

SIGN IN [SUBSCRIBE](#)

- Search
- U.S.
 - World
 - Business
 - Tech & Science
 - Culture
 - Newsgeek
 - Sports
 - Health
 - Opinion
 - Vantage

TECH & SCIENCE

THIS WAS THE LOWEST POINT IN U.S. HISTORY IN TERMS OF NATION'S HAPPINESS

BY [ROSIE MCCALL](#) ON 10/14/19 AT 11:00 AM EDT



[f](#) [t](#) [t](#) [in](#) [p](#) [u](#) [e](#)

How do you measure something as abstract and intangible as happiness?

Researchers in the U.K. have attempted to create a happiness index based on books and newspaper clippings, with the words used in the text treated as a way to gauge public emotion over the last 200 years. The results have been published in the journal *Nature Human Behavior*.

"One of the things that is surprising about the study is how resilient subjective well being is," co-author Thomas Hills, a professor of psychology at Warwick University, told *Newsweek*—in particular, "how quickly people recovered from events like war."

Judged by the content of books and papers, the lowest happiness point among the U.S. public coincided with the Vietnam War and, in particular, the evacuation of Saigon. In contrast, the highest happiness point recorded between 1820 and 2009 was in the 1920s, during a period of optimism and sustained economic prosperity prior to the 1929 crash.

The Vietnam War (pictured) and, in particular, the Fall of Saigon was the lowest point in US history between 1820 and 2009, the study reveals.

PATRICK CHRISTAIN/GETTY

The largest source of material for the index came from the Google Books corpus, a large library of text containing 8 million books—more than 6 percent of books that have ever been published, the study authors say.

The concept behind the study was based on the idea that, by and large, what people say or write discloses a lot about their happiness or contentment levels and this emotion can be measured. The *Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW)*, for example, is a set of words that has been rated by groups of individuals on how good (or bad) they make them feel.

"Happiness is a multi-faceted concept that includes not only measures of mood and emotion but also contentment and seeing purpose in life," Bruce Hood, Chair of Developmental Psychology in Society at the University of Bristol, told *Newsweek*. "Many of these themes may be captured in text but I would imagine that these might be subject to cultural variation."

What's more, as the researchers point out, one of the problems with this method is that the meaning of words can change over time.

"It was really important to ensure that the changing meaning of words over time was taken into account. For example, the word 'gay' had a completely different meaning in the 1800s than it does today," Chanuki Seresinhe, a doctoral researcher at the Warwick Business School and the Alan Turing Institute, said in a statement.

"We processed terabytes of word co-occurrence data from Google Books to understand how the meaning of words has changed over time, and we validate our findings using only words with the most stable historical meanings."

The authors also accounted for censorship (as in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy) and changes in the literature marketplace. Over the 200-year time period studied, reading stopped being a hobby restricted to the elites but something for everybody to enjoy and as such, the content of books changed. There were also trends like literary realism and social commentary that became popular starting in the early nineteenth century.

Happiness peaked in the roaring twenties, supporting the view that the economic crash of 1929 succeeded a period of over-optimism related to sustained economic prosperity, the researchers say. Pictured: Female flappers kicking, dancing, and having fun while musicians perform during a Charleston dance contest at the Parody Club on 22nd January 1926. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

GETTY IMAGES/HULTON ARCHIVE

The index was tested on four countries (the U.S., U.K., Germany and Italy) and validated with survey data including the Eurobarometer, which has been collected from 1974 onwards.

General trends suggest increases in income can have an effect on national happiness but it takes a big rise to have any observable impact. In contrast, national events can have a dramatic effect on the national emotional state. One less year of

war, for example, was associated with a rise in happiness equivalent to a 30 percent rise in Gross National Product (GDP).

In the U.S., low points can be connected to war—the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam—and economic recession, like the crash of 1929. In general, national happiness has steadily risen in the decades since the Vietnam War to a high in 2009, when the data stops.

Elsewhere in the world, the strikes in the so-called 'Winter of Discontent' (1978-9) were associated with a slump in U.K. happiness levels and the rise of fascism correlated to a slow but steady decline in Italian happiness levels.

"The nation's well being—which is about life satisfaction and not just happiness—is affected by major events," Cary Cooper, a Professor of Organizational Psychology & Health at Manchester University who was not involved in the research, told *Newsweek*.

The data stops in 2009 but Cooper expects had it continued, it is likely that it would have shown that levels of happiness in the U.K. have declined following three years of Brexit stagnation.

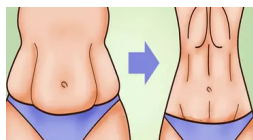
And the U.S.? "In the US, I should think the divisiveness you have because of [President Donald] Trump would probably cause life satisfaction to drop," said Cooper.

PROMOTED CONTENT

by mgid



These 2 Vegetables Will Kill Your Belly Fat Overnight!



These 2 Vegetables Can Kill Your Belly Fat Overnight!



Keep Everything That's Important Hidden, With This Secure VPN

Express VPN



Retired City Worker Shows How To Turn £5 Into £5,784 In 1 Week

news spy



Getting Rich With Bitcoin, Without Even Buying Bitcoin

utopnewsonline



Rich Coventry Mom Kept £1,150,470 Hidden From Poor Husband

news spy

The study authors hope this information can be used to inform governments and advise decisions on policy-making. The approach has been effective in predicting various trends, including the stock market and public opinion regarding certain political candidates.

"It's a step down the road of using subjective well being in policy-making," Hills told *Newsweek*, adding that this type of quantitative measurement of subjective well-being could be used to weigh up different policies.

REQUEST REPRINT & LICENSING, SUBMIT CORRECTION OR VIEW EDITORIAL GUIDELINES

Promoted Links

Ads by Revcontent

Do This Immediately if You Have Diabetes (Watch)

Blood Sugar

Doctors Stunned: This Melts Belly Fat Like Crazy! (Do This)

Keto

Learn How You Can Save by Booking a Holiday Cancellation

Huntnow