

Colombia: Unlivable but Happy. Fool's Paradise?

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This mostly theoretical and review article attempts to start resolving the apparent contradiction between happy Colombians despite unlivable Colombia. Colombia is one of the several very happiest countries, and at the same time apparently unlivable—by Western standards—Colombia's poor, corrupt, dangerous, and roads and ports are bad, too. But objective livability of a society measured in terms of money/consumption/physical stuff misses two points: 1) already very basic commodities are good enough to satisfy human needs and produce wellbeing; 2) non-commodities such as personal freedom and social connection not only matter, but also are hampered by excessive pursuit of commodities. For instance, impeccable organization and physical infrastructure such as that in Singapore or richest parts of the US not only is unnecessary and insufficient for livability and happiness, but it may actually decrease them by: 1) having to focus on what's unimportant and overwork, and 2) by making environment inhuman, sanitized, hospital/airport-like. Paper argues that the world has much to learn from Colombia how to be happy—it is a real paradise. Yet another possibility that we cannot fully rule out is that ignorance is a bliss—it is a fool's paradise. More research is needed.

LIFE SATISFACTION, HAPPINESS, SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING, QUALITY OF LIFE, LIVABILITY, BEST PLACES TO LIVE, COLOMBIA, ALIENATION, MARX, DEGROWTH

Happy Colombia

Colombia is one of a handful of the happiest countries—both World Values Surveys and World Database of Happiness rank it top 3 in table 1.¹ Colombia is typically happy at 8-8.5 on 1-10 scale. Colombia is a truly outstanding at achieving highest happiness at low development level.

Colombia shines. The happiest countries are either the very most developed, rich, and equal, or rather poor and very unequal Latin countries. Still, Colombia is happier than all other Latin countries and about as happy as Mexico, but Colombia is significantly poorer than Mexico, at least 25% poorer either in nominal or PPP terms.²

¹We do not use Gallup data because Gallup data are not meant for research but for commerce—Gallup charges \$30,000 (per year) for data access (authors' inquiry). Clearly happiness industry (Davies 2015), not happiness research. In general, private corporations are often making fortune from tax dollars and students tuition—scholars should resist corporatization of academia (Mills 2012a, Cox 2013, Mills 2012b, Catropa and Andrews 2020, Schmidlin 2015), and corporatization of happiness research (Davies 2015).

²See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)_per_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)_per_capita) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(PPP\)_per_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(PPP)_per_capita)

Table 1: 10 happiest countries in the world. Data from World Database of Happiness (WDH) 2010-2019 out of 160 countries at worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/rank-reports/satisfaction-with-life; and World Values Surveys (WVS) 2005-2022 [waves 5-7] out of 88 countries at worldvaluessurvey.org.

WDH			WVS		
rank	country	happiness (1-10)	rank	country	happiness (1-10)
1	Denmark	8.2	1	Puerto Rico	8.4
2	Mexico	8.1	2	Mexico	8.3
3	Colombia	8.1	3	Colombia	8.3
4	Switzerland	8	4	Qatar	8.0
5	Finland	8	5	Norway	7.9
6	Iceland	8	6	Nicaragua	7.9
7	Costa Rica	7.9	7	Tajikistan	7.9
8	Norway	7.9	8	Switzerland	7.9
9	Canada	7.9	9	Uzbekistan	7.9
10	Qatar	7.8	10	Ecuador	7.8

Unlivable Colombia

Table 2: Livability/Quality Of Life (QOL): objective indicators.

Indicator	Value	Source
2019 poverty (national benchmark)	42%	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=CO
2011 median daily income/cap PPP USD	\$7	https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/23/seven-in-ten-people-globally-live-on-10-or-less-per-day/
2019 percent on <\$5.5/day	30%	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.UMIC?locations=CO
2017 R/P 10%	40	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.10TH.10
2020 unemployment rate	15%	https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=CO
2020 freedom rank	96/210	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores
2021 corruption rank	87/180	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/col
2020 political stability, no violence/terrorism pctl	20th	https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports
2020 rule of law pctl	34th	https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports
2021 working conditions decile	bottom decile	https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2021/countries/col
2018 quality of roads rank	110/137	https://reports.weforum.org/pdf/gci-2017-2018-scorecard/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Scorecard_E0SQ057.pdf

In sharp contrast to superb Colombian happiness, Colombia is not livable or has low quality of life (QOL), as measured with objective indicators in table 2, Colombia scores mediocre or low on all of them.³ In a remarkable contrast to Colombia's superb happiness, some of the objective indicators of quality of life are unthinkable grim: About a third of Colombians live on less than \$5.50 a day (2019). Poverty (national benchmark) is at 42%—the whole nation has a higher poverty rate than one of the poorest cities in the US, Camden NJ, at 36% (also national benchmark, census.gov/quickfacts/camdennewjersey). Median daily PPP per capita income in 2011 was at \$7 (the US was at \$56). Colombia is one of the 10 worst countries in the world for working people: murders and impunity, union-busting and dismissals. R/P 10% is the ratio of the average income of the richest 10% to the poorest 10%—Colombia ranks 3rd out of 70 at a whooping 40—top decile of Colombians makes on average 40x the average of the poorest decile— even greater disparity than in the unequal US at 30. Unemployment rate is at 15%, with informal labor at about 50% of the workforce.⁴ All of that—precarious labor, poverty, and inequality should lead to unhappiness. Notably inequality is associated with a multitude of negative outcomes (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).⁵ Specifically in Latin America, inequality was found to have negative effects on happiness as it signals persistent unfairness (Graham and Felton 2006)—unfairness seems to be more important than inequality (Starmans et al. 2017). Indeed, perhaps inequality is the most stark feature of Colombian life, and it is inequality that has sparked recent mass protests.

³There are many ways to measure QOL. USNEWS, for instance, ranks Colombia 68/78 on QOL. World Economic Forum provides indicators, too. See Supplementary Online Material (SOM).

⁴See Hurtado (2016). Colombia has a high prevalence of informal work above 50% and workers in informal sector are less happy (Hurtado et al. 2017).

⁵But see criticism by Snowden (2010).

Colombia is still being haunted by violence and conflict, much of which is rural (hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/colombia). Colombia is less stable and more violent than 80 percent of the countries—metric “political stability and absence of violence and terrorism” is only 20th percentile.

Colombia is only partly free, ranked at 96/210, and quite corrupt at 87/180. Voice and accountability and government effectiveness and control of corruption are around median rank. Colombia scores best on Regulatory Quality, better than about 2/3 of countries, but Rule of Law is problematic—below about 2/3 of countries.

In terms of quality of roads Colombia ranks 110/137—part of the problem is mountains, yet, for example, equally mountainous Ecuador succeeded in road building—roads are a basis for travel, commerce, and trade, especially that Colombia has no rail—transport is the blood of the society (e.g., De Vos et al. 2013).

Unlivable but Happy—“Fool’s Paradise”?

The goal of this study is to spark the debate and provide directions to explain the massive mismatch or paradox of apparently low or mediocre livability or Quality Of Life (QOL) and top life satisfaction. Colombia is a livability/QOL v happiness puzzle. It scores mediocre or low on most QOL indicators, but tops rankings of happiness. In other words, it appears to be unlivable but happy, hence, so called “Fool’s Paradise,” a place where people are subjectively happy, despite objective misery (Michalos 2014). An intersection of QOL and SWB can be visualized in a 2x2 matrix in table 3—expected outcomes are lo-lo or hi-hi, but there can also be unexpected lo-hi “fool’s paradise” or hi-lo “fool’s hell.”

	lo livability	hi livability
lo SWB	real hell [deprivation, unhappy poor]	fool’s hell [dissonance, unhappy rich]
hi SWB	fool’s paradise [adaptation, happy poor]	real paradise [well-being, happy rich]

Table 3: Michalos 2 variable theory: fool’s paradise and fool’s hell (Michalos 2014). Cummins classification is shown in square brackets (Sirgy 2002, p.61). (Veenhoven’s 4 qualities of life Veenhoven are somewhat similar, too.) For other examples of fool’s paradise and fool’s hell see Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente (2019).

Adaptation (Brickman et al. 1978) can explain the Colombian paradox of high subjective wellbeing despite objective problems such as poverty and crime—humans are able to adapt to just about anything. Perhaps, Colombians have adapted, at least to some degree, to poverty, inequality, and even violence⁶ having suffered through recent civil war and breakdown of the state—now that things are better than they used to be just few decades ago, Colombians are making best out of the conditions. In other words, the sources of Colombian happiness may be resilience, positive outlook, ability to make out most of little.

In explaining the Colombian mismatch or paradox of low QOL but high SWB, aka “fool’s paradise,” it is useful to dedicate a subsection to livability theory.

Livability Theory

A major and ideally fitting happiness theory, specifically about the link between livability and SWB, is Veenhoven’s livability/needs theory (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995, Veenhoven 2014). Humans, like all animals, have needs, as those on the Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow [1954] 1987)—the more the needs are satisfied, the more happiness—places or societies that satisfy human needs well are livable or have high QOL:

Societies are systems for meeting human needs, but not all societies do that job equally well. Consequently, people are not equally happy in all societies.

⁶This is not to say that the objective problems, notably abject poverty and violations of human rights, are not important and don’t need to be addressed.

Improvement of the fit between social institutions and human needs will result in greater happiness. (p. 3645 Veenhoven 2014)

The Colombian chasm between livability and happiness may point to the limitations of livability theory. But we argue that, counterintuitively, the livability theory may mostly hold true because: 1) mediocre or even moderately poor development (physical and institutional infrastructure) is already good enough to satisfy most basic human needs and make a place livable;⁷ 2) physical and institutional infrastructure mostly serves only first two steps of Maslow's pyramid (physiological and safety)—higher needs such as personal freedom and social connection that are critically important for livability are rarely captured by livability metrics 3) given always limited resources, time, and attention, the more of one, the less of the other one (opportunity cost). That is, excessive pursuit of money or consumption at person level or economic growth at community or society level sacrifices non-commodities such as personal freedom and social connection notably through overwork and alienation.

A notable human need overlooked by QOL indices is biophilia (Fromm 1964, Wilson 2021), a need for contact with nature—"Nature is not a place to visit. It is home." (Gary Snyder). There is an obvious tradeoff between economic growth and nature preservation, for instance, the more urbanization, the less natural the human habitat. Or next door in Brazil—the more economic growth, the less Amazon rainforest. Climate change is a critical challenge for human needs as it endangers the very habitat of homo sapiens (Pachauri et al. 2014), and again, the more economic growth, the worse the environmental degradation (e.g., Klein 2014), indeed a reasonable course of action is to de-grow the economies (Hickel 2020, Kallis 2011), especially the rich and carbon intensive ones such as the US.⁸

Related to biophilia and climate change is biodiversity, which also improves happiness (Adjei and Agyei 2015, Prescott and Logan 2017). Nature is extraordinary in Colombia. Colombia has 2nd largest biodiversity (after Brazil), despite being 7x smaller than Brazil. Colombia has just about any type of natural amenities. Exposure to nature (as opposed to cities) is the key ingredient for happiness Pretty (2012), Tesson (2013), Thoreau (1995 [1854]).

Another human need, and a key to happiness is social capital (Tönnies [1887] 2002, Lane 2000, McMahon 2006, Putnam 2001), and there is plenty of social capital in Colombia. Colombians are extraordinarily social, friendly, outgoing and spontaneous—social gatherings, events and festivals are widespread, frequent and long-lasting.

Freedom is a great human need—perhaps worth dying for.⁹ Colombia scores average on freedom listed earlier as a QOL metric in table 2, but that is one kind of freedom: "freedom from" (negative)[objective]: be no slave, live in a free country, have no coercion, free from restrictions/impediments; lack of obstacles. But there is another kind of freedom: "freedom to" (positive)[subjective]: be able to choose, control and direct one's own life; presence of control. On scale 1-10, World's average is about 7; the legendary land of the free, the US, scores higher at 7.7, but Colombia scores higher yet at 8 (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2014, 2015). Surely, the US does have many freedoms, but Colombians (and Mexicans, too) feel more free than people in the US.

Folklore's Theory: Colombia's "Good Energy"

The folklore theory, a less known theory, defines happiness in terms of the reflection of broadly held perceptions about life which are rooted in traditions and the culture of a society. For example, if a culture has an optimistic outlook on life regardless of circumstances, future generations will remain positive. Thus, a society may be happy, regardless of the socioeconomic situation, because of cultural influences (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995).

⁷Human physiological needs are simple and easily satisfied without much economic or institutional development.

⁸Recommendations about Colombian economic growth and development are beyond the scope of this study, but see some discussion for instance in A (2022).

⁹As a movie character Scottish warrior William Wallace put it:

Fight and you may die. Run, and you'll live...at least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance—just one chance—to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives but they'll never take our freedom! ([imdb.com/title/tt0112573](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112573))

The folklore theory is about national disposition/trait/character. It does appear that Colombians have slow-paced familial/social cheerful/happy disposition, which could be conducive for happiness. Colombian happiness does appear very real, however: rather than just being due to cognitive cultural norms, wearing pink glasses.

Proper treatment of the folklore theory is left for the future research as authors' knowledge of Colombian cultural and heritage is limited—but we discuss below some popular explanations for Colombia's happiness—future research can test them properly and systematically. We start with authors' personal observations, anecdotal evidence. In Colombia there is human factor, good energy that we have lost in the West (Freud et al. 1930). Colombians' attitude and approach to life is spontaneous unbridled joy—as if Marcuse's and Fromm's ideal (Marcuse 2015, Fromm 2013, 2012, 1964, [1941] 1994). also reminiscent of Nietzsche's ideal of a child—curious, spontaneous, creative, and innocent (Nietzsche 1896). It is present time orientation—not living in the past or worrying about future, happy-go-lucky free spirit without shame or guilt—in sharp contrast to the West, where anxiety and calculating attitude prevail.¹⁰ The US way of life is unnaturally fast and mostly about money (Easterlin 1973), aka “busyness” (?Musk 2018). The US way of life is also full of stress and anxiety even outside of work and money pursuit. Another source of stress and anxiety may be the constant drive to excel in everything, be perfect, and keep up with the Joneses (Frank 2012, Manson 2015)—so well portrayed in “American Beauty” and “Crash” movies.¹¹

Yet another source of stress and anxiety is quantity and quality of social relationships—in the US, a capitalistic society, social relationships are about business, not about actual meaningful social contact (Horowitz 2022, ?). As compared to calculating and fake Americans, Colombians are more spontaneous, innocent, closer to human nature, and more real. Colombians do not pay much attention to bad news and politics. Life is more about family, friends, and fun. Next, let's move to popular media/popular culture explanations. Two popular media articles seem most informative: Bargent (2016), Wallace (2017a).

According to an Englishman living in Medellin these are the things that make it happy in Colombia (Bargent 2016): putting most importance on family, friends, and fun—bravado and blind optimism may help, too; having less entitlement and appreciating what one has, having joy in small things, e.g., cheap coffee/alcohol are just fine; not worrying and not expecting much (“tranquilo.”)

Bargent (2016) observes: “Colombia violence and cruelty became frighteningly routine”—indeed people can get used to just about anything (Brickman et al. 1978), and again, even though the violence is bad, it used to be even worse in 80s and 90s—happiness can be produced through relative advantage (Michalos 1985).

Bargent (2016) wonders further that in Colombia emotions change seamlessly and effortlessly between shame and pride, despair and hope, sorrow and happiness—but shouldn't they? Isn't being natural, simple, and easy-going a good thing? As opposed to the US, where one is supposed to pretend to just be perfect, happy, and busy working as in “American Beauty” movie.¹²

Wallace (2017a) offers many illustrative quotes by Colombians and about Colombians:

“Money is nice but it's not the most important thing,” “In general we are a culture that values what you have,” and “We love people and music” “Colombians are innocent. They're curious.” “Colombians have become indifferent to situations of war. In other words, if the problem does not touch me directly, I must feel grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky.” “Colombians have always demonstrated incredible, Herculean and powerful resilience to war, death and to the harsh history of violence and diplomatic failures,” “Colombians feed this resilience through human connections and the communal experience.”

“We live for parties, holidays, and fill the void with a fanaticism for sporting events and beauty pageants and entertainment” “The dance frees you. It is a way of expression and feeling. Here the music is carried in the blood, in the veins, in our heart. It's a great passion we carry throughout our lives”¹³

¹⁰But see Banfield (1967, 1974)—it could be also culture of poverty that results in poor development. Yet, not caring too much can be actually what is needed for much of a society in the West—see wonderfully refreshing Manson (2015).

¹¹Excellence is pervasive, e.g., Plano TX, has on its official logo “City Of Excellence.” Pursuit of perfection/excellence generates arms race and constantly raises the bar, creating even more stress and anxiety in a vicious cycle, and ultimately by definition creates mass failure—humans by definition are not perfect, and there can only be one or a handful of winners in any race (Frank 2012, Manson 2015). In addition to stress and anxiety, shame and guilt are arguably created as well.

¹²“Surface acting” (faking emotions that are deemed appropriate) is emotionally draining (Brooks 2022).

¹³“Colombian salsa, as opposed to other forms, is denoted by faster syncopations that match the people's natural energy. It's an egalitarian genre, accessible

Davies (????) adds few happy Colombian traits: warm and polite, deeply affectionate among friends, and kind to strangers; loves to party, reveres, and adores their family, and is so enthusiastic about life.

Moreno (2013) lists some intriguing hypotheses as to happiness predictors that could be used in the future research: biodiversity, climate diversity, plenty of festivals/holidays, healthy lifestyle and food, dancing.

Theory of Alienation

"Alienation is the transformation of people's own labor into a power which rules them" (marxists.org/subject/alienation). Alienation means separation of a person from the conditions of meaningful agency—a typical situation is when a person does not own means of production—such a person is only an appendage of a machine (Horowitz 2022). The overall alienation consists of alienation from: the product of labour, the activity of labour, one's own specific humanity, others/society. For elaboration see Horowitz (2022) and marxists.org/subject/alienation.

For instance, in Colombia, pull over from the road and right there on a roadside you get a friendly personal cup of coffee. In the US, you can go to Starbucks that feels like hospital or airport—robotic and inhuman. Starbucks workers (not to mention McDonald's and other fast foods) do seem to be alienated both from the product and the activity—they have no freedom, autonomy or latitude over the product and almost none over labor (there are strict procedures that must be followed).

Same holds for other chains that dominate the US, and could be extended to other businesses, delivery for instance. US Amazon drivers have cameras and motion detectors in the truck and to meet the quota sometimes they have to pee in the bottle (Moyer 2022). Similarly in warehouses, workers are wearing bracelet with GPS, and to meet the quota sometimes have to restore to painkillers that are freely available from dispensaries (Streitfeld and Kantor 2015, Guendelsberger 2019). What else could be a better example of loss of humanity or de-humanization than a human wearing a bracelet with GPS eating painkillers and working alongside robots in a giant warehouse?¹⁴ Of course, not all workers have such dire conditions, but this is arguably the trend, if innovative Amazon does it, others are likely to follow. In Colombia, on the contrary, much of delivery is informal—often a guy on a motorcycle who has much more autonomy and freedom over execution of his job. In fact, about half of the Colombian economy is informal—informal labor is at about 50% of the workforce (cited in Hurtado 2016).¹⁵

And then there are two other types of alienation: from oneself and society—if one performs highly specialized task in a repetitive fashion for long hours (such as much of the US economy), one becomes alienated from herself and the society. This can be easily observed after working hours—the US workers are like ghosts without much life in them and without much interaction (Putnam 2001, Duany et al. 2001).

Colombians are not alienated—their life is about family, friends, and fun, not about money—less money orientation, less alienation (?).

As per livability theory (Veenhoven 2014), society is a system to satisfy human needs, but there are multiple serious discontents of the Western society and many human needs are suppressed and not satisfied (Freud et al. 1930). Notably highly capitalistic societies, such as the US, serve to satisfy the capitalists, rather than the working people (Marx [1867] 2010).¹⁶

to everyone, and it seems to make the entire country happy. But is it a different experience than in other countries, like, say, with Brazilians and samba?" "I think there are several differences [...] Our dance is much more sociable. It's necessary to dance salsa as a couple or in a group. There is a more direct connection. For these reasons, it's been gaining importance in the world." "Salsa is a refresher of human dignity. It overshadows inequity and discontent with sharp rhythms and the madness of love. It closes social distances because it requires people to embrace each other in a moment of eye contact, the feel of the skin, bringing them together with movement, helping them to know each other and see the best in each other. It has a long cultural heritage of peace."

¹⁴Movie fiction is becoming reality—"Elysium" (imdb.com/title/tt1535108)

¹⁵Colombia has a high prevalence of informal work above 50% and workers in informal sector are less happy (Hurtado et al. 2017). This would contradict alienation hypothesis, but it doesn't take into account confounders such as lower pay, lack of benefits, etc.

¹⁶To be fair, so far alternatives to capitalism such as communism did have failed spectacularly say as in Soviet Union and continue to fail in Venezuela and elsewhere. But what about fully automated luxury communism (Bastani 2019)? Furthermore, to be fair, there are many great things about the West and the US: vibrant international melting pot—Colombia may be a microcosm of Latin America, but US may be a microcosm of the World; relative lack of (crude) corruption, working independent courts, un-corrupt law enforcement, abundance of goods and services (not that need that much for livability), and arguably the biggest advantage: the highest wages in the world. But arguably if you do not make a lot of money, the US is not the best place to be—alienation is not worth for little money.

Singapore: a Fool's Hell?

An useful counterexample for Colombia could be “fool’s hell”—a place that has high objective quality of life or livability, but low subjective wellbeing or life satisfaction.

Singapore, Switzerland of Asia, is impeccably/squeaky clean, extremely stable/predictable/disciplined and safe (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022). Singapore, by many standards, is one of the best, if not the best place in the World. It has World’s third highest (after Qatar and Luxembourg) Gross Domestic Product per Capita Purchasing Power Parity adjusted (IMF 2017). It has also third highest (after Monaco and Japan) life expectancy (Central Intelligence Agency 2017), second highest economic freedom (Heritage 2017). Singaporean children score highest on educational tests (Coughlan 2017), it is making greatest progress in health (Fullman et al. 2017), has the World’s fastest internet (McSpadden 2015), and 2nd best roads (World Economic Forum 2017). It even has world’s strongest passport (Chandran 2017). In short, one could say that Singapore is one of most livable places in the World, if not the very most livable in the World. Singapore’s life satisfaction rank is 68/160 (WDH), again, Colombia is 3/160.

Being impeccably clean, extremely disciplined and safe can hamper positive freedom (Singapore scores 7 v Colombia 8 in WVS) and ultimately happiness. For instance, no smoking in Singapore—but cigars help great deal (Freud).¹⁷ No marijuana, no gum chewing, and a list of prohibitions continues (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022).

the US: Fool's Hell?

The US, the world-renowned “best country in the world,” home to the American dream, notably the very richest country in the world (excluding tiny oil producing countries such as Norway), ranks only 46/160 in WDH—the “best country in the world” doesn’t even make it to the top happiness quartile. This sounds like fool’s hell, the opposite of Colombian mismatch of QOL and SWB. Except that, also as in Colombia’s case, there is arguably better match between QOL and SWB than expected, because there are non-commodity components such as personal freedom and social connection that need to be taken into account. Colombia is actually quite livable and so it is happy, and the US actually is not that livable, and hence not that happy.

In the US, pursuit of money and pursuit of happiness are about the same thing (Easterlin 1973). But we know that money does not buy happiness, and if anything, excessive pursuit of it, such as that in the US, may actually decrease happiness (Kasser 2016, Dittmar et al. 2014, Brown and Kasser 2005, Kasser 2003, Schmuck et al. 2000, Kasser and Ryan 1993, Leonard 2010). Arguably the major culprit is consumerism—in the US one can make a good living, make good salary, the problem is people spend it on stuff they don’t need and end up on the hamster wheel (again Colombians feel more free than Americans 8 v 7.7 in WVS).

One would imagine that US must have top income mobility in the world or surely somewhere near the top, it is after all the country of American Dream where hard work results in success better than elsewhere. But many other countries have actually “more realistic dreams” than the US—for instance, it is easier to make it in Norway, Denmark, or Finland (?????). In terms of mobility, the US is more like Fool’s Paradise—people and especially immigrants think it is a paradise—you work hard, and you go to the top, but it is actually easier in other countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

This is one of the striking paradoxes in the social indicators field—given poor or mediocre objective quality of life indicators, Colombia is an extremely happy country. How? So is Colombia “Unlivable” but “Happy,” a so called Fool’s Paradise ? Arguably not.

¹⁷ “Smoking is one of the greatest and cheapest enjoyments in life, and if you decide in advance not to smoke, I can only feel sorry for you,” “[Cigars have] served me for precisely fifty years as protection and a weapon in the combat of life ... I owe to the cigar a great intensification of my capacity to work and a facilitation of my self-control.” Per Freud see <https://www.freud.org.uk/2020/04/22/freud-and-his-cigars/> and Elkin (1994). Of course, as with everything, moderation should be exercised, for instance, smoking more than 2 cigars a day increases probability of health problems much more than smoking less than 2 cigars per day, and while some studies find no health effects of smoking less than 2 cigars per day, some studies do find negative effects (e.g., Chang et al. 2015).

Colombia is a genuinely wonderful deeply familial/social place as many locals and travelers would attest (e.g., Roos 2019, Wallace 2017b, Davies ????)

Colombians don't seem to be weighted down by civilization and its discontents (Freud et al. 1930), or ghosts of the past Pile (2005b,a), Pile et al. (1999).

The world has much to learn from Colombia how to be happy.¹⁸ This paper argues that Colombia is one of the very best countries to visit, and it may even be one of best places to live.

The conclusion is that Colombia is not only one of the happiest countries, but also arguably quite livable. Surely many QOL metrics point to Colombia's real and serious problems, notably poverty and inequality, but at the same time Colombians enjoy superb positive freedom, and social connection.

In contrast—there is the great American alienation—a key point is that Americans don't even seem to realize at all, don't give it the slightest thought and don't question the status quo and current way of life—indeed travel to a place like Colombia may be necessary to open one's eyes. For instance, it is clear from figure 7 that Philly is for business and Cali is for people.¹⁹

Figure 1: Getting out of the city's main transportation hub. (Zoom in to see the details.)

(a) Philadelphia 30th st station

(b) Cali's terminal de transporte



Colombia is mostly a real paradise, not fool's paradise—the point is that in the West, and especially in the US, materialism and consumerism are so extremely rampant and widespread that they are not even noticed—equating happiness with money is a norm money=happiness (Easterlin 1973). So then it is unthinkable that not wealthy country such as Colombia can be happy. For instance, ?? wonders about paradox of happy peasants v frustrated millionaires—but is it that unexpected? Peasants spend their time in nature, human natural habitat; millionaires likely spend their time in office in meetings on a hamster wheel.

The reasoning is that there must be something wrong with happiness measure (e.g., ?????), or with Colombians 'fools paradise'—it simply seems wrong that with little money there may be happiness; but again, we know that money doesn't buy happiness, and indeed excessive pursuit of money, such as that prevalent in the US, may kill happiness.

Only apparently great happiness is possible in unlivable conditions. Table 2 points to problems in terms of metrics that are mostly economic, some legal/institutions, and physical infrastructure. But these things are not the only things that matter ²⁰ there are other

¹⁸Note that the arguments and results presented here likely generalize to some degree to other Latin countries, perhaps especially the Caribbean—perhaps, there may be “Caribbean energy.” Ecuador's energy, for instance, is more flat.

¹⁹It is getting worse in Colombia however—notably the urban landscape is getting littered with commercial centers “centro commercial” (Western-like malls). Villages are still spared.

²⁰As long as the problems are not extreme, and in Colombia they sometimes are. For instance, mediocre or relatively poor road condition does not hamper human flourishing much, but extremely bad condition such as falling bridge does create great unhappiness. Same with poverty—one can live happily on very little, indeed be poor by western standards, without hot water, without car, etc, but abject poverty such as malnutrition does create great unhappiness. There is considerable abject poverty in Colombia, and no amount of nature, festivals, or cheerfulness can help with it.

things that matter for human flourishing or happiness. Despite all the problems with poverty, roads, corruption, etc, as enumerated at the beginning in table 2, Colombia arguably is a quite livable place. Colombians have a wonderful joyful, stressless, and spontaneous way of life, they feel free and are socially connected. And, again, in fact the more focus on money, the less human friendly the place is.

Finally, let's turn to the issue of fool's paradise in Colombia. Yes, survey data does show that Colombians living in Colombia and making Colombian salary are happy, but would they still be happy if they knew life, salary, and opportunities in the West, say the US, would they stay in Colombia, so again ignorance is a bliss? it's a paradise but only because people don't know any better?

The concept of fool's paradise is related to the concept of 'ignorance is a bliss,' and there may be a grain of truth there. Colombians may not know about good life, may not realize the possibilities and opportunities in the West, especially those in poor and isolated areas. For instance, inhabitants of poor municipalities in the Choco are happy to know only that environment in which they were born and raised, but when they know and live in other municipalities with greater socio-economic development their demands and expectations increase (Muñoz-Cardona 2018). Many poor may be relatively segregated and isolated into their neighborhoods, not knowing better, and thus being satisfied with little what they have. Similarly, to women in rural China, who only became unhappy once they became exposed to higher standard of living (Rosenthal 1999).

Curiously, Martínez and Short (2020) reports that in Cali residents in the poorest districts were more satisfied with their lives, and speculates that it may be so due to the high resilience of this population being affected by crime, poor health, and insufficient provision of public goods. It may be similar at country level, Colombia was ravaged by largest civil conflict in Latin America and drug-trafficking related violence in 80s and 90s (Martínez and Short 2020), and now while still poor and unsafe as compare to West, much better than 30-50 years ago; and what it went through might have made it resilient.

ONLINE APPENDIX

Brief Definitions

Overall Subjective WellBeing (SWB) can be broken down into components. Notably, there is affective happiness (feel happy) v cognitive life satisfaction (perceive/evaluate life as satisfying).

The two would overlap/correlate moderately but they are conceptually different—e.g., I am happy at the moment because I see blue sky and eat a tasty burger, but I am dissatisfied with my life because I have no friends, no money, and bad health. Or I can be satisfied with my life as a whole because I have many friends, excellent health, and great job, but I am unhappy now because the weather is bad and my lunch is not tasting good.

Likewise, a typical Scandinavian, say from Iceland, looks grumpy, cold, unfriendly, and rather sad, doesn't talk much, doesn't smile, yet Scandinavians consistently report very high life satisfaction. Latinos report quite high life satisfaction, and are extremely happy: warm, cheerful, friendly.

Another notable distinction is hedonia: more joy and fun than pain and misery (Bentham) v eudamonia: good life, realizing one's potential, becoming who you are (Aristotle, Nietzsche). **todo somewhere eg discussion where i say ignorance is a bliss its like be satisfied pig v unhappy Socrates, so perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia**

For discussion see Diener (2009), Weijers (2011), Weijers and Jarden (2013), McMahon (2006), Ryff (2014) CITE RYFF guess that youtube vid i

Happiness v Life Satisfaction

Colombia is one of the happiest countries in the world, or indeed the happiest (Roos 2019). Colombia scores in top decile in terms of life satisfaction (Scandinavia often tops the rankings). Yet in terms of emotions and daily life experience: smiling and laughter, respect, enjoyment, worry, sadness and anger: positive daily experiences and emotions, the top countries are: Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Of the 10 countries that rank highest on positive experiences, 7 are Latin American (Roos 2019). Colombians seem to have warm, welcoming, and unshakable spirit; and they appear resilient—grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky, and even innocent (Wallace 2017b).

Existing Limited Research

a small subsection where list existing research on swb in col-lina—any other?

There is economic research focusing on SWB and inequality in Latin America (Graham and Felton 2006) and Colombia specifically (Burger et al. 2021), but it doesn't address livability-happiness paradox. The top 1% of the income distribution accounts for over 20% of total income in 2010—the rich Colombians are mostly rentiers and capital owners. (Alvaredo and Londoño Vélez 2013) Yet, regardless of the income level, Colombians are optimistic about their mobility (Londoño Vélez 2011).

Adaptation is strong in Latin America, for instance poor people such as peasants can be happy because of adaptation; crime and corruption decrease happiness, but less so when they are more prevalent—again people adapt (Graham 2009).

Then there is a useful volume on happiness in latin America: “Handbook of Happiness Research in Latin America” making two relevant points about SWB in Colombia. In the poorest income quintile life satisfaction was above 8 on a 10-point scale (Hurtado 2016). Family is the most important relational good, main social support—family is the meaning of life—the end that justifies efforts (Velásquez 2016).

In conclusion—there is still very little research on happiness in Colombia, and the exiting research is rather indirect and tangential only to our topic, and hence, we turn to anecdotal evidence to explain high happiness amidst low livability

again see tag col in ebib

A look over time

First we have observed a paradox across space (v other countries) of happiness amongst un-livability. Another paradox is within Colombia and over time: Easterlin's Paradox—PCGDP went up 50% but SWB remained flat.

Other metrics improved, too—Gini dropped from 59 in 2000 to 51 in 2019 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.P0V.GINI/?locations=CO>.

Unemployment rate is at 15%, in 2010, poverty rate was at 34.1%

Colombia was ravaged by largest civil conflict in Latin America and drug-trafficking related violence in 80s and 90s (Martínez and Short 2020).

armed conflict between government forces, leftist guerrilla groups and right wing paramilitaries. The conflict escalated in the 1990s mainly in remote rural areas.

so we focus on the aftermath—how's Colombia doing in the last 20 years 2000-2020

Here we focus on 20 year span.

about a third of Colombians live on less than \$5.50 a day in 2019, but strikingly, that's a progress, it is down from about 2/3 of Colombians in 2000!

We use www.worldvaluessurvey.org

SWB question reads "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Using this card on which 1 means you are "completely dissatisfied" and 10 means you are "completely satisfied" where would you put your satisfaction with your life as a whole?"

Freedom q and some elab from free from and to

GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$) in thousands <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?locations=CO>

Colombian GDP went up by 50% over 1997-2018. Colombians happiness and feeling of freedom are among the highest in the world, but they did not change over 1997-2018. In Colombia, GDP has no relationship with SWB, i.e., the Easterlin Paradox holds.

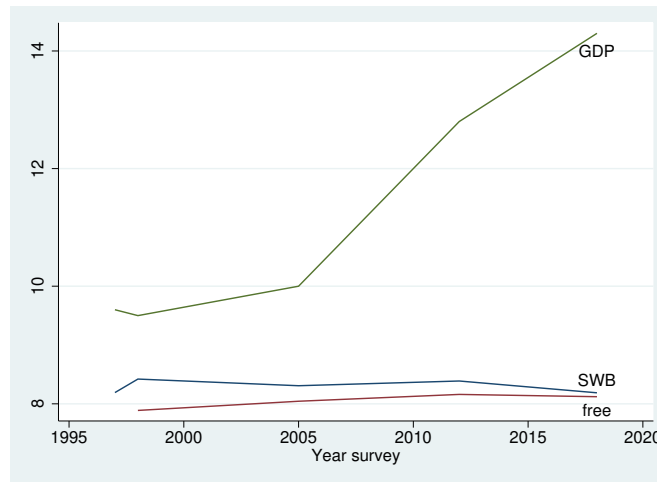


Figure 2: XXX

like 1st caption on swb, wave 5-7: 3 most free cties, plus usa, germany uk cp some explanation from free from and free to Puerto Rico 8.4 Mexico 8.3 Colombia 8.1 Germany 6.9 UK 7.2 USA 7.7

swb flat—but given enormous improvement in QOL these should be increasing—so again, arguably GDP has little to do with QOL, just as in a cross section

The US v Colombia in Pictures

note these are screenshots on full screen of res at 1200 860

The point is that the apparent economic or even livability superiority of the US over Colombia actually is only economic—more expensive physical infrastructure doesn't make it more livable and actually can make it less livable.

It is often overlooked point that something less developed economically and cheaper is actually better (happier).

The US infrastructure is great for business or making money, but it is bad for living there. It could be a difficult tradeoff to solve: economic growth v wellbeing, except that a very convincing argument has already been made that we do not need any more economic growth KALLIS

Some inspiration comes from Quercia (2014)—the idea is that what matters when traveling is not only speed and distance.

US has this strange obsession with excellence/perfection and productivity, also in terms of built environment apparently thinking that the more ordered, organized, and man-made, the better. But the thinking was not always this way. Thoreau, for instance, was an American (Thoreau 1995 [1854], 1993).

The following are one of the author's own subjective/anecdotal opinions. Note when picking images i dropped the Google's yellow man more or less randomly only given rural, urban, suburb, toll, etc and took first useful image. I tried to avoid to cherry pick positive

and negative imaginary. Comments welcomed! Contact the corresponding author.

For best results zoom as much as screen allows.

In fig 3 obvious difference is width or 6 v 2 lanes, and economically 6 beats 2—can move more stuff faster, but assuming the same traffic, it is more interesting and fun or joy to ride on smaller roads.²¹ The other less obvious difference is vegetation—around I-95 it is pedigreed nicely trimmed man made fake nature; around 25 it is real wild nature—more happiness there too.

I-95 misery v bad Colombian road fun!

Keep in mind that 25 is not some small rural road—it's one of the most major ones, the Pan Americana.

²².

have captions and or in text: like robotic/alien-like v human

Figure 3: A major road/highway in the middle of nowhere.

(a) US I-95 rural MD, couple miles N of Susquehanna River

(b) Colombian 25 (Pan Americana), between Cali and Popayan



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fig 4 here we are passing through towns—on 295 through cherry hill, but who would have noticed looks the same as I-95 in previous picture, whether rural or urban, there's the same fake nature on the side.

fig 5 Approaching Del Mem Br toll—looks unwelcoming, like an entrance to minimum security prison. Peaje on 25 looks better, again natural wild vegetation, can pull over and rest a bit, buy an organic orange.

in fig 6 even toll booth looks more human in Colombia, a friendlier more welcoming place, the one in the US looks like entrance to a minimum security prison

Last but not least let's hang out in a city, in fig 7 Say you are a weary traveler arriving at 30th st station in Philly. You get out of the station, and it's a desert—nowhere to hangout, have to keep walking. You arrive to terminal de transporte in Cali, get out of the building and plenty of places to buy food, drinks, and sit down.

fig 3:

https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6003437,-76.0444379,3a,75y,249.22h,83.1t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1s0wpnM0Yc9KK6YD6ZhdgiJQ%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D150.322%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192

²¹And adding more lanes does not automatically mean less traffic, often on the contrary, people decide to drive more—adding more lanes for traffic is like losing your belt for obesity (e.g., Duany et al. 2001).

²²And why not more fun highway, say from rural mountainous TN? Because the contrast is for the flat, dense, developed and wealthy North East—that's where economic productivity thrives

²³295 not NJ Turnpike, to be conservative, NJ Turnpike is even more fake

Figure 4: Passing through a town.

(a) El Bordo on 25

(b) Cherry Hill on 295



Figure 5: Approaching toll.

(a)

(b)



https://www.google.com/maps/@2.7886904,-76.5521276,3a,75y,177.41h,100.48t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sDBBN1UaixNJLt92e0!6shttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DDBBN1UaixNJLt9uUruLT5g%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D259.4146%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656
fig 4

https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9151715,-74.9812986,3a,75y,355.06h,94.72t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1svjTItcXHUaahWE2e0!6shttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DvjTItcXHUaahWEkdG9iXbg%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D108.39489%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192

https://www.google.com/maps/@2.1191142,-76.9827811,3a,75y,29.76h,78.92t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sLImUajMcEKyf6eLx2e0!6shttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D155.053%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656
fig 5

https://www.google.com/maps/@3.1520675,-76.460229,3a,75y,181.56h,83.61t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s27q_DTIQZ3Tc67jR

Figure 6: Paying toll.

(a) Del Mem Br

(b) Peaje on 25 south of Cali



Figure 7: Getting out of the train station and bus terminal. (Note: no trains in Colombia.)

(a)

(b)



2e0!7i13312!8i6656

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6962957,-75.5445256,3a,75y,284.53h,94.14t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s6XzK4mx61AETyW>

2e0!7i16384!8i8192

fig 6

same as above just move ahead

fig 7

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9556825,-75.1809809,3a,75y,98.3h,91.96t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sxOT6mOTfk7frupGV>

2e0!7i16384!8i8192

<https://www.google.com/maps/@3.4656412,-76.5213045,3a,75y,89.77h,81.78t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sWYckArtZNxDNuhKT>

2e0!7i13312!8i6656

What is Better: The West e.g, the US or Latin America, e.g., Colombia? Future Research and Questions that Remain

Much further research needed, especially in terms of systematic and deeper approaches—here the goal was to paint a broad picture.

A big question remaining is who would move where, ie if a person had reasonable information and opportunity to chose a place to live—would a better choice be the West, e.g., the US, or Latin America, e.g., Colombia. Ideally actual moving should be measured, not self-reported plans or ideas as it is likely to be biased especially if a person haven't actually experienced life in both countries.

There is obviously large migration from Latin America to the US, and surely more people want to come to the US than leave it, but this doesn't mean that the US is the best place to live—people mostly come to the US for the money, not necessarily for quality of life.

Indeed recent media reports argue the opposite—people are leaving the US for Latin America for better quality of life there, eg Californians and others are moving to Mexico; and anecdotal evidence—many westerners fall in love with Colombia.

So while presumably many Colombians would like to move to the US, and not many Americans would like to move to Colombia, it should be noted that indeed many Westerners, from better objective conditions, do move to Colombia.

To provoke discussion and spark research, these are only speculations so far.

World Economic Forum report 2017

USNEWS measures QOL as: A good job market, Affordable, Economically stable, Family-friendly, Income equality, Politically stable, Safe, Well-developed public education system, Well-developed public health system—see <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/colombia>.

World Economic Forum (WEF) indicators are in figure ??.



Figure 8: World Economic Forum report 2017 from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TTCR_2017_web_0401.pdf.

Colombia is a wonderful place, it has everything: Pacific, Caribbean, jungle, desert, mountains, you name it, like Latin America in one country, 2nd greatest biodiversity in the world so it is striking that according to WEF in terms of Prioritization of Travel & Tourism Colombia ranks 97th out of 136 countries (World Economic Forum 2017). Given that its air transport infrastructure is good 60th, but Ground and Port Infrastructure bad 116th. And Safety and Security 136th/136—surely Colombia should work to improve safety, but

much progress has already been done, and it is important to point out that much of the country is safe, and dangerous Colombia is more of a stigma of the past than present reality.

Additional Information

9

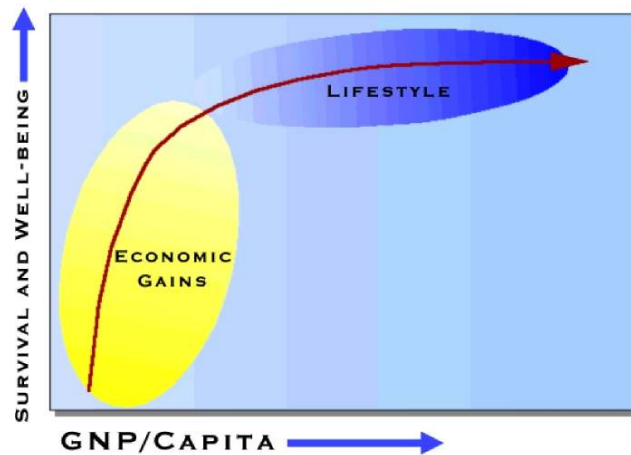


Figure 9: Well-being and income, (Inglehart 1997).

TO n org later can redo with latinobarometer, goes back every year to like 95, but at least since 05 has 8 step urbanicity, but top one is 100k and then there is capital ad and then can do size with province :)



Figure 10: Long term GDP from Colombian government.

	a1	a2	a3	a4	a5	a5A	a5b
-10	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
10-50k	-0.04	-0.02	-0.04	-0.07	-0.08	-0.18	-0.18
50-500k	-0.03	-0.01	-0.10	-0.15	-0.14	-0.11	-0.17
500k+	-0.05	-0.02	-0.18	-0.25+	-0.23+	-0.20	-0.31*
1998	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00		
2012	-0.03	-0.02	0.01	-0.06	-0.02	0.00	0.00
2018	-0.24***	-0.21**	-0.19**	-0.20**	-0.18*	-0.19*	-0.13+
age		0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.03+	0.03
age2		-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
male		0.01	-0.10*	-0.11*	-0.05	-0.13	-0.12
married or living together as married		0.21***	0.22***	0.22***	0.19**	0.16+	0.17+
divorced/separated/widowed		-0.02	-0.00	-0.01	-0.03	-0.11	-0.12
health			0.61***	0.59***	0.58***	0.59***	0.62***
class			0.12***	0.07*	0.06*	0.05	0.06
education			-0.03**	-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.06**	-0.06**
income				0.08***	0.07***	0.09***	0.10***
Full time					0.00	0.00	0.00
Part time					0.08	-0.10	-0.10
Self employed					-0.04	-0.14	-0.16
Retired					0.13	0.19	0.20
Housewife					0.08	0.03	0.05
Students					0.02	0.12	0.12
Unemployed					-0.25**	-0.26+	-0.27+
Other					-0.13	-0.18	-0.15
religious services					0.02	0.01	0.01
No religious denomination					0.00	0.00	0.00
Buddhist					-0.18	0.04	-0.09
Christian					0.05	0.10	0.08
Evangelical					0.01	-0.14	-0.13
Jehovah witnesses					0.40+	0.61	0.52
Jew					0.38		
Muslim					0.94***	1.44***	1.19***
Other					0.07	-1.02+	-1.03*
Pentecostal					1.11**	1.16**	1.20**
Protestant					0.38	0.14	0.08
Roman Catholic					0.06	0.13	0.13
Seven Day Adventist					0.76+	0.76	0.82+
Wicca					1.15***	1.37***	1.36***
AU: Uniting Church					-0.26*	-0.42**	-0.27+
victim of a crime last year						-0.21*	
freq felt unsafe from crime at home						-0.17***	
constant	8.46***	8.25***	5.49***	5.53***	5.46***	5.40***	4.97***
N	6025	6024	5895	5874	5853	2885	2885

+ 0.10 * 0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001; robust
std err

Table 4: OLS regressions of satisfaccionvida. See coef on 2018—they're becoming less happy!!

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