

AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2011

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The Economics of Happiness in the Americas

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Executive Summary. Does money buy happiness? Classic research into the question argued the affirmative but *only* at the individual level, maintaining that living in a wealthier country does not lead to comparatively higher levels of life satisfaction (Easterlin 1995). The “Easterlin paradox,” as this is termed, has since been subjected to debate. In this *Insights* report, with data from the 2010 AmericasBarometer, I document that economic factors matter at both the individual and national levels in the Americas. Specifically, perceptions of one’s personal economic situation, household wealth, and national economic development are strong predictors of happiness. In addition, other factors, such as church attendance, interpersonal trust, ideology and socio-demographic traits play a significant role in predicting levels of life satisfaction in the region. I conclude with a discussion of remaining questions, suggesting in particular that future research focus on happiness as an independent variable in explanations of political attitudes and behavior.

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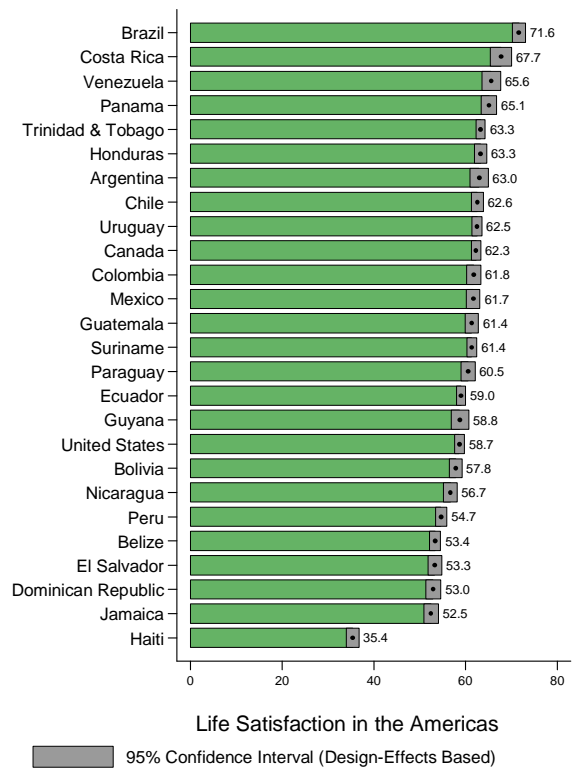
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What brings happiness? In the academic pursuit of the formula for happiness, there is no consensus view on what determines “the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life favorably” (Veenhoven 1991, 565)¹. At the same time, economic factors are frequently linked to happiness and life satisfaction (Easterlin 1995; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; Tella and MacCulloch 2008).² However, a debate has developed over an important early finding suggesting that economic fortunes matter *only* at the individual level, so that living in a wealthier country does not lead to comparatively higher levels of life satisfaction. While Easterlin (1995) provided important evidence in support of this “paradox,” newer research suggests that national wealth may indeed matter for happiness. The *AmericasBarometer* survey allows the opportunity to ask these questions: To what extent do economic factors predict life satisfaction in the Americas? Does economic development across countries explain levels of well-being in the region? Furthermore, what other factors explain happiness in the Americas?

This *Insights*³ report looks at levels of life satisfaction in the Americas and assesses both individual and national determinants of variation in those levels. To evaluate this topic, I query the 2010 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys,⁴ in which 43,990 respondents from 26 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States and Canada were asked the following question:

LS6. On this card there is a ladder with steps numbered 0 to 10, where 0 is the lowest step and 10 the highest. Suppose that I tell you that the highest step represents the best life possible for you and the lowest step represents the worst life possible for you...if the highest is 10 and the lowest 0, on what step of the ladder do you feel at this moment?⁵

Figure 1. Life Satisfaction in the Americas, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

¹ I would like to thank Carol Graham for her comments on a previous version of this report

² Scholars agree that life satisfaction and happiness are extremely highly correlated and that the concepts can be used interchangeably (Schyns 1998).

³ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>
The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop>

⁴ Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

⁵ Recent studies find that support for the Easterlin paradox depends on multiple factors such as the question used to measure life satisfaction. Specifically, it is found that questions framed like the one used in this report show a clear relationship with income, while using questions that ask directly about the level of happiness or life satisfaction attenuates that relationship (Graham et al 2010). The LAPOP questionnaire has another question tapping the same issue of life satisfaction, LS3. This question asks respondents if they are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very satisfied with their lives in general. Although average scores are higher using LS3, countries remain almost in the same positions, with the exception of Colombia, which appears at the top. When the models presented here are estimated using LS3 as the dependent variable, results are quite similar, though married becomes statistically significant and size of town becomes insignificant. GDP at the national level is significant at $p=0.07$.

Responses were recoded on a 0-100 scale to follow the LAPOP standard, which facilitates comparability across questions and survey waves.⁶

Figure 1 displays national average scores with their confidence intervals. The average level of life satisfaction in the Americas is 59.5. All the countries except for Haiti, with an average of only 35.4, surpass the middle point on the scale.

Nonetheless, there is some variation across countries. At the one extreme, citizens in Brazil report the highest levels of life satisfaction in the Western hemisphere; Brazil is the only country with a score higher than 70. Costa Rica, Venezuela and Panama also show relatively high levels of life satisfaction. At the other extreme, apart from the aforementioned low levels in Haiti, we find Peru, Belize, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, where average life satisfaction scores fall in the low 50s.

What factors explain variation in life satisfaction in Latin America and the Caribbean?⁷ I approach this question by assessing the impact of different factors pointed out by the literature on happiness, first using a linear regression model with individual level variables, and then a multilevel analysis in order to capture the effects of national income.⁸

Many scholars link economic conditions to happiness, but there is dispute over the extent to which national- versus individual-level economic factors matter.

Individual Determinants of Life Satisfaction: Economic Factors and Beyond

The numerous factors identified in existing scholarship as relevant to life satisfaction or happiness can be grouped into broad categories of variables that encompass economic, social, political, and demographic factors. While these can be considered at both the individual and national levels, in this section I focus on individual-level predictors of happiness.

Many scholars have linked economic conditions to happiness, although there is dispute over the extent to which national versus individual level economic factors matter (Clark, Frijters, and Shields 2008; Easterlin 1995; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; Tella and MacCulloch 2008). Easterlin's well-known paradox states that the relationship between income and well-being is only clear within countries and not between countries. For Easterlin (1995), "subjective well-being varies directly with one's income and inversely with the income of others" (p. 36). In the next section I test the extent to which Easterlin's argument holds at the national level. At the individual level, however, previous research in Latin America has shown that wealth (Graham and Felton 2006) and satisfaction with one's financial situation (Graham and Pettinato 2001) are positively related to happiness. It would be consistent with this literature to find that levels of individual wealth and perceptions of both the personal and national economy are directly linked to life satisfaction in Latin America and the Caribbean. Along the same line, some have found that unemployment has a strong influence on well-being (Lucas et al. 2004).

Beyond economic conditions, some scholars stress the influence of "companionship" (Lane

⁶ The rate of non response for the whole sample is 2.36%.

⁷ Citizens in Canada and the United States hold sharply higher levels on many socio-economic characteristics; for this reason and because the focus of this series is on Latin America and the Caribbean, I excluded these cases from the analyses. Nonetheless, when I estimated the models presented here including Canada and the United States, the impact of GDP at the national level remains statistically significant, though diminished. Because not all questions were asked in the United States and Canada, these models do not contain all the independent variables used in this report (i.e. wealth, size of city and unemployment). Without these three variables, GDP remains significant at $p < 0.05$. When including income, which leads to a drop of 10% of cases, GDP is significant at $p = 0.07$.

⁸ All statistical analyses in this report were conducted using STATA v10.1 and results were adjusted for the complex sample designs employed. Given that levels of life satisfaction vary across countries, dummy variables for each country were included in the OLS model, with Uruguay

being the country of reference (see Table 1 in the Appendix for the complete model).

2000); that is to say, families and friends provide individuals with social support that positively affects their happiness. In the same vein, some studies have found that church attendance is positively related to life satisfaction (Radcliff 2001; Napier et al 2008), given that religion can be seen as an insurance that offers social and personal support especially in hard times (Clark and Lelkes 2006). Following this line of logic, we might expect that married people and those with children will exhibit higher levels of life satisfaction. The same is expected for churchgoers.

Age is another factor often explored in the literature. The relationship is defined as a U, with young and old people being the most satisfied with their lives. Research shows that people after their 50s become happier, as they are increasingly able to control emotions, resolve conflicts, and escape from difficulties (Economist 2010; Jopp and Rott 2006). I thus expect that citizens in Latin America in the youngest and oldest cohorts will express comparatively higher levels of life satisfaction.

Other scholars focus on cultural and political characteristics to explain variations in happiness. The cultural approach states that there is a positive correlation between life satisfaction and interpersonal trust (Inglehart 1988). Ideology is also seen as a factor that may predict levels of happiness. Studies in the United States (Taylor, Funk, and Craighill 2006) and cross-national works (Napier and Jost 2008) have found that conservative (or rightist) citizens are happier than liberals (or leftists).

To test expectations generated from the above discussion, I model happiness as a function of individuals' wealth and economic evaluations; family structure (marital status and whether or not the respondent has children); age; interpersonal trust; and ideological self-placement.⁹ In addition, because most studies

identify demographic variables as statistically significant predictors of happiness, I include measures of gender, education, and size of town in the model. Finally, although they are not shown in the figure, the model includes country dummy variables to account for the impact of non-measured factors related to the different countries.

The results of this regression analysis are shown in Figure 2. Each variable included in the model is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables on life satisfaction is shown graphically by a dot, which if falling to the right of the vertical "0" line implies a positive contribution and if to the left of the "0" line indicates a negative impact. Only when the confidence intervals (the horizontal lines) do not overlap the vertical "0" line is the variable statistically significant (at $p < .05$ or better). The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients (i.e., "beta weights").

The model shows that, at the individual level, economic factors (wealth and perception of the national and personal economic situation) are positively related to levels of life satisfaction in Latin America and the Caribbean. Those with better economic profiles are happier. Interestingly, the variable with the strongest effect is perception of one's personal economic

rightist/conservative positions. The variable called *married* includes married respondents and those in common law marriages. *Unemployed* refers to respondents who are actively looking for a job. The baseline category contains those who are working, students, housewives, retired or disabled, and who do not work but are not looking for a job. The variable called *children* is a dummy variable which accounts for those who have children, regardless of how many. The economic perception variables come from two questions that ask respondents to describe both the country's economic situation and their overall economic situation as very good, good, fair, bad or very bad. *Church attendance* is measured based on the following question: Do you attend meetings of any religious organization once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year or never? *Interpersonal trust* is measured based on a question that asked respondents about the extent to which people in their community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy. Finally, the measure of *wealth* is based on an index which takes into account household asset items such as television, vehicles, refrigerator, telephone, etc. For more details on the construction of this index see Córdova (2009).

⁹ The *ideology* variable is based on merging two different questions that ask respondents to place themselves on the left-right continuum (asked in Latin America) or on the conservative-liberal one (asked in Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago). Higher values refer to

situation. The influence of this subjective determination is far greater than the more objective wealth measure.¹⁰ In the model, perception of the national economic situation is also statistically significant but its effect is smaller than that of the other economic variables. Also, as expected, being unemployed decreases levels of life satisfaction.

Contrary to what researchers have found in other contexts, being married has a positive effect, but one that is not statistically significant.¹¹ Moreover, having children is negatively related to one's reported level of life satisfaction. In line with the expectation, we observe that those who attend church more frequently are more satisfied with their lives.

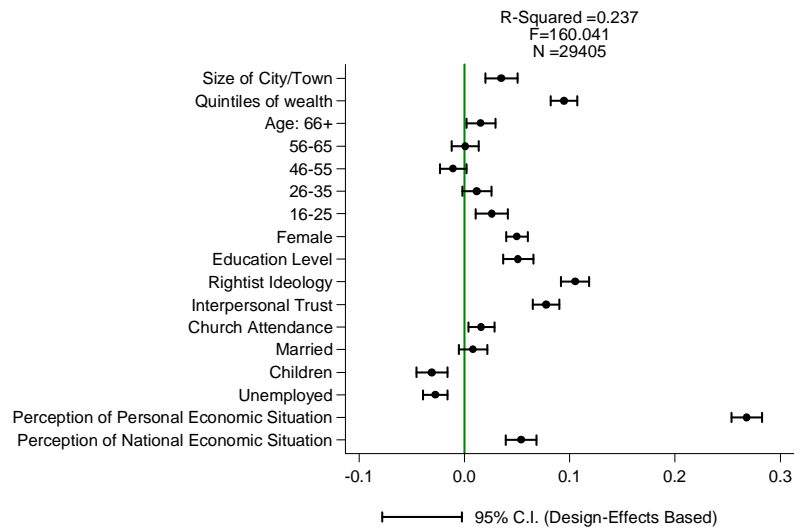
Interpersonal trust has a statistically significant relationship with happiness. Those citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean who consider the people around them to be trustworthy have higher levels of life satisfaction, holding all other variables constant.¹² Also, as is found in advanced democracies, ideology plays a role in explaining happiness. Those at the right end of the ideological spectrum tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction than those placed on the left.

¹⁰ It is possible that this relationship is driven by dual causality: a perceived positive economic situation increases happiness and, as well, happy people tend to perceive better economic situations. It is beyond the scope of this report to test for such dual causality. Nonetheless, it is consistent with the literature to interpret the results to mean that economic evaluations exert an influence on happiness.

¹¹ Breaking this into further categories, I find that, compared to single respondents, married ones are happier, but this is not statistically significant. Divorced and separated citizens are unhappier than singles, but this is not statistically significant. The same is true for a comparison between widowed respondents and married ones; the latter appear slightly happier but the difference is not significant.

¹² We might expect that higher levels of life satisfaction increase interpersonal trust. However, given the scope of this short report I do not test this possible dual causality.

Figure 2. Determinants of Life Satisfaction in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Country Fixed Effects and Intercept Included but not Shown Here

Finally, and consistent with Graham and Felton's (2006) research on Latin America, women, the oldest and youngest, and those who are more educated express higher levels of happiness. However, contrary to a finding in that same study, the results here suggest that living in large cities is related to higher levels of life satisfaction.

Economic Development and Life Satisfaction

But how does a country's economic condition affect its citizens' levels of happiness? Two contrary positions have emerged. Specifically, Easterlin (1995) states that national income and happiness are not related. He argues that citizens determine their levels of life satisfaction by comparing themselves to the others around them; thus, when the national income rises, citizens simply adjust their expectations upwards. However, other scholars find a strong correlation, with citizens in richer countries being happier than those in poorer ones (Economist 2010; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). This would be consistent with an approach based on needs or welfare (Sen 1999, Maslow

1987). That is, in wealthier states, citizens are better able to meet their basic needs and have greater capabilities for human development; this then affects their levels of life satisfaction.¹³

To empirically test this relationship in the context of Latin America and the Caribbean, I estimate a multilevel regression model which includes the previous individual level characteristics *plus* an indicator of economic development. Specifically, national income is measured by an index of GDP per capita.¹⁴ Results from this model are graphically shown in Figure 3. The effects of individual level variables remain practically the same when compared to the previous model. In addition, the national level variable displays a positive effect. Citizens living in richer countries express significantly higher levels of life satisfaction.¹⁵

Conclusion

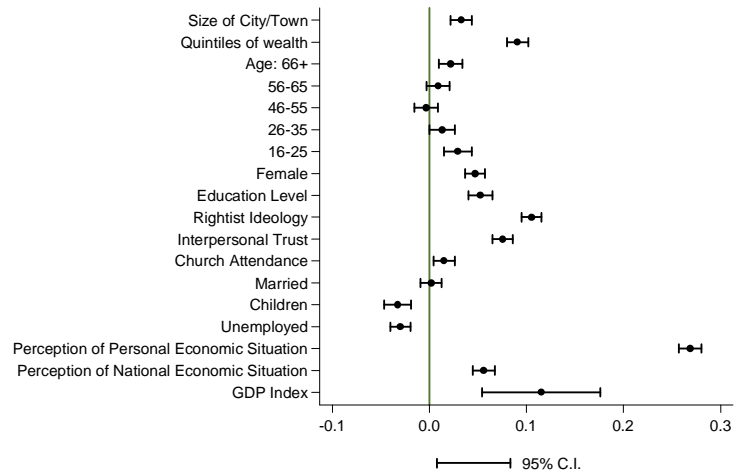
In sum, this *Insights* report suggests that happiness in Latin America and the Caribbean is related to economic factors as well as social, political, and demographic variables. With the exception of Haiti, all the countries display levels of life satisfaction higher than the midpoint on a 0-100 scale. But, still, variation exists within and across countries. Overall, however, we have found that individual and national economic circumstances have a

¹³ Other researchers have focused on types of welfare state regime (Pacek and Radcliff 2008) and democracy (Dorn et al. 2007) among other country-level factors that may affect happiness levels. Democracy is moderately correlated with economic development. Nonetheless, using democracy as a second level variable, measured by Freedom House scores, does not yield statistically significant results, suggesting that economic development is what matters for happiness, rather than democracy.

¹⁴ To measure national wealth, I rely on the 2009 UNDP's GDP index. This index, which can take values between 0 and 1, is based on GDP per capita in purchasing power parity terms in US dollars.

¹⁵ Results for other economic variables at the national level such as GDP growth and inequality did not yield statistically significant results.

Figure 3. The Effect of Economic Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and UNDP (Human Development Report 2009)

powerful effect on happiness and thus find no evidence of the Easterlin's paradox.

This variation in the levels of happiness can be explained by both individual and national characteristics. Therefore, results in this report do not support Easterlin's paradox, according to which happiness is only related to economic conditions at the individual level. We observe that at least within Latin America and the Caribbean, economic development at the national level explains different levels of life satisfaction among citizens in the region. While other factors matter, we clearly see that economic conditions at both levels help to explain a great part of the variance. In fact, it is striking that perceptions concerning one's personal economic situation, a household wealth measure, and a measure of a country's level of development are among the factors with the most substantial power (that is, they have the greatest substantive effects) to predict happiness in Latin America and the Caribbean. Therefore, if policy makers are interested in increasing levels of life satisfaction among citizens, improving economic conditions would seem to be one of the most effective ways to achieve this goal.

It is also striking that most research on happiness is focused on finding its determinants

rather than on looking at its implications, with few exceptions such as a recent study that finds a relationship between levels of life satisfaction and voter turnout among Latin-Americans (Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2011). This report has followed the former model. However, future research could assess the effects of life satisfaction on politics, such as the way citizens get involved in their communities. We might expect happiness to affect how citizens interact

Economic conditions at the personal and national levels are among the factors with greatest substantive impact on happiness in Latin America and the Caribbean.

with their social and political environments or express their demands. For instance, it would be useful to learn the extent to which dissatisfied citizens engage in political activities to demand policies that could improve their levels of happiness. Also, it would be interesting to assess the extent to which life satisfaction is translated into satisfaction with democracy. In short, the study of happiness offers researchers a wide array of possibilities worth exploration.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Predictors of Life Satisfaction in Latin America and the Caribbean 2010

| | Coefficient | Standard Error |
|----------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Percep. National Econ. Situation | 0.0538* | 0.0074 |
| Percep. Personal Econ. Situation | 0.2680* | 0.0074 |
| Unemployed | -0.0275* | 0.0059 |
| Children | -0.0307* | 0.0075 |
| Married | 0.0083 | 0.0069 |
| Church Attendance | 0.0162* | 0.0062 |
| Interpersonal Trust | 0.0777* | 0.0064 |
| Rightist Ideology | 0.1050* | 0.0068 |
| Education | 0.0512* | 0.0072 |
| Female | 0.0499* | 0.0052 |
| 16-25 years old+ | 0.0261* | 0.0077 |
| 26-35 years old+ | 0.0118 | 0.0070 |
| 46-55 years old+ | -0.0105 | 0.0064 |
| 56-65 years old+ | 0.0009 | 0.0065 |
| 66+ years old+ | 0.0158* | 0.0070 |
| Quintiles of Wealth | 0.0945* | 0.0064 |
| Size of Town | 0.0352* | 0.0077 |
| Mexico | 0.0032* | 0.0072 |
| Guatemala | 0.0296* | 0.0078 |
| El Salvador | -0.0420* | 0.0070 |
| Honduras | 0.0337* | 0.0086 |
| Nicaragua | -0.0142 | 0.0079 |
| Costa Rica | 0.0365* | 0.0134 |
| Panama | 0.0104 | 0.0074 |
| Colombia | -0.0007 | 0.0070 |
| Ecuador | -0.0150 | 0.0094 |
| Bolivia | -0.0374* | 0.0094 |
| Peru | -0.0366* | 0.0068 |
| Paraguay | -0.0280* | 0.0077 |
| Chile | 0.0014 | 0.0077 |
| Brazil | 0.0902* | 0.0113 |
| Venezuela | 0.0468* | 0.0085 |
| Argentina | 0.0219* | 0.0092 |
| Dominican Rep. | -0.0340* | 0.0085 |
| Haiti | -0.1176* | 0.0075 |
| Jamaica | -0.0240* | 0.0082 |
| Guyana | -0.0301* | 0.0089 |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 0.0152* | 0.0065 |
| Belize | -0.0271* | 0.0079 |
| Suriname | -0.0197* | 0.0078 |
| Constant | 0.0034 | 0.0070 |
| <i>R-Squared</i> | 0.237 | |
| <i>Number of Observations</i> | 29,405 | |

* p<0.05

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed.

Country of Reference: Uruguay

+ Cohort of reference: 36-45 years old

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Life Satisfaction in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010

| | Coefficient | Standard Error |
|----------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| GDP | 0.1153* | 0.0310 |
| Percep. National Econ. Situation | 0.0561* | 0.0059 |
| Percep. Personal Econ. Situation | 0.2686* | 0.0059 |
| Unemployed | -0.0297* | 0.0052 |
| Children | -0.0325* | 0.0070 |
| Married | 0.0018 | 0.0057 |
| Church Attendance | 0.0153* | 0.0055 |
| Interpersonal Trust | 0.0756* | 0.0053 |
| Rightist Ideology | 0.1052* | 0.0052 |
| Education | 0.0526* | 0.0063 |
| Female | 0.0470* | 0.0052 |
| 16-25 years old+ | 0.0292* | 0.0073 |
| 26-35 years old+ | 0.0131* | 0.0066 |
| 46-55 years old+ | -0.0033 | 0.0062 |
| 56-65 years old+ | 0.0092 | 0.0061 |
| 66+ years old+ | 0.0220* | 0.0061 |
| Quintiles of Wealth | 0.0908* | 0.0056 |
| Size of Town | 0.0329* | 0.0056 |
| Constant | 0.0009 | 0.0314 |
| <i>Number of Observations</i> | 29,253 | |
| <i>Number of Countries</i> | 24 | |
| <i>Wald Chi2</i> | 5711.51 | |

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed.

+ Cohort of reference: 36-45 years old