

G.A. Makulbayeva¹, Zh.Zh. Davletbayeva¹, M.M. Dyussenov²

¹Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan,
Astana, Kazakhstan

²Illinois University, Urbana-Champaign, USA

(E-mail: g.makulbayeva@apa.kz, zhuldyz.davletbayeva@apa.kz, mergend7@gmail.com)

Subjective well-being in Central Asia: rural-urban differences

Abstract. *The article examines the subjective well-being in rural and urban settings of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. For that purpose, this study uses the data drawn from the World Values Survey's 7th wave. The subjective well-being is measured through self-reported happiness and satisfaction with life. Findings suggest that there are within country variations of subjective well-being in two Central Asian countries. In both countries, rural residents are happier and satisfied with their lives compared to urban counterparts. In terms of urban settings, findings demonstrate that capital city residents have the lowest levels of happiness and satisfaction with life in Kyrgyzstan. Whereas in Kazakhstan, regional center dwellers have the lowest levels of happiness and satisfaction with life. This is explained by varying socio-economic development of the capital cities and regional centers in two countries.*

Keywords: *subjective well-being, rural, urban, happiness, life satisfaction, citizens.*

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Introduction

This article aims to examine to what extent rural and urban citizens are happy and satisfied with life in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In this article we define subjective well-being (SWB) as respondents' self-evaluation of life satisfaction and happiness. According to Diener, "well-being is an umbrella term for the different valuations people make regarding their lives, the events happening to them, their bodies and minds, and the circumstances in which they live." [1, p.400]. Most studies conventionally use self-perceived life-satisfaction and self-perceived happiness as proxy indicators to measure subjective wellbeing, the former is a cognitive component of SWB whereas happiness is an emotional or affective component [2]. Therefore, we use happiness and life satisfaction to measure SWB. Drawing on World Values Data 2018, this study examines the extent of life satisfaction and happiness across rural and urban settings in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Scholars pay particular attention to urban-rural differences in SWB across various contexts [3,4]. Sørensen argues that the number of people living in urban areas is increasing across the globe [2]. According to the UN forecast, 60% world population will live in urban settings by 2030 [5]. Similarly, the share of urban dwellers is increasing in Central Asia. For example, 54,1 % of Kazakhstan population lived in urban settings in 2009, with an increase to 61.8% in 2023 [6]. Likewise, 35% of the population lived in urban areas in Kyrgyzstan in 2009, and 37% in 2022 [7]. This shows the ongoing urbanization in these countries. Thus, by differentiating urban-rural SWB among citizens our study will offer a more nuanced understanding of well-being across the population.

Central Asian states have undergone political and economic transformation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In this study we focus on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which exhibit varying levels of SWB [8]. According to Sharipova and Kudebayeva, life satisfaction

declined in Kazakhstan and increased in Kyrgyzstan between 2011 and 2018. Scholars argue that financial satisfaction and freedom of choice are powerful predictors of this change [8]. Another research by Kudebayeva et al. examines the relationship between social capital and SWB in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan [9]. Although there is some research on SWB in Central Asia, however no one has looked at urban-rural differences in Central Asia. Regarding rural-urban differences in other developing countries, scholars suggest that cities are associated with better socio-economic conditions such as education, income, infrastructure, and health indicators, which leads to a higher SWB in urban settings [5]. Therefore, based on prior studies in developing countries, we hypothesize that there is a higher self-reported SWB (happiness and life satisfaction) in urban areas in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The article consists of five parts. First, we will analyze the existing literature on urban-rural differences of SWB in developed and developing countries. Then the methodology is discussed. The following part discusses the key findings on life satisfaction and happiness in Kazakhstan, followed by a discussion. Thereafter, the findings related to Kyrgyzstan are demonstrated and discussed. Finally, we will draw the conclusion, offer policy recommendations, and show research limitations.

Literature review

The literature lacks a consensus on whether urban dwellers are happier and more satisfied compared to their rural counterparts [2, 10]. Group of scholars find out that people in economically prosperous societies are less happy in urban settings due to city inconveniences such as noise and pollution and levels of social interaction [2, 10, 11]. For instance, Requena demonstrates that people from developed countries are happier in rural areas, which is reversed in less developed countries [10]. It is explained by Wirth's thesis, which posits that density, community size and concentration in large cities lead to social isolation, social disorganization and individualism [12]. Similarly, Sørensen's study in 25 EU member states and three candidate states finds that rural residents have a higher stock of SWB in twelve richest countries in the EU [2]. In contrast, in less rich EU states, rural dwellers are less satisfied and happier than urban ones [2]. Another study in Scotland also shows that life satisfaction is statistically higher in remote rural areas after controlling for individual characteristics [13]. In general, studies for developed countries demonstrate higher stock of SWB in rural areas compared to its counterpart.

In contrast to western societies, urban-rural differences of SWB for developing countries are mixed. First group of scholars suggest that SWB is highest in urban areas in economically inferior countries [14, 15]. For example, Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn's study demonstrates that SWB is higher in large Asian cities [15]. Interestingly, Rukumnuaykit's research in Thailand reveals that after controlling for socio-economic variables, urban residents have higher life satisfaction, but the same level of happiness in both rural and urban contexts [16]. The second group of scholars avoids simple binary treatment of urban-rural, rather calls for disaggregation of population according to the population size [5, 17]. Their studies reveal a more interesting finding. For example, findings in India suggest that people living in middle-sized cities or towns (10 000 - 50 000 inhabitants) report higher SWB than rural and large city dwellers [5]. This perhaps happens due to better infrastructure, amenities and healthcare in middle-sized cities compared to small cities or rural areas [17].

Literature on post-communist life satisfaction and happiness mainly focuses on its determinants. Inglehart et al. shows that already in 1982 Russian people had lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness compared to poorer nations such as India and Nigeria [18]. According to scholars, SWB further declined in the 1990s in post-communist Russia explained by the collapse of the economic development, belief system and national pride. Studies on SWB in Central Asia also focus on its determinants. Serikbayeva and Abdulla argue that trust in government increases life satisfaction as well as the quality, accessibility, and affordability of services. Other scholars highlight the impact of economic and financial factors for SWB in Central Asia [19]. For example, Abbott and Wallace suggest that economic circumstances play an essential role for

SWB in Kazakhstan [20]. Similarly, another study that examined the changes of SWB in Central Asia concluded that financial satisfaction and freedom of choice contributed to the changes of SWB [8]. In terms of happiness, Kaluzhnova and Kambhampati find that unemployment did not increase unhappiness of individuals in Kazakhstan, because people do not feel marginalized in regions with high unemployment [21]. As demonstrated above there is a body of literature on SWB in Central Asian countries, however there is no scholarship that examines the rural-urban differences of SWB in Central Asia. This study aims to address that specific literature gap.

Methodology

This study employs the data from World Values Survey 7th wave for Kazakhstan (2018) and Kyrgyzstan (2020). The sample size for each country is approximately 1,300 respondents. A multi-stage sampling procedure stratified by region and respondents' location was implemented in Kazakhstan. A proportional probability sampling (PPS) methodology was used in data collection for Kyrgyzstan. As illustrated in table 1 overall 1276 people were recruited for survey in Kazakhstan in 2018. Among them 521 respondents represent rural areas and 755 represent urban areas. In Kyrgyzstan, 1200 completed the questionnaire, among which 431 people are from urban settings and 769 are from rural settings.

To measure the SWB we use two proxy variables from the World Values Survey - feeling of happiness and satisfaction with life. Feeling of happiness is measured on a four point-scale: "very happy", "happy", "not very happy" and "not at all happy". In the findings we only show the sum of percentages of respondents who are very happy and happy. Regarding life satisfaction, the survey asks respondents to self-record their satisfaction with life from one to ten, starting from "completely dissatisfied" to "completely satisfied".

Firstly, the study employs simple dichotomous urban-rural differentiation. For that analysis we use World Values Survey's urban-rural division. Secondly, we also disaggregate the data into 5 sub-groups based on population size, which is drawn from the World Values Survey 7th wave (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1
Population groups by settlement size, Kazakhstan

		Number of respondents
Urban	Capital city	70
Urban	Regional center	641
Rural	District center	55
Rural	Town, small city	44
Rural	Village	466
Overall number of respondents		1276
Number of rural respondents		N= 521
Number of urban respondents		N=755

Source: World Values survey, 2018

Table 2

Population groups by settlement size, Kyrgyzstan

	Number of respondents
Capital city	210
Regional center	127
District center	140
Town, small city	45
Village	679
Overall number of respondents	1200
Number of rural respondents	N= 769
Number of urban respondents	N=431

Source: World Values survey, 2018

Results and discussion

First we will discuss the life satisfaction and happiness in Kazakhstan. According to the World Happiness Report, Kazakhstan ranks 45 among the 149 countries in 2020 [22]. Respondents evaluated the quality of their current lives from 0 to 10, which includes indicators such as freedom to make choices, corruption perception, GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, social support and generosity. According to the World Happiness Report, Kazakh citizens' happiness is mainly explained by GDP per capita at national level [22].

At sub-national level, findings of this study demonstrate that in both indices of life satisfaction and happiness the rural settings show higher values (Figure 1). For happiness, 88,3% of rural respondents evaluated themselves as very happy and happy. In general, urban dwellers are also happy, 81,9% of urban citizens judged themselves as happy and very happy. Nevertheless, people in rural areas are slightly happier than their urban counterparts. Similarly, the mean value for life satisfaction is higher for rural respondents (8,64) compared to urban respondents (7,97).

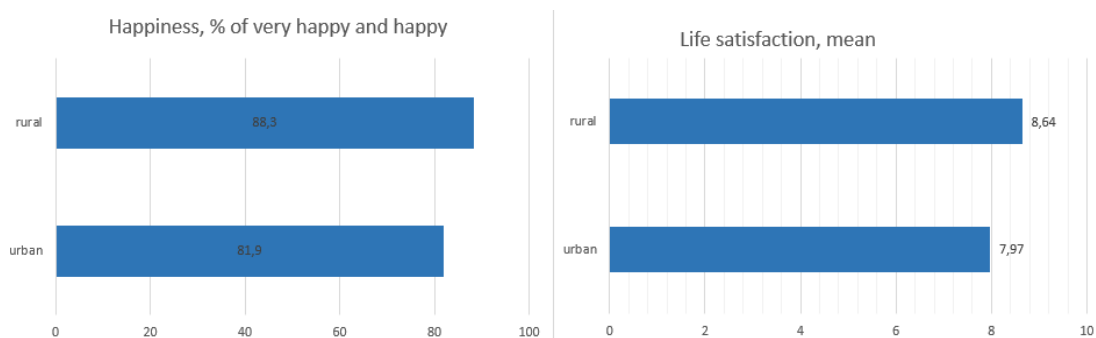


Figure 1. Urban-rural differences in happiness and life satisfaction, 2018

Source: World Values Survey, 2018

These findings are consistent with happiness and life satisfaction levels of people in developed countries. As mentioned above, in the majority of cases, people in economically prosperous societies are less happy in urban settings compared to rural settings [2, 10, 11]. According to previous studies that examine the main determinants of SWB in Kazakhstan, financial satisfaction and economic factors are the main determinants that explain the SWB and its change over the time [9, 22]. Indeed, people from rural areas are more satisfied with the financial situation of their households than people from urban areas in Kazakhstan [23]. Although living standards and size of salary are higher in urban settings, the expenditures are much higher in urban areas of Kazakhstan. Another study in the Russian Saha Republic also

found that urban dwellers are less satisfied with their lives than rural ones, which is explained by ecological and financial conditions, leisure time and the improvements of socio-economic development of rural areas [24].

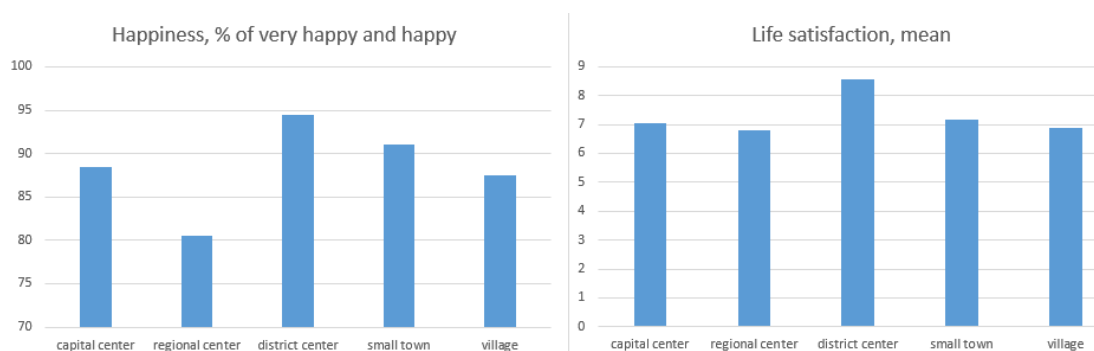


Figure 2. Happiness and Life satisfaction in Kazakhstan, 2018

Source: World Values Survey, 2018

Figure 2 offers more details on SWB in various settlements according to their population size in Kazakhstan. According to the figure, citizens who live in district centers are the happiest (94%) and satisfied with their lives (mean = 8.56). In contrast, respondents from regional centers are the least happy (80,5%) and dissatisfied with their lives compared to others (mean = 6.7). These settlements are mainly administrative centers of provinces such as Taraz (population 358 000), Aktau (population 183 000), Pavlodar (population 335 000) and others [25]. These settings (i.e. regional centers) have around 100 000 to 500 000 population. On the one hand, like the capital center the regional centers face problems such as pollution, transportation, and stressful lifestyles. However, unlike capital center, salaries are low and living standards are inferior, moreover almost all regional centers financially depend on national transfers. More recently, administrative centers have numerous problems associated with infrastructure. Particularly, power plants which provide electricity and heat to the city dwellers are in poor conditions in many regional cities [26]. For example, a power plant crush during the winter in Ekibastuz city (Northern Kazakhstan) in 2022 led to a public outcry and anger [27].

District centers, small towns and villages are among the happiest and satisfied with their lives in Kazakhstan. Regarding small towns, since the 2000s the Kazakh government developed various policy measures to support small towns with the population from 20 000 to 100 000, which were named as monocities [28, 29]. In the Soviet period, monocities (small towns) had single industries such as coal, mining, and chemical production, which collapsed along with the dissolution of the communist regime in the 1990s. Small towns or monocities faced numerous challenges in the 1990s due to the collapse of industries to which their population heavily relied, thus the Kazakh government issued a variety of state programs and delivered budget transfers to them since the 2010s [28]. As a result, Figure 2 shows that dwellers from small towns are almost equally happy and satisfied along with dwellers from district centers or capital centers in Kazakhstan.

In the following part we will discuss the life satisfaction and happiness in Kyrgyzstan. According to the World Happiness Report, Kyrgyzstan was ranked 64 among 134 countries in 2022. The study by Namazie and Sanfey suggests that the higher level of relative income makes people happier in Kyrgyzstan [30]. More recent research by Sharipova and Kudebayeva on SWB in Central Asia also claims that satisfaction with financial situations predicts the changes in SWB in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan [8]. Referring to the World Values Survey, rural people are more satisfied with their financial situation than urban people in Kyrgyzstan. And figure 3 also shows that rural residents are more satisfied and happier than urban ones.

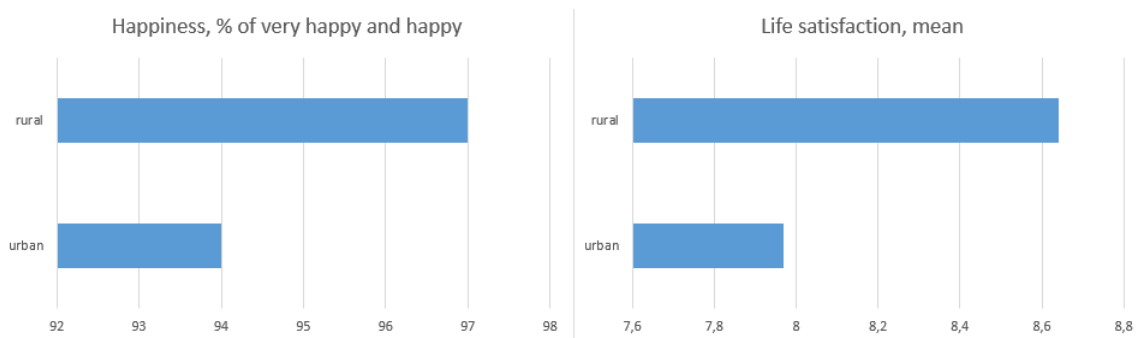


Figure 3. Happiness and Life satisfaction in Kyrgyzstan, 2018

Source: World Values Survey, 2020

The figure 4 offers more information on SWB across various settlement types. As illustrated, the capital center is the least satisfied and happiest place compared to other types of settlement. Firstly, Kyrgyzstan is a lower middle-income country and faces socio-economic challenges in its development [31]. Thus, since the 1990s the country has been experiencing an intensive labor migration flow toward the capital city Bishkek and other CIS countries. In addition, Kyrgyzstan is less urbanized compared to other Central Asian countries, only 37% of its population live in urban areas [6,7]. The literature states that migration from rural or Southern part of Kyrgyzstan to Bishkek (capital center) led to antagonistic discourses between the “old residents” and others who arrived from rural areas [32, 33]. Arrival of new migrants causes socio-economic, environmental pressure to capital center, as a result these circumstances in the capital center created a negative perception by old residents on the current “state with its current weakness and vices, or as something now unrealizable, lost in history and preserved in their imagination” [32, p.466]. Secondly, the internal migration led to the uncontrolled construction of houses without relevant infrastructure and increasing number of vehicles, which in turn has a negative impact on air quality in Bishkek [34]. Once the greenest city Bishkek, is now among the most polluted according to the World Air Quality ranking [34]. Therefore, it is unsurprising that capital center dwellers show the lowest level of happiness and life satisfaction.

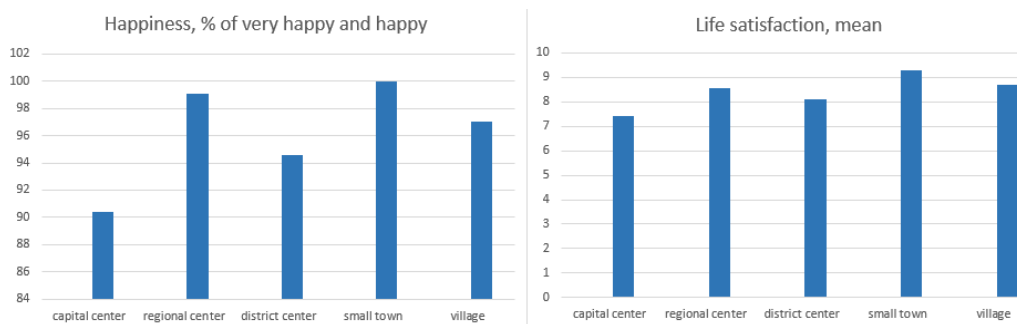


Figure 4. Happiness and Life satisfaction in Kyrgyzstan, 2018

Source: World Values Survey, 2020

Contrary to capital center, dwellers from small towns are the happiest and satisfied with their lives in Kyrgyzstan. Small towns with inhabitants around 5 000 – 20 000 faced immense challenges in terms of public infrastructure and basic services in the 2000s (e.g. water supply, sewage). To address this deterioration, the World Bank provided \$US 4 million to support 23 small towns’ infrastructure and capacity building in 2004 [35]. This project lasted from 2005-2010 and aimed to improve the efficiency and quality of infrastructure and assistance to local

governments in maintaining and repairing of local infrastructure [35]. In that sense, middle-sized cities and towns are better off in infrastructure, amenities, and healthcare than rural areas in Kyrgystan [17]. At the same time, small towns in Kyrgyzstan are not under harsh migration inflow like capital city Bishkek, which enables small towns' citizens to be happy and satisfied with their lives.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that there are variations in life satisfaction and happiness in the two Central Asian countries. Indeed, Ngoo et al. also observed large within-country variations of life satisfaction in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan [36]. Thus, this study disaggregated the data into rural-urban settings and according to settlement size. By doing so this research offers more nuanced perspective on life satisfaction and happiness in various settings e.g. capital city, regional center, district center, small towns and villages.

This inquiry proposed the following research question: "To what extent people are happy and satisfied with their lives in rural and urban settings?" Findings demonstrate that rural people are happier and are more satisfied with their lives than urban residents. Based on prior research of SWB in Central Asia, which highlights the relative income and financial satisfaction as a determinant of SWB in Central Asia, we assume that the urban-rural differences in SWB in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are associated with financial satisfaction of respondents [8,30]. Indeed, the data shows that rural people are more satisfied with their financial situation in rural areas in both countries [23]. In addition, urban settings impose a stressful lifestyle, pollution and other challenges compared to rural areas in Central Asia. Additionally, the findings show that the capital city (Bishkek) dwellers are the least happy and satisfied with their lives in Kyrgyzstan. According to the literature, Bishkek faces huge challenges due to domestic migration, which resulted in antagonistic discourse in the city and socio-economic pressure. In Kazakhstan, regional centers (cities such as Taraz, Aktau, Kostanay) are the least happy and satisfied. This is due to the deteriorating infrastructure and financial dependence on national government funds. Thus, the Kyrgyz and Kazakh governments should adopt appropriate policy measures to improve SWB among capital city dwellers and regional cities, respectively.

This study has the following limitations. It mainly addressed the proposed research question and demonstrated the SWB in rural and urban settings. However, explanations of reasons for within-country variation is beyond the scope of this study. The explanations provided here are based on assumptions stemming from the literature review. To gain a deeper understanding of reasons as to why capital city residents in Kyrgyzstan and regional center residents in Kazakhstan show the lowest levels of SWB, an additional qualitative inquiry is required.

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Г.А. Макулбаева¹, Ж.Ж. Давлетбаева¹, М.М. Дюсенов²

¹Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясының Мемлекеттік саясаттың ұлттық мектебі, Астана, Қазақстан

²Иллинойс Университетінің, Урбана-Шампейн, АҚШ

Орталық Азиядағы субъективті әл-ауқат: ауыл мен қала айырмашылығы

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Қазақстан мен Қырғызстанның ауылдық және қалалық жағдайларындағы субъективті әл-ауқат қарастырылады. Осы мақсатта Дүниежүзілік құндылықтар сауалнамасының 7-ші толқынынан алынған деректер пайдаланылады. Субъективті әл-ауқат азаматтардың бақыты мен өмірге қанағаттануы арқылы өлшенеді. Нәтижелер қарастырылып отырған Орталық Азияның екі елінде субъективті әл-ауқат бойынша ерекшеліктер бар екенін көрсетеді. Екі елде де ауыл тұрғындары қала тұрғындарына қарағанда бақыттырақ және өмірлеріне қанағаттанарлық өмір сүру деңгейін көрсетеді. Деректерге сай, Қырғызстанның астана қаласының тұрғындары ауыл тұрғындарына қарағанда бақытсыз және өмірге қанағатсыз екенін көрсетеді. Ал Қазақстанда облыс орталықтарының тұрғындарының субъективті әл-ауқаты ауылға қарағанда төмен. Бұл екі елдің астаналары мен облыс орталықтарының әлеуметтік-экономикалық дамуының әртүрлі болуымен түсіндіріледі.

Түйін сөздер: субъективті әл-ауқат, ауыл, қала, бақыт, өмірге қанағаттану, азаматтар.

Г.А. Макулбаева¹, Ж.Ж. Давлетбаева¹, М.М. Дюсенов²

¹Национальная школа государственной политики Академии государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан, Астана, Казахстан

²Университет Иллинойс, Урбана-Шампейн, США

Субъективное благополучие в Центральной Азии: различия между деревней и городом

Аннотация. В статье проводится анализ уровня субъективного благополучия в сельской и городской среде Казахстана и Кыргызстана. В работе используются данные, полученные в ходе 7-й волны Всемирного исследования ценностей. Субъективное благополучие измеряется на основе самооценки счастья и удовлетворенности жизнью жителями. Результаты показывают, что в двух странах Центральной Азии существуют внутристрановые различия в уровне субъективного благополучия. В обеих странах сельские жители показывают более высокий уровень счастья и удовлетворенности своей жизнью по сравнению с городскими жителями. По субъективному благополучию в городской местности результаты показывают, что жители столицы имеют самый низкий уровень счастья и удовлетворенности жизнью в Кыргызстане, тогда как в Казахстане жители областных центров имеют самый низкий уровень счастья и удовлетворенности жизнью по сравнению с сельскими респондентами. Это объясняется различиями в социально-экономическом развитии столиц и региональных центров в двух рассматриваемых странах.

Ключевые слова: субъективное благополучие, село, город, счастье, удовлетворенность жизнью.

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Information about authors:

Makulbayeva G.A. – PhD, Associate Professor, National School of Public Policy, Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Davletbayeva Zh.Zh. – Candidate of Sociological Sciences, Professor, National School of Public Policy of the Academy, Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Dyussenov M.M. – PhD, visiting scholar, Illinois University, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Макулбаева Г.А. – PhD, доцент, Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясының Мемлекеттік саясаттың ұлттық мектебі, Астана, Қазақстан.

Давлетбаева Ж.Ж. – Әлеуметтану ғылымдарының кандидаты, профессор, Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясының Мемлекеттік саясаттың ұлттық мектебі, Астана, Қазақстан.

Дюсенов М.М. – PhD, Иллинойс Университетінің қонақ ғылыми зерттеушісі, АҚШ.