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Mental Health

America's Best States To Live

Rebecca Ruiz, 03.11.09, 1:00 PM ET

It seems that the recession has touched every corner of American life. From factory workers to those in finance, Americans have been shaken by a contracting economy that has shed 4.4 million jobs since December 2007.

But a report released this week by Gallup and disease management company Healthways suggests that reality is less grim in certain states. In these places, residents enjoy their jobs, express deep optimism about future prospects and even manage to stay healthy.

Utah earned the highest marks. Here residents reported a high level of satisfaction in several areas, including work environment, emotional health and their local communities. One major factor for Utah's strong performance might be its unemployment rate: When last reported in January, it was 4.6% compared with a national rate of 7.6%.

Hawaii ranked second, followed by Wyoming, Colorado and Minnesota. West Virginia ranked last, and manufacturing-reliant states like Michigan and Ohio also landed in the bottom 10.

In Depth: State-By-State Ranking

The results were based on a year-long, random-dial telephone survey of 355,000 Americans. Though the sample size for each state varied widely--with 37,000 Californians polled vs. 950 North Dakotans--each was controlled to reflect population and demographics.

In addition to state rankings, Gallup and Healthways also measured quality of life in congressional districts. The 14th district, which stretches from south San Francisco to just north of Monterey, Calif., ranked as the most content.

Amy Neftzger, director of surveys and assessment for Healthways, says the survey is meant to draw attention to quality of life beyond the standard indicators, which have traditionally included statistics like median income, poverty rates and life expectancy.

"When you look at well-being," Neftzger says, "you have to look at [the] whole person and all facets of their life."

Behind the Numbers

Using that approach, the Gallup-Healthways team came up with six important measures: life satisfaction, work quality, healthy behavior, physical health, emotional health and basic access to necessities like food and shelter.

Participants were asked a range of questions that addressed each area, including if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with their job, if they had health insurance and if they'd laughed or smiled the previous day.

Dr. George Loewenstein, a professor of economics and psychology at [Carnegie Mellon University](#), says the survey's strength is its mix of subjective and objective measures. But he also warned that the grouping all of the indicators into one index might produce misleading results.

Hawaii, for example, scored in the top 10 in every category except for work environment, where it placed last. So while Hawaiians may have an excellent quality of life with respect to physical and emotional health, life satisfaction and basic needs, that's despite poor job prospects. In fact, Hawaii's 6.1% unemployment rate has reached a 10-year high.

A similar lopsided trend appeared in the states at the bottom of the list. Work environment in Ohio and Michigan unsurprisingly ranked 44th and 47th, respectively, but those states received better marks in the basic necessities category, ranking 30th and

23rd.

West Virginia ranked last in life satisfaction, physical health and emotional health, but surprisingly came in 13th for work environment, perhaps due to a 5.3% unemployment rate. Matt Turner, communications director for the governor's office, says the rankings also don't reflect recent progress in areas like declining youth obesity rates and increased spending on infrastructure.

Dr. Betsey Stevenson, an assistant professor of business and public policy at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), says the differences across states could reflect a number of factors, including policy, social services and even the types of people who choose to live there. Social scientists also established long ago that per capita gross domestic product and happiness are linked.

The median incomes in the top and bottom three states reinforce that point: Those at the top range from \$50,000 to \$62,000 while states at the bottom range from \$36,000 to \$40,000, which is significantly lower than the national median income of \$50,000.

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Still, Stevenson warns against relying on that sole indicator. "A lot of things go into happiness," she says, "and it's not all income."

[Best States For Business](#)

Revising the American Dream

If the Gallup-Healthways survey and other new polls are any indication, Americans are becoming acutely aware of other factors they might have neglected in years past when the economy was much better.

[America's Healthiest And Unhealthiest States](#)

In a MetLife online survey of 2,200 people released this week, participants expressed changing opinions on what matters most when trying to achieve the American dream. In years past, "financial security trumped family by a long shot," says Beth Hirschhorn, senior vice president and chief marketing officer for MetLife. This year, 44% of respondents reported spending more time with friends and family.

[Best Places To Raise A Family](#)

The trend isn't generational either. More than a quarter of Gen-Xers said that marriage was important to achieving the American dream, up from 18% in 2008.

Americans are also changing their attitudes about consuming. Four in 10 respondents expressed buyer's remorse about past purchases and wished they had spent less and saved more. Boomers also reported that the pressure to acquire more possessions was down significantly from last year.

The findings of a Northwestern Mutual survey, also released this week, were similar. Many of the 1,000 Americans polled online reported that spending more time with family and being healthy was more important than "owning the home of your dreams" or "earning a high income."

While the Gallup-Healthways index doesn't plan on tracking answers to these types of questions, it will continue to survey 1,000 Americans each night for 25 years in an effort to better understand how well-being changes over time.

Healthways' Neftzger says that circumstances might seem bleak at the moment, but survey participants have more optimistic thoughts about life five years from now.

"You might think it's terrible now," she says, "but a lot of people are hopeful about the future."

[In Depth: State-By-State Ranking](#)