

Why single-item measures of wellbeing are best

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We argue that individual wellbeing is best captured by single self-reports of one's overall quality of life. This approach is direct, efficient, globally comparable, and distinguishes wellbeing from what might explain it.

We are writing, as the editors of the World Happiness Report¹, in response to VanderWeele and Johnson², who argue that wellbeing cannot be effectively assessed using a single-outcome measure, and instead propose measuring multiple dimensions using a composite flourishing index. They have used such an index to compare the quality of life in different countries.

In our view, most of the individual factors that get combined in such an index are causes of wellbeing and not wellbeing itself. For example, self-ratings of health, finances, social relationships, religiosity and so on are critical to understanding why people feel the way they do. But, the resulting product is wellbeing – in other words, the quality of life as we experience it.

A variety of indices of national wellbeing exist (Box 1). Each offers a different estimate of the overall quality of national life that depends on the choice of indicators to include.

How does this index-based approach compare with our approach emphasizing single overarching life evaluations? Both attach great importance to the measurement of many factors that influence the quality of life. They differ fundamentally in how these factors are used to measure and rank the quality of life at various times and places.

Each index reflects what its creators think to be most important, while by contrast, single measures give primacy to a sole subjective umbrella assessment made by each respondent. We use this as the dependent variable in equations whose independent variables routinely include variables appearing in indices.

A single-item measure of how people themselves evaluate their lives is best for the following reasons:

- When wellbeing is the goal of policymakers, a single overarching goal is required to compare policy options, and a single measure is best suited for this.
- A single umbrella measure is easily collected globally and the results are intuitively understood by everyone.
- A single measure does not rely on views of what matters most for wellbeing, which may vary by culture and by researcher.

When it comes to making international comparisons of the quality of life, VanderWeele and Johnson² criticize the Cantril ladder, a single-item measure of wellbeing used by the World Happiness Report (WHR)¹. They argue that the Nordic countries rank top for this measure primarily because of their high per capita incomes, reflecting an excessive influence of income on the Cantril ladder scores, and that the variables selected for the Composite Flourishing Index⁵ (which ranks Indonesia, Mexico and the Philippines highest) deliver a more useful indicator of the quality of life.

Yet we observe that across many more countries income has a similar impact on self-reported measures of wellbeing for both the WHR's Cantril Ladder and a question about life satisfaction in the Gallup World Poll⁶, indicating that income does not unduly influence this specific measure.

Furthermore, WHR research has shown that the high rankings of the Nordic countries are not driven solely by their GDP per capita. Instead, countries in the top echelon of the world happiness rankings report high values for all six of the following: having someone to count on in difficult times, having a sense of freedom to make major decisions in life, healthy life expectancy, real GDP per capita, generosity, and having government and business seen to be free of corruption. These variables appear in our explanations, with weights based on how strongly they relate to individuals' life evaluations.

Beyond those variables, our analysis in *World Happiness Report 2025*¹ showed that the expected return of a lost wallet is far more important than higher income or even the absence of key harms. Belief in such benevolence is much higher in the Nordic countries than elsewhere, and the reality of these beliefs is shown by higher actual returns of experimentally dropped wallets.

Regarding the marked difference in country-level ranking by indices vs single-item measures, we argue that for Indonesia to rank well above Sweden among the 22 countries in the Composite Flourishing Index⁵ reflects the weights assigned by the authors to the various elements of their index, and not how Indonesians and Swedes evaluate their own lives.

To summarise: we much prefer to report and rank how people feel about their own lives and seek to understand their answers by using a single-item measure of wellbeing like the Cantril ladder. We think this better than having others decide what is most important for the quality of life.

One final point on these indices: how good are they at predicting important behaviours like voting or migration? Life satisfaction measures are better than economic measures in predicting election outcomes⁷. They are also good at predicting the pattern of international migration⁸. It would be interesting to know how well such outcomes are predicted by various national indices.

If the science of wellbeing is to have a meaningful impact on policy-making, it must facilitate policy analysis. This requires a single outcome variable which is then explained by all the relevant factors, with their influence obtained by empirical estimation and not by judgment. Life evaluation is an excellent outcome measure. Single-item measures of the quality of life should stay at the core of data collection and analysis, thereby providing a beacon for policy choices.

Box 1. Overview of existing national well-being indices

- The Gross National Happiness Index of Bhutan of 2012³ comprised 33 indicators covering nine domains, with people defined as happy if they achieve above-threshold values in a sufficiently high proportion of life domains.
- The Happy Planet Index⁴ for a country is its average Cantril ladder score times life expectancy divided by the country's carbon footprint. It is calculated periodically for the full range of countries covered by the Gallup World Poll.
- [The Legatum Prosperity Index](#) measures countries in terms of promotion of residents' flourishing, considering both social and economic well-being based on 300 indicators grouped into 67 elements defining 12 pillars under three themes.
- The Composite Flourishing Index⁵, which covers 22 countries, is based on twelve items across six domains. These include including financial and material stability, physical and mental health, happiness and life satisfaction, character and virtue, meaning and purpose, and close social relationships.
- The [OECD Better Life Index](#) compares well-being across countries, drawing on 11 dimensions that have been identified as essential by the OECD. These include material living conditions, quality of life and community relationships. Users are invited to attach their own weights.

Each of these indices contains some form of life evaluation, as one among the overall group of indicators, with its weight determined by the number and weighting of other indicators.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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