

March 2022

Canadian Happiness Report

The Reality Behind Canada's Happiness Ranking

Population
Well-being Lab



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although Canada finds itself at the top of most happiness charts, we found that Canadian well-being has been on a downturn since the late 2000s. Nation-wide problems require nation-wide solutions, and population well-being decline is no exception. Surveying Canadians regularly will be a necessary first step in monitoring and reversing this worrying trend.

HISTORY OF WELLBEING INDICATORS

Since World War II, gross domestic product (GDP) and its rate of growth have been used as proxy indicators of well-being. In recent years, economists and psychologists alike have called for looking beyond GDP to measure population well-being.

As there is no universal well-being framework, determining the best national well-being indicators will require political willingness to consider alternatives to GDP (Lepenies, 2019). One alternative is subjective well-being (SWB), which includes three main components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. This indicator is used in international reports such as the UN's *World Happiness Report*.

A PERSPECTIVE FROM ABROAD

From 2000 onwards, many countries published their own well-being frameworks. Indicators in key domains like education, health, and environment were frequently emphasized. Some considered SWB as a discrete indicator. As an example, in New Zealand's *Living Standards Framework*, SWB is one of twelve indicators in one broader domain (The Treasury New Zealand, 2021).

Establishing a stable well-being framework can be used for tracking progress, informing government budget allocation and policy developments. For long-term policy effectiveness and consideration of changing well-being over time, frameworks must integrate subjective indicators.

CANADA'S FRAMEWORKS

In Canada, there are existing efforts to move beyond GDP. For example, the *Canadian Index of Wellbeing* aggregates 64 indicators across eight domains including education, living standards, demographic engagement and time use (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2016). A 2021 Government of Canada report from the Department of Finance suggested a more inclusive approach to measuring well-being. Five key domains were identified: prosperity, health, society, environment, and good governance (Department of Finance Canada, 2021). This demonstrated that the Canadian government is moving towards a comprehensive understanding of their population's well-being.

OUR AIM

A good well-being framework should include measures that predict better outcomes for individuals and the population at large. Studies have shown that SWB predicts better physical health, longevity, social relationships, creativity, citizenship, work performance, and resilience (De Neve et al., 2013; Diener et al., 2018). Given that SWB is predictive of a myriad of positive outcomes, our proposed framework is advocating for the inclusion of SWB into existing frameworks in Canada and abroad. Investigating changes in our SWB over time will improve our ability to increase well-being on a population scale.

DATA

The Gallup World Poll is one of the largest international surveys, conducting interviews in over 160 nations. Every year from 2005 to 2021, Gallup surveyed approximately 1,000 Canadians. The Gallup World Poll is used jointly by businesses, NGOs, philanthropies, and academic institutions. It is also a major data source for the *World Happiness Report*.

METHOD

We looked at trends in Canadians' SWB using Gallup World Poll surveys from 2005-2021.

- **Life satisfaction.** How Canadians view their lives from 0 (worst possible life) to 10 (best possible life).
- **Positive affect.** How frequently they felt the emotions of happiness and enjoyment recently.
- **Negative affect.** How frequently they felt the emotions of sadness, worry, anger, and stress recently.

CHECKPOINT

How would you answer the Gallup World Poll questions?



TRENDS IN CANADA

Figure 1. Trends in Life Satisfaction

Figure 1 shows population trends in life satisfaction. In 2010, Canada was the 6th happiest country in the world. In 2021, it dropped down to 14th place (Helliwell et al., 2021). In between, Canadian life satisfaction dropped by 0.78 points, 95% CI [-0.94, -0.63].

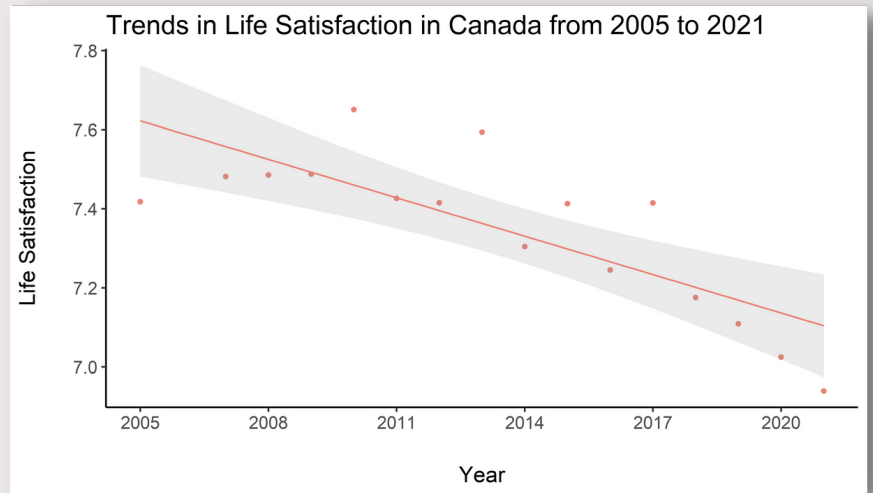


Figure 2. Trends in Positive Affect

In Figure 2, we see changes in daily feelings of positive emotions, specifically happiness and enjoyment. We notice that over time daily experiences of positive emotions have dropped 6.1%, 95% CI [-9.2%, -3.0%].

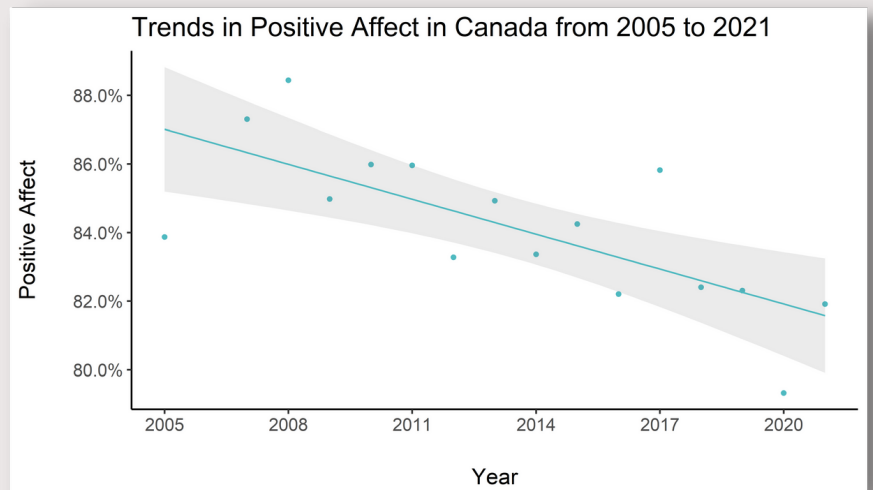
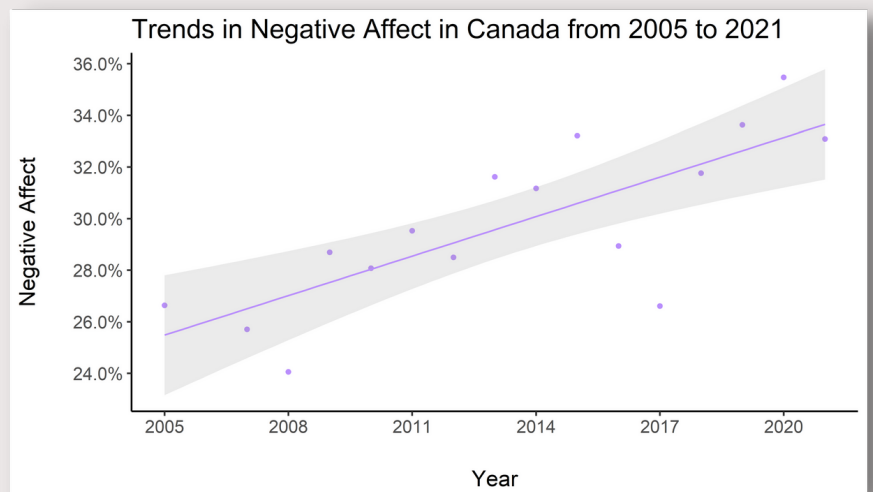


Figure 3. Trends in Negative Affect

In Figure 3, we note trends in daily experiences of negative emotions. Specifically, the emotions of sadness, worry, anger, and stress. Over time, we notice daily experiences of negative emotions have risen by 6.6%, 95% CI [3.6%, 9.7%].



TRENDS AROUND THE WORLD

Figure 4. Global Changes in SWB

Figure 4 compares trends in Canadian well-being to trends worldwide. The map shows change in life satisfaction for countries with 10 or more years of available data. Countries on the left side of the gradient (red shades) have been experiencing decreases in life satisfaction. Countries on the right (blue shades) have been experiencing increased life satisfaction over time.

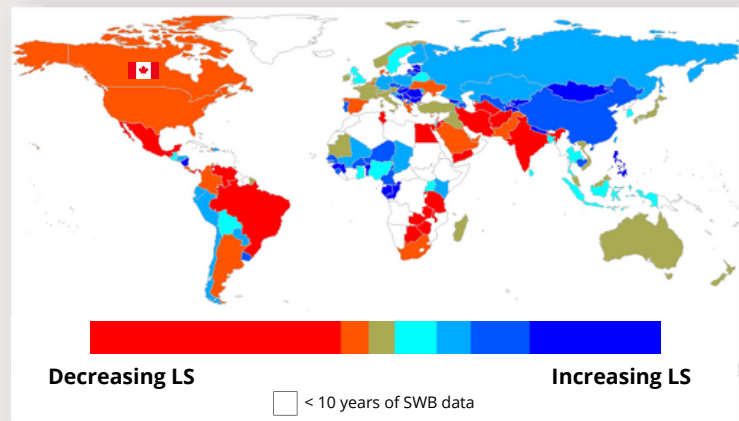


Table 1. Canada's Ranking

We are used to Canada's Top 20 ranking in the yearly *World Happiness Report*. But if we look at the *change* in SWB for the past 16 years, a different picture emerges. Whereas Canada ranked 13th in absolute life satisfaction in 2021, it ranked 107th (out of 128 countries) in terms of change to life satisfaction. Only looking at Canada's absolute rank in the SWB categories misses the bigger picture of the decline in Canadian well-being.

Canada's Ranking	SWB (2021)	Change in SWB
Life Satisfaction	13 th	107 th
Positive Affect	3 rd	102 nd
Negative Affect	41 st	76 th

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, our analysis found that Canadian well-being has been decreasing since the late 2000s. Although Canada finds itself at the top of most happiness charts, this downturn in well-being is cause for concern and greater involvement from policymakers.

Given our findings, we think it is important for the Canadian government to gain a more in-depth understanding of changes to population well-being by monitoring SWB trends in the population. This monitoring can serve as a type of pacemaker which alerts the public when levels of well-being are low or dropping. Conversely, it can also monitor if certain policy implementations have had a significant impact on the Canadian population.

To this end we conclude with three main recommendations:

1

If we treasure it, we should measure it.

We recommend frequent Canada-wide population surveys with larger sample sizes to more precisely capture changes in well-being across Canada.

2

Population-wide problems require population-wide solutions.

The key to happiness does not solely rest with us. If our well-being is declining on a national level, we should determine which factors can improve it on a national level.

3

We need Canadian voices.

Subjective well-being can't be measured without input from Canadians. We need to hear Canadian voices on what matters to them to tackle this trend.

NEXT STEPS

This report will be the first in a series where we present our findings on Canadians' well-being. Going forward, we will be exploring topics such as well-being trends across provinces and well-being inequality. These more detailed analyses will serve to build a comprehensive and fine-grained understanding of changes in Canadians' well-being over time. They will also measure disparities of happiness across Canada, which can be used for more effective policy implementation by the Canadian government.

If you would like to receive newsletters from our lab where we will present our latest findings along with other engaging content sign up here: <https://forms.office.com/r/N5S5YtV9Ab>

ABOUT US

The Canadian Happiness Report was developed by members of the Population Well-being Lab at the University of Toronto. The lab focuses on research, teaching, and advocacy related to the determinants, consequences, and policy relevance of a satisfying, purposeful, and engaging life. The lab takes an interdisciplinary perspective and uses diverse methodological and statistical techniques to examine population well-being in relation to pressing global issues (e.g., sociopolitical unrest, economic justice, and major population events). Find out more on our lab website: <https://cheung.artsci.utoronto.ca/>



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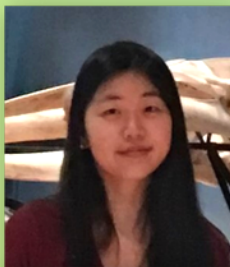
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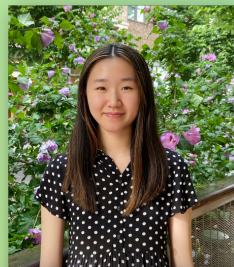
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Canada Foundation for Innovation. This research was undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada Research Chairs Program. The data shown in this report were drawn from the Gallup World Poll, and the views expressed in this report are our own and do not reflect the views of Gallup. We would also like to thank the experts who compose the yearly World Happiness Report. Our report is inspired by their work, but we are not affiliated with the World Happiness Report.

Suggested Citation Population Well-being Lab. (2022). *Canadian Happiness Report March 2022*. doi: <https://osf.io/f8t5d/>



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