

DEPARTMENT OF DATA

# The happiest, least stressful, most meaningful jobs in America

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Envy the lumberjacks, for they perform the happiest, most meaningful work on earth. Or at least they think they do. Farmers, too.

Agriculture, logging and forestry have the highest levels of self-reported happiness — and lowest levels of self-reported stress — of any major industry category, according to our analysis of thousands of time journals from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey. (Additional reporting sharpened our focus on lumberjacks and foresters, but almost everyone who works on farms or in forests stands out.)

## The joy of working

Well-being by industry, rated on a six-point scale

ACTIVE	HAPPINESS ▼	MEANING	STRESS
Agriculture, logging and forestry	4.4	5.2	1.9
Real estate, rental and leasing	4.2	4.4	2.6
Construction	4.2	4.6	2.0
Management, administrative and waste	4.1	4.3	2.3
Information	4.0	4.3	2.1
Health and social assistance	4.0	4.9	2.6
Arts, entertainment and recreation	4.0	4.2	2.2
Transportation and warehousing	4.0	4.1	2.2
Wholesale	3.9	4.4	2.1
Retail	3.9	4.1	2.3
Educational services	3.9	4.7	2.9
Repair, laundry and membership	3.9	4.6	2.1
Nondurable-goods manufacturing	3.8	4.1	2.5
Public administration	3.8	4.1	2.4
Durable-goods manufacturing	3.7	4.2	2.6
Hotels, restaurants and bars	3.7	4.1	2.5
Professional, scientific and technical services	3.7	4.2	2.7
Finance and insurance	3.6	4.1	2.9

Note: Data is weighted for duration and comes from 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2021.

The time-use survey typically asks people to record what they were doing at any given time during the day. But in four recent surveys, between 2010 and 2021, they also asked a subset of those people how meaningful those activities were, or how happy, sad, stressed, pained and tired they felt on a six-point scale. As you might guess, activities like playing with your grandkids tend to be loaded with happiness and meaning, while waiting on hold or commuting produce little of either.



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But the two aren't always correlated. Health-care and social workers rate themselves as doing the most meaningful work of anybody (apart from the laudable lumberjacks), but they rank lower on the happiness scale. They also rank high on stress.

The most stressful sectors are the industry including finance and insurance, followed by education and the broad grouping of professional and technical industries, a sector that includes the single most stressful occupation: lawyers. Together, they paint a simple picture: A white collar appears to come with significantly more stress than a blue one.

While our friends the lumberjacks and farmers do the least-stressful work, their jobs are well-known to be particularly perilous, and they report the highest levels of pain on the job. To puzzle out why, we zoomed out to look at activity categories beyond work.

The most meaningful and happiness-inducing activities were religious and spiritual, which doesn't tell us much about farming or forestry — at least not as it's commonly practiced in the United States. But the second-happiest activity — sports, exercise and recreation — helps crack the case.

## The happiest, most meaningful and most stressful activities

Rated on a six-point scale

ACTIVE	HAPPINESS ▼	MEANING	STRESS
Religious and spiritual activities	5.1	5.6	0.7
Sports, exercise and recreation	5.0	5.0	0.8
Caring for and helping non-household members	4.9	5.3	1.3
Caring for and helping household members	4.9	5.3	1.4
Volunteer activities	4.9	5.4	1.3
Eating and drinking	4.7	4.5	1.0
Telephone calls	4.5	4.7	1.7
Consumer purchases	4.4	4.2	1.4
Socializing, relaxing and leisure	4.4	3.9	1.0
Traveling	4.3	4.0	1.4
Household activities	4.2	4.5	1.3
Work and work-related activities	3.9	4.4	2.4
Professional and personal care services	3.8	4.6	2.2
Education	3.6	4.2	2.6
Household services	3.6	4.0	2.0
Personal care	2.8	3.3	2.8

Note: Data is weighted for duration and comes from 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2021

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics via IPUMS

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Like farming, recreation ranks high on both happiness and pain. And the two activities have one obvious thing in common: They take place outside. Preferably in nature. The slight pain is a sign of demanding physical exertion, and the price of getting outdoors.

With that in mind, we ran the numbers again, this time for the location of each activity. We found that while your workplace looms as the single most stressful place in the universe, the great outdoors ranks in the top three for both happiness and meaning — only your place of worship consistently rates higher.

# The happiest places on earth

Rated on a six-point scale

ACTIVE	HAPPINESS ▼	MEANING	STRESS
Place of worship	5.2	5.5	0.7
Outdoors (not at home)	5.0	4.9	1.0
Someone else's home	5.0	4.8	0.9
Restaurant or bar	4.9	4.6	0.8
Bicycle	4.8	4.2	1.1
Vehicle (passenger)	4.7	4.2	1.2
Gym or health club	4.6	4.9	0.9
Other store or mall	4.6	4.4	1.3
Walking	4.5	4.1	1.2
Your home or yard	4.3	4.1	1.3
Vehicle (driver)	4.3	3.9	1.5
Grocery store	4.2	4.1	1.5
Subway or train	4.1	3.8	1.9
School	4.1	4.2	2.2
Bus	4.1	3.5	1.5
Your workplace	3.9	4.4	2.3
Bank	3.8	4.5	2.1

Note: Data is weighted for duration and comes from 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2021

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics via IPUMS

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Researchers across the social and medical sciences have found a strong link between mental health and green space or being outdoors. Even seeing a tree out your window can help you recover from illness faster. So imagine the boost you get from being right next to said tree — even if, like our friend the lumberjack, you're in the process of chopping it down.

That adjacency to nature forms the core of forestry's appeal. Mike Wetherbee is now board president of the Maine Forest and Logging Museum and marketing manager of his wife Alissa's timber-sports barnstorming crew, the Axe Women Loggers of Maine. But his long journey into forest work began on a bridge while driving home from a seasonal job near the coastal scrub forests of the Everglades.

"I said, 'Why am I leaving the forest? Why am I going back to an office setting?' And I stopped right there in the middle of the bridge and pulled a U-turn," Wetherbee told us. He would go on to fight wildfires in the area, work in conservation and, eventually, marry a timber-sports world champion: Alissa excels in ax throwing, log pushing and crosscut sawing, and is the only person to have rolled a log across the Mississippi River. (It only took her 30 minutes!)

Dana Chandler, co-owner of Family Tree Forestry in South Carolina, compared working in the forest not just to therapy, but to aromatherapy. It's tough being a woman in the industry, especially an African American one, but what other job gives you a constant smelltrack of pine sap, fresh wood chips, loamy soil and swamp decay?

"Even on your worst day — something has broken down and you need to get wood to the mill — the wind'll blow and you'll inhale a familiar scent — that pine sap — and it'll just take you to a place of peace instantly," Chandler said. "It's therapy. The woods is therapy, the forest is therapy. You can have the worst day ever but when you get out here? The forest just takes it all away."

Chandler's dad was a logger. So was her granddad. She grew up around logging, exploring the creeks and crannies of Carolina forests with her sister while her dad sawed and chopped. And now her own daughter, Lana, bounces around Dana's operation, effortlessly tossing around industry jargon and visiting local wildlife — they recently found a family of baby raccoons! — as she learns the forest. Chandler said she'd be delighted if Lana, 5, joined the family business.

"With all of those challenges that they face, I have never heard a logger say, 'I'm going to get out of it,'" Chandler said. "They say, 'I wouldn't want to do anything else.'" She says it's because of the woods: "It humbles you."

Like Wetherbee, Leslie Bobby didn't grow up in the industry or originally target a life in the trees.

"I actually grew up in Chicago, so I had no idea about forestry. ... I just wanted to work outside," said Bobby, who runs Southern Regional Extension Forestry in Athens, Ga. "Even though I grew up in a city with a family that has no outdoorsy history."

That instinct led her from a Peace Corps posting in Kenya teaching forestry to wildland firefighting in the dusty ponderosa and pinyon pines of Northern New Mexico. And finally to her current post supporting forest-focused outreach and education at land grant universities across 13 Southern states.

But foresters' happiness comes from more than just the great outdoors, Bobby says. Forestry forces you to work on a slower time scale. It pushes you to have a generational outlook.



“There’s a point where you are now planting trees that you are not going to see harvested,” she said. “It speaks to something larger than yourself. ... Your work is living on, and someone else will benefit from your efforts in a tangible way.”

Just as importantly, she said, as a forester you know your work is sustainable. As your trees grow, they’re sucking carbon out of the air while providing a habitat for wildlife and a linchpin for regional ecosystems. When they’re harvested, their carbon will either be stored for the long term as a joist in a house, or as paper packaging that will replace the fossil-fuel-heavy plastics littering American landfills.

“People are mission-driven,” Bobby told us. “They feel that this is an important thing they’re doing, even if the financial rewards are not nearly enough.”

***Howdy! The Department of Data is still looking for quantifiable queries! What are you curious about: Are political donors as old as our politicians? Which states drink the most alcohol? Which countries use the most water? Just ask!***

*If your question inspires a column, we’ll send an official Department of Data button and ID card. This week’s button goes to the one and only Nathan Yau, a longtime visualization inspiration whose work at FlowingData sparked this particular column.*