



**CALIFORNIA  
STATE ASSEMBLY**

# **Select Committee on Happiness and Public Policy Outcomes**

**2023-24 Legislative Session  
Final Report**

*Presented by*

**Speaker Emeritus Anthony Rendon,  
Chair**

**Report by: Katie Talbot  
With special assistance from Justine Chueh-Griffith**

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# INTRODUCTION



**“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”- Declaration of Independence**

Nearly 250 years after these words were drafted into the Declaration of Independence, our fundamental right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness continues to inspire millions of people across the world. Our system of government is based on these principles and exists to provide services and laws that protect and enforce these rights. They form a proposed answer to the great philosophical question of “What is the purpose of government?”

California has passed countless laws to support the lives and liberties of its people in an enormous variety of ways. But in our 175-year history as a state, the California State Assembly has not considered how California can improve the happiness of its people. Happiness is seen as a byproduct of the work we do to build housing, improve education, and boost wages, among other things. Legislators tend to assume that safe housing, higher incomes, and improved educational opportunities will inevitably lead to happiness. But is that *all* that leads to happiness? Or do we have a responsibility to do more, to examine happiness more closely as an outright goal?

Happiness experts in California and across the world would urge us to seriously consider the answers to those questions. They’re not just philosophical considerations. As the Select Committee on Happiness and Public Policy Outcomes has found and this report will summarize, the myriad benefits of happiness are extraordinary and worth pursuing through public policy.

The Select Committee on Happiness and Public Policy Outcomes is the first committee focused exclusively on happiness in the nation, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. California is once again forging a bold new policy path, one that I hope other state legislatures will follow.

This summary report of the Select Committee’s three hearings in 2024 includes major findings and recommendations that the California Legislature may want to consider. I hope this report is helpful to my colleagues in their work in future legislative sessions, and that it inspires all to consider how California may explore the answers to our great philosophical questions with tangible, real-world solutions.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Rendon'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial 'A' and 'R'.

Speaker Emeritus Anthony Rendon  
Chair, Select Committee on Happiness and Public  
Policy Outcomes

# 2023-24 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

## SELECT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Speaker Emeritus Anthony Rendon  
Assemblymember Isaac Bryan  
Assemblymember Lisa Calderon  
Assemblymember Phillip Chen  
Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia  
Assemblymember Alex Lee  
Assemblymember Tina McKinnor  
Assemblymember Liz Ortega  
Assemblymember James Ramos  
Assemblymember Pilar Schiavo  
Assemblymember Marie Waldron

## HEARINGS

March 12, 2024  
*Happiness: An Overview*

May 29, 2024  
*Happiness Across the Ages: Youth and Young Adults, Midlife, and Seniors*

August 12, 2024  
*Happiness in California: Public Policy Perspectives*



## PANELISTS

**MARCH 12, 2024**

Roko Belic – *Academy Award-Nominated Filmmaker*

Emiliana Simon–Thomas – *Science Director, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley*

John Helliwell – *Editor, World Happiness Report*

Mark Baldassare – *Statewide Survey Director and Miller Chair in Public Policy, Public Policy Institute of California*

Reverend Rajeev Rambob – *Minister, United Church of Christ*

Phuntsho Norbu – *Consul General of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United States*

Mayor Lily Mei – *City of Fremont*

Zima Creason – *Executive Director, California EDGE Coalition*

Professor Meliksah Demir – *Endowed Professor of Happiness, California State University, Sacramento*

**MAY 29, 2024**

Jan-Emmanuel De Neve – *Editor, World Happiness Report, and Professor of Economics and Director of the Wellbeing Research Centre at University of Oxford*

Martha Dominguez Brinkley – *Deputy Director of Program Innovation and Evaluation, First 5 California*

Amanda Guyer – *Associate Director, UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain*

David Blanchflower – *Professor of Economics, Dartmouth University*

Susan Charles – *Professor of Psychological Science, University of California, Irvine*

Susan DeMarois – *Director, California Department of Aging*

Carol Larson – *Senior Research Scholar, Stanford Center on Longevity*

**AUGUST 12, 2024**

Tony Thurmond – *State Superintendent of Public Instruction*

Doug Everhart – *Director of Student Wellness and Health Promotion, University of California, Irvine*

Cindy Bagley – *President, California Park and Recreation Society*

Julie Rusk – *Co-Founder, Civic Wellbeing Partners*

Stephanie Harrison – *Founder, The New Happy*

Ted Lascher – *Professor, Department of Public Policy and Administration, California State University, Sacramento*

# FINDINGS

## 1. HAPPINESS HAS A MULTITUDE OF BENEFITS

Happiness profoundly improves the functioning of our society. Happiness experts here in California and across the globe have identified substantial and varied benefits to happiness, benefits which make greater happiness levels worth pursuing through public policy.

Meliksah Demir, the Rekhi Singh Endowed Professor in Happiness at California State University, Sacramento, says the data on the benefits of happiness should be of serious interest to the Legislature. “We do have convincing empirical evidence showing happiness confers a variety of benefits in different life domains. It’s good for the individual, and it’s good for the society,” said Demir.

The health benefits to happiness alone are notable. Multiple studies indicate being happier improves a patient’s general health[1]. Happier people tend to live longer[2]. They’re more likely to survive a cancer diagnosis[3] and are less likely to develop heart disease[4]. Happier people have lower rates of pain following a stroke[5] and generally recover better from illness[6].

Considering the substantial burden diseases and illnesses cause to our health care system, policies designed to create happier and healthier Californians have the potential to lower health care costs and wait times for patients, therefore reducing strain to the overall system.

On the downward trend, the health negatives to unhappiness and its related factors are severe. Susan DeMarois, Director of the California Department on Aging, testified to the committee that loneliness has damaging health outcomes for California’s seniors.

“A significant driver in the epidemic of older adult behavioral health issues is loneliness,” DeMarois said. “Loneliness has such far-reaching consequences that the health impact is comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.”

The benefits to happiness are not solely associated with health. There’s employment, economic, and personal benefits to happiness as well.

Happy people are more productive. They work faster, organize their time better, and can solve more complex problems than their unhappier colleagues[7].

Happier people have also been found to be more transformative leaders and managers[8].

Happy people are more likely to volunteer (and as it turns out, volunteering is also likely to make people happier)[9]. Happy people are more likely to vote in elections. They are more likely to join clubs and memberships, more open to trusting others, more willing to donate money to charity, and even more likely to donate blood[10].

In short, the benefits of happiness go far beyond the personal. Increasing the number of happier people in California could provide greater economic, health, and civic benefits to the state.



*Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia asks a question during the August 12, 2024 hearing.*

## 2. WHILE MANY CALIFORNIANS ARE HAPPY, UNHAPPINESS IS GROWING

While the State of California has not conducted a survey or otherwise collected specific data on happiness levels in California, other agencies have.

The *General Social Survey*, conducted nationally since 1972, asks American citizens about their personal life satisfaction levels. Other organizations have conducted research specifically on happiness levels in California. Findings from these surveys indicate happiness levels across the state are dropping and varied.

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, first asked Californians about their happiness levels in May 1998, and asked again in September 2023.

Responses to PPIC Survey on Happiness	May 1998	September 2023
“Very Happy”	28%	16%
“Pretty Happy”	59%	58%
“Not Too Happy”	13%	26%

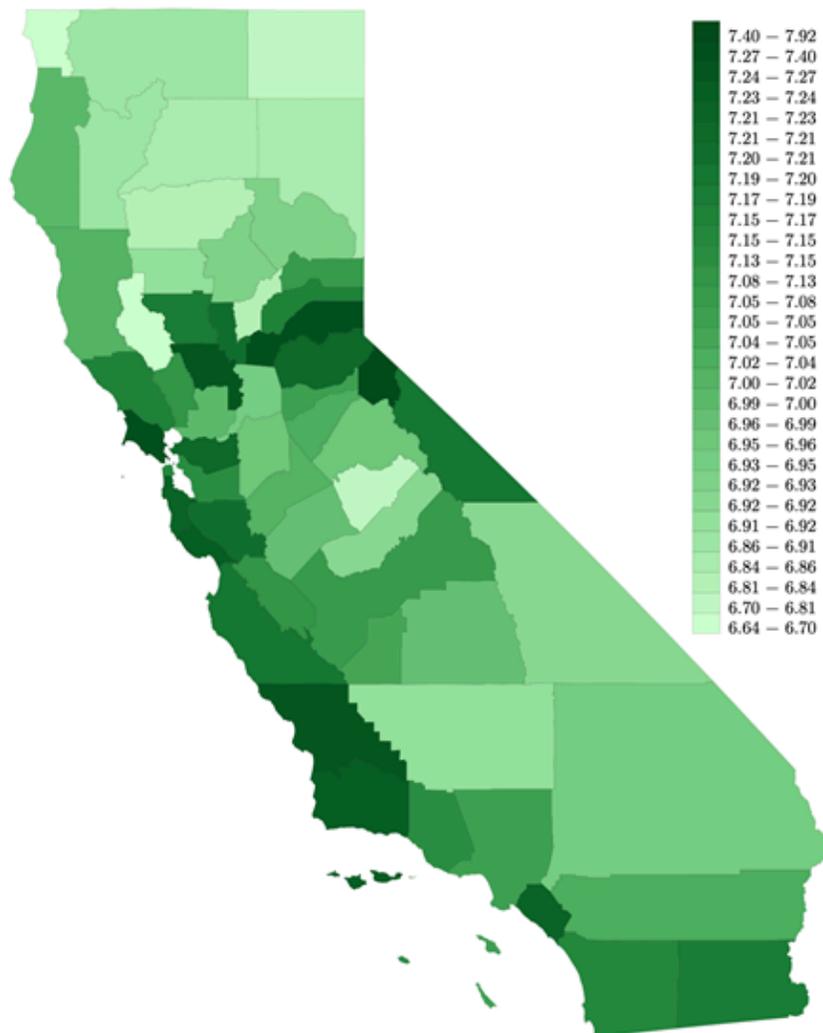
Source: PPIC

Responses indicate that while the number of “pretty happy” Californians has remained relatively stable over the past 25 years, the percentage of “very happy” Californians has shrunk substantially, from 28% in 1998 to 16% in 2023. Meanwhile, the percentage of “not too happy” Californians has doubled.

Mark Baldassare, Statewide Survey Director and Miller Chair in Public Policy at PPIC, links the decline in happiness to corresponding declines in other sectors.

“We find that happiness is aligned with specific quality of life ratings. In particular, jobs, leisure, and housing,” said Baldassare. “In our polling, we also looked at personal finance. But the biggest change we’ve seen over time has been satisfaction with jobs, which went from 52% saying they were very satisfied in our first polling to 31% today.”

Global research firm Gallup, which provides research for the international World Happiness Report, has also conducted research on happiness levels in California, with data beginning in 2009 and extending through 2018. The survey asked respondents to rate their life satisfaction on a scale from 1-10. For the Select Committee on Happiness, the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford mapped 215,801 Gallup poll responses from Californians by county.



Source: Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Wellbeing Research Centre  
Gallup U.S. Poll, 2009-18 (N=215,801 for California)

Rank	County Name	Life Satisfaction
1	Alpine	7.92
2	Marin	7.40
3	Placer	7.29
4	Yolo	7.27
5	San Luis Obispo	7.26
6	Santa Cruz	7.24
7	Santa Barbara	7.24
8	Orange	7.23
9	San Mateo	7.22
10	Contra Costa	7.21
11	El Dorado	7.21
12	Santa Clara	7.21
13	Sutter	7.20
14	Monterey	7.20
15	Mono	7.19
16	Imperial	7.18
17	Colusa	7.18
18	Sonoma	7.17
19	Nevada	7.17
20	San Francisco	7.15
21	Ventura	7.15
22	San Diego	7.15
23	Alameda	7.14
24	San Benito	7.13
25	Napa	7.11
26	Sierra	7.08
27	Fresno	7.06
28	Amador	7.06
29	Los Angeles	7.05
30	Kings	7.04

Rank	County Name	Life Satisfaction
31	Calaveras	7.04
32	Riverside	7.02
33	Mendocino	7.02
34	Stanislaus	7.00
35	Solano	7.00
36	Humboldt	7.00
37	Tulare	6.99
38	Merced	6.97
39	Tuolumne	6.96
40	San Joaquin	6.95
41	Sacramento	6.95
42	San Bernardino	6.95
43	Butte	6.93
44	Plumas	6.93
45	Madera	6.92
46	Glenn	6.92
47	Inyo	6.92
48	Kern	6.92
49	Trinity	6.90
50	Siskiyou	6.89
51	Lassen	6.86
52	Shasta	6.85
53	Tehama	6.83
54	Yuba	6.82
55	Modoc	6.81
56	Mariposa	6.73
57	Del Norte	6.70
58	Lake	6.64

Source: Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Wellbeing Research Centre  
Gallup U.S. Poll, 2009-18 (N=215,801 for California)

The survey found responses regarding happiness levels in California vary substantially by location.

Of the top 10 happiest counties in California, seven are situated on the coastline and have higher-than-average median income levels. Discounting Alpine County, which only had 12 individual respondents, Marin County ranked as the happiest county in California, with an average life satisfaction at 7.40. If Marin County was its own nation, it would rank as the seventh-happiest country in the world, between the Netherlands and Canada, in the *2018 World Happiness Report*[11].

On the opposite end of the spectrum, of the 10 least-happy counties in California, nine are inland and tend to have lower-than-average median income levels. Lake County, which was the lowest-ranking county according to the Gallup data from 2009-2018, has an average life satisfaction of 6.64. If Lake County were its own nation, it would rank as the 22nd happiest nation in the world, between the Czech Republic and Malta, in the *2018 World Happiness Report*.

These two separate data sets show that while many Californians are happy, unhappiness is growing in California and that happiness is not distributed evenly across the state.

Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Director of the Wellbeing Research Centre, encourages the legislature to explore opportunities for happiness-related public policy by using existing happiness data to assess what issues may be causing unhappiness.

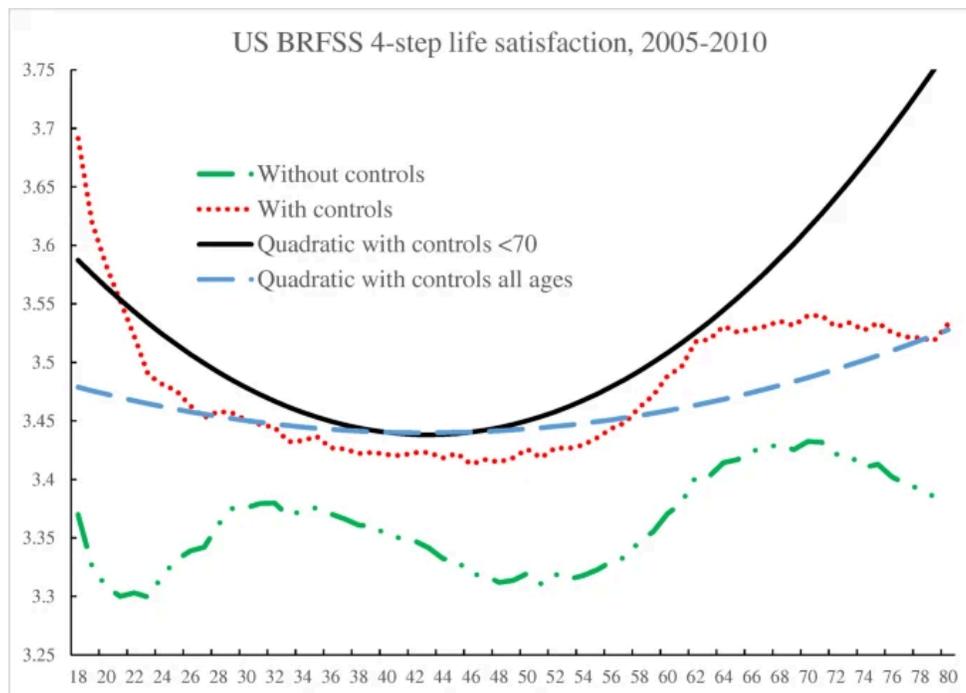
“Essentially you start from asking people how they feel about their life, and then look for differences, or what might help to explain differences, by looking at traditional policy levers. Whether it’s housing, mobility, education, etc. And so, the data is there... so we essentially start from asking people whether they’re happy, and then try to reverse engineer, put the science to work, and make it relevant to policy and policy actionable,” said De Neve.



*Assemblymembers Lisa Calderon, Pilar Schiavo, Chair Anthony Rendon, and staff listen to testimony during the May 29, 2024 hearing.*

### 3. YOUTH IS A KEY DEMOGRAPHIC IN HAPPINESS POLICY

In 2008, David Blanchflower, Bruce V. Rauner Professor of Economics at Dartmouth University, first identified the existence of the “U-curve[12]” in happiness levels across the age groups. Data from the 1970’s and beyond have shown that happiness historically tends to be high amongst youth and young adults, drops lower in midlife, and goes up again in senior years, as responsibilities and demands change throughout a person’s lifetime. In the last few years, this pattern has shifted.

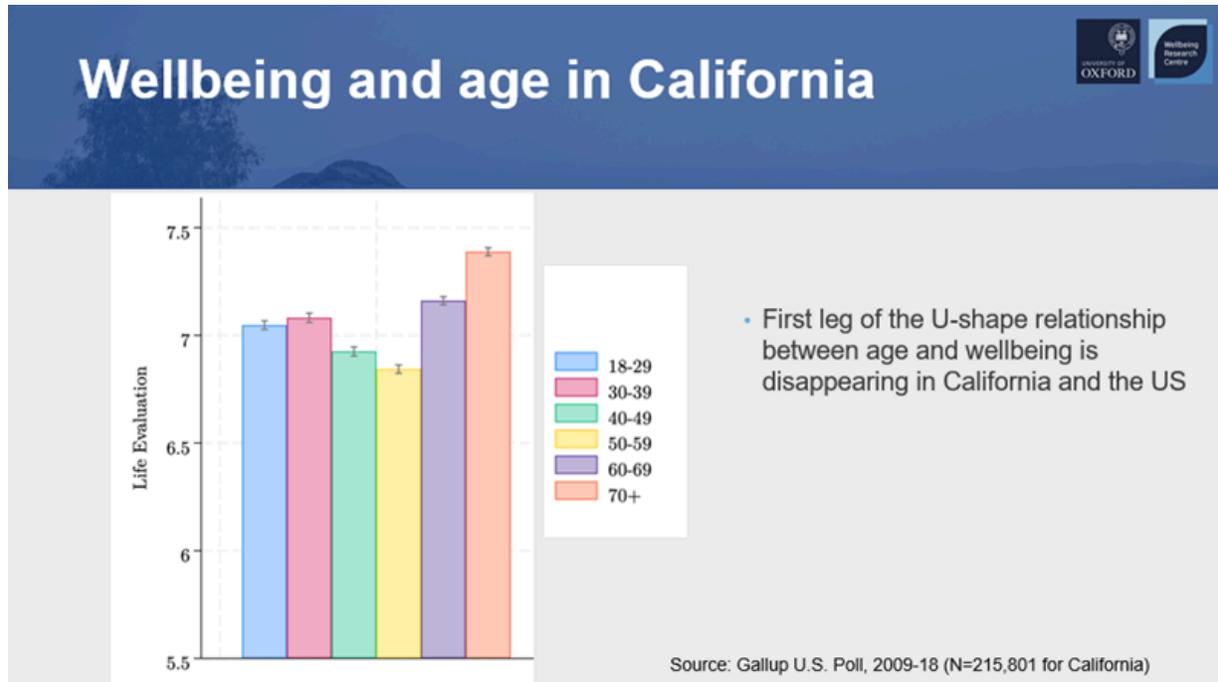


Source: Blanchflower, D.G.

“Is happiness U-shaped everywhere? Age and subjective well-being in 145 countries.”  
J Popul Econ 34, 575–624 (2021).

In 2024, for the first time since the inception of the World Happiness Report in 2012, the United States was not ranked in the top 20 happiest nations in the world. The United States ranked 23rd, a substantial drop from 15th place in 2023. Editors of the report attribute this dramatic drop to a substantial decrease in youth happiness (identified as ages 15-24). If the youth of the United States were their own country, they would bring the happiness ranking of the nation down from 23rd to 62nd place[13].

This indicates the previously identified “U-curve” of happiness has disappeared in the United States. Further research indicates that the drop in youth happiness may be a global phenomenon[14], but the drop in the U-curve can also be seen in California, according to the Wellbeing Research Centre’s analysis of Gallup polling data.



Source: Jan Emmanuel De Neve, Wellbeing Research Centre

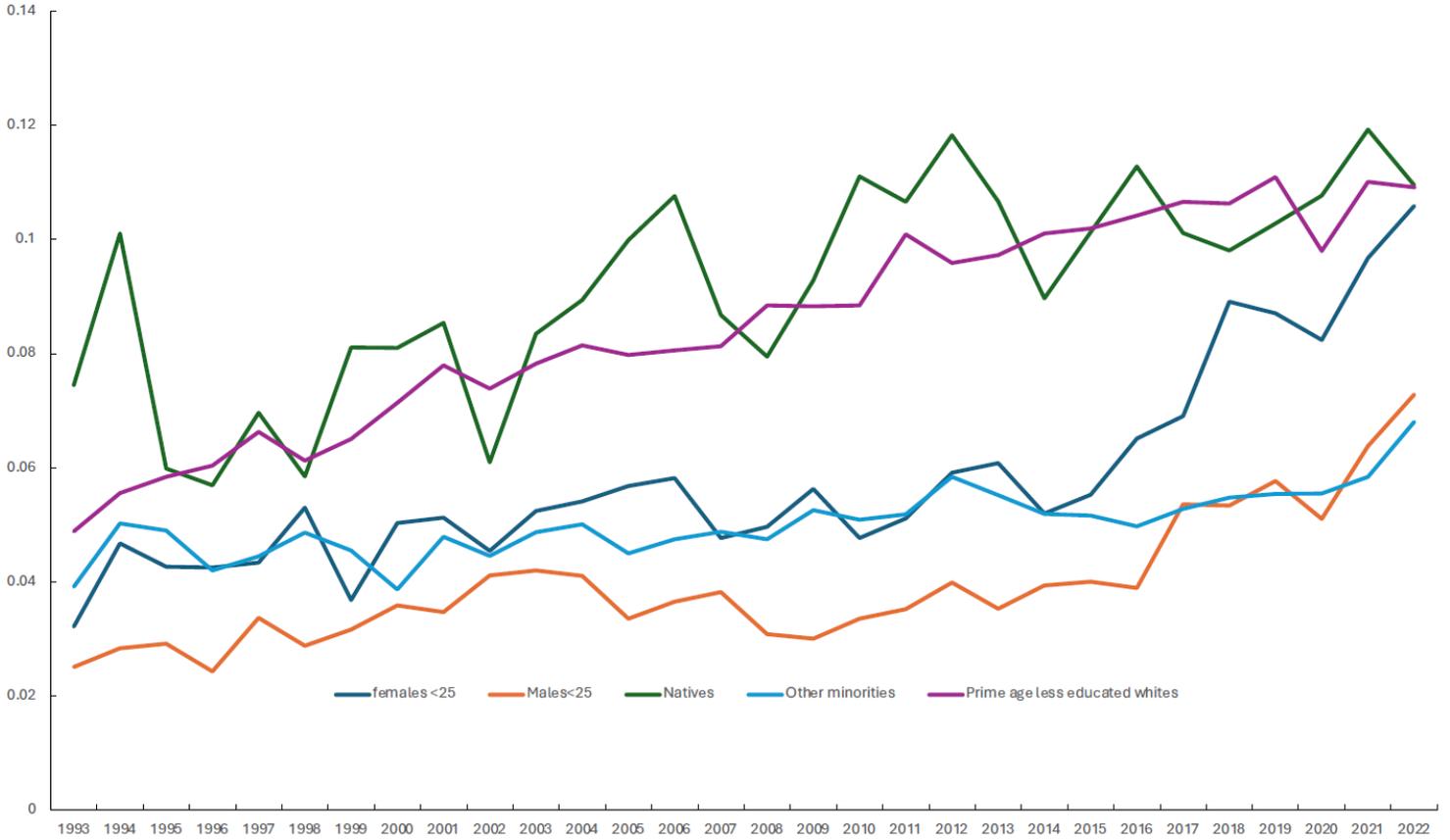
California’s young adults are also seeing a concerning drop in happiness levels that align with the rest of the United States. In a September 2023 survey, the Public Policy Institute of California found that 30% of 18-34 year olds report they are “not too happy”. That number increased by a substantial margin, from 10% in 1998[15].

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System* interviews roughly 400,000 adults per year on their health and risk-factor behaviors and collects data on stress, depression, and problems with emotions. Analysis of this data that Professor Blanchflower shared during the May 29, 2024 hearing indicates that these levels, which he labels ‘despair’ in the figures below, have risen dramatically for young adults, particularly among women, since 2009. The same dramatic rise in levels of despair can be seen in California.

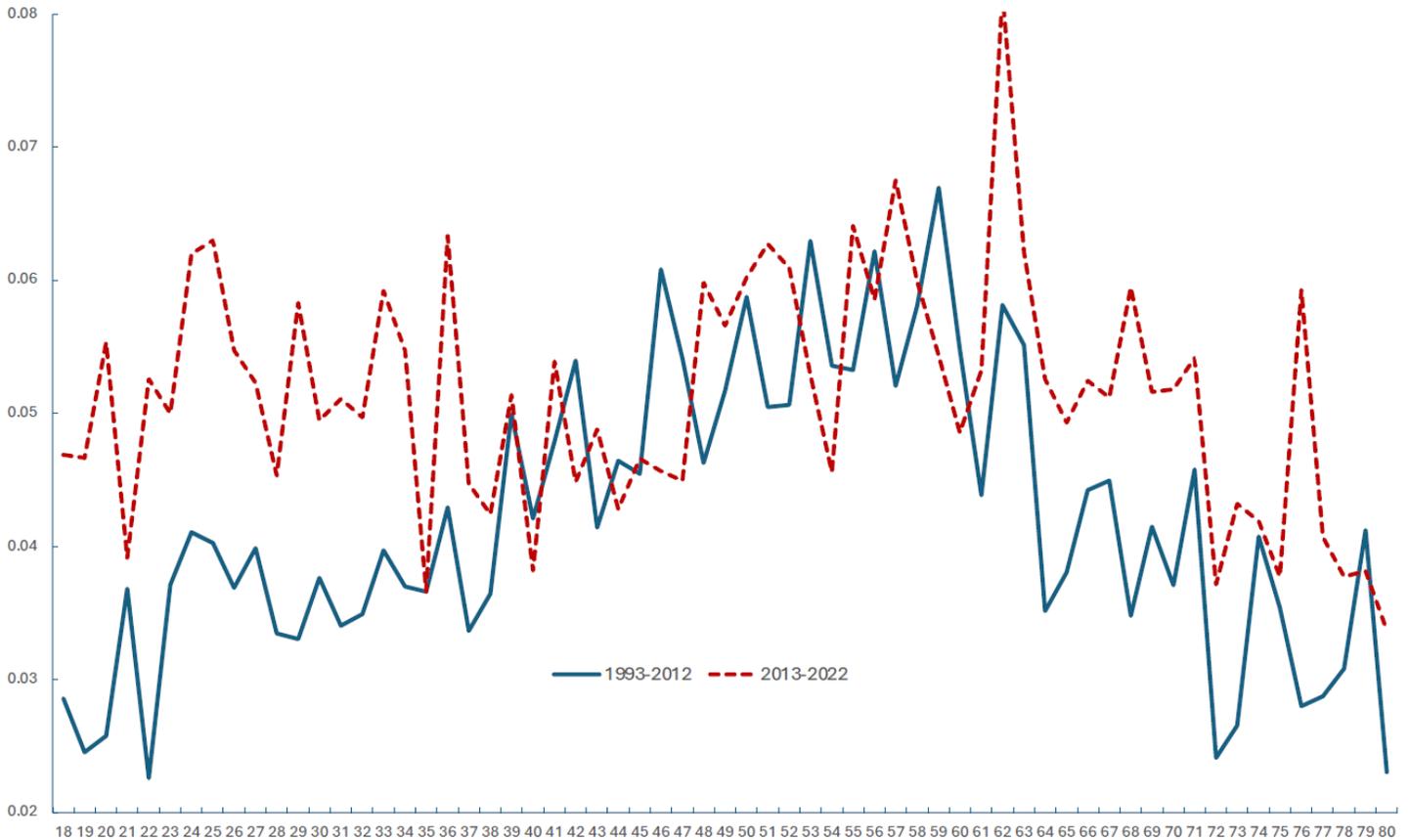
This data has serious and concerning implications for California’s youth, not only presently, but as they age. Research shows happy children have greater life satisfaction, social relationships, and general wellbeing as adults[16]. Dramatic reductions in happiness levels could have long-term repercussions.

“This is about the midlife crisis being replaced by a youth crisis,” said Blanchflower.

Despair by age USA, BRFSS, 1993-2022



Despair in California in BRFSS n=250,000



Source: Professor David Blanchflower, Dartmouth University

## 4. A PUBLIC POLICY-ORIENTED APPROACH EXISTS, AND HAS BEEN DONE BEFORE

There is precedent to the California State Assembly approaching happiness as a public policy goal. Other governments, including here in California, have successfully implemented policies aimed at increasing happiness in a variety of ways.

### **Bhutan:**

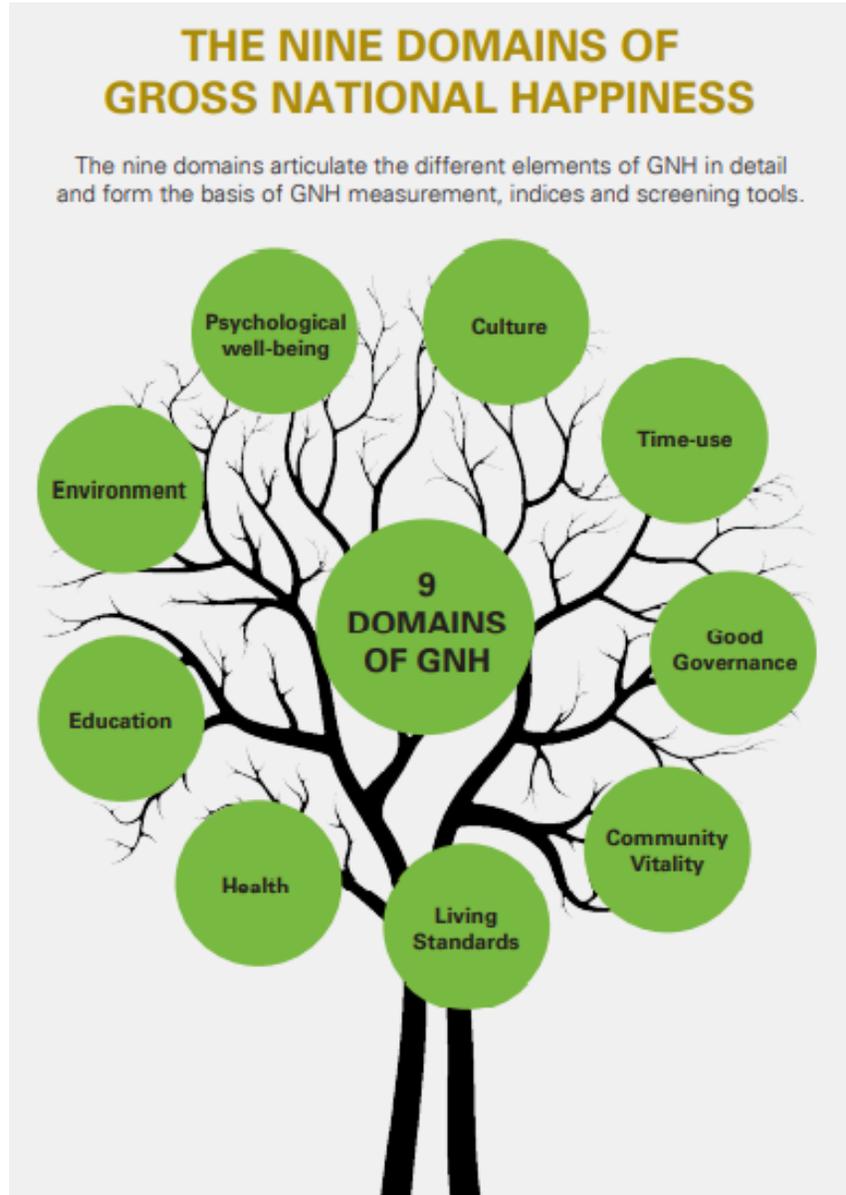
The Kingdom of Bhutan, a small, landlocked Himalayan nation, has pursued happiness as a public policy goal since the 1970's, when the 4th King of Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, proclaimed "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product."

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a philosophy designed to balance the happiness and well-being of its people when developing public policy, as opposed to solely focusing on economic output. The Bhutanese government, which reestablished as a constitutional monarchy in 2008, developed four pillars to inspire and guide public policy: Good Governance, Sustainable Socio-Economic Development, Preservation and Promotion of Culture, and Environmental Conservation.

To closely track happiness levels and the needs within the nation, Bhutan developed the GNH Index. The index measures happiness and wellbeing of Bhutanese individuals across nine separate categories, known as "domains". Domains include Psychological Wellbeing, Education, Cultural Diversity and Resilience, and Living Standards. Within these domains are separate measurable indicators, designed to provide a detailed assessment of individual and collective needs. Through this framework, public policy is considered and developed.

Phuntsho Norbu, Consul General of Bhutan to the United States, shared with the select committee views on the government's role.

"The government is not in the business of making every Bhutanese happy. That is not the responsibility of the government, and the happiness of individuals must remain the responsibility of individuals. What the government does is, through deliberate public policy, create the right conditions that will allow people to pursue happiness," said Norbu.

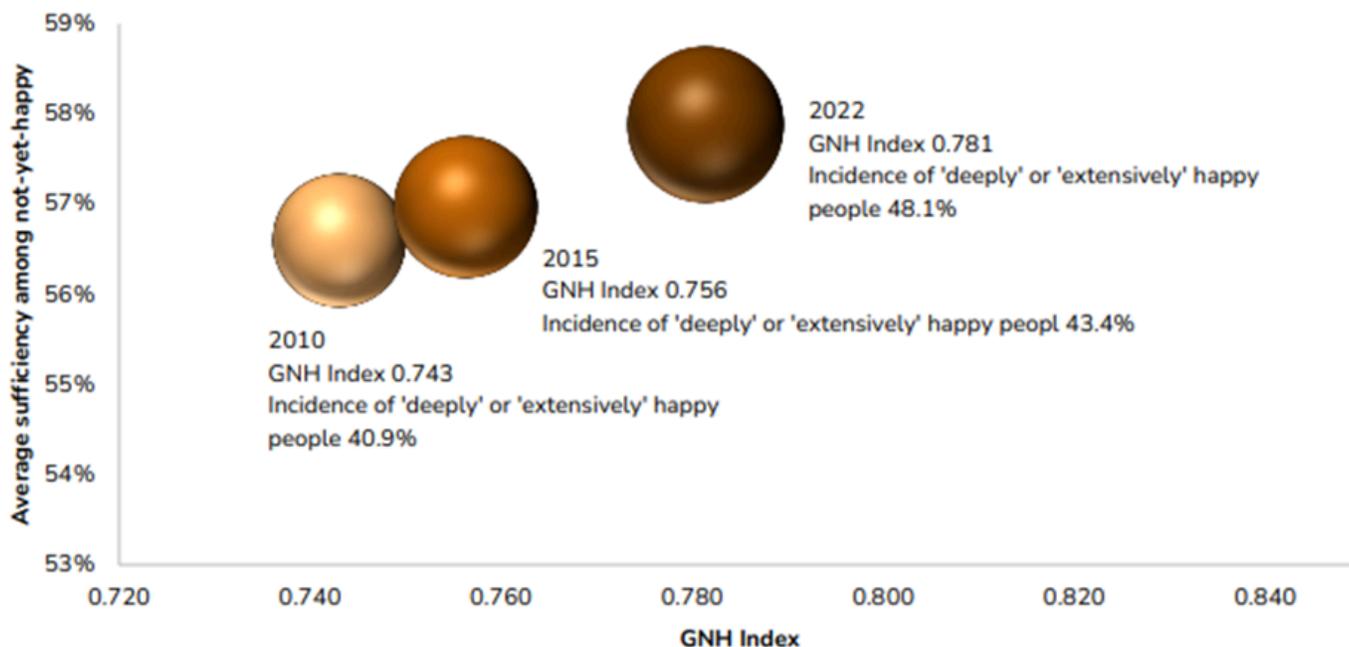


Source: [GNH Centre Bhutan](#)

The nation is surveyed using the GNH Index every five years. The results have allowed the government of Bhutan to track how its policies are impacting happiness across the country. The 2022 GNH report, released in May 2023, indicates that happiness levels in Bhutan have climbed since 2010.

GNH 2022

**Figure 16:** National GNH Index and share of happy people, 2010–22<sup>21</sup>



Source: [Centre for Bhutan Studies](#)

The GNH philosophy of focusing on domains has led to other policy victories. Following the country’s constitutional commitment to protect its forested lands, Bhutan became the world’s first carbon-negative nation. The World Bank reports poverty levels in Bhutan also decreased from 39.5% to 8.5% between 2017 and 2022.

This is not to say the GNH approach has solved every problem in Bhutan. Poverty, economic issues, and climate threats remain. But the Bhutanese model could serve as an inspiration and a reminder that centering happiness and wellbeing in public policy can lead to significant successes.

### Santa Monica:

A decade before the California State Assembly began to study happiness policy, the City of Santa Monica was already putting happiness policy into action.

In 2013, with an eye toward rethinking how cities approach the wellness of their citizens, the City of Santa Monica applied for, and was awarded a \$1 million government innovation grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies.

With this funding, Santa Monica became the first city in the United States to measure and center wellbeing in its public policy initiatives. In 2014, the City of Santa Monica launched the Santa Monica Wellbeing Project, which transformed into the official Office of Civic Wellbeing in 2017. With support from private entities, including the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica developed a Wellbeing Index.

Based on six key issue areas, the Santa Monica Wellbeing Index measured factors such as local health, community outlook, opportunities for education, and more.



Source: Julie Rusk, Civic Wellbeing Partners

Like the Kingdom of Bhutan’s GNH Index, the Wellbeing Index gave the City of Santa Monica the opportunity to analyze existing data, align it with the key issue areas, and identify areas and groups most in need of support. Julie Rusk, former Chief Wellbeing Officer for the City of Santa Monica, says data on what people wanted and needed was very helpful in developing plans for the city.

“Our Downtown Community Plan in 2017 really used our wellbeing data. We did a neighborhood-based project in the Pico neighborhood in Santa Monica, which is really facing gentrification like many of our communities are. And we really used the data and the framing in those projects...It’s not about a top-line, feel good story, but it’s about really understanding how people are doing,” said Rusk.

In addition to its neighborhood-specific projects, the Office of Civic Wellbeing also developed a Wellbeing Microgrants Program. The program provides small grants of up to \$500 to individuals looking to engage their communities in a variety of ways. Examples of former grant projects include the development of an Ethiopian Community group, ethical business classes for young entrepreneurs, a pop-up hair salon for African American women, and educational gardening workshops. Not only did these projects offer opportunities for connection and community engagement for thousands of people across the city, but surveys found increased levels of hope for the future among those individuals who applied for and organized the microgrant programs[17].

### **Fremont:**

In an annual study, personal finance company Wallethub deemed Fremont, California the happiest city in the country for five consecutive years. The study is based on data analysis of 29 metrics, which include Emotional and Physical Well-Being, Income and Employment, and Community and Environment. Fremont Mayor Lily Mei credits inclusive city initiatives in contributing to the overall happiness and wellbeing of Fremont residents. She says while Fremont faces the same challenges as other California cities, a commitment to increasing wellness has benefited residents.

“It’s a vibrant community with exceptional quality of life and abundant opportunities,” said Mei. “Fremont has really earned its reputation as a beacon of happiness and well-being...Whether it’s through numerous community events, volunteer initiatives, or neighborhood associations, our residents deeply are connected and are committed to supporting one another.”

As an example, Mei cites the City of Fremont’s “10-Minute Walk Plan”, adopted into the Parks and Recreation Master Plan in 2022[18]. The 10-Minute Walk Plan, an initiative from the Trust for Public Land, asserts that every resident should live within a 10-minute walk to the nearest public park. This initiative has led Fremont to increase park access for the benefit of the community. The plan led to the opening of Fremont’s 63rd park last year. Numerous experts have identified the benefits of nature access in increasing happiness levels[19], including California Park and Recreation Society President Cindy Bagley in her testimony before the select committee.

“It’s really important that kids have access to parks and open space,” said Bagley. “There’s so many kids in our state who don’t have access to parks and open space, which is the basis of happiness right from the beginning of youth.”

As of September 2024, the City of Fremont is also updating its Active Transportation Plan to include the existing Bicycle Master Plan and Pedestrian Master Plan. This inclusive, health-oriented approach may contribute to overall increases in wellbeing, and subsequently benefit happiness levels. Other city initiatives cited by Mayor Mei include the Senior Citizen Commission, which organizes educational and supportive activities to create a social and active senior community.

## 5. SOCIAL CONNECTION IS KEY

Over the course of the three hearings of the Select Committee on Happiness and Public Policy Outcomes, the extraordinary value of social connection emerged as an important factor.

Emiliana Simon-Thomas, Science Director at the Greater Good Science Center at University of California, Berkeley, shared that while genetics play an important role, emerging research indicates social and external factors are also key in happiness.

“While genes and irreversible life history shed some light on why one person’s default happiness is different from another’s, external circumstances, barring extreme disadvantage, also explain a bit of this variance. Our everyday experiences and behaviors can influence happiness much more than people tend to assume,” said Simon-Thomas.

One of those key everyday experiences is who we spend time with. Studies show that an individual’s happiness is social and depends on whether or not others around them are happy[20]. Our connections with others influence our own happiness levels.

John Helliwell, editor of the *World Happiness Report*, cited [a successful program in Saskatoon, Canada](#), that places sixth graders into a long-term care facility as their primary educational setting for the entire school year. The program benefits both students and seniors, allowing them to foster new connections and learn from each other.

“It’s quite apparent from the detailed investigations of the lives of the students, their teachers, the elders, the families of the students, the people who simply work in that environment, that everybody’s life is improved. Is it terribly expensive? No, it’s just a class... It’s just a different way of thinking of things. It’s using the elders to teach the youngsters,” said Helliwell.

Reverend Rajeev Rambob, Minister of the United Church of Christ, spoke about his years of personal experience in connecting with parishioners and their families before death. He says the primary thing people share with him is the extraordinary value of the connections they made throughout their lives.

“People always express gratitude for the things that brought them happiness, and here’s what those sentiments boil down to: community, family, a friend circle, a service club, a house of faith, one or two real friends, friends who know all your stuff and are still your friends, sharing laughter, time spent together doing nothing. Mother Teresa said, ‘The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread’. And I add that happiness, true happiness, is the evidence that the hunger for love has been satisfied,” said Rambob.

Fremont Mayor Lily Mei also cites social connection as being vitally important to the overall happiness and vibrancy of the community. Prioritizing places where people can connect, including parks, is beneficial to residents.

“I think after the pandemic, we realized how people really need to have that connection. It’s not about just seeing someone on Zoom. It’s about how we are able to connect with community. Little things, like making a 10-Minute Walk Pledge so the city can utilize and better boast our array of amenities and services that cater to the needs and interests of our residents,” said Mei.

Doug Everhart, Director of Student Wellness and Health Promotion at University of California, Irvine, says he frequently sees students struggling to connect with each other and with faculty in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may lead to isolation and anxiety.

“I think this is coming out of the pandemic... students are begging for ways to engage. But what we’re finding in our office is we’re having just to reteach the basics of starting a conversation and building relationships,” according to Everhart.

Everhart says UC Irvine is meeting this need by planning social events designed to teach students how to make friends and build social relationships.



*Witnesses Cindy Bagley and Doug Everhart testify before the Select Committee on August 12, 2024.*

## 6. HIGHER INCOME MIGHT HELP, BUT POVERTY CERTAINLY HURTS

The question “Does money buy happiness?” has been the subject of academic debate for time immemorial.

In 1974, University of Pennsylvania economist Robert Easterlin, the first economist to study happiness, published his theory of the so-called Easterlin Paradox. The paradox indicates that as gross domestic product (GDP) rises over time, happiness does not necessarily grow with it[21].

In 2010, Nobel Memorial Prize winners Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, both of Princeton University, conducted a widely publicized study on individual happiness and income. Their findings indicated that happiness levels increase with higher income levels, but only to an extent. This study found happiness levels generally plateau between income levels of \$60,000 and \$90,000[22].

In 2021, Matthew Killingsworth, Senior Fellow at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted a study on happiness and income with different findings. His study found that higher incomes were significantly connected with higher happiness levels, with no observable plateau point[23].

In 2023, Kahneman, Killingsworth, and Barbara Mellers teamed up for a third study on happiness and income levels. Their findings indicated there is indeed a plateau between happiness levels and higher income, but only for people who are already unhappy. For low-happiness individuals, happiness increases with income up to roughly \$100,000, and then plateaus. For all but the unhappiest individuals, larger incomes were associated with greater happiness levels[24].

These are not the only studies on income and happiness, and while these findings may reveal inconsistencies, they serve as indicators that income likely plays a role in happiness levels, be it large or small. While the relative importance of higher income may still be under debate, poverty’s close connection with unhappiness and other wellbeing problems is much clearer.

“The research is very clear that overall poverty is a major source of dissatisfaction, and that’s one of the key points I need to stress today,” said Professor Ted Lascher of California State University, Sacramento in his comments before the select committee. “It’s not just in the ways we first might think. It’s access to good food and being able to get health care, and things of that sort. But a lot of it is even psychological.”

Research finds those living in poverty are up to three times more likely to experience anxiety or depression than their wealthier counterparts[25]. Individuals living in poverty have shorter life spans[26]. Research has also shown that not only is poverty linked with unhappiness[27], but that simply being at risk of poverty is linked to greater levels of unhappiness[28].

Data indicates the same is true in California. The PPIC shared data with the select committee indicating that poorer and lower-educated Californians are significantly less happy than their wealthier, higher-educated counterparts.

“Not Too Happy” Individual Groups	Percentage
18-to-34-year-olds	30%
Renters	32%
Those with a high school education or less	33%
Those with an annual household income of \$40,000 or less	39%

**Source: PPIC**

According to Mark Baldassare of PPIC, survey results indicate a particularly high jump in unhappiness levels for those Californians with household incomes under \$40,000. In 1998, 18% of Californians at that income level reported being unhappy, as opposed to 39% last year.

These numbers indicate that poverty levels should be of special significance when considering public policy designed to increase happiness.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

According to the National Conference on State Legislatures, the California State Assembly's Select Committee on Happiness is the first legislative committee in the nation to study happiness through the lens of public policy.

Considering the multitude of benefits to happiness this select committee has outlined in this report, the downward trends in happiness levels nationally, and the possibilities that may exist for legislatures across the country to take action on this issue, it is concerning this is the first committee in the nation formed to study happiness.

The Select Committee on Happiness and Public Policy Outcomes encourages current and future lawmakers to strongly focus on happiness when developing public policy in all sectors. The California State Legislature should be a champion for happiness. A public education campaign, resolutions, and other public acknowledgements undertaken by the Legislature will legitimize happiness as a public policy issue and advance our work in improving the lives of all Californians. An official survey on happiness levels in California, conducted by the state, may also help contribute to overall awareness. In addition to raising awareness, this additional data could help guide future policy decisions enacted by the Legislature.

Whether or not the Select Committee on Happiness continues into the next legislative session, the work of the committee should continue in some way. When developing legislation, the potential impact on collective and individual happiness should be considered by the author. Committees should openly discuss and question a bill's potential on happiness.

By continuing the conversation on why happiness matters to the Legislature, and openly acknowledging the benefits happiness brings to our state, this worthy subject is legitimized. Happiness deserves the attention of the California State Assembly as much as any other policy matter.

## 2. THINK CREATIVELY AND COLLABORATIVELY

Multiple experts who testified before the Select Committee on Happiness identified that by taking a creative approach and breaking down traditional silos between government agencies and issue areas, there may be opportunities to both boost happiness and help solve other issues facing California. The State of California should strongly consider ways to break down traditional policy silos in order to help Californians be happier.

Carol Larson, Senior Research Fellow at the Stanford Center on Longevity, is working on one such innovative approach. Her work at the center focuses on three pilot projects designed to connect seniors in need of engagement, employment, and social connection with childcare centers facing severe workforce shortages.

“We have a growing natural resource of older people over 50 with assets to give, both experience-wise, mentally, emotionally, and time to give it,” said Larson. “And we have this dire workforce shortage everywhere in early childhood.”

This creative approach serves as a reminder that by thinking outside traditional frameworks, one problem may be solved by another. An Office of Wellbeing, established under the purview of the Health and Human Services Agency or within the Office of the Governor, may be well-situated to identify creative opportunities and act as a liaison between agencies in developing and implementing happiness-related policies.

The California Legislature should also consider how recent work in other issue areas may have already impacted happiness levels. Notably, research from CSUS Professor Lascher and his colleagues Ngan Lam Thi Tran and Robert Wassmer indicate that happiness levels are associated with greater health insurance coverage<sup>[29]</sup>, meaning California may have already taken a meaningful step toward happier citizens with recent efforts to broaden health insurance coverage to new demographics.

“One of the implications, and this is a tangible policy implication that I think the committee is interested in, is the California Legislature’s recent efforts to expand health insurance has very likely increased overall health, overall life satisfaction in the state,” said Lascher.

The solution to promoting greater happiness levels may be in unexpected policy areas, and by creating unexpected partnerships. By continuing to consider happiness levels when developing all policies, we have the chance to develop creative and unexpected solutions.

### 3. CREATE MORE TRUST

The Select Committee’s final recommendation is likely the most essential, and the most difficult to accomplish. The Legislature should strongly prioritize and consider ways to foster greater trust among Californians, and between Californians and the state government.

A key predictor of happiness is positive social connection, as well as connection and trust with an individual’s government. Social Connection and Perception of Corruption are two of the six metric pillars of the international *World Happiness Report*. How someone feels about the people around them, and the people entrusted to lead them, has genuine impact on how they feel about the outlook of their life.

Yet, our nation is in a time of great distrust. Research indicates public trust in government institutions in the United States remains near a historic low. The vast majority of Americans do not trust their government.[30] Data also indicates Americans believe social trust has fallen over the past decades[31]. The people of the United States are socializing less than they used to, and generally spend more time alone. Research shows this decline in companionship is more severe in young Americans.[32]

This state of collapse in both personal and institutional trust is deeply concerning, and should be a top priority to the State of California’s Legislature and institutions. Efforts should be made, by current and future legislators, to identify potential causes of distrust, increase opportunities for positive socialization, and continue to find ways to ensure the people of California have trust in their government. These efforts will benefit Californians now, and for generations to come.



Witnesses Mark Baldassare, Emiliana Simon-Thomas, and Rajeev Rambob listen to testimony.

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