

Happiest States in America: Louisiana, Hawaii, Florida

Published: Friday, 18 Dec 2009, 11:41 AM EST

Randolph E. Schmid, Associated Press Science Writer

WASHINGTON - People in sunny, outdoorsy states — Louisiana, Hawaii, Florida — say they're the happiest Americans, and researchers think they know why. A new study comparing self-described pleasant feelings with objective measures of good living found these folks generally have reason to feel fine.

The places where people are most likely to report happiness also tend to rate high on studies comparing things like climate, crime rates, air quality and schools.

The happiness ratings were based on a survey of 1.3 million people across the country by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It used data collected over four years that included a question asking people how satisfied they are with their lives.

Economists Andrew J. Oswald of the University of Warwick in England and Stephen Wu of Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., compared the happiness ranking with studies that rated states on a variety of criteria ranging from availability of public land to commuting time to local taxes. Probably not surprisingly, their report in Friday's edition of the journal *Science* found the happiest people tend to live in the states that do well in quality-of-life studies.

Yet Oswald says "this is the first objective validation of 'happiness' data," which is something he says economists have been reluctant to use in the past. "Very loosely, you could say that we prove that happiness data are 'true,' — such data have genuine objective informational content," he said.

"Moreover," Oswald added, "it is interesting to uncover the pattern of life-satisfaction across one of the world's important nations."

Ranking No. 1 in happiness was Louisiana, home of Dixieland music and Cajun/Creole cooking. Oswald urged a bit of caution in that ranking, however, noting that part of the happiness survey occurred before Hurricane Katrina struck

the state, and part of it took place later. Nevertheless, he said, "We have no explicit reason to think there is a problem" with the ranking. Rounding out the happy five were Hawaii, Florida, Tennessee and Arizona.

At the other end of the scale, last in happiness — is New York State. As if to illustrate the problem, residents attending a meeting Wednesday in rural Queensbury unleashed their anger and cynicism at a state government they described as corrupt, self-dealing and too quick to increase taxes. It was a tirade that had one lifelong resident saying he was ready to flee "this stinkin' state." Oswald suggested the long commutes, congestion and high prices around New York City account for some of the unhappiness.

He said he has been asked if the researchers expected that states like New York and California, which ranked 46th, would do so badly in the happiness ranking. "I am only a little surprised," he said. "Many people think these states would be marvelous places to live in. The problem is that if too many individuals think that way, they move into those states, and the resulting congestion and house prices make it a non-fulfilling prophecy."

Besides being interesting, the state-by-state pattern has scientific value, Oswald explained. "We wanted to study whether people's feelings of satisfaction with their own lives are reliable, that is, whether they match up to reality — of sunshine hours, congestion, air quality, etceteras — in their own state. And they do match."

Oswald and Wu used data from CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System collected from 2005 to 2008. The survey, launched in 1984, collects information on a variety of health measures. The research was supported by Britain's Economic and Social Research Council.

Here are the 50 U.S. states (and the District of Columbia) in order of their well-being:

1. Louisiana
2. Hawaii
3. Florida
4. Tennessee
5. Arizona
6. Mississippi
7. Montana
8. South Carolina
9. Alabama
10. Maine
11. Alaska
12. North Carolina
13. Wyoming
14. Idaho
15. South Dakota
16. Texas
17. Arkansas
18. Vermont
19. Georgia
20. Oklahoma
21. Colorado
22. Delaware
23. Utah
24. New Mexico
25. North Dakota
26. Minnesota
27. New Hampshire
28. Virginia
29. Wisconsin
30. Oregon
31. Iowa
32. Kansas
33. Nebraska
34. West Virginia
35. Kentucky
36. Washington
37. District of Columbia
38. Missouri
39. Nevada
40. Maryland
41. Pennsylvania
42. Rhode Island
43. Massachusetts
44. Ohio
45. Illinois
46. California
47. Indiana
48. Michigan
49. New Jersey
50. Connecticut
51. New York