

Job Satisfaction in the United States

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Most American adults are employed and their job is not only their main source of income, but also an important life domain in other ways. Work occupies a large part of each worker's day, is one's main source of social standing, helps to define who a person is, and affects one's health both physically and mentally. Because of work's central role in many people's lives, satisfaction with one's job is an important component in overall well-being. For example, job satisfaction and general happiness are positively related (Pearson's $r=.286$, $\text{prob.}=.000$) with those saying they are very happy in general rising from 15.7% for those very dissatisfied with their job to 45.3% very happy among those very satisfied with their job.

Job satisfaction is not evenly distributed across occupations or workers. In general, job satisfaction increases with the prestige or social standing of occupations.¹ As Table 1 shows, for all workers 47.0% are very satisfied with their jobs and that increases from 33.6% very satisfied among the unskilled and entry-level occupations lowest in prestige to 55.8% very satisfied among professionals and others in jobs with the highest occupational prestige. Similarly, general happiness among the employed averages 33.3% very happy and also rises with occupational prestige. The % very happy climbs from 25.5% to those in occupations with the lowest social standing to 40.2% very happy for those with jobs of the top social standing.

But there is even more variation in job satisfaction and well-being across occupations than shows up by looking at the 10 deciles of occupational prestige. The US Census Classification of Occupation (1980 edition) distinguished over 500 categories of jobs. Of these 198 have enough people employed in the jobs for measures of job satisfaction and/or general happiness to be reported on from NORC's General Social Surveys (GSS).² The remaining occupations have too few workers for reliable reporting.

Table 2 lists the top and bottom 12 occupations in terms of job satisfaction. The most satisfying jobs are mostly professions, especially those involving caring for, teaching, and protecting others and creative pursuits. Heading the list are members of the clergy with a mean score of 3.79 and 87.3% very satisfied.³ Second are the first of two healing professions, physical therapists with 78.1% very satisfied. They are followed in 8th place by psychologists with 66.9% very satisfied. Third are firefighters with 80.1% very satisfied. Fourth, comes the first of three educational occupations: educational administrators (e.g. deans, principals, and superintendents) with 68.4% very satisfied, teachers in 6th place with 69.2% very satisfied, and special education teachers in 9th place with 70.1%. Fifth is the first of two creative professions, painters, sculptors, and related with 67.3% very satisfied and then authors in 7th place with 74.2% very satisfied. Next comes operating engineers in 10th place with 64.1% very satisfied, office supervisors in 11th position with 80.6% very satisfied, and in 12th place those in security and financial sells positions such as stock brokers, bond sellers, and financial advisors.

The least satisfying dozen jobs are mostly low-skill, manual and service occupations, especially involving customer service and food/beverage preparation and

¹ Occupational prestige is measured by the NORC-General Social Survey Occupational Prestige scale. For details see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2007 and Nakao and Treas, 1994.

² See Appendix for details on the GSS.

³ The mean score best reflects the overall position of an occupation since it takes into consideration all responses. The % very satisfied is a more limited measure and does not perfectly follow the overall mean score. However, the % very satisfied has more intuitive meaning and will be primarily used in this report. The same applies to the measure of general happiness.

serving. Roofers have the least job satisfaction with only 25.3% very satisfied. Second comes the first of several food and beverage occupations, waiters and servers, with 27.0% very satisfied. Other food/drink occupations near the bottom include bartenders in 4th place with 26.3% very satisfied, food preparers at 9th with 23.6% very satisfied, and butchers and meat cutters in 11th position with 31.8% very satisfied. Third from the bottom is another manual trade, laborers outside of construction, with 21.4% very satisfied. In fifth and sixth position are handpackers/packageers with 23.7% very satisfied and freight, stock, and material handlers with 23.9% very satisfied. Next in 7th and 8th place are apparel clothing salespersons and cashiers with respectively 23.9% and 25.0% very satisfied. At 10th place are expeditors which includes customer service clerks and complaint desk clerks with 37.0% very satisfied.⁴ In 12th position are furniture/home furnishing salespersons with 25.2% very satisfied.

Table 3 shows the top and bottom 12 occupations in general happiness. Unlike job satisfaction, general happiness does not explicitly refer to work and occupations. Most of the occupations ranking high in general happiness are professions involving helping others, technical and scientific expertise, or creativity. The occupation with the happiest people is the clergy with 67.2% very happy. Second are firefighters with 57.2% very happy. Third come transportation, ticket, and reservation agents such as travel agents with 56.5% very happy. Fourth are architects with 53.5% very happy. Fifth are special education teachers with 52.6% very happy. Other scientific and technical occupations scoring near the top are science technicians in 7th place with 51.0% very happy, industrial engineers in 9th place with 48.4% very happy, and airline pilots and navigators in 10th position with 49.1% very happy. Sixth come actors and directors with 51.0% very happy. In 8th position are those in miscellaneous mechanical and repairing occupations with 53.6% very happy. In 11th position are hardware and building supply salespersons with 55.9% very happy. 12th position is held by housekeepers and butlers with 57.7% very happy.

The occupations with the least happy people are mostly unskilled manual and service positions. At the bottom are garage and service station attendants with 13.2% very happy. Second are roofers with 14.2% very happy. Third are molding and casting machine operators with 11.1% very happy. Next, in fourth and fifth place are two lower-level, construction trades, construction laborers with 18.8% very happy and miscellaneous construction workers with 22.1% very happy. Sixth are welfare service aides with 18.4% very happy. Seventh are amusement and recreation attendants with 15.7% very happy. Eighth are maids and housemen with 22.8% very happy. Ninth come pressing machine operators with 23.5% very happy. Tenth are electronic repairers with 15.7% very happy. Eleventh are food-preparation, kitchen workers (not including cooks and chefs) with 20.8% very happy. In 12th position are miscellaneous machine operators with 17.3% very happy.

Three occupations finish in the top dozen on both job satisfaction and general happiness. The clergy distinguishes itself from all other occupations by ranking first in both job satisfaction and general happiness. Firefighters do almost as well being third on

⁴ Expeditors have a higher proportion in the very satisfied category than is typical for occupations ranked near the bottom. They also have high levels in the dissatisfied categories that bring their overall average down. There is more internal variation in satisfaction among expeditors than for most occupations.

job satisfaction and second on general happiness. Special education teachers are the third doubly-top-ranked occupation, being 9th in job satisfaction and 5th in general happiness.

Only one occupation, roofers, scores in the bottom on both scales, being lowest in job satisfaction and next to the bottom on general happiness.

It is also instructive to note that a number of very high prestige occupations do not finish at the top of either list. Physicians are first overall in occupational prestige and do score well-above average in both job satisfaction (mean score 3.47; 57.9% very satisfied) and general happiness (mean score 2.39; 43.9% very happy), but not in to top 12 on either measure. Similarly, lawyers, who are number two in occupational prestige, also score above average on job satisfaction (mean score 3.33; 52.4% very satisfied) and general (mean score 2.37; 43.0% very happy), but outside the top dozen positions.

The scorings of some other occupations that do not fall in the top or bottom 12 are as follows:

	Job Satisfaction		General Happiness	
	Mean Score	% Very Satisfied	Mean Score	% Very Happy
Police and Detectives	3.45	59.3	2.41	44.0
Registered Nurses	3.42	53.1	2.31	36.3
Editors & Reporters	3.39	52.9	2.23	35.7
Accountants	3.37	49.7	2.38	41.8

Table 1

Job Satisfaction and General Happiness by Occupational Prestige

Deciles of Occupational Prestige	Job Satisfaction		General Happiness	
	Mean Score	% Very Satisfied	Mean Score	% Very Happy
Lowest	3.05	33.6	2.12	25.5
2 nd	3.10	34.6	2.15	28.4
3 rd	3.25	43.4	2.20	31.3
4 th	3.28	46.1	2.16	29.4
5 th	3.25	44.3	2.21	31.8
6 th	3.37	51.5	2.28	36.0
7 th	3.36	49.2	2.28	35.9
8 th	3.40	53.9	2.27	36.0
9 th	3.45	57.3	2.31	38.6
Highest	3.44	55.8	2.35	40.2
Overall Average	3.30	47.0	2.23	33.3

N=27,587

Source: General Social Surveys, 1988-2006, See Appendix

Job Satisfaction: On the whole, how satisfied are you with the work you do—would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?

Mean Score runs from 1 for someone who is Very Dissatisfied to 4 for someone who is Very Satisfied.

General Happiness: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

Mean Score runs from 1 for someone who is Not Too Happy to 3 for someone who is Very Happy.

Table 2

Top Occupations in Job Satisfaction

Rank	Occupations	Mean Score	% Very Satisfied
1	Clergy	3.79	87.2
2	Physical Therapists	3.72	78.1
3	Firefighters	3.67	80.1
4	Education Administrators	3.62	68.4
5	Painter, Sculptors, Related	3.62	67.3
6	Teachers	3.61	69.2
7	Authors	3.61	74.2
8	Psychologists	3.59	66.9
9	Special Education Teachers	3.59	70.1
10	Operating Engineers	3.56	64.1
11	Office Supervisors	3.55	60.8
12	Security & Financial Services Salespersons	3.55	65.4

Bottom Occupations in Job Satisfaction

1	Roofers	2.84	25.3
2	Waiters/Servers	2.85	27.0
3	Laborers, Except Construction	2.86	21.4
4	Bartenders	2.88	26.4
5	Hand Packers and Packagers	2.88	23.7
6	Freight, Stock, & Material Handlers	2.91	25.8
7	Apparel Clothing Salespersons	2.93	23.9
8	Cashiers	2.94	25.0
9	Food Preparers, Misc.	2.95	23.6
10	Expeditors	2.97	37.0
11	Butchers & Meat Cutters	2.97	31.8
12	Furniture/Home Furnishing Salespersons	2.99	25.2

Job Satisfaction: On the whole, how satisfied are you with the work you do—would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?

Mean Score runs from 1 for someone who is Very Dissatisfied to 4 for someone who is Very Satisfied.

Table 3

Top Occupations in General Happiness

Rank	Occupations	Mean Score	% Very Happy
1	Clergy	2.61	67.2
2	Firefighters	2.57	57.2
3	Transportation Ticket & Reservation Agents	2.55	56.5
4	Architects	2.52	53.5
5	Special Education Teachers	2.51	52.6
6	Actors & Directors	2.49	51.0
7	Science Technicians	2.47	51.0
8	Mechanics & Repairers, Misc.	2.47	53.6
9	Industrial Engineers	2.47	48.4
10	Airline Pilots & Navigators	2.45	49.1
11	Hardware/Building Supplies Salesperson	2.45	55.9
12	Housekeepers & Butlers	2.45	57.7

Bottom Occupations in General Happiness

1	Garage & Service Station Attendants	1.78	13.2
2	Roofers	1.88	14.2
3	Molding & Casting Machine Operators	1.92	11.1
4	Construction Laborers	1.94	18.8
5	Construction Trades, Misc.	1.97	22.1
6	Welfare Service Aides	1.98	18.4
7	Amusement & Recreation Attendants	1.98	15.7
8	Maids & Housemen	1.99	22.8
9	Pressing Machine Operators	1.99	23.5
10	Electronic Repairers	2.00	15.7
11	Kitchen Workers, Food Preparations	2.00	20.8
12	Machine Operators, Misc.	2.02	17.3

General Happiness: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

Mean Score runs from 1 for someone who is Not Too Happy to 3 for someone who is Very Happy.

Appendix: General Social Surveys (GSS)

The GSS are conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. James A. Davis, Tom W. Smith, and Peter V. Marsden are the principal investigators. The GSS are full-probability samples of adults living in households in the United States. Interviews are conducted in-person. Not including the oversamples in 1982 and 1987, sample size across 1972-2006 totals 50,313 respondents (1972=1613, 1973=1504, 1974=1484, 1975=1490, 1976=1499, 1977=1530, 1978=1532, 1980=1468, 1982=1506, 1983=1599, 1984=1473, 1985=1534, 1986=1470, 1987=1466, 1988=1481, 1989=1537, 1990=1372, 1991=1517, 1993=1606, 1994=2992, 1996=2904, 1998=2832, 2000=2817; 2002=2765; 2004=2812; 2006=4510). Full technical details on the sample, response rates, and other methodological matters are presented in James A. Davis, Tom W. Smith, and Peter V. Marsden, General Social Surveys, 1972-2006: Cumulative Codebook. Chicago: NORC, 2007.

For more information of the GSS: www.gss.norc.org

References

- Davis, James A.; Smith, Tom W.; and Marsden, James A., General Social Surveys Cumulative Codebook: 1972-2006. Chicago: NORC, 2007.
- Nakao, Keiko and Treas, Judith, Updating Occupational Prestige and Socioeconomic Scores: How the New Measures Measure Up,” Sociological Methodology, 24 (1994), 1-72.