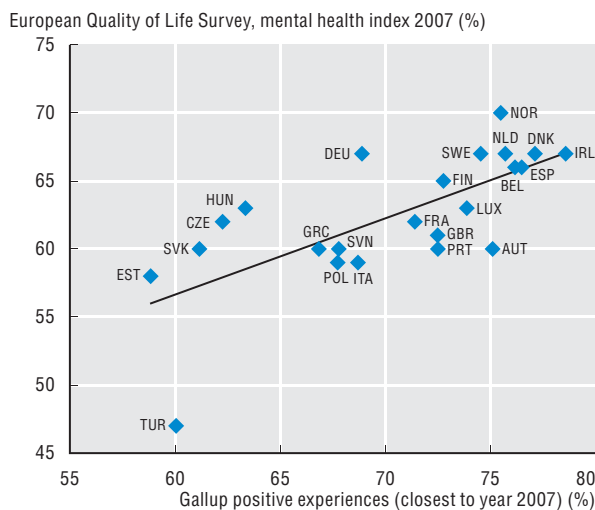
Panel A. Positive experience index, percentage having reported positive experiences, 2009 or latest year (↘)



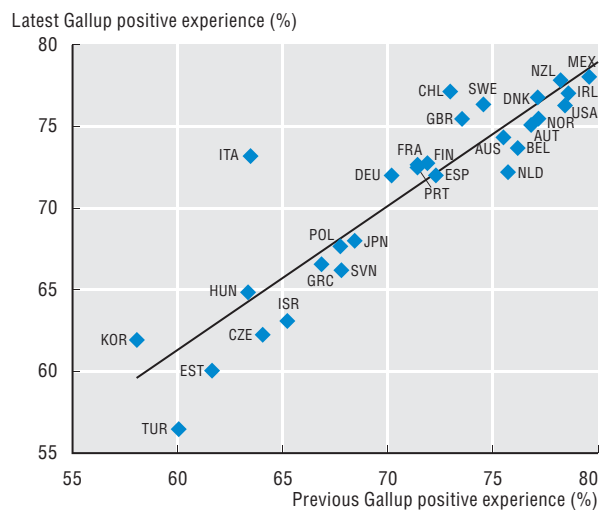
Panel B. Negative experience indicator, percentage having reported negative experiences, 2009 or latest year



HE3.2. Positive experiences correlate with positive mental health for 21 OECD-Europe countries



HE3.3. Countries with higher positive experience are similar the next survey



Source: Gallup World Poll (www.gallup.com).

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932382007>



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