



Editorial: Geography of Happiness and Well-being

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Well-being and happiness have been subjects of scientific reflection since ancient times. The determinants of well-being and happiness, along with their individual and societal implications, have been extensively examined. Nevertheless, the quantification of heterogeneous well-being profiles, their driving forces, and their consequences remains a persistent challenge.

Over recent decades, scientific interest in the measurement of subjective well-being, often described as happiness or life satisfaction (Veenhoven, 2000), has expanded rapidly across academic disciplines and policy domains. This growing relevance is evident at the highest institutional levels. In 2012, the United Nations adopted a resolution urging governments to place citizens' well-being at the center of public policy. Subjective well-being has also attracted substantial public attention, as reflected in widely cited media rankings and its prominent role in the OECD Better Life Index. At the European level, the European Strategy 2020 explicitly emphasizes the advancement of research on subjective well-being. Importantly, this policy focus extends beyond national governments and increasingly shapes the agendas of regional and local authorities.

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Against this backdrop, there has been a growing emphasis on understanding the geography of well-being at both local and regional scales. A substantial body of research on the geography of happiness and well-being at the subnational level already exists, as comprehensively illustrated by Veenhoven (2026) in his article “How to Take Stock of Research Findings on Happiness in Regions Using the World Database of Happiness.” Although subnational data on happiness and well-being remain less systematically organized than national-level data (see also Burger et al., 2025), Veenhoven (2026) demonstrates how such data can nevertheless be effectively compiled and analyzed. The remainder of this special issue focuses on two key themes within the geography of happiness and well-being: (1) unraveling the urban paradox, and (2) methodological and conceptual advances in the geography of happiness and well-being.

Unraveling the Urban Paradox

Well-being and happiness are unequally distributed in many countries of the world. Since the work of Easterlin et al. (2011), Okulicz-Kozaryn (2015), Morrison (2021), and Burger et al. (2020), there has been considerable attention to the urban-rural happiness paradox in happiness studies, geography, and related fields. Despite cities being perceived as enriching and beneficial, higher urbanization is generally associated with lower subjective well-being. This pattern is especially observed in the Western world (Burger et al., 2020), although some argue that urban unhappiness is more common (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2021). The debate questions why people migrate to cities despite this lower reported subjective well-being. The causes are complex, involving negative agglomeration externalities and the selective migration of certain demographics (Hoogerbrugge & Burger, 2022). Urban problems like crime and congestion may contribute to lower subjective well-being, while selective migration patterns may attract happier individuals to smaller cities or villages.

Several contributions to this special issue engage with the urban-rural paradox. Sørensen (2026) examines this phenomenon in Denmark, where urban residents likewise report lower levels of subjective well-being than their rural counterparts. His analysis shows that the urban–rural happiness gap is remarkably consistent across population groups and can be largely explained by structural differences between urban and rural areas. In particular, lower access to natural amenities, weaker bonding social capital, a smaller share of retired individuals, and a higher proportion of non-native residents in Denmark’s five largest cities account for much of the observed disparity in subjective well-being.

Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente (2026) examine urban–rural differences in happiness during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on one potential disadvantage of large and densely populated cities: their heightened vulnerability to the rapid spread of infectious diseases. Using World Values Survey data for Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Uruguay, they analyze changes in life satisfaction before and during the pandemic. Their findings indicate that cities experienced a decline in happiness that was roughly twice as large as that observed in smaller and less densely populated areas.

However, the urban–rural differential in happiness is far from uniform across countries. Drawing on EU-SILC data, Jurčišinová et al. (2026) examine patterns of

subjective well-being across Europe and find that residents of rural areas in Northern and Western Europe generally report higher levels of well-being than their urban counterparts, whereas the reverse holds in post-communist European countries. In Western and Northern Europe, rural areas are often valued for their peacefulness and closeness to nature, pointing to societal preferences that extend beyond material affluence. In contrast, in post-communist contexts, cities are more closely associated with economic aspirations and improved access to services, reflecting a stage of development in which urbanization continues to symbolize progress and opportunity.

Additional evidence that the association between place size and happiness varies across global contexts is provided by Jantsch and Piper (2026). Focusing on Latin America, they examine the relationship between town size and life satisfaction using a more fine-grained classification of settlement sizes than is common in earlier research. Their analysis reveals that individuals living in towns with populations between 10,000 and 500,000 report lower levels of life satisfaction than those residing in either smaller settlements or larger cities. This pattern is partly explained by compositional effects: individuals with lower levels of education (who tend to report lower life satisfaction) are disproportionately concentrated in relatively small and medium-sized towns.

Another explanation for the urban-rural happiness paradox is provided by Lenzi and Perucca (2026). Using self-reported dissatisfaction data for the European Union and the United Kingdom, they show that large cities are often linked to greater dissatisfaction because they tend to amplify interpersonal income inequalities. Particularly, people experiencing occupational and economic disadvantage suffer the greatest negative effects from urban living, although the benefits of urbanization partly mitigate these drawbacks.

Overall, research on the urban-rural paradox demonstrates that context is central to understanding the geography of happiness and well-being. Outcomes vary not only by place but also by who lives there: some groups benefit more from urban environments, while others are better off in rural areas, depending on factors such as economic opportunities, social conditions, and exposure to inequalities. Recognizing these heterogeneous effects makes it possible to design more tailored and evidence-based policies aimed at reducing spatial inequalities within and between cities and the countryside, and at fostering more livable, sustainable, and inclusive places.

From a methodological perspective, future research would benefit from paying attention to endogeneity concerns, including reverse causality and selection effects as well as a more critical approach to how place size is defined and classified, explicitly accounting for the position of places within broader urban systems. The latter can be achieved by paying more attention to borrowed size effects (Meijers & Burger, 2017; Burger, 2021) in explaining spatial differences in subjective well-being. For the Netherlands, it has been shown that higher levels of life satisfaction in rural areas can be explained by the fact that because rural areas are very accessible, rural residents are able to ‘borrow’ the positive effects of much larger cities, while being relatively protected from negative urbanization externalities. In this regard, more attention can also be paid to spatial spillover effects using spatial econometric techniques, as utilized in the paper by Guevara-Rosero et al. (2026). Focusing on poverty as an objective measure of economic well-being, they find that poverty in one region is influenced by the poverty level in neighboring regions, suggesting that interregional coordina-

tion of local governments is necessary to reduce poverty. Addressing these challenges will strengthen causal inference, deepen our understanding of how different spatial contexts shape subjective well-being, and result in better policy advice.

Advances in the Geography of Happiness and Well-Being

The ‘Geography of Happiness’ has in recent years become a fashionable research domain (see e.g. Ballas, 2020). In the second part of the special issue, attention is drawn to place-specific elements influencing well-being at the local or regional level. Various well-being indicators exist, like the OECD Better Life Index, UNDP Human Development Index, UN World Happiness Index, and others. However, these often lack micro-geography specifics. Overall, this second part of the special issue aims to contribute to understanding the geographical nuances of subjective well-being and its implications for policy and urban planning.

Several contributions in this special issue examine the relationship between the built environment and happiness (see also overviews by Mouratidis (2021) and Samavati and Veenhoven (2024), focusing more on the city and neighborhood level. The meta-analysis by Wong et al. (2026) suggests that while earlier studies have generally found the built environment to play a relatively modest role in explaining differences in happiness, place-based neighborhood interventions (such as housing refurbishment, greening initiatives, and urban regeneration) are more likely to yield positive effects on mental well-being. Their findings further indicate that greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening the social environment of neighborhoods as a means of enhancing the well-being of residents.

The importance of social capital is also underlined in several other studies in the special issue. Using data from the China Longitudinal Aging Social Survey, the study by Duan (2026) examines the impact of digital village development (rural areas undergoing transformation through digital tech) on the well-being of older adults. The findings show that digital villages significantly enhance several dimensions of well-being, including self-rated health, mental health, and life satisfaction, with especially strong effects among the oldest individuals, those with lower education levels, and non-internet users. These benefits are primarily driven by strengthened social capital. Guo et al. (2026) document a decline of more than 20% in personal well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, with especially strong negative effects on perceptions of future security, personal safety, and living standards. Importantly, these impacts were highly heterogeneous. Research shows that access to urban green spaces and other open spaces supports physical activity, reduces stress, and fosters social connectedness, all of which are crucial for maintaining well-being during challenging times. In a densely populated city such as Hong Kong, however, access to these spaces is uneven and often limited, particularly in poorer neighborhoods with a high concentration of public housing. Yet, it remains crucial to ask what works for whom and under which conditions. Chen et al. (2026a) analyze life satisfaction in Suzhou and show that its key determinants differ markedly between residents of public-led and private-led housing communities. In the more affordable public housing communities, life satisfaction is driven mainly by functional and environmental factors, such as building height, housing quality, and exposure to pollution. In contrast, residents

of private housing communities place greater emphasis on lifestyle-related attributes, including access to education and commercial amenities. Complementing these findings, Grimes et al. (2026) demonstrate that both the physical quality of housing, particularly problems like dampness and insufficient heating, and subjective neighborhood perceptions, especially social capital and safety, are strongly linked to mental health and life satisfaction. Their analysis also highlights the importance of housing tenure security for well-being. Private renters facing insecure tenure report significantly lower well-being, helping to explain why individuals with similar characteristics living in comparable environments can nonetheless experience divergent well-being outcomes.

Over the past years a specific research focus has emerged, in which intra-city well-being disparities play a crucial role. Especially well-being differences at the district, neighborhood or community level have gained much analytical attention, which has, amongst others, led to the introduction of the 'city love' concept (see e.g. Kourtit et al., 2024). Cities are experienced not only by their residents but also by people who visit from elsewhere, such as tourists. The study by Kourtit et al. (2026) analyzes visitor satisfaction, referred to metaphorically as 'smileys' and its relationship to the success of tourism destinations. Using London as a case study and applying sentiment analysis, digital text analysis, multilevel modeling, and geographically weighted regression, the authors show that proximity to parks, good access to public transport, and the availability of natural amenities are positively related to visitor satisfaction. These findings support more informed decision-making by destination managers, policymakers, and tourism stakeholders, while underscoring the importance of location-specific factors and tailored strategies to enhance how cities are experienced by visitors.

The special issue also opens up promising new directions for research that integrate perspectives from urban studies and happiness research. The contribution by Popescu and Reis Mourão (2026) connects the notion of creative cities - urban centers that strategically leverage culture, arts, and creativity as engines of sustainable economic, social, and environmental development - to subjective well-being. Their findings reveal a positive association between the number of creative cities in a country and levels of happiness and life satisfaction. This relationship likely operates in both directions: higher happiness may stimulate creativity and contribute to the emergence of creative cities, while, conversely, the cultural and amenity-rich environments of such cities may enhance subjective well-being. Migration research is another avenue to study the geography of well-being. An advantage of this type of research is that one can study how changing to places with different characteristics affects happiness and well-being (Hoogerbrugge & Burger, 2022). Sikun Chen and colleagues (2026b) examine seasonal retirement migration on Hainan Island - many older adults spend the winter months here. Using a one-year prospective cohort study of almost 9000 seasonal retirees in Wuzhishan City, this study finds that health-related quality of life significantly improves during migration, with particularly strong gains among individuals with chronic conditions and those who experience better sleep quality and increased physical activity. These results highlight the importance of place and lifestyle changes in shaping well-being and contribute to a broader understanding of the geography of happiness and well-being.

Space and well-being or happiness are two mutually interwoven aspects of humanity worldwide. Space comprises multiple geographical scales ranging from global to

local. The geography of our world reflects a pluriform patchwork quilt of elements that altogether co-determine well-being at different geographical scales, impacting on individuals, groups and society as a whole. Subjective well-being can also be considered a multidimensional phenomenon referring to complex feelings or perceptions on happiness, satisfaction, contentment, mutual care or place love. A considerable effort has been made in the recent literature to understand the complex causal relationship between the geographical attributes of a place and their implications for personal or group well-being. Meanwhile, also much attention has been paid to the consequences of people's well-being for the socio-economic and cultural development of places, ranging from localities to regions or nations. It goes without saying that the complex interdependencies between well-being, happiness and place opens up a rich and multi-scalar research challenge at the interface of happiness studies and the spatial sciences.

Overall, the special issue demonstrates that research on the geography of well-being and happiness is a rapidly growing and genuinely interdisciplinary field with a clear social purpose: contributing to greater happiness for a larger share of the population. By generating new insights into how well-being is shaped across places and contexts, this body of work provides valuable evidence that can support policymakers and community leaders in making more informed decisions aimed at improving quality of life.

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Declarations

Competing Interests There are no competing interests.

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