Our Happiness

What we can learn from the happiest Danes

Realdania

Henrik Mahncke and Meik Wiking

Our Happiness

What we can learn from the happiest Danes

Realdania

Our Happiness
What we can learn from the happiest Danes?
1. edition, 2025

Authors: Henrik Mahncke and Meik Wiking
Design and layout: Peter Ørntoft
Photos: Jonas Drotner Mouritsen
Typesetting: Klahr | Grafisk Design Omslagsfoto: Steffen Stamp

Print: Dystan & Rosenberg ApS
Printed on: 150 gr. G-print, 150 gr. Munken Polar, 130 gr. Arctic Volume White

ISBN: 978-87-93360-55-6

Copyright Realdania, 2025. All rights reserved.
No part of this book may be reproduced without permission from Realdania.

Realdania
Jarmers Plads 2
1550 København V realdania.dk

ClimateCalc™
Denne tryksag er klimakompenseret i henhold til ClimateCalc.
Kompensation er købt hos:
Gold Standard
www.climatecalc.eu
CC-000062/DK

SVANEMÆRKET
Tryksag
5041 0504

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Papir | Støtter ansvarligt skovbrug
FSC® C016433

TRYKT I DANMARK
Dystan & Rosenberg ApS

About the Authors

Henrik Mahncke is Head of Analysis at Realdania. He holds a Master's degree in Political Science from Aarhus University and a PhD from Copenhagen Business School. Henrik is the former Deputy Director of the consultancy firm Oxford Research and has served as ministerial secretary in the Ministry of Science. He is the author of the annual publication on quality of life titled The Danes in the Built Environment, which has been published by Realdania and Bolius every year since 2018.

Meik Wiking has been the CEO of the think tank The Happiness Research Institute since 2013, focusing on well-being, happiness, and quality of life. He is also the Research Associate for Denmark at the World Database of Happiness and the founder of The Happiness Museum in Copenhagen. Meik is the author of several books, including Lykken under lup and The Little Book of Lykke. His books have been featured on The New York Times bestseller list and have been translated into 38 languages.

Table of Contents

The entire book (Danish only) is available at realdania.dk/livskvalitet

Preface

When Realdania was established as a philanthropic association 25 years ago, the board and management set a clear direction for its philanthropic work. Realdania's mission was – and still is – to create quality of life for everyone through the built environment.

In the early years of Realdania's existence, the focus was largely on developing philanthropy: creating tools and methods and defining the playing field – that is, determining what is encompassed by the concept of "the built environment."

In hindsight, many of the early board members – including including myself – likely assumed that we already knew what quality of life was. It was the good life in wonderful surroundings, with beautiful architecture, charming cities, and well-preserved building heritage.

However, over the years, curious and reflective minds, both within and outside Realdania, began to scrutinize and challenge the concept of quality of life. Is it really that simple? What are the underlying reasons that Denmark is often ranked as one of the happiest countries in the world? And what role do our physical surroundings, our cities, and our buildings play?

When this book's main author, Henrik Mahncke, joined Realdania as its first Head of Analysis over a decade ago, the premise was that there already existed a vast amount of relevant knowledge about construction, produced by other organizations, businesses, and authorities. Realdania's task was to utilize that knowledge in its philanthropic efforts.

But from the outset, the plan was also for Realdania to give back—to support the expansion of knowledge in areas where it was lacking, thereby providing a stronger foundation for important professional debates shaping the built environment.

Over the years, Realdania has supported and contributed to the development of new knowledge in many fields, including climate adaptation, sustainable restoration, indoor climate in homes, senior co-housing communities, urban planning, and rural development.

With a desire to understand the connection between quality of life and our physical surroundings, Realdania and the knowledge center Bolius have, since 2018, published the annual survey *The Danes in the Built Environment*. This publication serves as an annual barometer of Danes' quality of life, examining how they experience life in the built environment.

The survey has provided valuable insights into quality of life from multiple perspectives. Yet, despite a fairly large number of respondents, it has its natural limitations.

That is why the idea and ambition for a much larger study have always been present:

What if we conducted a significantly larger survey, asking thousands of people a broad range of questions about their lives and comparing their answers with Denmark's uniquely comprehensive registry data? What new insights into quality of life might we gain?

To mark Realdania's 25th anniversary, we decided to act on this idea and carried out a study involving more than 122,000 Danes. Our ambition has been to present the results in an accessible way – something we hope to have achieved with this book.

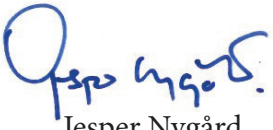
With *Our Quality of Life*, we aim to provide a broad insight into the concept of quality of life, to enhance our own understanding of it, and to lay the groundwork for a more informed conversation—both in relation to Realdania's work and in society at large—about what truly matters in our lives and how the built environment can enhance our quality of life.

This is vital knowledge that can contribute to a more cohesive society and lead to decisions about the built environment that take a holistic view of the challenges at hand. I believe this book and the large-scale study behind it can make a significant difference. It will expand our understanding and provide new insights into an important field.

Therefore, above all, a big thank you to the visionary mind behind the study and this book—Realdania's Head of Analy-

sis, Henrik Mahncke. He has worked closely with co-author Meik Wiking and editor Rasmus Øhlenschlæger Madsen, while Kenneth Thue Nielsen and Lars Foldspang have contributed to the statistical calculations. A special thanks also to Siri Daa Funder and Peter Ørntoft, who were responsible for the beautiful infographics. It is an excellent team.

Enjoy the book. Reading it is, in itself, a boost to our quality of life. Happy reading!



Jesper Nygård
CEO
Realdania

Introduction

When you impatiently await spring, and winter feels too long. When your bike has a flat tire, and the bus has just left. In those moments, it can be hard to imagine that we live in one of the happiest countries in the world.

But then, suddenly, the sun shines, and we feel the urge to open the windows, hang out the laundry, gather in the city's squares, and hear the sound of children playing in the gardens again. In those moments, most of us can sense that we have something special in Denmark.

Living in Denmark provides a strong foundation for a high quality of life and a good life. Numerous international studies confirm this.

Denmark is known worldwide for its high quality of life. Danish companies use this in advertisements across the globe, and politicians from many countries often highlight Denmark and the Nordic region as ideal models.

Given how much international attention Denmark's high quality of life receives, it is remarkable how few books have been written on the subject and how little detailed knowledge we have about quality of life based on Danish data. It is also striking how little political attention is given to our quality of life—beyond celebrating our high international rankings. Some groups' quality of life is discussed, particularly the well-being of young people, which has received significant attention. But what about the rest of the population?

So, what is quality of life? How can we promote it? What characterizes the areas in Denmark where quality of life is particularly high—or low? And how is quality of life connected to our surroundings, our buildings, and our cities? These are the questions we seek to explore in this book.

In 2025, Realdania celebrates its 25th anniversary. Throughout its history, the association has had a clear purpose: to enhance the quality of life for all Danes across the country through the built environment. With this book, we aim to contribute to this mission by expanding our understanding of quality of life based on solid data. We seek to generate knowledge that can be used in Realdania's philanthropic work. And we hope this book will foster a nuanced conversation about quality of life in Denmark.

The Best Data in the World

This book is based on the most extensive study of quality of life ever conducted in Denmark. Even in an international context, the study is exceptionally comprehensive.

Denmark offers unique opportunities for studying quality of life. This is due in part to the high level of trust in the security and anonymity that underpin effective survey research. This trust is a privilege—one that cannot be taken for granted in many countries where people fear repercussions for sharing their opinions. It is a privilege worth safeguarding.

Additionally, Denmark has a well-functioning system with CPR numbers and widespread use of digital mail (e-Boks), making it technically easy to reach citizens. This enabled us to gather responses from over 122,000 Danes, forming the foundation of this book. This means a substantial portion of the adult population participated in the survey. Furthermore, due to Denmark's high standards for security and proper data use, we have access to high-quality, detailed registry data that can be linked to the study in an anonymized form—far superior to what is available in most other countries. This is a major advantage for exploring quality of life in depth.

Finally, Denmark consistently ranks among the top countries in international happiness studies. By zooming in on Danish conditions, we can contribute detailed knowledge about quality of life that may be relevant for other countries seeking

to create frameworks that support well-being.

What You Should Know as a Reader

First and foremost: quality of life is dynamic—it is something that can be changed. This applies both to individual lives and to society as a whole, meaning Denmark's overall quality of life across all citizens. But it is not simple, and it takes time.

There is no quick fix to achieving higher quality of life by merely doing a few things right. Just as you don't gain full benefits from strength training by only using one machine at the gym, quality of life is shaped by a variety of factors that interact with each other.

It is also tempting to believe that high quality of life simply means the absence of problems—that a smooth, conflict-free life is the key to happiness. Fortunately, that is not the case.

Research on quality of life actually shows that life crises are important. People who have experienced adversity—such as overcoming illness—are often happier (and less distressed, stressed, or weakened) than those who have never faced challenges. The ability to navigate difficult phases of life often makes us better at handling future challenges, both big and small. Of course, there are limits, but the key takeaway is that humans have an extraordinary ability to recognize, overcome, and use negative experiences as stepping stones for personal growth.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that there is no single objective standard for quality of life that applies to all Danes. The foremost expert on your own quality of life is you.

That said, it can still be valuable to learn what works for others. Perhaps it inspires a new way of thinking. It is never too late. Maybe some ideas about the good life are rooted more in myths than reality. And maybe, as a society, we can incorporate quality of life more consciously into our decision-making.

The Book's Call to Action

This book is driven by curiosity—a fundamental human curiosity about the phenomenon of quality of life, which in some ways is easy to understand and self-evident, yet in other ways, when examined closely, raises profound questions.

Some of these questions relate to the built environment, which is where Realdania has its roots and expertise.

Realdania's foundation was created over 150 years by Danish homeowners and businesses through mortgage financing of real estate. Today, Realdania is a non-profit, philanthropic association that supports projects across Denmark for the benefit of all.

The built environment serves as the foundation for Realdania's philanthropic work. It includes large cities, small towns, and rural villages, as well as public spaces, buildings, and architectural heritage. This is where we strive to make a difference.

The underlying premise is that, just as nature has shaped Denmark since the first humans settled here, the built environment also shapes the way we live. As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said about architecture: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards, our buildings shape us." This statement holds much truth—our behavior is influenced and enabled by the physical spaces we create, sometimes obviously, sometimes in ways we do not fully realize.

Your daily life is deeply affected by where and how you live. Your behavior and activity levels depend on whether you live on the fifth floor of an apartment building, in a suburban house, or surrounded by farmland. These factors influence how much you interact with neighbors, whether you choose to cycle, drive, or walk. Homeownership structures also affect your ability to shape your living environment according to your needs. Studies show that Danes spend 80–90% of their time indoors, so it is no surprise that our physical surroundings influence us significantly.

The problem is that we still know relatively little about the connection between the built environment and our quality of life. Over the past 150 years alone, there have been major demographic shifts in where we live, how densely we live, and how we design the built environment. All of this has developed organically, often as gradual and almost invisible changes over time. In other cases, the changes are striking—through the emergence of large cities, suburbs, motorways, and altered relationships between urban and rural areas.

The evolution of the built environment and the changing physical framework of our everyday lives can be viewed as a long-term social experiment spanning centuries. And like all phenomena that reshape the conditions of our lives, it has consequences for us.

That's why this book also contains a call to action. Many books on quality of life focus inward—on the search for meaning, mindfulness, or happiness, that is, on our thoughts, feelings, body, and soul. This book, by contrast, invites us to look outward. Out at everything that surrounds us. Nature, the built environment, and human relationships. All the things that shape us.

The Structure of This Book

This book is divided into 12 chapters, each exploring different aspects of quality of life in Denmark. The structure combines insights from international research on quality of life with findings from our own large-scale study.

Chapter 1 explores how quality of life is measured. The measurement methods themselves are a crucial premise for understanding the book's data. At the same time, the chapter presents some of the criticism that exists around happiness research, and it also describes the historical interest in measuring societal progress.

Chapter 2 introduces quality of life in Denmark from a bird's-eye view and looks at how it has developed over time. Here, we also present Danish data on how quality of life is distributed among young and older people. In addition, we look at which population groups in Denmark report the highest quality of life.

Chapter 3 takes a look across the map of Denmark, examining where in the country quality of life is highest and exploring the relationship between rural and urban areas from a quality of life perspective. We also look at equality in quality of life and connect it to social and economic factors.

Chapter 4 zooms in on the importance of local areas for our quality of life—namely the close surroundings around our homes, which make up a large part of everyday life. We also examine how noise reduces our quality of life, and how safe local areas can support it.

The role of the home itself is explored in Chapter 5, which focuses on how housing type, size, ownership, and access to a balcony or garden influence quality of life. The home is, in many ways, the most important setting for us as humans, and this chapter examines the housing conditions that affect our quality of life.

Chapter 6 zooms out again and focuses on the connection to neighbors and the importance of relationships within the

local community. We explore how architecture can help build connections and support good neighborly relations.

Chapter 7 addresses the single most important factor for our quality of life: social relationships. We look at different types of social relationships and their significance. We also explore the role of volunteering in shaping quality of life.

Chapter 8 examines the role of family, including key life choices around partners and children. Unlike other studies, we focus not on child-friendly but on "parent-friendly areas," since this study focuses on the well-being of parents. We look at the impact of partnerships, marriage, single life, and parenthood, and at which housing types best support families with children.

In Chapter 9, we delve into topics around economy, income, and wealth. We investigate whether there is an upper limit beyond which higher income no longer contributes to higher quality of life, and we explore the role of assets and home equity. We also examine how work and unemployment influence quality of life.

Chapter 10 investigates the connection between experienced quality of life and health, especially the link to nature and how we use it. This chapter also addresses the impact of indoor climate issues in the home.

Chapter 11 focuses on trust—trust in institutions and authorities, and trust in other people. It is about how we encounter the world when we step outside our homes.

Chapter 12 brings together the book's conclusions, looks ahead, and calls for a stronger understanding of quality of life.

The book concludes with a methods chapter, which details the study's methodology, its population, sampling, and data collection methods.

In addition, the book includes an appendix with supplementary data in table form, as well as a detailed explanation of the methodology behind all figures. We have chosen this approach to balance two considerations. First, we wanted a

book that is easy to read for most people, which is why we present simple figures without too many notes and technical details. Second, we wanted to make the full data foundation available and be transparent about the calculation methods and statistical techniques used. For that reason, we have gathered this information in a separate section, where those with a particular interest can access all essential insights.

Chapter 1

The Architecture of Happiness

We all seem to be in search of the good life. But where and how do we find it, and what role does the built environment play? How do other countries work with quality of life? Can we measure quality of life? And could such measurements end up becoming a tyranny of positivity?

The infographic shows the countries with the highest quality of life in the world. The scale ranges from 0 to 10, where 10 represents the highest possible quality of life.

The Learning Spiral in Hedeland is a sustainable and functional artwork that serves as a meeting place and outdoor activity hub for visitors to Hedeland. The main structure is a raised, 29-meter-wide spiral made of wood, on which 17 small, semi-open, covered shelters have been built. At the center of the spiral platform, a wooden platform shaped like a world map has been constructed. Realdania supported the project in 2022.


1 Finland 7,74
2 Denmark 7,58
3 Iceland 7,53
4 Sweden 7,34
5 Israel 7,34
6 The Netherlands 7,32
7 Norway 7,30
8 Luxembourg 7,12
9 Switzerland 7,06
10 Australia 7,06
11 New Zealand 7,03
12 Costa Rica 6,96
13 Kuwait 6,95
14 Austria 6,91
15 Canada 6,90
16 Belgium 6,89

Interest in quality of life and the good life seems to be growing, if one judges by the number of articles and features in newspapers, magazines, online media, and television. And there are many competing views on what it takes to improve quality of life. The messages presented are often drawn from various academic fields and represent different perspectives and suggestions on how to create a society that supports high quality of life. Much of the research has its roots in health sciences or psychology, while studies that include the built environment and the surroundings we have in Denmark are much rarer. Conversely, analyses and books on the built environment too seldom focus on how we actually thrive as human beings.

To link measurements of quality of life with the built environment, we conducted a large survey and combined the results with registry data from Statistics Denmark.

This means we now have such high-quality data that we can get closer to understanding how quality of life is connected to the quality of our surroundings. In fact, this study of quality of life—focused on the built environment—is the largest of its kind in the world in terms of the amount and quality of data available.

When it comes to quality of life and how we create better frameworks for good lives, there is a need for new knowledge and better answers. Unfortunately, well-being is under global pressure. According to the *UN's World Happiness Report*, life satisfaction has declined over the past decade, and populous countries like the United States, Brazil, Turkey, and India are now experiencing lower quality of life than they did ten years ago. In Denmark, happiness has also declined since the first World Happiness Report was published in 2012.

This decline in quality of life is often overlooked by the world's leaders. This is because most governments closely monitor GDP, unemployment, and inflation figures, while far fewer have historically focused on their populations' experienced quality of life. Fortunately, this is beginning to change.

How Do We Measure Progress?

Are we just getting richer—or are our lives actually getting better? Is it our standard of living or our quality of life that is the best measure of progress?

What we measure matters. If we weigh ourselves daily, we're more likely to eat less or move more. And when what we measure influences our behavior, we should measure what really matters. We should therefore consider whether gross domestic product (GDP) is the only relevant way to assess a country's development.

Toward the end of World War I, two philanthropic foundations—The Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation—believed there was a need for better national economic data, and thus funded the establishment of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in the United States. The foundations wanted to support economic research that was "independent of ideology," in a world still dominated by struggles between competing political ideologies.[4]

In the early 1930s, the Wall Street crash had led to mass unemployment and poverty. The U.S. Congress asked NBER to develop a method for calculating a nation's total income.[4] The task fell to economist Simon Kuznets. Born in 1901 in what is now Belarus, Kuznets immigrated to the United States in 1922, earned his degree from Columbia University in New York, and was then employed by NBER.

In 1934, Simon Kuznets presented a report that not only offered a relatively simple way to estimate a society's annual value creation, but also made economic growth measurable and politically manageable. At the core of the model was an entirely new concept: gross domestic product (GDP).[4]

Kuznets himself, however, warned against simplistic use of this single metric, emphasizing that GDP does not measure the total value in a society. In fact, he had originally proposed an additional dimension—"the value of the pleasure and joy experienced by individuals." This dimension was omitted by

U.S. authorities in the final version.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first American president to use the term GDP. In a speech in 1945, Roosevelt said that American society needed to transition from a wartime economy to a peacetime growth economy. This would happen through job creation and increased consumption, measured as GDP growth. Since then, GDP has been the central metric for assessing economic progress and comparing prosperity across countries or political systems.

At the end of 1999, President Bill Clinton's economic staff hailed GDP as "one of the greatest inventions of the 20th century," while German professor Philipp Lepenies from Freie Universität Berlin called GDP "the most important statistical indicator in human history." Simon Kuznets was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1971.

After the turn of the millennium, however, GDP has increasingly come under criticism. Much of this criticism echoes the very warnings Simon Kuznets once voiced.

In 2008, then-President of France Nicolas Sarkozy appointed a commission of some of the world's leading economists, chaired by Joseph Stiglitz—an American professor of economics at Columbia University and Nobel Prize winner. The Stiglitz Commission's task was to examine how we measure national progress. Their conclusion was clear: it is high time to supplement the one-sided focus on GDP with other measures, including quality of life and sustainability.[4]

The report pointed out that GDP is increasingly out of step with how people experience their everyday lives. For example, GDP includes the paradox that even if a country depletes its natural resources to increase production, this counts as a positive in GDP accounting.

In 2012, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution on happiness, recognizing the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental and universal human goal. The resolution emphasized that GDP does not sufficiently reflect the

quality of life of a country's population.

Some countries have long supplemented GDP with other measures of societal progress. For example, Bhutan—a small country in the eastern Himalayas—has, since the 1970s, used what it calls *Gross National Happiness*. Happiness is even enshrined in the country's constitution as an official development goal.

Bhutan's happiness index is often misunderstood as a rejection of economic progress. It is not. It is a supplement. The four pillars of Bhutan's national happiness index are: 1) Good governance; 2) Sustainable economic development; 3) Cultural preservation and promotion and 4) Environmental protection.

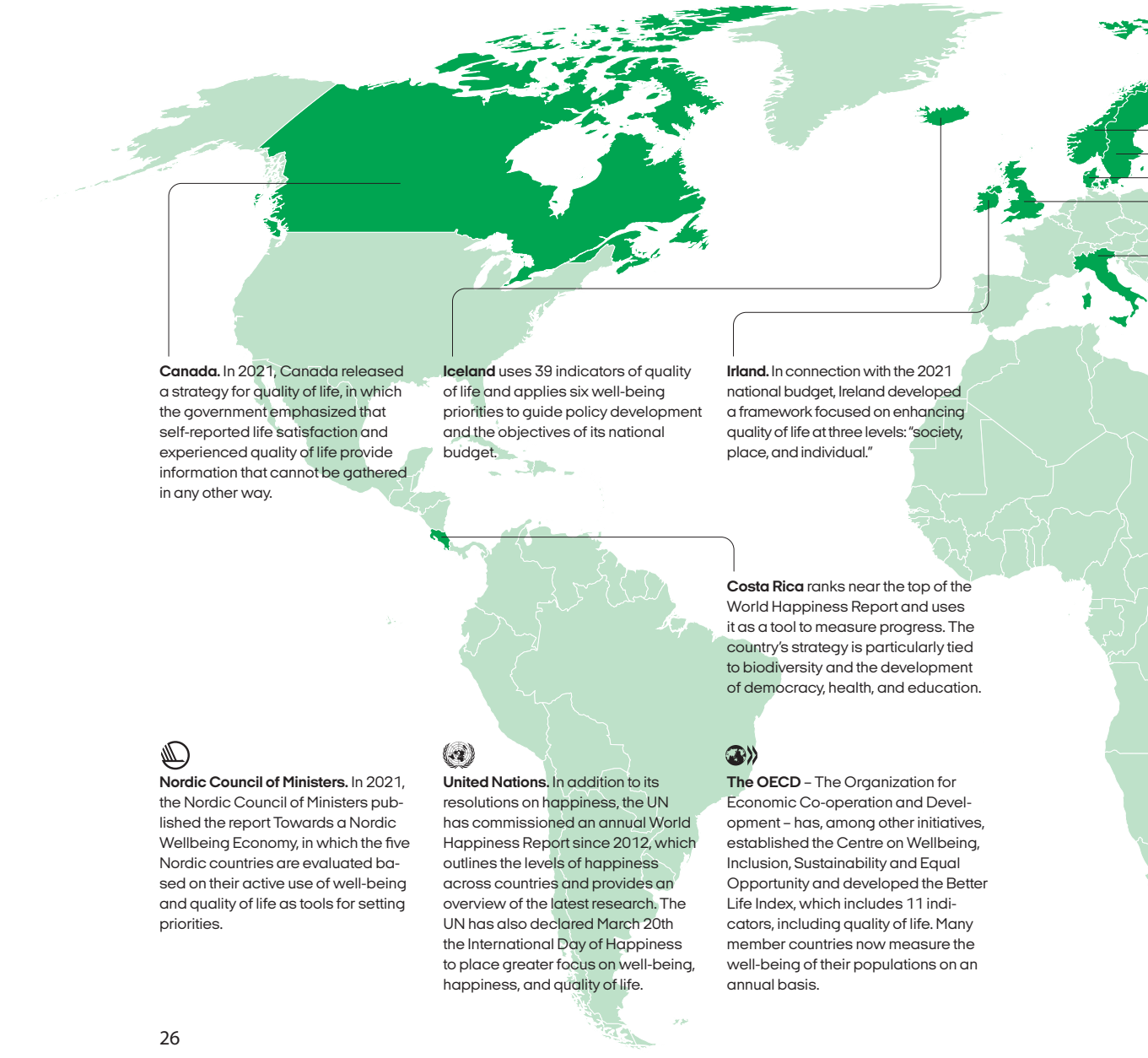
However, it remains the case that with an average quality of life score of 5.08 and a global ranking of 95, Bhutan—despite its noble intentions—has not succeeded in raising its happiness levels significantly. So, despite the extensive praise Bhutan's Gross National Happiness index has received in books and media, a closer look reveals that Bhutan is not quite a Shangri-La of happiness.

Still, many other countries have taken steps to develop models that integrate well-being and quality of life into their development strategies. Iceland, Finland, Canada, and New Zealand, for instance, are all part of the Wellbeing Economy Governments group, which supplements GDP with other indicators of progress.

The argument is that economic growth is important, but not the only thing that should be measured. A population's satisfaction is not just about how well-off people are economically. It also involves civil society, neighborly relations, the role of family, volunteer work, the quality of our homes, nature, and many other essential aspects of life that GDP does not capture—or captures only minimally.

An Atlas of Happiness

All over the world, initiatives are being launched to promote quality of life. The map shows countries and organizations that have made quality of life a priority.



Canada. In 2021, Canada released a strategy for quality of life, in which the government emphasized that self-reported life satisfaction and experienced quality of life provide information that cannot be gathered in any other way.

Iceland uses 39 indicators of quality of life and applies six well-being priorities to guide policy development and the objectives of its national budget.

Irland. In connection with the 2021 national budget, Ireland developed a framework focused on enhancing quality of life at three levels: "society, place, and individual."

Costa Rica ranks near the top of the World Happiness Report and uses it as a tool to measure progress. The country's strategy is particularly tied to biodiversity and the development of democracy, health, and education.

Nordic Council of Ministers. In 2021, the Nordic Council of Ministers published the report Towards a Nordic Wellbeing Economy, in which the five Nordic countries are evaluated based on their active use of well-being and quality of life as tools for setting priorities.

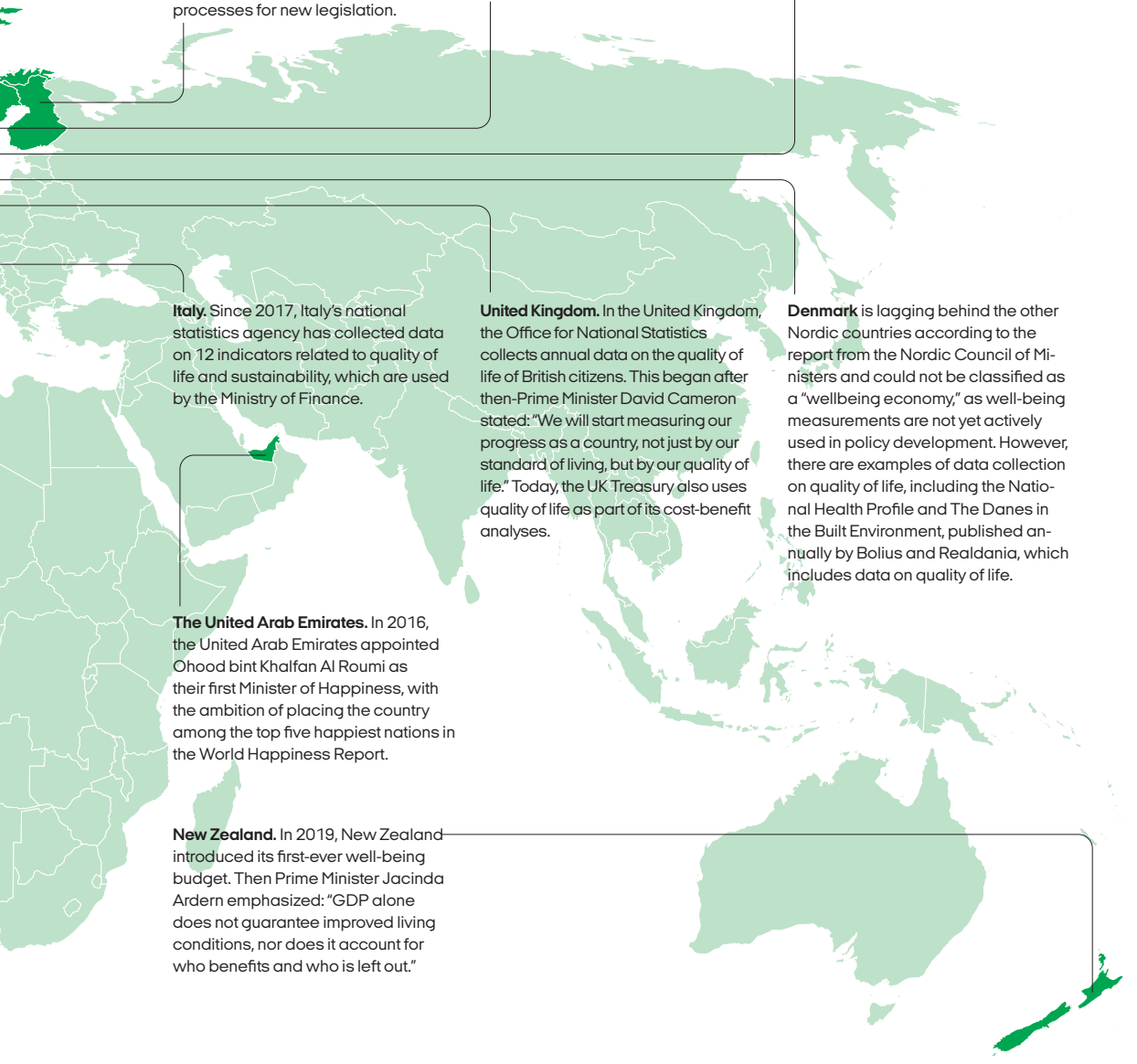
United Nations. In addition to its resolutions on happiness, the UN has commissioned an annual World Happiness Report since 2012, which outlines the levels of happiness across countries and provides an overview of the latest research. The UN has also declared March 20th the International Day of Happiness to place greater focus on well-being, happiness, and quality of life.

The OECD – The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – has, among other initiatives, established the Centre on Wellbeing, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity and developed the Better Life Index, which includes 11 indicators, including quality of life. Many member countries now measure the well-being of their populations on an annual basis.

Finland. Since 2019, Finland has used a measurement method that tracks 39 different indicators of growth and quality of life, and in 2023 adopted an action plan aimed at integrating quality of life into decision-making processes for new legislation.

Norway. In 2021, Norway decided to develop a strategy for quality of life and, in 2024, presented the first draft outlining how to move from measuring quality of life to applying it in policy-making.

Sweden. In 2017, the Swedish government introduced New Measures of Wellbeing, which track developments in people's quality of life.



Italy. Since 2017, Italy's national statistics agency has collected data on 12 indicators related to quality of life and sustainability, which are used by the Ministry of Finance.

United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, the Office for National Statistics collects annual data on the quality of life of British citizens. This began after then-Prime Minister David Cameron stated: "We will start measuring our progress as a country, not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life." Today, the UK Treasury also uses quality of life as part of its cost-benefit analyses.

Denmark is lagging behind the other Nordic countries according to the report from the Nordic Council of Ministers and could not be classified as a "wellbeing economy," as well-being measurements are not yet actively used in policy development. However, there are examples of data collection on quality of life, including the National Health Profile and The Danes in the Built Environment, published annually by Bolius and Realdania, which includes data on quality of life.

The United Arab Emirates. In 2016, the United Arab Emirates appointed Ohood bint Khalfan Al Roumi as their first Minister of Happiness, with the ambition of placing the country among the top five happiest nations in the World Happiness Report.

New Zealand. In 2019, New Zealand introduced its first-ever well-being budget. Then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern emphasized: "GDP alone does not guarantee improved living conditions, nor does it account for who benefits and who is left out."

An Atlas of Happiness

Criticism of GDP as a measure of well-being is not new. As early as 1968, U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy pointed out the shortcomings of the metric:

"For too long, we have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl (...) Yet the Gross National Product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

According to the World Happiness Report, there are now more than 150 global initiatives attempting to measure progress in terms of well-being. The map on the previous page shows some of the national initiatives.

It's the Happiness, Stupid!

There are many reasons why we should take a greater interest in people's quality of life. Quality of life has a number of positive side effects. So what might happen if we succeed in raising it?

When Bill Clinton ran for president of the United States in 1992, a large sign hung on the wall of his campaign headquarters as a constant reminder: *"It's the economy, stupid!"*[4] The point was that the economy was what mattered most to voters on election day.

But what really matters to people when they cast their votes in a general election? That's the focus of the study *Happiness and Voting Behavior*, published in the *World Happiness Report* 2019. The study looked at election outcomes in 15 EU countries since 1973 and found that citizens' well-being played a greater role than the economy.

The economy clearly matters. Economic growth increases the likelihood that the sitting government will be re-elected. Likewise, the chances of re-election drop if unemployment is high in the election year. But the average national life satisfaction also has a significant impact on whether a government is re-elected.

In other words: It's about happiness, stupid! Or as Clinton's early predecessor Thomas Jefferson once said: "The care of human life and happiness is the only legitimate object of good government."

And Jefferson may have been right. When people are asked directly what areas are most important to them, quality of life tops the list. That's shown in the *Better Life Index,* launched by the OECD in 2011. In the index, you can rank 11 different areas: housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, safety, work-life balance, and quality of life.

You might choose health, environment, and income as your top three priorities, while ranking safety and education

lower and placing the rest somewhere in between. Based on that, you can see how various OECD countries perform relative to your priorities. Since over 100,000 people worldwide have completed the exercise, we now know what people prioritize most.

In Denmark, experienced quality of life ranks first—and the same is true in many European countries. Quality of life is also the top priority for people in a wide range of countries that don't necessarily resemble Europe, including India, Kazakhstan, the United States, South Korea, and Zimbabwe.

In other words: quality of life is an important topic for many people across the globe. Which brings us to the question of how, exactly, quality of life is measured.

Is It Just About Eating Cheese Sandwiches?

Many Danes know the song *Svantes lykkelige dag (Svante's Happy Day)*, in which Svante enjoys his cheese sandwich while waiting for coffee, and Nina is in the shower. So—is that happiness? Well, perhaps it's part of it. But only part.

Countless shelves of books have been written about happiness and quality of life. Very few of these books contain a precise definition of either term. That's partly because many of them explore the changing meaning of happiness throughout intellectual history, and partly because most empirical studies of happiness and quality of life let individuals define what happiness means to them.

One feature of the word "happiness" in Danish is that it usually refers to something situational, fleeting, and short-lived. Like Svante's peaceful morning. A specific moment of strongly felt satisfaction. In contrast, the term "quality of life" typically implies a longer time perspective—more about life as a whole over time than about the present moment.[4]

The problem with the concept of happiness is that it tends to suggest an either-or state: you either have it or you don't.

With the notion of happiness, we can get the impression that if only we work hard, find the right partner, get a promotion, or buy that summer house we've dreamed of—then happiness will arrive, like a new stage in life.

But life doesn't really work that way. It doesn't make sense to imagine happiness as a destination we reach or a medal we hang on the wall after overcoming life's hardships.

There are many ingredients that need to be on the plate. The good life is about both finding joy in everyday moments (the situational aspect) and experiencing a deeper sense of satisfaction and meaning with life as a whole. Or put another way: being happy in life and with life.

Quality of life is something else—longer-lasting and more stable. When we measure quality of life, we ask respondents to rate their satisfaction with life on a scale from 0 to 10, not as an either-or.[4]

Most books about happiness are, in fact, based on measurements of quality of life. But "happiness" is a more appealing word—and simply sells more books.

Quality of life, then, is a concept that better captures the human reality that life contains both positive and negative aspects at the same time. You can have a high perceived quality of life and still struggle with significant problems and challenges. And many people also know the opposite feeling—that everything seems to be going well, but something still doesn't feel quite right.

The former head of the Danish Church Army, Bjarne Lenau Henriksen, expressed it precisely: "Quality of life is not the same as success. Quality of life also walks with crutches and sits in a wheelchair in a nursing home. Quality of life can also be blind and have a guide dog."[4]

Quality of life is therefore an umbrella term covering various things—like Svante's morning—but also the feeling of being challenged or content with one's life.

We commonly use umbrella terms for complex concepts.

For instance, how is the Danish economy doing? That's an umbrella term we can break down into smaller parts. At the time of writing, unemployment is low, inflation is falling, consumer confidence is negative, the stock market is rising, interest rates have dropped, and housing prices are expected to increase. These details allow us to have a more nuanced conversation about how the Danish economy is actually performing. That is the level of detail and specificity we would like to apply to well-being, happiness, and quality of life.

That is why quality of life research often uses three distinct dimensions: evaluative, affective, and eudaimonic.[34]

The evaluative dimension is about whether we are satisfied with our lives—overall. This is where we step back and assess our life as a whole, ignoring whether it happens to be a grey and cold Monday morning. It's about viewing life from a broader perspective over a longer period.

The affective dimension concerns the mood we are in at a specific moment. How happy did you feel yesterday? Or how stressed or lonely? The two dimensions are connected. If we often feel happy in our daily lives, we are also more likely to be satisfied with life overall. But of course, you can argue with your partner, miss the bus, or have a headache—a bad day—and still feel very satisfied with your life.

The third dimension is called eudaimonic, from the ancient Greek word eudaimonia, used by the philosopher Aristotle to describe a flourishing and successful life. For Aristotle, the good life was the meaningful life filled with good deeds. This dimension, then, looks at whether people feel a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

It is utopian to think we can summarize a person's quality of life in a single number. Instead, inspired by economics, we can build a kind of dashboard, offering a set of indicators to reflect our condition and development in a multifaceted way.

That's why, in this study, we asked about different dimensions. Both overall life satisfaction—"All things considered,

how satisfied are you with your life these days?"—and the mood and emotions people experience in daily life: "How often have you felt optimistic about the future in the past two weeks?" And we asked about meaningfulness: "How often do you do something that you find meaningful (for example, engaging in a hobby, helping others, or similar)?"

Our study shows that these different dimensions often behave similarly. That is, a person who is highly satisfied with their life will often also report feeling optimistic about the future over the past two weeks. In most chapters of the book, we will focus on overall quality of life and delve into the other dimensions in cases where they differ from one another.

What all dimensions have in common is that they are based on the individual's own experience of life. There is only one person who can say whether we feel happy or not—and that is ourselves. Do we feel that we have a good life, that life has meaning, and that everyday life is manageable?

An Academic Wave of Happiness

Over the past few decades, there has been growing academic interest in well-being, happiness, and quality of life. The University of Oxford has established a Wellbeing Research Centre, Tsinghua University in Beijing has a Happiness Lab, and Harvard University has created a Center for Health and Happiness. At Yale University, the course Psychology and the Good Life is the most popular class in the university's 324-year history. More than three million people have taken the course online.[4]

There are now more than 15 academic journals focused on happiness, quality of life, and subjective well-being—including the *Journal of Happiness Studies, Quality of Life Research,* and the *International Journal of Wellbeing*. More than 4,000 academic articles are published each year in this field. In fact, the academic output on quality of life and happiness has increased tenfold since 2003.[4] [4]

Previously, most research in this field came from Europe, North America, and Australia, but today, researchers from China, India, South Korea, South Africa, Brazil, Turkey, Mexico, and many other countries contribute to the field. It is now a truly international research community—and a global search for the good life.

Despite the strong academic momentum and the good conditions we have in Denmark for conducting such studies, there have been relatively few large-scale Danish studies on quality of life.

In short, quality of life is a research field that has been tested, debated, illuminated, and substantiated. This raises the question of whether it is meaningful to ask about quality of life across different languages and cultures. The concept of "happiness" in particular has sparked much debate about whether people who speak different languages attach different meanings to the word. Our study doesn't deal with that specific translation issue, but that doesn't change the fact that even in a small and relatively homogenous country like Denmark, there can be very different perceptions of what quality of life means.

Overall, however, confidence is growing that experienced quality of life can be measured in a constructive way—especially as more data and research accumulate. As the OECD concludes: "Subjective well-being can be measured in surveys in a valid and reliable way." A healthy academic field also includes debate—so let's consider some of the key perspectives.

Quality of Life Is Dynamic

At the most basic level, one can ask whether it is even possible to improve quality of life—either for individuals or for an entire society. Or is quality of life something we are born with and cannot change?

This book starts from the assumption that quality of life is dynamic—that it can, in fact, be changed. But some researchers question whether quality of life can truly be improved. They point out that our perceived quality of life contains a number of stable, unchanging elements.

We know from our own bodies that we function best in equilibrium. If our body temperature rises, we begin to sweat and a number of internal processes kick in to restore balance. If we're cold, the body prioritizes protecting vital organs like the brain and heart, once again aiming to return to the comfort zone of around 37°C. Something similar may happen with our perceived quality of life.

Two American psychology professors—Tim Wilson from the University of Virginia and Dan Gilbert from Harvard University—describe what they call the "psychological immune system." Just as our physical immune system protects us from illness, we have built-in psychological defenses that shield us from falling apart when we encounter adversity or stress. And conversely, we also have a tendency to dream big about the future, only to set new goals when those dreams are fulfilled.

Gilbert and Wilson show that our fundamental mistake is overestimating how long and how intensely a specific negative life event (like a divorce or being fired) will make us unhappy—and how long a particularly positive event (like winning the lottery or getting engaged) will make us happy. We tend to exaggerate the impact of potential changes because we don't foresee how quickly we will adapt to them.[4] [4]

In other words, while we're saving up to buy the summer house we've always dreamed of, we forget that many other factors will still affect our quality of life afterward. Likewise, before getting married, we often think about the joys of companionship and growing old together—but only afterward do compromises, disagreements, and disappointments begin to occupy our thoughts.

An important explanation for why both highs and lows fade over time lies in the concept of hedonic adaptation.[44]

You move into a new apartment, trade in your old car for a brand-new one, or upgrade your phone to the latest model—and there's a risk that you quickly get used to it. Of course we feel excited, but surprisingly soon, the new becomes the normal, and the joy wears off. We take the improvement for granted. This ability to adapt works both ways—and it's important. It constantly cushions the impact of both positive and negative experiences, returning us to a baseline.

Another theory about why it's hard to raise our quality of life relates to the idea that societal and technological developments don't always align with human nature. From this viewpoint, one may sound like someone who believes everything was better in the old days. But the point is that while some advancements—like central heating and refrigerators—are universally appreciated, there are other technological developments whose long-term consequences for humans we don't fully understand.

These include technologies that may impact our social relationships, the climate, or children's development. They may be innovations that inspire initial excitement but later turn out to have negative consequences. No one today, for instance, dreams of getting mercury fillings or installing an asbestos roof. There are also time-thieves like commuting or mobile phones, which may reduce the time we spend on activities that boost quality of life. For some researchers, our rapidly changing lifestyles help explain why we still see high rates of psychological distress, depression, and suicide—even in highly developed countries.[44]

So, it seems that quality of life is not so easy to change. We adapt. And there are no quick fixes. But that doesn't mean that quality of life is static over time. A study by Dutch sociologist Ruut Veenhoven titled *Long Term Change of Happiness in Nations* examined the development of quality of life in 67

countries since the 1970s. Some countries have seen declining levels of quality of life, while others—especially in Eastern Europe—have made progress. The overall conclusion is that countries, on average, have experienced a rise in quality of life of 0.016 points per year on a scale from 0 to 10. At that pace, quality of life would increase by 10 percent over a span of 70 years. The change may be slow, but it shows that quality of life can, in fact, shift over time.

The idea that quality of life is fixed and cannot be influenced stands in sharp contrast to the growing body of self-help literature, coaching practices, and positive psychology, all of which frame happiness as a personal choice. The argument here is that quality of life can be improved by focusing on the individual's inner core and authenticity. In other words, we can choose happiness.

Is Quality of Life Research a Tyranny of Positivity?

This brings us to a final point of criticism—what might be called the tyranny of positivity: the idea that positive emotions become an ideal we are always supposed to live up to.[4] [4]

In the anthology *The Struggle for Happiness (Kampen om lykken)*, Alfred Sköld and Svend Brinkmann argue that the pursuit of happiness risks making individuals "the smiths of their own happiness." In this view, all responsibility for our quality of life is placed on the individual. In this way, happiness is transformed from a possibility into a duty—and therefore also into a burden for those who don't succeed or who don't want to chase happiness.

But research on quality of life actually shows that much of our well-being is in the hands of forces outside ourselves. For one, there is a significant genetic component to each person's quality of life. This has been shown in studies of twins raised in different families. For identical twins, there is a strong statistical correlation in their levels of happiness—something that is not observed among fraternal twins. These studies

have contributed to what is known as the happiness set point theory, which posits that individuals have a genetically determined baseline for their quality of life. That baseline will, of course, fluctuate over time, but tends to remain relatively stable, so that we return to our starting point fairly quickly after major positive or negative life events.

Then there is the role of chance in where we are born. If we look at the *World Happiness Report*, we see significant differences between countries. Simply being born in Denmark dramatically increases the statistical likelihood of having a high quality of life.

And then there's our environment—the landscape, the natural surroundings, and the built environment—which influences our chances of living a good life. The way we design our homes, neighborhoods, cities, and rural areas affects our well-being. So too does nature—its recreational possibilities, resources, and harvest yields; our access to trade routes by sea; the risk of extreme weather, drought, or flooding—or, elsewhere in the world, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis.

In short, we are not solely responsible for our own quality of life. As individuals, we typically have limited influence over how society is structured. And on top of that, there is always an element of luck—or misfortune—in life's many twists and turns.

Significant aspects beyond our control affect our quality of life—but at the same time, there are things we as individuals can influence. We can think of well-being the same way we think of health. Our health and life expectancy are influenced by factors within our control: what we eat, how much we exercise, whether we smoke or drink. But health is also affected by factors we as individuals can't do much about: the level of air pollution in our city, or the quality of the healthcare system. That's where our elected officials have influence. We are also born more or less healthy—and so there are crucial health fac-

tors beyond anyone's control.

The same applies to quality of life. But as we will see in the following chapters, there are also factors within our influence that have a significant impact on our quality of life.

Our study seeks to understand under what conditions people thrive—or don't. Are there patterns among those who report living a good life? Are there geographic or behavioral commonalities in our quality of life?

As mentioned earlier, the quality of life study is built on the fundamental assumption that only one person can tell us about your well-being—and that is you. The alternative would be to define, in advance, what it objectively takes to live a good life. One might say it requires a certain number of years of education, an annual income of at least 400,000 DKK, or at least 45 square meters of living space per person. But we chose to do it differently.

First, we ask people how they are doing—and then we try to understand why some people are more or less satisfied with their lives and their everyday routines. We believe that can help us better understand how to create the best conditions for a good life.

We don't believe that everyone can—or should—be happy all the time. Misfortune, grief, and longing are part of the human experience, and even in one of the world's happiest countries, there are people who struggle with life, as this study also shows. Life has ups and downs. We experience good days and bad days. Good years and less good years. But are there patterns to when we as human beings thrive? That's what we hope to learn more about.

Chapter 2

The Missing Curve?

Denmark usually ranks in the global top three when it comes to well-being, happiness, and quality of life. At the same time, many Danes experience stress, depression, and loneliness, and the mental health crisis among young people is a recurring topic in both the media and on the political agenda. How do these things fit together? And what about the quality of life for those who move here? What does the demographic landscape of quality of life in Denmark actually look like?

The infographic shows the quality of life among Danes across age groups. The scale ranges from 0 to 10, where 10 represents the highest quality of life.

Jarmers Plads 2 is a prominent example of a Danish modernist office building from its era. Today, the property serves as the headquarters for the entire Realdania association and is part of Realdania By & Byg's collection of listed and preservation-worthy buildings.


7,09 18–24 year
7,12 25–29 year
7,27 30–34 year
7,23 35–39 year
7,27 40–44 year
7,30 45–49 year
7,49 50–54 year
7,52 55–59 year
7,76 60–64 year
8,01 65–69 year
8,16 70–74 year
8,12 75–79 year
8,08 80–84 year
7,57 85–94 year

Reading international media, one frequently encounters headlines like "Denmark Again the Happiest Place on Earth," "Copenhagen: The Happiest City in the World?" and "Why Denmark Dominates the World Happiness Report." We are globally known as one of the happiest nations, celebrated for having created a society where the majority thrives.

This is because Danes, on average, report a high quality of life compared to other countries. When our survey asks the question, "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life these days? On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied,'" the average response among Danes is 7.51. From a global perspective, that is high. Very high, in fact.

A similar question is used in the *UN's World Happiness Report,* where Denmark's average score in 2024 was 7.58. That placed Denmark as the second happiest country in the world, just behind Finland, with Iceland in third. In contrast, Afghanistan was ranked 137th, with an average of only 1.72.

But just because Denmark performs relatively well from an international perspective and has a high national average, that doesn't mean everyone in Denmark scores around the average. Some Danes are above it—and some are far below. It's entirely possible to feel unhappy in the world's happiest country. Our survey shows that about one percent of Danes respond with 0 when asked how satisfied they are with their lives. Nine percent respond between 0 and 4, indicating low quality of life (Figure 2.1).

More than three out of four Danes report a quality of life of seven or higher. But at the same time, nearly one in ten Danes report a quality of life of four or lower. So clearly, not all Danes experience a high quality of life.

Reading Danish media, you'll also encounter headlines like: "Denmark's Largest Pension Fund Raises Alarm: Has Never Seen So Many Clients with Stress," "Danish Psychological Association: We've Created a Society That Many Young

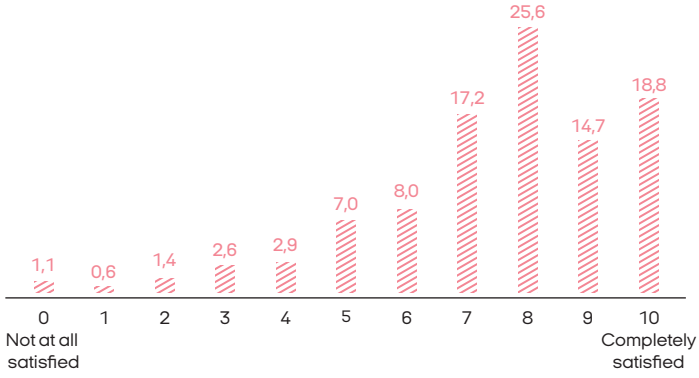


Figure 2.1:
Danes' Happiness (percent)

People Simply Cannot Endure," or "DR: It's Spreading Almost Like a Pandemic in Denmark—Now a National Strategy Against Loneliness."[3]

The report *The Shadow of Happiness*, published by the Nordic Council of Ministers, shows that other Nordic countries experience a similar distribution of quality of life. The report concludes "that there are many systematic overlaps and similarities, which may indicate that there are also certain societal structures that negatively affect people's lives." In other words: every person is unique, but there are patterns in our societies that lead some people to thrive more than others. Some of those patterns are largely outside the individual's control—but there are also many areas where we do have influence, and where changes can affect our quality of life.

At the same time, Denmark's average quality of life is changing over time. While we currently enjoy a high national average, there are trends in society that suggest that this might not be the case in a decade or two. In fact, average quality of life in Denmark has steadily declined since the first *World Happiness Report* was released in 2012.

The decline in life satisfaction in Denmark over that period is 0.27 points on a 0–10 scale. That corresponds to a 3.5 percent drop. That may not sound like much, but for compa-

rison, countries like China, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Philippines, Georgia, Serbia, and the three Baltic states have all seen an increase in life satisfaction of over 1 point—equivalent to a roughly 28 percent improvement. In other words, while some countries are sprinting ahead, Denmark is moving in reverse.

Poland, Iceland, Portugal, Vietnam, Armenia, Uruguay, Slovenia, and Slovakia have all experienced an increase of half a point or more, corresponding to a 12 percent improvement for those countries. In fact, Denmark currently ranks 104th out of 136 countries when it comes to changes in quality of life.[4]

So even if Denmark today might be considered a superpower in terms of quality of life, it has seen a decline in recent years. The reason this hasn't made headlines domestically is probably that many countries at the top of the list have also experienced a decline, so Denmark still remains near the top—despite the drop.

This decline might be linked to a shift in what we could call the demographics of happiness—in other words, who in the population thrives and who doesn't. And this is where Denmark stands out quite distinctly from other countries.

No U-Curve in Denmark

Canadian psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques noticed that many people in their mid-thirties came to him showing signs of depression and distress. He began to systematize his observations, and in 1965 he published the research article *Death and the Mid-Life Crisis*, becoming the first to introduce the concept of the "midlife crisis." Very quickly, other researchers followed, and the idea of the midlife crisis spread through the media and into everyday language—even in Denmark.[4]

In the early 1990s, the first quantitative data on midlife crisis began to emerge, although they initially attracted little media attention. In 2010, however, *The Economist* published an article titled *The U-Bend of Life*, which documented the

midlife crisis using quantitative data. The article claimed that across countries, a pattern emerges in which quality of life follows a U-shape across the lifespan—high in youth, lowest in midlife, and high again in later years. And with that, the U-curve became a global phenomenon. One of the researchers behind it, Andrew Oswald, professor of economics and behavioral science at Warwick University, stated: "I think this is a fundamental discovery about human beings, and one that will last for hundreds of years."[4]

When looking at the connection between age and life satisfaction internationally, the youngest and oldest tend to be more satisfied with life than those in between. In various global studies, a U-curve often appears, showing that people under 30 and over 60 report higher quality of life than those in midlife.

In broad strokes, the theory behind the U-curve is this: We begin life with high quality of life as young people—full of optimism, freedom, and bubbling enthusiasm. Then come children and worries, sleepless nights, less presence, long work hours, the successes of others, relationship issues—or panic if we don't have a relationship. As a result, quality of life hits a low point around age 40. Later, as children grow up, careers stabilize, and we become better at focusing on what truly matters, quality of life begins to rise again toward old age. That's the U-curve.

Not everyone experiences a drop in quality of life, but the trend shows up in the statistics. As Jonathan Rauch, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, writes in his book *The Happiness Curve,* the U-curve functions like a kind of tide that pulls at us midway through life. We can resist it, but it gradually affects our quality of life in a way comparable to sudden negative events such as divorce or unemployment.[4]

The U-curve is not universal—but it is well documented in many countries. Globally, people under 30 are the demographic group with the highest quality of life. According to

the *World Happiness Report,* young people are the happiest group in 105 out of 143 countries. Only in seven countries do young people constitute the least happy group. Denmark is one of them—along with Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Canada, and Germany.

Figures from Eurostat confirm this picture. In fact, the latest EU data show that no EU country has a larger gap in well-being between the young and the old—in favor of the older generation—than Denmark. If young people are the least happy group, it becomes clear that the U-curve does not exist in Denmark.

Our survey confirms this. Figure 2.2 shows experienced quality of life by age across Denmark. Here, quality of life is significantly lower among younger Danes than among older generations.

The figure clearly shows that quality of life in Denmark does not follow a U-curve across age groups. It starts out relatively low among the youngest and rises steadily through most of life, peaking among those in their mid-70s. Around age 85, quality of life drops sharply again, nearing the level seen among the youngest groups.

Our study shows that people under the age of 30 in Denmark are significantly less satisfied with life than the rest of the population. People aged 60 and over are, on average, 13

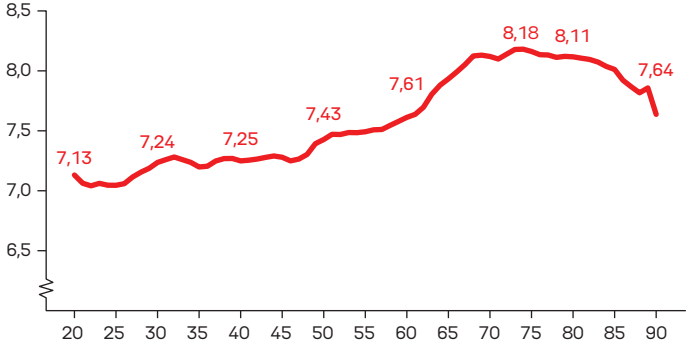


Figure 2.2:
The Missing U-Curve: Age and Happiness

percent more satisfied with life than those under 30. So instead of a U-curve, what we see in Denmark resembles more of a hilltop.

The issue of youth well-being in Denmark has become a serious topic in recent years. Social media, weakened communities, and an accelerating, performance-oriented society are among the many possible explanations that have been widely discussed. The situation in Denmark certainly deserves special attention. However, the fact that young people report lower quality of life than older people should not be misinterpreted as meaning that all young people are struggling or experiencing low quality of life.

The proportion of young people reporting low quality of life (scoring between 0–4 on the 0–10 scale) is 10.9 percent among 18–24-year-olds and 11.2 percent among 25–29-year-olds.[11] That's a higher proportion than in other age groups and something that must be taken seriously—but it does not amount to a general crisis among young people. The share of 18–29-year-olds in severe distress (scoring 0–2 on the scale) is 3.7 percent, which is almost identical to the rate among 30–59-year-olds (3.6 percent).

Moreover, if we—just as a thought experiment—entered only our "youth team," that is, the 18–24-year-olds, in the *World Happiness Report* 2024, Danish youth, with an average experienced quality of life of 7.09, would rank ninth in the world—just behind Luxembourg and ahead of Switzerland.[12] That's an important perspective to keep in mind.

Danes' Quality of Life Peaks in Old Age

It is among the 74-year-olds that we find the highest average quality of life in Denmark: 8.18. And quality of life remains high even among those in their mid-80s. But why is that?

Laura Carstensen, professor of psychology and founder of the Stanford Center on Longevity, has spent over 20 years researching this question. One of her theories is that we change

our outlook on life as we approach its end. The less time we feel we have left, the more motivated we become to focus on the present and spend our limited time on the things that truly matter to us and bring us value.

At the same time, research shows that with age, we become better at regulating our mood and maintaining a sense of joy, while also avoiding situations that make us unhappy. Interestingly, studies have also found that we are treated differently—more respectfully and kindly—the older we get. So it's not just that we become better at appreciating life; the way we are treated by others also contributes to increased quality of life later in life.

As mentioned earlier, our study raises questions about whether the U-curve applies in Denmark when comparing across generations. It doesn't appear to—at least not currently. But that doesn't mean the U-curve isn't lurking beneath the surface.

After all, the U-curve could still manifest itself if the generation currently aged 18–29 ends up experiencing a dip in quality of life in their 40s—while those now in their 40s become more satisfied as they approach retirement age.

In other words, the current pattern may be the result of either a life cycle effect (that people become happier as they grow older) or a generation effect (that each generation carries a different level of quality of life). Is the difference in life satisfaction between generations due to some having been born into better times than others? Or are older people simply more content because their expectations or sense of gratitude are different? We can't answer that yet. But if the U-curve does turn out to apply to the current young generation—as it does in many other countries—it would be deeply concerning and could have major implications for overall quality of life in Denmark.

This is why we need more studies that follow people over time and explore the connection between age and happiness.

If we repeat this survey in a few years and track the same respondents, we'll likely learn more.

No Difference in Quality of Life Between Men and Women

According to the *UN's World Happiness Report*, women around the world generally experience a higher quality of life than men—but they also more often report negative emotions in daily life.

Of course, this can vary from country to country. In Finland, for example, women are three percent more satisfied with life than men, while in Italy, men are three percent more satisfied than women. But in most countries, women report a higher experienced quality of life than men.

Denmark, however, stands apart. Our survey shows no significant difference in quality of life between men and women when comparing the two groups overall.

Nor do we see major differences in terms of mood or emotions experienced in daily life. Men and women feel equally optimistic about the future and equally useful. But there are some small differences.

Men feel slightly more relaxed than women and are also somewhat more likely to feel that they've handled problems well, thought clearly, and been able to form their own opinions. Women, meanwhile, report feeling closer to other people.

When we zoom in on specific age groups, we do find a difference among 18–24-year-olds: young men are slightly more satisfied with life than young women. Among 25–34-year-olds, however, women are more satisfied than their male peers.

There's also a small tendency for the oldest group of men to be slightly more satisfied with life than the oldest women. This might surprise many—after all, we often assume that older women are more resilient than older men—but international research shows a similar pattern.

A German study also found that older women had lower quality of life than men, and one explanation offered was

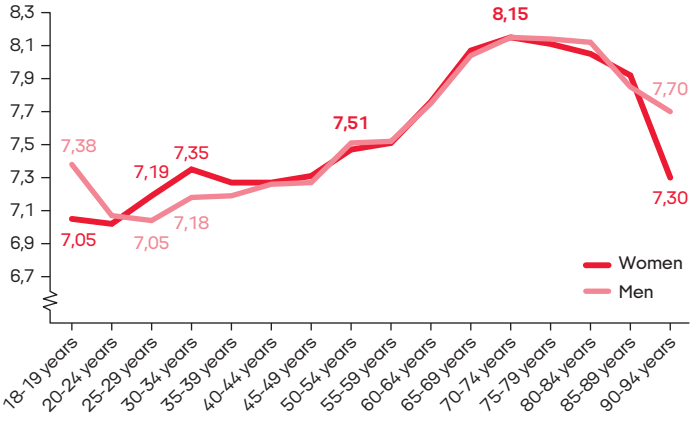


Figure 2.3:
Happiness for Men and Women

that older women have a harder time living alone than older men.[4]

We examined this by comparing older men and women based on whether they lived alone or with others. Our data showed no significant difference between men and women in their ability to live alone. Living alone reduces quality of life for both men and women, and both groups report higher quality of life when living with others. But older men seem to gain slightly more from being in a relationship than older women.

The report *Elders' Health, Functional Ability and Lifestyle* from VIVE points out that losing one's partner is a major factor in reduced well-being.[14] Life expectancy in Denmark is currently 79.6 years for men and 83.4 years for women. So it's reasonable to ask whether women's lower well-being later in life is due to outliving their partners. However, our survey suggests that widowhood is not the main reason for the slightly lower satisfaction among older women.

Instead, we found that older men are more likely to feel lonely than older women—if they live alone. The opposite is true for those in relationships: among older people in couples, a significantly higher share of women report feeling lonely compared to men. This may hold part of the explanation.

The Happiest Danes Are from the Philippines

Because our survey is so large, we also have many respondents with backgrounds in other countries—either as immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

It seems natural to assume that living in Denmark—a country that consistently ranks at the top of global quality of life lists—should provide a boost to one's quality of life. On the other hand, it also seems likely that there would be a difference in average quality of life between ethnic Danes and newcomers from countries with significantly lower quality of life, and because it can be difficult to settle in a new country, regardless of the reason.

Looking at international research, however, the difference between being born in the country where quality of life is measured and being a newcomer is small. According to the *World Happiness Report*, the difference is just 0.06 points lower for newcomers—statistically insignificant.

In Denmark, though, the difference is statistically significant. Ethnic Danes report a slightly higher experienced quality of life than immigrants and descendants of immigrants. But the difference is not large (see Figure 2.4).

In Denmark, the overall average quality of life is 7.51 on a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 is the highest experienced quality of life. This figure includes all respondents living in Denmark, regardless of background or origin. When we zoom in on country of birth, some differences emerge. As Figure 2.4

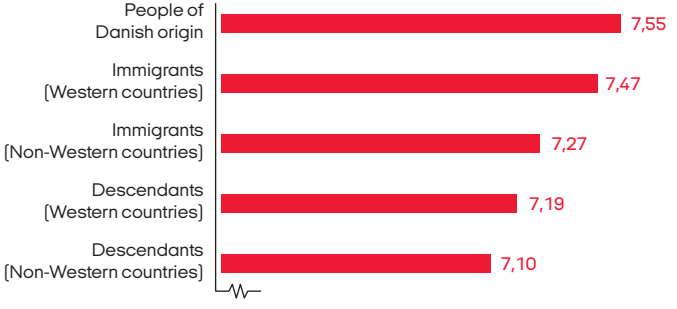


Figure 2.4:
Happiness and Origin

shows, ethnic Danes report an average quality of life of 7.55—slightly above the national average. Western immigrants living in Denmark have an average of 7.47, and non-Western immigrants report 7.27. The figure also shows that descendants of immigrants, whether from Western or non-Western backgrounds, report lower quality of life than both immigrants and people of Danish origin.[4]

There are many reasons why people migrate. Some come as refugees, others move for work or study. Some move for love. And many other personal reasons. Our study does not capture the reasons why someone came to Denmark—but we do know their country of origin.

A comparison of experienced quality of life by country of origin reveals something interesting: the population group living in Denmark with the highest quality of life is not ethnic Danes, but people from the Philippines. Filipinos living in Denmark report an average experienced quality of life of 8.12. Immigrants and descendants from Thailand, the Netherlands, the USA, Norway, Vietnam, and Germany also report higher quality of life than ethnic Danes.

That said, there are also many immigrants and descendants in Denmark who report significantly lower quality of life than ethnic Danes on average. But typically, their quality of life is still higher than in the countries they left.

In fact, most ethnic groups living in Denmark report a markedly higher quality of life here than the average for the population in their home countries. The data for those home countries comes from the *World Happiness Report* 2024.

Higher experienced quality of life in Denmark compared to the home country is especially common among immigrants from Asia and the Middle East. This is particularly true for countries affected by violent conflict and war, such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Ukraine.

Only two groups stand out as having lower quality of life in Denmark than in their country of origin: people from Iceland

Country of Origin	Happiness of the Population Group in Denmark	Average Happiness Country of Origin (according to the World Happiness Report)	Country's Ranking in the World Happiness Report 2024	Difference Between Happiness in Denmark and in Country of Origin
The Philippines	8,12	6,05	53	2,07
Thailand	8,00	5,98	58	2,02
The Netherlands	7,76	7,32	6	0,44
USA	7,60	6,73	23	0,87
Norway	7,60	7,30	7	0,30
Vietnam	7,60	6,04	54	1,56
Germany	7,60	6,72	24	0,88
Denmark	**7,55**	**7,51**	**2**	**0,04**
India	7,54	4,04	126	3,50
Finland	7,54	7,74	1	-0,20
Romania	7,51	6,49	32	1,02
United Kingdom	7,49	6,75	20	0,74
Spain	7,45	6,42	36	1,03
Bosnia and Herzegovina	7,45	5,88	65	1,57
Pakistan	7,44	4,66	108	2,78
Ukraine	7,42	4,87	105	2,55
Sweden	7,37	7,34	4	0,03
Iceland	7,36	7,52	3	-0,16
China	7,34	5,98	60	1,36
Poland	7,23	6,44	35	0,79
Italy	7,20	6,32	41	0,88
Turkey	6,94	4,98	98	1,96
Iran	6,93	4,92	100	2,01
Lebanon	6,89	2,71	142	4,18
Iraq	6,86	5,17	92	1,69
Afghanistan	6,72	1,72	143	5,00

Table 2.1: Happiness and Country of Origin

and Finland. Both countries, as mentioned earlier, rank at the very top of international quality of life measures, alongside Denmark in the top three of the *World Happiness Report* 2024. That could be part of the explanation. They come from some of the most well-functioning societies in the world, measured by quality of life.

The difference between the average in the immigrant group's country of origin and their experienced quality of life in Denmark can be due to several factors. First, it may be that those who migrate are more resourceful—meaning the peop-

le who come to Denmark already had relatively high quality of life in their home country. In that case, the group living in Denmark is not directly comparable to the average population in the country of origin. That's an important caveat—and a likely explanation.

On the other hand, it could also be that those who were least satisfied are more likely to emigrate. We don't know the full background.

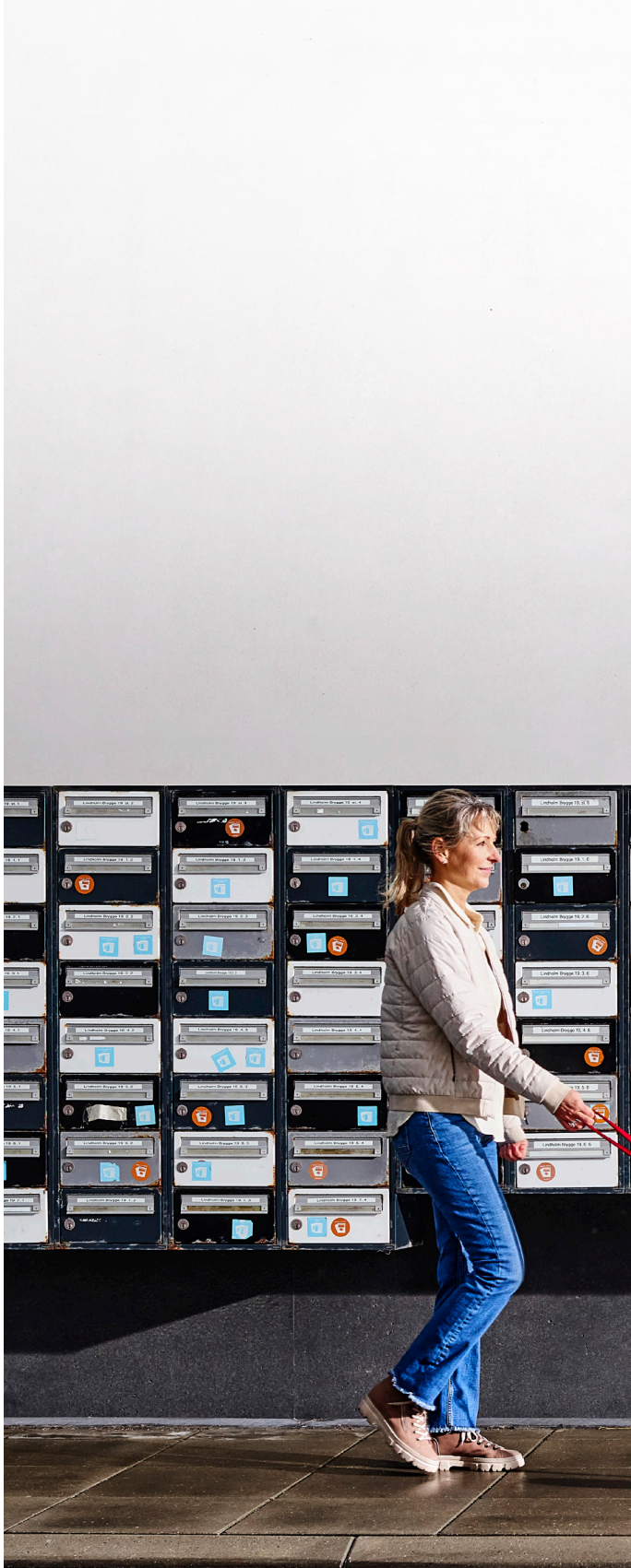
Naturally, it may also be the case that they have come to a country where they have settled in well and where the conditions are good for achieving a high quality of life. The countries where the difference in quality of life is smallest compared to the home country—such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and the Netherlands—do in many ways resemble Denmark.

The most important takeaway, however, is that quality of life in Denmark is relatively high—no matter one's background.

In the next chapters, we zoom all the way in on Denmark.

What if we conducted a large-scale survey, asking tens of thousands of people a wide range of questions about their lives? And then compared their answers with the uniquely detailed register data we have access to in Denmark. What could we then learn about quality of life?

To mark Realdania's 25th anniversary, we turned this idea into reality. We asked 122,000 Danes about everything from their homes and local areas to family life, finances, and friendships. The results are brought together in this book, which not only paints a picture of a population with a high quality of life but also points to what we can learn from the happiest Danes.



Realdania