

Quality of life indicators - overall experience of life

Statistics Explained

*Data from October 2013
No planned update*

This article is part of the [Eurostat](#) online publication [Quality of life indicators](#) , providing recent 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 present article focuses on the last dimension of the '8+1' [quality of life indicators](#) framework, **overall experience of life** . Whereas the first eight quality of life indicators focused on various individual dimensions such as material living conditions, living environment or employment, which are often analysed from both an objective and a subjective perspective, no assessment of quality of life can be complete without taking into account the overall subjective well-being of persons, perhaps the only way to integrate the diversity of the experiences, choices, priorities and values of an individual. Furthermore it is also the ultimate goal of any EU policy, as stated in the [Treaty on European Union](#) .

Overall life satisfaction in the context of quality of life

While most dimensions of the framework for statistical measurement of quality of life deal with objective functional capabilities of persons (such as material living conditions, living environment, leisure and social interactions, employment, etc), any measurement of quality of life should also extend to cover the subjective well-being of persons. Measuring subjective well-being, in addition to aggregating people's experiences of these objective dimensions by implicitly weighing their own preferences, is perhaps the only way to take into account people's diverse choices, priorities and values.

In a European comparative context, we need to take into account that these widely differing priorities and values are also shaped by societal structures, norms and cultural background, which may vary between the different 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.

But even setting these considerations aside, measuring well-being has an inherent appeal: it is arguably the ultimate aim of all EU policies, and the common thread that runs through them all. Promoting the well-being of people in Europe is one of the principal aims of the [European Union](#) , as set forth by the [Treaty on European Union](#) .

Subjective well-being encompasses three distinct but complementary sub-dimensions: 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 eudaimonics (the feeling that one's life has a meaning), as specified in the [OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being](#) . The first sub-dimension, which looks at an entire life rather than fleeting experiences, and gives an overall view of all life domains taken together, provides a more stable perspective. Life satisfaction involves a cognitive, evaluative reflection on present and past experiences. There is a subtle but significant difference between the concepts

(and the statistical measurement) of happiness and life satisfaction, which must be taken into account when interpreting relevant statistical data.

However, this lifetime and 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 or day of the week, or 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.

Life satisfaction in Europe

The data presented here come from the 2016 round of the [European Quality of Life Survey \(EQLS\)](#). On average, as shown in Figure 1, Europeans rate their satisfaction with life in general at 7.1 on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). It is highest in the [Nordic](#) countries (though also notably high in Austria and Luxembourg), and lowest in Greece and Bulgaria. Latvia, Croatia and Slovakia also show quite low levels of satisfaction. However, it should be noted that in most countries (with the exception of Greece and Bulgaria) average levels of life satisfaction were higher than 6 (i.e. satisfied rather than dissatisfied).

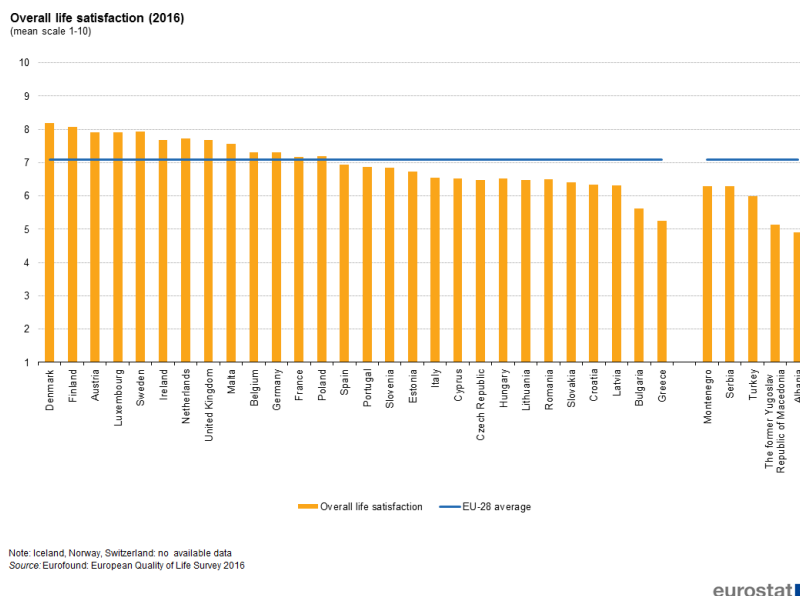


Figure 1: Overall life satisfaction, 2016 (mean scale 1-10), Source: Eurofound (European Quality of Life Survey 2016)

There are also regional patterns. People in the [Nordic](#) countries tend to be more satisfied with their lives than people in the [Baltic](#) countries and some of the Member States located in the south and east of the European Union. While this gap deserves more systematic investigation, one cannot entirely ignore economic and historical factors. Most of the countries in this 'considerably less satisfied' group were, and still are, characterised by a low level of income in the near past (as indicated for example by PPP adjusted GDP per capita). Possibly also important is the fact that a significant part of the population, the older generations, had experienced lasting and dramatic reversals in the economic, social, welfare and political circumstances of their lives.

Before the 2016 wave, this survey was carried out in 2011-2012, 2007 and 2003. During the period from 2011 to 2016, average overall life satisfaction in the EU-28 remained stable (see Figure 2). In most countries which were at or over the EU average in 2016, life satisfaction increased slightly or remained stable. While the

satisfaction increases in Luxembourg, Germany and Poland were only slight (0.1 point), in the United Kingdom, Malta, Austria and Ireland they were relatively higher (0.2-0.4). On the other hand, small decreases were seen in Denmark, Sweden and Belgium amongst the countries in this category.

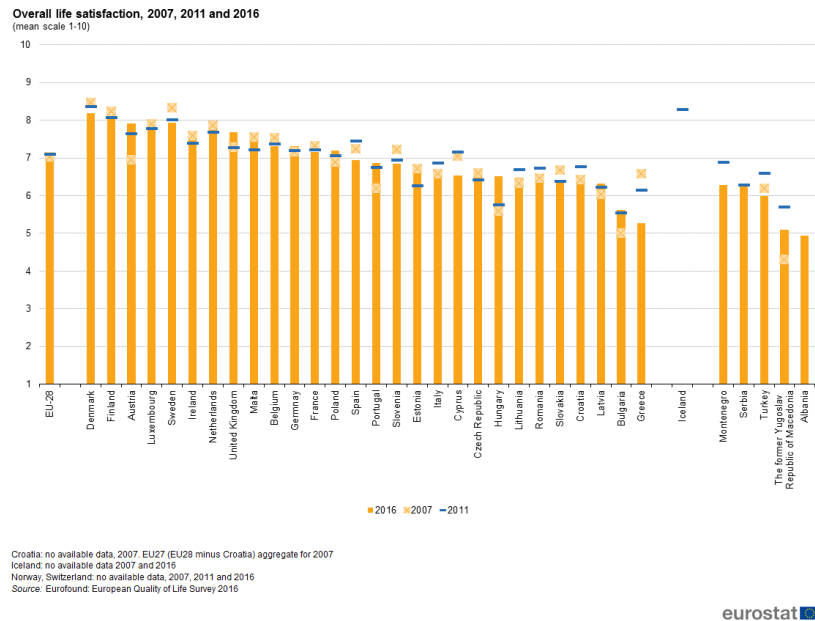


Figure 2: Overall life satisfaction, 2007, 2011 and 2016 (mean scale 1-10)Source: Eurofound (European Quality of Life Survey 2016)

Conversely, for the countries in which life satisfaction was below the European average in 2016, it was noted that most of them registered a decrease from the value corresponding to 2011. This decrease was steepest for Greece (mean life satisfaction fell from 6.2 to 5.3 in this country), Cyprus (from 7.2 to 6.5), Spain (from 7.5 to 7.0), Croatia (from 6.8 to 6.3) and Italy (from 6.9 to 6.6) (all countries located in the [Mediterranean](#) area). On the contrary, satisfaction rose in Hungary, Estonia, Portugal, Latvia and Bulgaria, the highest rises being recorded in Hungary (from 5.8 to 6.5) and Estonia (from 6.3 to 6.7).

Another sub-dimension of overall life satisfaction is a sense of purpose and meaning, as measured by the percentage of Europeans who answer that they agree (or disagree) with the statement 'I generally feel that what I do in life is worthwhile'. In general, a high level of life satisfaction correlates with a high sense of purpose. For example, as shown in Figure 3, the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Ireland, Malta, the United Kingdom, Austria and Luxembourg, all of which have the highest levels of life satisfaction (averages over 7.5 while the EU-28 average stands at 7.1), also have the highest proportion of positive answers for this question (over 85.0 %, while the European average is 78.0 %).

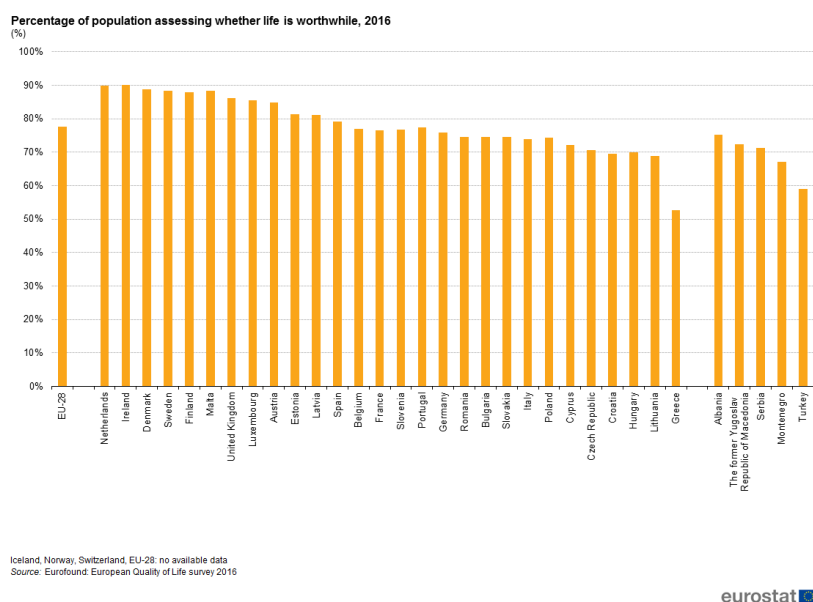


Figure 3: Percentage of population assessing whether life is worthwhile, 2016 (%)Source: Eurofound (European Quality of Life Survey 2016)

This indicator may reveal subtle but important differences underlying overall life satisfaction levels. For example, as already noted, life satisfaction levels in Bulgaria and Greece are among the lowest in Europe. But while a sense of purpose and meaning is at a record low for Greece (53.0 %), in Bulgaria (75.0 %), it is close to the European average. This indicates that the reasons underlying the similarly low levels of life satisfaction in the two countries are quite different.

Life satisfaction by income and age groups

As a general rule, those with high incomes tend to be more satisfied with their lives (7.5 on average for the highest income quartile) than the ones with the lowest earnings (6.4 on average for the lowest income quartile) (see Figure 4). However, even people in the lowest income quartile tend to be more satisfied with their lives than not (reporting an average of more than 5, except in Bulgaria and Greece; and the candidate countries the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania). This income-related gap varies significantly between countries, showing a general pattern of greater variance in levels of life satisfaction between economic strata in those countries in which average life satisfaction is lower. In Bulgaria, a difference of over two points in the scale is observed between the lowest and the top quartiles (from 4.1 to 6.7 respectively), and differences of a similar order of magnitude are observed in many other countries where the overall life satisfaction level is relatively low. On the other hand, in many of the countries in which mean life satisfaction is higher than the EU average this difference tends to be smaller than 1 percentage point (0.6 in France, 0.7 in Sweden and Malta, 0.8 in Luxembourg and Belgium, 0.9 in Finland, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands). Despite this, it must be emphasised that there is no statistically significant correlation of life satisfaction averages by country with inequality measurements, as expressed by their corresponding Gini coefficients¹. The pattern observed in life satisfaction inequality is, however, consistent with the one observed for income levels and inequalities and described in the article on [Quality of life indicators - material living conditions](#) .

¹Eurofound (2012), 3rd European Quality of Life Survey — Quality of life in Europe: Impacts of the crisis, p. 18

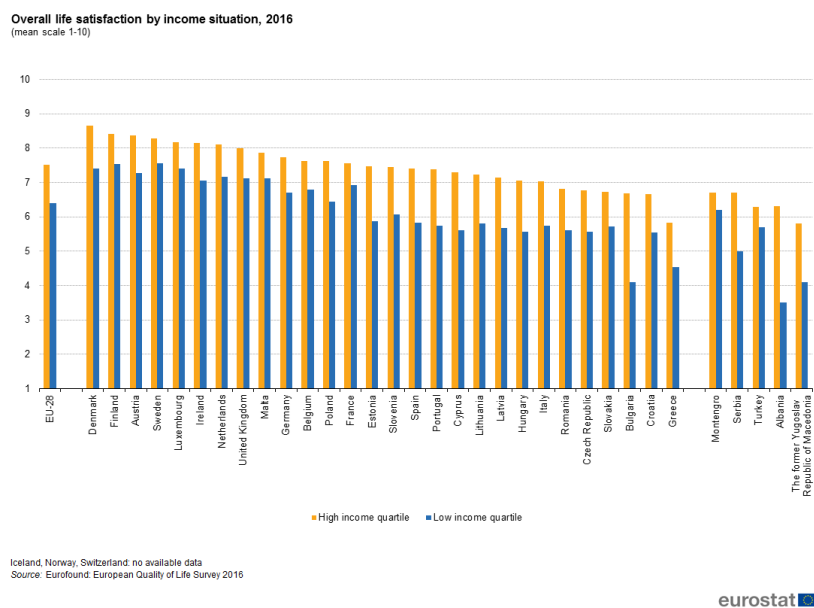


Figure 4: Overall life satisfaction by income situation, 2016 (mean scale 1-10), Source: Eurofound (European Quality of Life Survey 2016)

While there is no difference, on average, in the level of life satisfaction of men and women, age does seem to play a determinant role: life satisfaction consistently decreases with age until the age of 65, after which it increases again, sometimes leading to levels of life satisfaction for senior citizens similar to or even exceeding those of the youngest generation (see Figure 5). Existing evidence suggests that there is a U-shaped relationship between age and life satisfaction, where life satisfaction is the lowest in the middle age, when controlling for demographic and economic status. Interestingly, this pattern can be noted for some of the EU Member States when levels of life satisfaction are analysed by age group in 2016. This is notably visible in the English speaking countries (the United Kingdom and Ireland) and the **Benelux** countries. On the other hand, income follows a reverse U curve and the two are not necessarily associated (i.e. people of working age report lower levels of life satisfaction, although they have higher income levels). This is a good example of how quality of life measures convey more nuanced information and insight than that provided by income indicators alone.

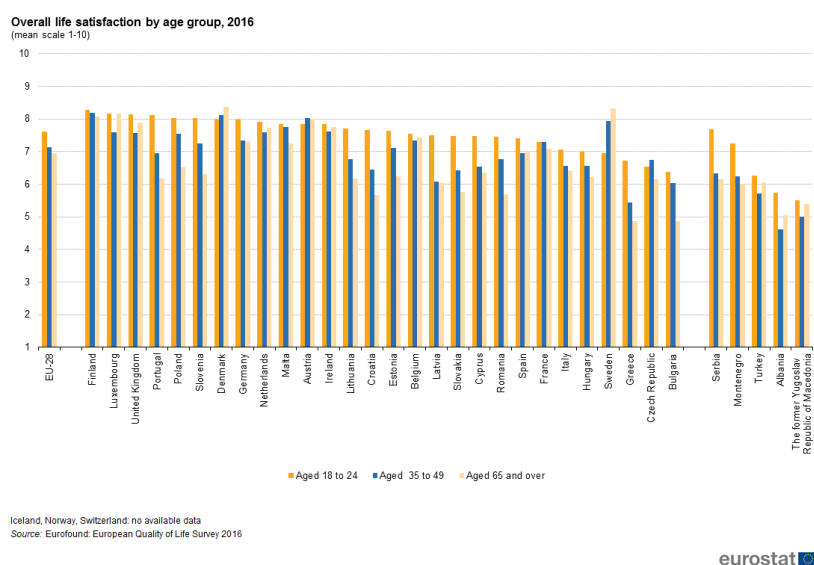


Figure 5: Overall life satisfaction by age group, 2016 (mean scale 1-10), Source: Eurofound (European Quality of Life Survey 2016)

In many other EU countries a different relationship between age and life satisfaction is apparent: life satisfaction decreases with age. This is also the case in the EU-28 in 2016, where the level of life satisfaction was 7.6 for the youngest generation (18-24), 7.1 for people aged 35-49, and 7.0 for people aged 65 years and over (see Figure 5). This pattern was repeated in many countries and was very visible in Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Croatia, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Greece and Bulgaria. In Austria, Finland and France, age seems to have a negligible impact on life satisfaction; while in Denmark and Sweden it seems that the life satisfaction of their citizens increases with age. When looking at the Baltic countries and members from the eastern part of the European Union, we see a wide gap between the level of life satisfaction of the youngest generation (18-24) and that of all the other age groups. Also due to this fact, the differences in overall life satisfaction levels between the countries are relatively lower when the youngest generation of Europeans (18-24) is examined separately (it still ranges between 6.4 in Bulgaria to 8.3 in Finland, while for those older than 65 it is as low as 4.9 in Bulgaria, and as high as 8.3 in Sweden). For the Baltic countries and members from the eastern part of the European Union, this is the first generation that has grown up entirely in a democratic society, which may corroborate the hypothesis stated previously on the effect of the economic, social and political transition experienced by older generations. Also, the younger generations may be benefiting to a larger extent from the opportunities and policy changes that have followed the EU enlargement.

Besides the effect of age and income, life satisfaction seems to be dependent on the level of educational attainment (reflecting differences from an average of 6.7 for people with primary education only, to an average of 7.6 for those with tertiary education) (see Figure 6). It also depends on household type, with an average of 6.7 for single people and 7.3 for couples without children and 7.4 for those who have children. But being a parent seems to have a positive effect even for those in a single adult household: average life satisfaction is 6.8 for this category, still slightly higher than for all single adult households. Finally, as expected, being unemployed or unable to work has a significantly adverse effect on life satisfaction. While the average life satisfaction of employed individuals was 7.4, it stood at 5.7 for unemployed individuals in 2016.

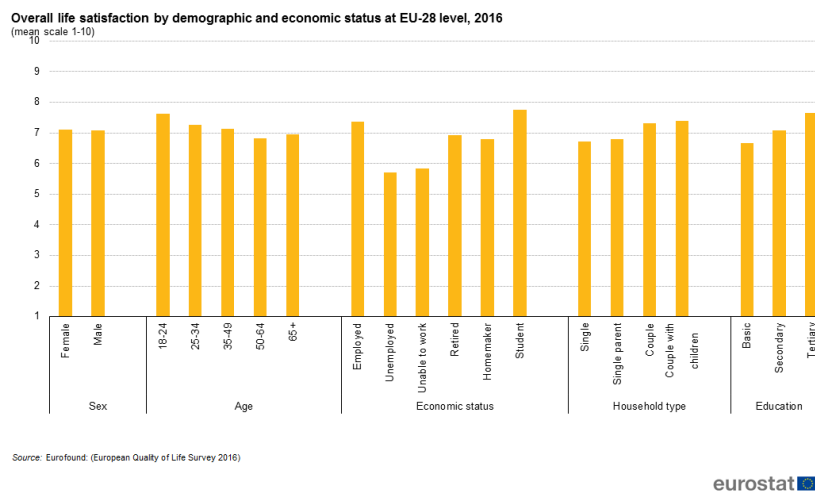


Figure 6: Overall life satisfaction by demographic and economic status at EU-27 level, 2016 (mean scale 1-10), Source: Eurofound (European Quality of Life Survey 2016)

Conclusions

Europeans tend to be quite satisfied with life in general, reporting an average of 7.1 out of 10.0, while in all but two countries, average levels were over 6. There are, however, clear regional patterns: people in Nordic countries, as well as western parts of the European Union, tend to be more satisfied with their lives than people in the Baltic countries, the Mediterranean area and eastern parts of the European Union. High levels of life satisfaction are, in general, correlated with high levels of sense of purpose.

Income has an impact on life satisfaction. But while the highest earners tend to be more satisfied with their lives than those with the lowest incomes, even people in the lowest income quartile tend to be more satisfied with their lives than not. The impact of income on life satisfaction tends to be more significant as the overall levels of life satisfaction of a society decrease. Thus, when comparing countries, the income-related gap between economic strata regarding life satisfaction increases as the overall level for a country gets lower.

Other demographic and socio-economic factors such as age, educational attainment, household type and employment status also play a significant role. There is a notable age-related pattern. Life satisfaction seems to decrease with age in the European Union, except in some English speaking, Nordic and Benelux countries. On the other hand, educational attainment has a positive impact on life satisfaction, as does being in a couple, and having children.

Source data for tables and graphs

- [Quality of life - Overall experience of life](#)

Data sources

The dimension “overall experience of life” requires data on life satisfaction, on positive and negative affect, and on the sense of purpose in life. These were collected in the SILC 2013 Ad-hoc module on Subjective Well-Being (available in 2015) and the data collection will partly be repeated in 2018 (available in 2020). In the meantime, relevant data to be used as a placeholder can be found at Eurofound ([European Quality of Life Survey 2016](#)).

Context

The measurement of subjective well-being is perhaps the only way to take into account people’s diverse choices, priorities and values, and the relative importance they assign to the objective functional capabilities [1] measured by other dimensions. The dimension «overall experience of life» of the Quality of Life framework refers to quality of life subjective appreciation (as contrasted to quality of life rather objective determinants measured by the other dimensions).

Other articles

- [Income poverty statistics](#)
- [Quality of life indicators](#) (online publication)

Dedicated section

- [Quality of life indicators - Overall experience 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](#)