

BUSINESS

« [Why Health Costs Make American Workers Less Competitive](#) | [Main](#) | [Washington's Short-Sighted Action May Haunt Unions](#) »

May 26 2009, 4:14 pm by [Conor Clarke](#)

Why Are Women Better Off, But Less Happy?

New York Times columnist and former colleague Ross Douthat [writes up](#) the results of a new study by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, which finds that women are less happy than they were a generation ago. Why is this surprising?

American women are wealthier, healthier and better educated than they were 30 years ago. They're more likely to work outside the home, and more likely to earn salaries comparable to men's when they do. They can leave abusive marriages and sue sexist employers. They enjoy unprecedented control over their own fertility. On some fronts -- graduation rates, life expectancy and even job security -- men look increasingly like the second sex.

But all the achievements of the feminist era may have delivered women to greater unhappiness. In the 1960s, when Betty Friedan diagnosed her fellow wives and daughters as the victims of "the problem with no name," American women reported themselves happier, on average, than did men. Today, that gender gap has reversed. Male happiness has inched up, and female happiness has dropped. In postfeminist America, men are happier than women.

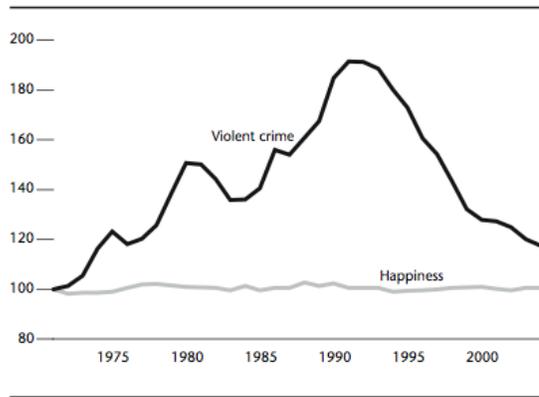
That's Ross's take on "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," available [here](#). The first time I read about this study was last week on Greg Mankiw's blog, where Mankiw [wrote](#): "It sounds like either the women's movement was a mistake or subjective happiness is not the right objective." And while I'm not sure Ross would call the women's movement "a mistake," it's clear he does think there's evidence more liberation has meant less happiness.

But really, why would that matter? I think it's clear that Mankiw's second option -- subjective happiness is not the right objective -- is the better one.

There's a fun game (well, maybe just a game) you can play with self-reported happiness and almost any other variable: Plot them over time and you'll find the most counterintuitive relationship, or no relationship at all. Here, for example, is self-reported happiness and violent crime in the United States (taken from [this study](#)):



Figure 3 Happiness and the violent crime rate in the USA, 1971–2004
1971 = 100



Same problem: "Either hiring all those shiny new police officers was a mistake, or subjective happiness is not the right objective." I'll take the latter option any day. A world with less crime certainly comports with my intuitive sense of justice, even if that world won't make us any happier. And if you think the women's movement was just, I wouldn't worry too much about its consequences for happiness.

Sad-looking little girl from Flickr user [nyki_m](#)

[Permalink](#) :: [Comments \(19\)](#) :: [TrackBacks \(0\)](#) :: [Share This](#)