

Denmark: Small, Happy Prosperous Families -- In Contrast to U.S.

Contributed by Marilyn Hempel / Jan Lundberg
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According to the OECD 2012 world report on life satisfaction, Danes are the happiest people in the world.

Editor's note: Marilyn Hempel's approach to equating happiness with low population size without out-of-control growth, plus equitable income levels, is simple and convincing. Some parts of the puzzle, such as stronger sense of community and safety in public without heavy policing, become more clear, as positive influences can be seen feeding upon each other. Following Ms. Hempel's article is a complementary report by Jan Lundberg (a Danish and Swedish name).

Have you ever tasted a freshly baked Danish pastry? It's delicious—why wouldn't the Danes be happy! Putting pastries aside (reluctantly), studies of the happiness of nations are always fraught with difficulties. How does one quantify such a nebulous term as happiness? Isn't happiness an individual state of mind? As it turns out health, a balance of work and leisure, and a strong social support network continue to correspond highly with happiness.

Despite the difficulties associated with quantifying happiness, each year the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) unveils its report on life satisfaction in the developed world. Since it was founded in 1961, the OECD has strived to help governments design better policies for better lives for their citizens. Based on this experience, its 11 topics reflect what the OECD has identified as essential to well-being in terms of material living conditions (housing, income, jobs) and quality of life (community, education, environment, governance, health, life satisfaction, safety and work-life balance).

Once again, the United States failed to make the top 10 list of happiest nations in the world, while all the Scandinavian nations did. They all have small stable populations. The US has the highest population growth rate of any industrialized nation.

Denmark tops the OECD ranking with the most satisfied citizens. If one only glances at the numbers, the reason is not obvious. Denmark ranks no higher than fourth in any of the categories that appear to correlate strongly with overall satisfaction. Yet, in addition to the OECD, organizations such as the World Map of Happiness and the World Database of Happiness have consistently put Denmark at the top of their list of the world's happiest countries.

When asked why they are happy, Danes usually give two reasons. First, they point out that most of their society is not created for the upper class. Just the opposite, nearly all things are catered to the middle class. Hence, there is a sense of contentment, which is key. There is little of the mentality of 'keeping up with the Joneses' or a 1% vs 99% debate.

Second, they mention the great services that the state provides. This comes at a price—extremely high taxes. But it turns

out high taxes have another benefit. People tend to decide on an occupation based on what they like and not based on earning potential. Incomes are somewhat comparable across the country so that a garbage collector lives in the same kind of neighborhood as a doctor. As a general rule, prestige is not so important: the garbage collector gets the same kind of respect as the doctor for a job well done. This creates happiness as well.

Denmark has a high employment rate (73%), and a low percentage of employees working long hours (less than 2%). Not surprisingly, having enough leisure time affects a person's mental health and strongly impacts happiness. The citizens of Denmark have the most leisure time per day of any country in the study, at 16.06 hours (including sleep) —and this is encouraged by government policies.

Badly hit by the 1973 Arab oil embargo, Denmark responded with a sustained, focused and systematic approach to energy production and use that today is the envy of the world. Denmark is one of very few energy independent nations. This didn't happen by Danish politicians telling their people the solution was 'drill baby drill' and fracking.

What did Denmark do? They imposed on themselves a set of gasoline taxes, CO2 taxes and building-and-appliance efficiency standards that allowed them to grow their economy—while barely growing their energy consumption—and gave birth to a Danish clean-power industry that is one of the most competitive in the world. Denmark today gets nearly 20 percent of its electricity from wind. America? About 1 percent. Government policies have spurred developers to build homes with thick insulation, and consumers to only buy energy-efficient appliances.

The result of these and many other policies is that Denmark's energy consumption—the amount of fuel it uses to heat its buildings, drive its cars and power its economy—has held stable for more than 30 years, even as the country's gross domestic product has doubled. (Remember, the population is stable as well.) During the same period, energy consumption in the U.S. has risen 40 percent, while its GDP has quadrupled. The average Dane uses 6,600 kilowatt hours of electricity a year (even with their fierce winters), compared with 13,300 for the average American.

Danish parents feel their children are safe within their families and in society as a whole (not true for American parents); baby prams are left unattended; bicycles are left unlocked; trust in other people and government is high.

Education, including sex education, is available to all with equity and with ease—99 percent of children graduate from high school (68 percent for the US). Higher education doesn't come with an enormous student loan price tag that requires trading off financial ease for knowledge and expertise.

Denmark has national health insurance which provides for all. Family planning, counseling, and pre- and post-pregnancy services are given free. The Danes accept sexuality as a normal part of life, and feel that abortion should be allowed free of charge. They decided that prevention of adolescent pregnancy should have high priority, therefore sex education and responsible parenting classes are part of their school curriculum, starting at an early age. Denmark's conception rates are less than 1/2 of those in the US. Not surprisingly, there are very few unwanted pregnancies, and few babies to be adopted.

Denmark is a small country with a relatively miniscule defense budget and no major defense obligations. Yes, if Denmark were attacked by a larger country, it is possible the Danes could not resist. However, they have good relations with their neighbors, and have no reason to fear them.

Denmark has a stable population, social cohesion, a great educational system, energy independence, fine health care including free family planning, jobs and a retirement system for everyone, comfortable housing, lovely countryside and plenty of leisure time to enjoy it. In short, why wouldn't the Danish people be happy? They have built themselves a society that looks after their citizens and gives them many reasons to be satisfied with their lives.

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Marilyn Hempel is the editor of the Population Press, which can be found online at populationpress.org

Note from Culture Change's Jan Lundberg, who visited Copenhagen one week last August:

Danes in their capital city are dedicated to having a good time by enjoying freedom and whatever their city has to offer. Life is more of a party each day. And when many citizens are on bikes as their main mode of transportation, they feel better about getting around -- they see fit, trim, sexy people moving alongside instead of mostly concealed inside cars. Bicyclists in a group or a line are not apt to be full of road rage; to the contrary, they can be observed to be relaxed and smiling. To see a moderately overweight person walking around or biking is rare in Denmark or anywhere in Europe, and obesity is extremely rare.

Work and survival are not the central purpose of life, as it is for almost everyone in the U.S. Much longer vacations, the right to walk along the urban lakes with open beers, no fear of being killed by a car for stepping off a sidewalk -- there are advantages to better urban design and a live-and-let live spirit.

Yet, Denmark is like the other Western European countries: affluence has come in the last few decades. This has a cost for almost everyone, such as higher prices, fancier living and less relaxed funkiness, and debt. Although energy efficiency is just over twice as high per capita in Denmark than the U.S., [see World Bank table], this is still unsustainable. The convenience of separate family appliances -- that ultimately end up in the landfill if not totally recycled -- means nonrenewable resources involving fossil fuels being exploited. Most renewable energy is run or derived via the petroleum infrastructure depending on oil's liquid fuels, plastics, asphalt, petrochemicals, etc. For what

it's worth, by 2020, 35% of all energy in Denmark will be coming from renewable sources, half of which will be from wind power.

People get along more easily in cities in Denmark and Holland, than in world-class insane and violent U.S. Many in the U.S. are on average far more ill than the Danes, due to diet and pollution. USAnians are more stressed, propagandized, oppressed and ignorant. In the U.S. almost all people are suffering from the greed of the 1% and the bloated, military industrial complex. If such issues were not rife in the U.S., then people here too would be more mellow, celebratory, and content. There are countless friendly people to be found both in the U.S. and northern Europe. But too high a ratio of people without their own land in the U.S. are unhappy and unable to enjoy a Danish kind of existence in part because of overpopulation. Ecological carrying capacity has further been exceeded in some parts of the world than others -- especially the U.S., based on the index "Ecological Footprint." Arable land may appear to be extensive, but dwindling fresh water and soil erosion are major issues.

In the U.S., any ethic of serious efficiency has been demonized as anti-freedom or for losers. Related to this is the nation's twisted thinking among many to deny anthropogenic global warming and refusal to believe in evolution. This is not changing any time soon. In the U.S., the sight and sound of huge personal vehicles or noisy motorcycles -- and the thoughtless, inconsiderate use of them -- are rarely encountered in Europe.

In Copenhagen I enjoyed walking everywhere at night with no fear of getting mugged, able to enjoy architecture and a modicum of nature instead of urban blight seen almost everywhere in U.S. cities and other parts of the world. In the U.S., the waste of space is most pronounced, with large parking lots, ugly metal fences, garish signs, and poor taste in architecture. Such an environment does not breed happiness. However, it is more conducive to a police state, which some associate with protection and superiority.

Further reading: Europe's Affluence Out On a Limb by Jan Lundberg, July 27, 2012

How 'hygge' can help you get through winter "The vague cultural concept doesn't translate easily into English, but it has helped Denmark become the 'happiest country on Earth' despite long, dark winters."

All photographs by Jan Lundberg except for the mermaid statue.