"Life satisfaction in the EU: an average of 7.2 (out of 10) in 2021, ranging from 5.7 in Bulgaria to 8.0 in Austria."

"Between 2018 and 2021, life satisfaction in the EU decreased slightly, with the most notable decreases in countries with higher average values of life satisfaction such as Ireland (8.1 to 7.3), Denmark (7.8 to 7.3) and France (6.8 to 6.3)."

"Between 2018 and 2021, increases were seen in EU Member States with lower overall values of average life satisfaction such as Lithuania (6.4 to 7.0), Croatia (6.3 to 6.8), Romania (7.3 to 7.7) and Greece (6.4 to 6.8), which led to converging average values for life satisfaction in the EU."

This article is part of the Eurostat online publication Quality of life indicators, providing statistics on the quality of life in the European Union (EU). The publication presents a detailed analysis of many different dimensions of quality of life, complementing the indicator traditionally used as the measure of economic and social development, gross domestic product (GDP). The article focuses on the last dimension of the '8+1' quality of life indicators framework, overall experience of life. The first eight quality of life dimensions focus on various individual aspects such as material living conditions, living environment or employment, which are often analysed from both an objective and a subjective perspective as no assessment of quality of life can be complete without taking into account the overall subjective well-being of persons, which is perhaps the only way to integrate the diversity of the experiences, choices, priorities and values of an individual.

EU citizens are rather satisfied with their lives in 2021

Information about the well-being of EU citizens come from the EU-SILC data collections of 2013, 2018 and 2021. As shown in Figure 1, in 2021 Europeans rated their satisfaction with life on average at 7.2 points on a scale from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). It was highest in Austria (8.0), Finland (7.9) and Romania (7.7) and lowest in Bulgaria (5.7), Hungary (6.5) and Latvia (6.7). Cyprus, Croatia, France and Greece showed quite low levels of satisfaction at 6.8. However, in most countries (with the exception of Bulgaria) average levels of life satisfaction were higher than 6 (i.e. satisfied rather than dissatisfied).
Figure 1: Overall life satisfaction (2021) (mean scale 0-10) Source: Eurostat (ilc_pw01)

It is interesting to note that some countries associated with low levels of income in the recent past (as indicated for example by PPP adjusted GDP per capita), such as Romania, Poland and Czechia, are among the countries where life satisfaction is high – showing the complexity of the relation between subjective well-being and economic welfare.

Average life satisfaction slightly decreasing in 2021

When looking at the results from all survey years available (2013, 2018 and 2021), the average life satisfaction was consistently at the higher end of the scale in Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg and Ireland. While for Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Portugal and Lithuania the results were consistently at the other end of the scale. Nevertheless, in some of these countries, life satisfaction increased considerably during the past decade. This development has led to a convergence of life satisfaction at EU level in recent years. In these countries - but not only - a significant part of the population, the older generations, experienced lasting and significant change in the economic, social, welfare and political circumstances of their lives.

Some countries showed a steady increase in life satisfaction over the 2013-2021 period: notably Bulgaria, which showed the highest increase of 0.9 points, followed by Portugal (0.8), Estonia (0.7), Romania, Greece and Cyprus (0.6), Italy and Croatia (both 0.5). On the other hand, Denmark (-0.7 points), Sweden (-0.4) and the Netherlands (-0.2) show a decrease. However, in these countries, the general life satisfaction remained among the highest in the EU.
In 10 EU Member States, life satisfaction increased between 2013 and 2018 followed by a decrease between 2018 and 2021. It is notable that between 2013 and 2018, in the midst of a general increase of life satisfaction, only 4 countries showed a decrease. Between 2018 and 2021 a decrease was observed in 14 countries.

At EU level, average overall life satisfaction increased between 2013 and 2018, from 7.0 to 7.3, followed by a slight decrease between 2018 and 2021 to 7.2.

**Figure 2: Overall life satisfaction, 2013, 2018 and 2021 (mean scale 0-10)**

*Source: Eurostat ilc_pw01*
In 2020 and 2021, the EU and the Member States took unprecedented measures to halt and mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures affected people’s life satisfaction differently in various geographic areas (see Map 1), while northern and western Member States showed a decrease in life satisfaction, countries in the east and south of Europe continued to show an increase. Demographic characteristics may have also influenced the changes in life satisfaction, as the analysis below shows.

Men in the EU are slightly more satisfied with their lives

As shown in Figure 3, generally men are a little more satisfied with their lives than women. Only in five Member States was the situation – albeit with a small margin – the opposite: Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Germany and Sweden. When comparing 2021 results with 2018 across the EU Member States, the life satisfaction of men and women changed in a similar manner regardless of the direction of the change.
Young people in the EU are more satisfied with their lives

While there is no difference, on average, in the level of life satisfaction of men and women, age does seem to play a role. The young age group of 16-29 years reported higher levels of life satisfaction on average, while the age group 65+ years reported lower levels of life satisfaction than the total surveyed population. This is the case at EU level as a whole and in 19 Member States. About half the countries reported the elderly to be at least as satisfied, or more satisfied, than the young and the total surveyed population (See Figure 4). In Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and Ireland, the young reported lower and the elderly reported higher levels of life satisfaction than the total surveyed population.
In the Baltic countries and some EU Member States from the eastern part of the EU, the gap between the level of life satisfaction of the youth and other age groups was wide. Due to this fact, the differences in overall life satisfaction levels between the countries were relatively lower when the youngest surveyed group of Europeans (aged between 16-29 years) was examined separately. The life satisfaction ranged between 6.4 in Bulgaria and 8.2 in Austria, while for those above 65 years it was as low as 4.9 in Bulgaria and reached 8.0 in Finland.

University degree holders’ life satisfaction decreased in 2021

In addition to the effect of age, life satisfaction seems to be dependent upon the level of educational attainment, which to a certain extent also reflects income levels. Figure 5 shows that, at EU level, most of the decrease in life satisfaction between 2018 and 2021 was seen among the more highly educated (-0.3 points), while there was no decrease, on average, in the life satisfaction level of those with less than a secondary education level. In general, people with more education tend to be more satisfied with their lives. Comparing 2021 with 2018, we can see that in the EU Member States where there was an increase, it was predominantly among those with a lower level of education. For those with a middle or higher education level, the subjective evaluation of their life decreased during this period.
Life satisfaction decreased in 2021 for those with medium and high incomes and households with children

Figure 6 shows that life satisfaction at EU level depends to an extent on household type, almost not at all on degree of urbanisation (due to opposing trends in the Member States) and a lot on level of income.

Regarding the type of household where an individual lives, people in households with dependent children consistently report the highest levels of life satisfaction. In 2021, at EU level, this was 7.4, compared with an average of 7.2 for couples living together, 7.0 for households with three or more adults and without dependent children and 6.8 for single person households. The fact that households with dependent children are more satisfied than those without is actually rather specific to the European context, as research on other continents has often found the contrary.

Between 2018 and 2021, life satisfaction decreased the most (-0.2 points) for households with dependent children, although they still remained those reporting the highest life satisfaction. During this period, life satisfaction stayed stable for single person households and decreased 0.1 points for all other household types.

Very little difference was found in the life satisfaction of people by degree of urbanisation, notably between big cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas. This, however, may conceal opposing trends in the EU Member States, as in the Nordic EU countries, those living in the rural areas are more satisfied, while for example in Romania and Bulgaria those living in the cities are significantly more satisfied (this may be linked to the financial situation and the location where wealthier people choose to live). The change between 2018 and 2021 was not uniform, it decreased slightly less in towns and suburbs (-0.1 points) than in cities or rural areas (-0.2 point).
Regarding income level, people with high income tend to be more satisfied with their lives (7.7 on average for the highest income quintile) than those with the lowest earnings (6.6 on average for the lowest income quintile). However, even people in the lowest income quintile tend to be rather satisfied with their lives. While the relationship between income quintile and life satisfaction appears constant, the second and fourth quintile experienced bigger decrease (-0.2 points) than the third and fifth quintile (-0.1) between 2018 and 2021. For the first quintile life satisfaction was stable during this period. This pattern in life satisfaction inequality is consistent with that observed for income levels and inequalities and described in the article on Quality of life indicators - material living conditions.

Conclusions

EU citizens tend to be quite satisfied with their life in general, reporting an average of 7.2 points out of 10.0, and in all but one country, the average level was over 6 (i.e., satisfactory and above). There are, however, clear regional patterns: people in the northern, as well as western parts of the EU, tend to be more satisfied with their lives than people in the Baltic countries, the Mediterranean area and eastern parts of the EU. However, a convergence in life satisfaction can be noted in the period between 2018 and 2021. Slight increases of life satisfaction took place in countries with generally lower life satisfaction and the opposite in those countries with higher life satisfaction.

Income has an impact on life satisfaction. However, while the highest earners tend to be more satisfied with their lives than those with the lowest incomes, even people in the lowest income quintile tend to be more satisfied with
their lives than not.

Other demographic and socio-economic factors such as age, educational attainment, household type and degree of urbanisation also play a significant role in subjective well-being. Educational attainment has a positive influence on life satisfaction, as does being in a couple and having children. There is also a notable age-related pattern. Life satisfaction seems to decrease with age in the European Union, except in some of the countries reporting the highest overall life satisfaction: such as Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Luxembourg, Denmark and Ireland where those aged 65 years and over are at least as satisfied as the general population.

Regarding the overall changes in average subjective well-being between 2018 and 2021, the data shows larger decreases for people with higher levels of education and medium to high income levels as well as for the younger population (aged 16-29 years) when compared with the total surveyed population. The decreases were uniform among men and women.

Source data for tables and graphs

- Quality of life - Overall experience of life

Data sources

Subjective well-being encompasses three distinct but complementary subdimensions: life satisfaction (or evaluation), i.e., a person's cognitive overall assessment of their life; affects (the presence of positive feelings, such as joy and the absence of negative feelings, such as sadness or anger); and eudaimonia (the feeling that one's life has a meaning), as specified in the OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being. All three subdimensions were collected in the EU-SILC 2013 ad hoc module on subjective well-being and the data collection was partly repeated in the 2018 ad hoc module on Material deprivation, wellbeing and housing difficulties. The variable 'life satisfaction' is collected yearly in EU-SILC starting with 2021, while the frequency of 'being happy' will be collected every 6 years starting with 2022. The variable 'sense of purpose in life' has been discontinued.

Context

Measuring well-being has an inherent appeal: promoting the well-being of people in Europe is one of the principal aims of the European Union, as set out by the Treaty on European Union.

Measuring subjective well-being also provides valuable insight into the role played by objective capabilities as determinants of well-being. In a comparative European context, we need to take into account the fact that these widely differing priorities and values are also shaped by societal structures, norms and cultural backgrounds, which may vary between countries. The importance assigned to each of the objective dimensions of quality of life may also, therefore, differ at the aggregate country level. Measuring subjective well-being also provides valuable insight into the role played by objective capabilities as determinants of well-being.

Life satisfaction involves a cognitive and evaluative reflection on past and present experiences. It provides a more stable perspective. However, this lifetime encompassing perspective also presents difficulties for the statistical measurement of life satisfaction: making an unbiased overall evaluation of one's life requires a survey respondent to make a conscious effort and the results may depend on the timing and circumstances of the survey. For example, the assessment could be influenced by fleeting experiences such as the time of day, day of the week, or even weather conditions, but these influences should cancel out in a large sample. An additional methodological difficulty stems from the entirely subjective nature of this metric. In other aspects of quality of life, which focus on functional capabilities, assessments based on perceptions can often be compared with and cross-checked against objective measures. There is, however, no such objectively measurable counterpart for life satisfaction. Nonetheless, this is a measure easy to comprehend and communicate.
Other articles

- Living conditions in Europe - income distribution and income inequality
- Quality of life indicators (online publication)

Database

- Quality of life, see:

  Material living conditions (qol_mlc)
  Productive or other main activity (qol_act)
  Health (qol_hlt)
  Education (qol_edu)
  Leisure and social interactions (qol_lei)
  Economic security and physical safety (qol_saf)
  Governance and basic rights (qol_gov)
  Natural and living environment (qol_env)
  Overall experience of life (qol_lif)

Dedicated section

- Quality of life

Publications

- Quality of life in Europe - Facts and Views

External links

- European Quality of Life Survey 2016
- OECD Guidelines on measuring subjective well-being
- Capability approach