

OPINION

Vancouver is Canada's unhappiest city, says StatsCan

And if you don't like it? **Move to Quebec**



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It is counterintuitive, and also not surprising, that Vancouver is Canada's unhappiest city when it comes to its residents' evaluation of life satisfaction.

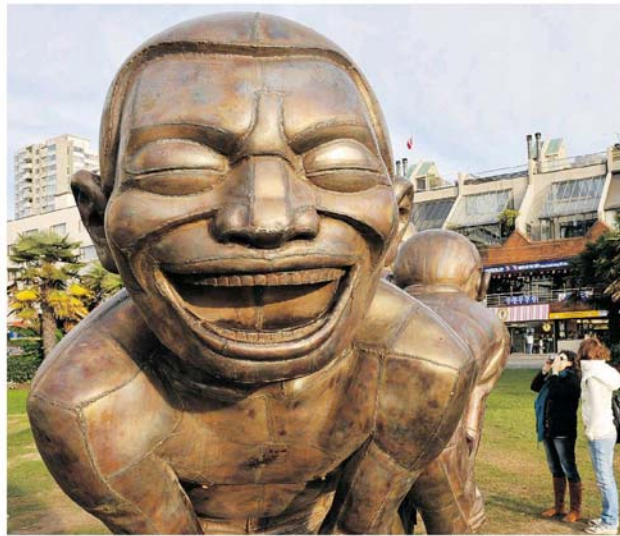
It is last among 33 cities in Statistics Canada's inaugural report on happiness released Monday.

Vancouver is consistently rated as one of the world's most livable cities. It's been praised for its urban design, natural beauty and the year-round outdoor lifestyle.

But when it comes to happiness, that beauty stuff doesn't make much difference. Even affordability and wealth aren't the best determinants of happiness.

What matters more, researchers say, are social connectedness and things like collaboration, generosity and having a sense of purpose.

Those are easier to achieve in smaller communities, which explains why top-ranked Saguenay, Trois-



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While praised for its urban design, natural beauty and year-round outdoor lifestyle, Vancouver is Canada's unhappiest city when it comes to residents' evaluation of life satisfaction.

Rivieres, St. John's and Sudbury do much better than Canada's biggest cities.

"Whenever we become more satisfied with our social relationships, our happiness increases," says Meik Wiking, CEO of The Happiness Research Institute in Denmark.

"We often choose to invest our time in achieving a higher income because we expect it will bring greater happiness, but sometimes that time might be better invested in our social

relationships."

Denmark has twice topped the United Nations' World Happiness Report. Wiking said Monday that is because of strong social networks but also because the Danish welfare system is "really good at reducing extreme unhappiness."

At least once a week, 78 per cent of Danes socialize with friends and family; the average in the rest of Europe is 60 per cent.

In Vancouver, it's only 41 per cent, according to a 2011 survey done by the Vancouver Foundation. In that survey, one in four residents in Metro Vancouver said they are alone more

often than they would like. Many respondents talked about how hard it is to find friends here.

Nearly half said they felt no connection to their neighbourhoods, while most had not participated in any community events in the past year.

UBC economist John Helliwell is co-author of the StatsCan and the World Happiness reports. In a paper he co-wrote last year, the happiness of British Columbians was compared with greater levels of life satisfaction of Atlantic Canadians. The conclusion was "the extent to which people feel they belong to their communities."

The study went on to say that there are also "very large effects from the size and the intensities of the individual's networks of both family and friends ... in the frequency of seeing friends and the extent to which neighbours are trusted."

But Quebec now surpasses the Atlantic Provinces in terms of people's life satisfaction.

In fact, the underlying theme of the How's Life in the City? Report is that if you want to be happy, move to Quebec.

"(The high levels of life satisfaction) is not explained by income alone," Helliwell said in an interview Monday. "It's because they feel at home — both Anglophones and francophones."

And that warm glow of belonging, he said, is the equivalent to a doubling or tripling of the average income.

Back in beautiful B.C., it seems there's not a lot of happiness.

Not a single city in the province cracked the top 10. Kelowna rates the highest, but it is in the middle of the pack — No. 12 of 33. Abbotsford comes in at No. 24 after Winnipeg — yes, Winnipeg! — but ahead of Kitchener.

As for Victoria, the capital and perennial tourist attraction, it's at 27 sandwiched between Peterborough and Barrie.

Of course, in Canada's unhappiest city, the average ranking of life satisfaction of 7.8 out of 10 isn't that much worse than the folks in Saguenay, Trois-Rivieres and St. John's who put themselves at 8.2.

But StatsCan researchers found significant variations when they looked at the lowest and highest scores from individuals across the country. They differed by as much as 10 to 17 percentage points, which raises questions about what accounts for the spread.

It's also worth pointing out that even being the unhappiest city in Canada still means that Vancouverites are considerably happier than the vast majority of people in the world since Canada consistently ranks high on the World Happiness Index.

And it's true, too, that we can change this. But how?

"People should do what they can to make the world a happier place, not what they can do to make themselves happy," says Helliwell.

"They will get the warm glow of happiness from helping other people. ... Happiness is not a tool (to make ourselves feel better). It's an outcome."

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