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# World Happiness Report 2026 — Finland Tops Again, Social Media Alarm for Youth

20 March 2026

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# World Happiness Report 2026 — Finland Tops Again, Social Media Alarm for Youth

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## ✎ WHY IN NEWS

The World Happiness Report 2026, released by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, ranked Finland first for the ninth consecutive year and placed India at 116th. The report sounded a global alarm on social media's adverse impact on the mental well-being of young people, particularly adolescent girls.

## WHAT IS THE WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT?

The **World Happiness Report (WHR)** is an annual publication of the **Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford**, in partnership with **Gallup**, the **UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)** and an independent editorial board. First released in **2012** to coincide with the High Level Meeting on Well-Being and Happiness at the United Nations, it is typically published on or around the **International Day of Happiness — March 20**. The 2026 edition was released on **March 19, 2026**.

**Mandate:** The UN General Assembly (Resolution 65/309, 2011) invited member states to measure the happiness of their people and use data to guide public policy. The WHR translates this mandate into a global ranking.

**Editors:** John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs (Columbia University), Jan-Emmanuel De Neve (Oxford), Lara B. Aknin (Simon Fraser University), and Shun Wang.

## METHODOLOGY — HOW COUNTRIES ARE RANKED

The rankings use data from the **Cantril Life Satisfaction Ladder** (Gallup World Poll):

Respondents imagine a ladder with the best possible life = 10 (top rung) and worst = 0 (bottom rung), and self-rate their current position

Responses are averaged over a **3-year rolling window** (~1,000 respondents/country/year = ~100,000 globally)

**Six explanatory variables** (not used to calculate the rank directly, but used to explain WHY a country scores high/low):

**GDP per capita** (log, PPP)

**Social support** (“If you were in trouble, do you have relatives/friends you can count on?”)

**Healthy life expectancy at birth**

**Freedom to make life choices** (“Are you satisfied with your freedom to choose what to do with your life?”)

**Generosity** (donations to charity, relative to GDP)

**Perceptions of corruption** (in government and business)

## 2026 RANKINGS — KEY DATA

### TOP 10 COUNTRIES:

Finland — 7.764 (9th consecutive year at #1)

Iceland — 7.540

Denmark — 7.539

**Costa Rica** — 7.439 (*highest-ever Latin American ranking*)

Sweden — 7.255

Norway — 7.242

Netherlands — 7.223

Israel — 7.187

Luxembourg — 7.063

Switzerland — 7.018

**Notable:** No English-speaking country in the top 10 (New Zealand ranked 11th).

**BOTTOM 3:**

Afghanistan  
Sierra Leone  
Malawi

**INDIA: 116TH (SCORE: 4.536; UP FROM 118TH IN 2025 AND 126TH IN 2024)**

**Regional peers:** Nepal ranked 99th, Pakistan 104th — both ahead of India.

**India's context:** India's score is weighed down by relatively lower values on social support, freedom of choice, and generosity variables, even as GDP per capita has improved. The report notes India's score is broadly consistent with its income level, but social cohesion indicators lag behind peers.

## SPECIAL FOCUS 2026 — SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH WELL-BEING

The report's **Special Chapter** examined declining happiness among young people (ages 15–24) in high-income countries, attributing much of the decline to **excessive social media use**.

**Key findings:**

In the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, teen life satisfaction scores have fallen sharply since ~2012 — roughly coinciding with the mass adoption of smartphones and social media

Teenagers using social media **5+ hours/day** showed significantly lower subjective well-being

**Gender gap:** Adolescent girls are disproportionately affected (linked to social comparison, cyberbullying, and body image issues on image-heavy platforms like Instagram and TikTok)

**Dose-response relationship:** 0–1 hour/day of social media use correlated with higher well-being; harm increased non-linearly beyond 2 hours/day

**Mechanism:** Passive scrolling is more harmful than active communication; late-night phone use disrupts sleep, which mediates much of the harm

**Policy implications the report flags:**

Age restrictions on social media (aligned with recommendations by Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*, 2024)

Digital literacy curricula in schools

Platform design regulation (no algorithmic amplification for under-18s)

India-specific: India has ~750 million smartphone users; NASSCOM estimates 380 million+ users under 25

## WHY IS FINLAND ALWAYS #1?

Academic research into Finland’s consistent performance identifies:

**Trust in institutions** – extremely low corruption, high trust in police/courts/government

**Nordic welfare model** – universal healthcare, free education, strong social safety nets

**Work-life balance** – generous parental leave, 4-day workweek experiments, short working hours

**Nature access** – “everyman’s right” (free access to nature regardless of land ownership)

**Social equality** – low income inequality (Gini coefficient ~0.27 vs India’s ~0.35)

**Low comparison culture** – less consumerist social pressure

**Important for UPSC:** Finland’s #1 ranking is not about GDP (Norway, Luxembourg have higher GDP per capita). It is driven most by **social support, freedom, and low corruption** – which are not purely economic variables.

## INDIA-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS

Indicator	India’s relative position
GDP per capita	Improving but still low
Social support	Below average
Healthy life expectancy	69.5 years (2023)
Freedom of choice	Below world average
Generosity	Moderate
Corruption perception	Lower than average

### India’s policy context:

**National Mental Health Policy 2014** acknowledged mental well-being as a public health priority

**Ayushman Bharat** covers mental health in its HWC (Health and Wellness Centre) mandate

**NIMHANS** (National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru) – apex institute for mental health research in India

India has a **mental health treatment gap** of ~80% – most people with mental illness receive no treatment

**UPSC RELEVANCE**

Publisher (Wellbeing Research Centre, Oxford + Gallup + SDSN), Finland's rank (#1, 9th year), India's rank (116th, score 4.536), methodology (Cantril Ladder), International Day of Happiness (March 20), first WHR year (2012), UN Resolution 65/309.

**MAINS GS1:**

Social well-being, role of social capital in happiness; youth mental health crisis.

**MAINS GS2:**

Role of international reports in policy-making; India's mental health policy; social media regulation.

**MAINS GS4:**

Ethics — relationship between happiness, freedom, and good governance; intergenerational responsibility on digital environment.

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT — CORE DATA:

Publisher: Wellbeing Research Centre, University of Oxford (with Gallup, SDSN, editorial board)

First edition: 2012; 2026 edition released March 19, 2026

Released on: International Day of Happiness — March 20

Survey: Gallup World Poll (Cantril Life Satisfaction Ladder, 0–10 scale)

Sample: ~100,000 respondents across ~147 countries

Window: 3-year rolling average (~1,000 respondents/country/year)

### 2026 RANKINGS:

#1: Finland 7.764 (9th consecutive year); #2: Iceland 7.540; #3: Denmark 7.539

#4: Costa Rica 7.439 (best-ever Latin American rank); #5: Sweden 7.255

#6: Norway 7.242; #7: Netherlands 7.223; #8: Israel 7.187; #9: Luxembourg 7.063; #10: Switzerland 7.018

India: 116th (score 4.536; up from 118th in 2025, 126th in 2024)

Nepal: 99th; Pakistan: 104th (both ahead of India)

Last: Afghanistan (147th); no English-speaking country in top 10

### SIX EXPLANATORY VARIABLES:

GDP per capita (log, PPP), Social support, Healthy life expectancy, Freedom of choice, Generosity, Corruption perception

These explain WHY a country scores high/low but are not used to calculate the rank directly

### SOCIAL MEDIA FINDING:

Teenagers 5+ hrs/day on social media: significantly lower well-being

Girls disproportionately affected (social comparison, cyberbullying, body image)

Passive scrolling more harmful than active communication; late-night phone use disrupts sleep

Decline most pronounced in US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand since ~2012

Dose-response: 0–1 hr/day correlated with higher well-being; harm increases non-linearly beyond 2 hrs/day

### OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

UN Resolution 65/309 (2011): mandated happiness measurement

International Day of Happiness: March 20 (since 2013)

Bhutan's GNH (Gross National Happiness): independent happiness index since 1972 — predates WHR

World's least happy region (consistently): Sub-Saharan Africa

Editors: John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Lara B. Akinin, Shun Wang

NIMHANS, Bengaluru: India's apex mental health research body

India's mental health treatment gap: ~80%

National Mental Health Policy: 2014; Mental Healthcare Act: 2017

India's Gini coefficient: ~0.35 (vs Finland's ~0.27)

Sources: [UN SDSN](#), [GKToday](#), [The Hindu](#)

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