Some states just happier than others

By Randolph E. Schmid
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WASHINGTON — People in sunny, outdoorsy states — Louisiana, Hawaii, Florida — say they're the happiest Americans, and researchers think they know why.

A new study comparing self-described pleasant feelings with objective measures of good living found those folks generally have reason to feel fine.

The places where people are most likely to report happiness also tend to rate high on studies comparing such things as climate, crime rates, air quality and schools.

South Carolina ranks sixth on the list.

The happiness ratings were based on a survey of 1.3 million people across the country by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It used data collected over four years that included a question asking people how satisfied they are with their lives.

Economists Andrew J. Oswald of the University of Warwick in England and Stephen Wu of Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., compared the happiness ranking with studies that rated states on a variety of criteria ranging from availability of public land to commuting time to local taxes.

Probably not surprisingly, their report in today's edition of the journal Science found the happiest people tend to live in the states that do well in quality-of-life studies.

"This is the first objective validation of 'happiness' data," Oswald said.

Ranking No. 1 in happiness was Louisiana, home of Dixieland music and Cajun/Creole cooking.

Oswald urged a bit of caution in that ranking, however, noting that part of the happiness survey occurred before Hurricane Katrina and part of it took place later. Nevertheless, he said, "We have no explicit reason to think there is a problem" with the ranking.

Rounding out the happy five were Hawaii, Florida, Tennessee and Arizona.

In last place on the happiness list is New York state.

Oswald suggested that commutes, congestion and high prices around New York City account for some of the unhappiness.

He said he has been asked if the researchers expected that states such as New York and California, which ranked 46th, would do so badly in the happiness ranking.

"I am only a little surprised," he said.