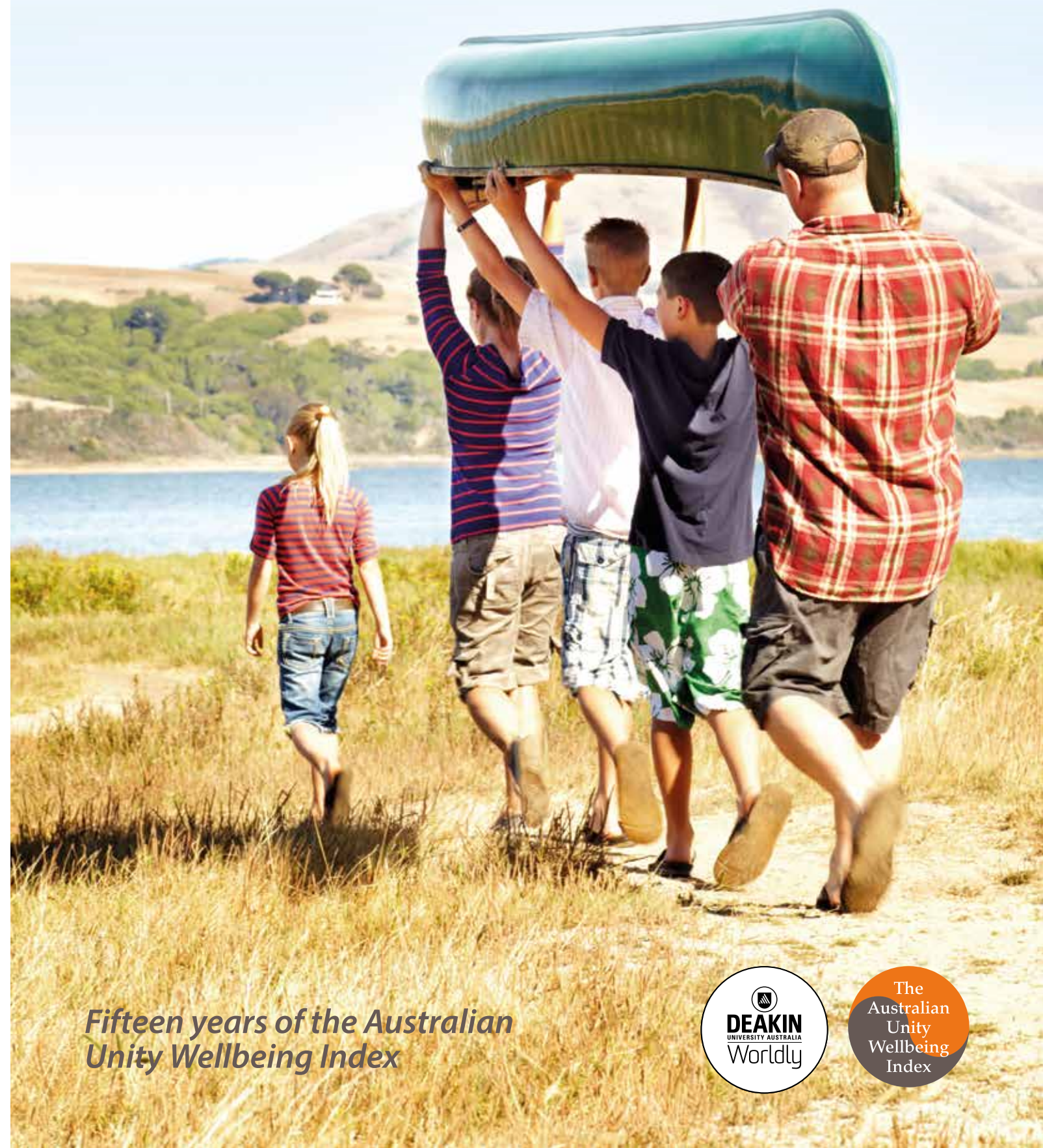




# What Makes Us Happy?

Third edition



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*Fifteen years of the Australian  
Unity Wellbeing Index*



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# Welcome

Welcome to the third edition of What Makes Us Happy? This report offers readers a host of information and insights from 15 years of research into the subjective wellbeing of Australians.

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, created in partnership with Deakin University, is the nation's most comprehensive measure of how satisfied we feel with our lives in general and also with life in Australia. We are proud to have been involved with such a longstanding, productive collaboration.

The Index regularly takes the pulse of the nation, and provides a diagnosis of what makes us happy, or not. Over time, it has built a detailed picture of our own sense of wellbeing, and the impact on this sense of various social issues and events. Whether it be our relationship with our loved ones, finances, or our broader purpose in life, we have sought greater understanding. So too we have sought to gauge the nation's satisfaction with economic, business and social conditions, government, national security and the environment.

This huge body of information about how we feel about our lives, our subjective wellbeing, is unrivalled in Australian research.

We hope you enjoy the third edition of What Makes Us Happy?

**Rohan Mead**  
Group Managing Director  
Australian Unity

**Professor Greg Tooley**  
Head of School of Psychology  
Deakin University

# Our wellbeing journey

Exploring the wellbeing of Australians over the last 15 years has provided some fascinating insights into how we feel about ourselves and the nation.

Across more than 30 Australian Unity Wellbeing Index surveys we have sought to explore what makes us happy and gain a better understanding of the things that are important to our life satisfaction.

From the first year of the survey, which coincided with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, we have asked a series of questions not only about our everyday wellbeing, but also what current issues or events may be linked to our satisfaction with life along the way.

Some have been tragic, such as 9/11, the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005, the Victorian bushfires in 2009 and the Queensland floods in 2010. Others have been an exploration of our day to day lives, including how our work, relationships, the number of children we have, how well we sleep, and whether we live in a big city, relate to our wellbeing.

Still others revolved around our finances, including the impact of interest rate changes, home ownership, the Global Financial Crisis, and gambling. And we had some fun as well, looking for instance at wellbeing in the context of mothers-in-law, owning a pet, dancing, listening to music or even eating chocolate.

What follows is a deeper exploration of what makes us happy and the science behind it.

*The Index regularly takes the pulse of the nation, and provides a diagnosis of what makes us happy ... or not.*



# What is wellbeing? Can it be measured?

## Personal Wellbeing

We are each born with a genetic level of happiness\*, which can be affected to some degree by environmental factors. It is different to that temporary moment of upset we feel at the end of a tearjerker film, or even our elation at the birth of a child. It is a long-lasting, deep sense of personal contentment, called 'subjective wellbeing'. It is not so much a feeling as a state of mind. And the good news is for most people that state of mind is quite positive.

Subjective wellbeing is extremely resilient. Just as we manage to hold our body temperature steady against external conditions, so too do we do a good job holding our wellbeing steady, even in challenging times. The psychological theory of *homeostasis* — on which the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is based — maintains that people have an inbuilt mechanism to help them recover their normal positive level of wellbeing after most life events. There may be short-term fluctuations but over time our feelings generally return to normal.

The extent and duration of any personal wellbeing change depends on the intensity of the challenging agent, and on the resources we can bring to bear to shield ourselves. These resources could be external, such as calling on the emotional support of friends or family, or internal, for instance finding a positive ("I needed a new challenge") from a bad event ("I lost my job"). It is only when negative life experiences reach chronic levels over time and our internal and external resources are overwhelmed that homeostasis fails. Then, subjective wellbeing may be seriously challenged, and this can be the signal for what we know as depression.

*\* For the purposes of this publication, even though we recognise the distinction between the terms 'wellbeing' and 'happiness', we use them interchangeably on the basis that happiness is a term easily understood by readers.*

## National Wellbeing

Traditionally, measures of how well a nation may be doing tend to be dry, objective economic calculations such as Gross Domestic Product or the Consumer Price Index. Increasingly though, there is an international impetus to find subjective measures to complement our understanding of how a country is travelling. Groups like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have taken this path.

In addition to measuring personal wellbeing, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index measures national wellbeing on issues such as satisfaction with the economic situation, government, social conditions, business, the environment and national security.

## Measuring Wellbeing

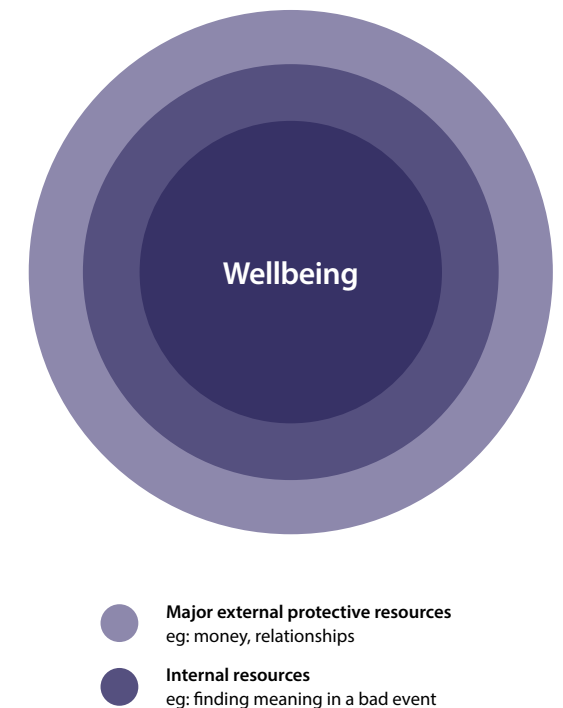
The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index uses two measurement tools to provide a simple comparison of wellbeing. The first is the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI). It asks survey participants to assess their satisfaction on a 0–10 scale across seven domains — standard of living; health; achieving in life; personal relationships; safety; community connection; and future security. The scores are then converted into a PWI score in a range of 0–100.

Average PWI in Australia sits at about 75. It has fluctuated over the years, but only within a tight normal range (3 points over the 15 year history of the Index), an indication of the consistency and stability of subjective wellbeing, as described by homeostasis theory. The PWI measure can identify demographic or geographic groups that sit outside of the normal range.

Average PWI is one thing, but what PWI is ok and what isn't? We believe there is a wide so-called normative range, between 60 and 90, as people are inherently different, some more positive, others less so. However if a person's PWI is below 60 and stays that way over time, it is a signal their homeostatic response is failing and they are at risk of depression.

The external measures assessing life in Australia are also measured using the National Wellbeing Index (NWI). This measure tends to be more volatile, and considerably lower than PWI.

Our wellbeing is protected by a shield of resources



Find out your own PWI by taking the survey at :  
[australianunity.com.au/about-us/Wellbeing/Check-your-wellbeing](https://australianunity.com.au/about-us/Wellbeing/Check-your-wellbeing)



# How are we doing?

**Most Australians are satisfied with life**

The wellbeing of Australians has proven extremely stable over the 15 years of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index. We are generally positive about our lives, and resilient too.

This average Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) score, calculated according to the formula described on page 5, has varied little over time, consistently falling between the narrow band of 73.9 and 76.7. This is now considered the normal range of wellbeing. This positive sense of personal wellbeing doesn't translate to issues of national life canvassed in the surveys such as the economy, government and social conditions, where the National Wellbeing Index (NWI) scores fall within a much lower and more volatile range of between 55 and 65 points. These issues are explored on pages 34–37.

**Are there big shifts in wellbeing?**

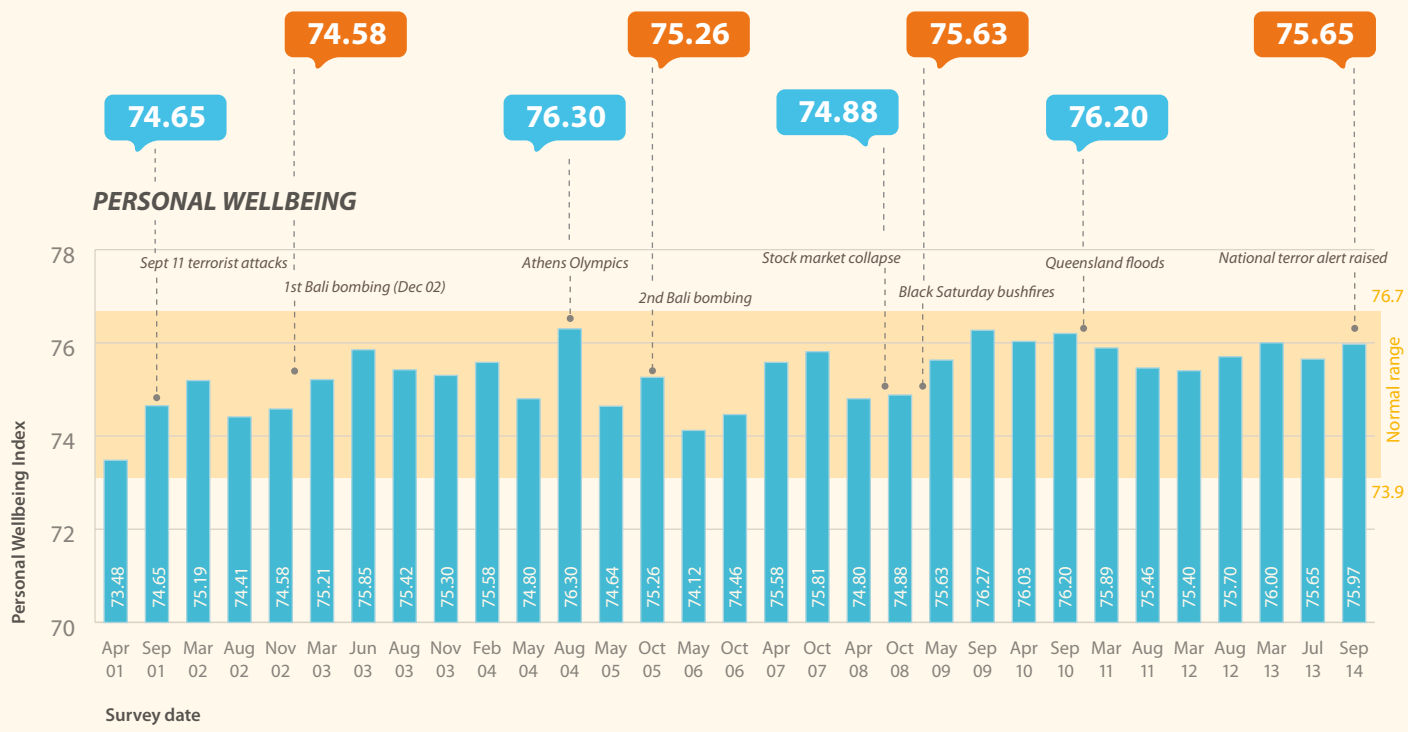
The theory of homeostasis — described in more detail on page 4 — is the key reason average PWI hasn't fluctuated much over time. The data reflect our resilience and attests to our capacity to adapt to changing life circumstances.

But there have been historical moments that coincide with changes, both positive and negative, in average PWI. Interestingly, external threats generally appear to have a *positive* association with overall wellbeing, judging by rises in average wellbeing in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings, and the threat of international conflict arising from the rise of the Islamic State movement in 2014, which saw the national terror alert level raised.

Overall PWI reached its highest point, 76.3 in March 2009 as the nation's economy began to emerge from the Global Financial Crisis. In the last five years it has been relatively steady, sitting just below the 76.0 mark.



The wellbeing of Australians has proven extremely stable over the 15 years of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index.





# What is the golden triangle of happiness?

## Strong relationship, financial control and sense of purpose

After 15 years of research, we believe we have managed to get to the essence of wellbeing. It is best summarised by what Deakin University Emeritus Professor Robert Cummins, the author of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, dubs the 'golden triangle of happiness'.

Professor Cummins says that for people to maintain a positive sense of wellbeing, they need three core elements present in their lives:

- strong personal relationship/s
- financial control
- sense of purpose

No one element is sufficient in isolation. We all must balance the various disparate elements that make up our everyday lives to enable wellbeing, but those who can positively maintain these three aspects of their lives are well on their way.

*We all must balance the various disparate elements that make up our everyday lives to enable wellbeing.*



### Relationship/s



Being part of an intimate relationship is perhaps the most vital component of wellbeing. The relationship doesn't have to be a romantic one, but closeness and support is the key. A good close relationship (or many good relationships) with someone you can share your thoughts, secrets, hopes, dreams and fears with, who will remind you that you are loved and valued, provides a critical resource to defend against life's challenges. Those who don't have this intimate relationship are at much higher risk of the difficulties in life overwhelming them.

### Financial Control



There is no denying that income and wellbeing are linked. Wellbeing rises consistently with household income up to about \$100,000, at which point their paths become less intertwined. However, the power of money to affect wellbeing lies in its capacity to alleviate stress and create an environment for happiness. Accordingly, people can achieve normal levels of wellbeing even with low income, so long as they feel in control of how they spend it.

### Sense of Purpose



It is imperative for personal wellbeing to be doing something that provides meaning in life. People are happier when they are active, particularly when that activity gives them a sense of purpose or responsibility. For some this may be their job, but the job has to provide more than just financial security. For others it may be a social activity such as being in the local tennis club or Rotary. Or it may be volunteering as a lifesaver, caring for someone or doing or something as simple as gardening.

# How important are relationships?

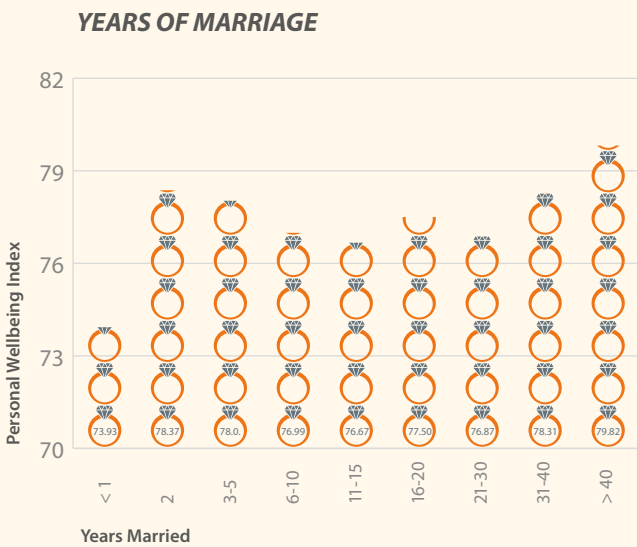
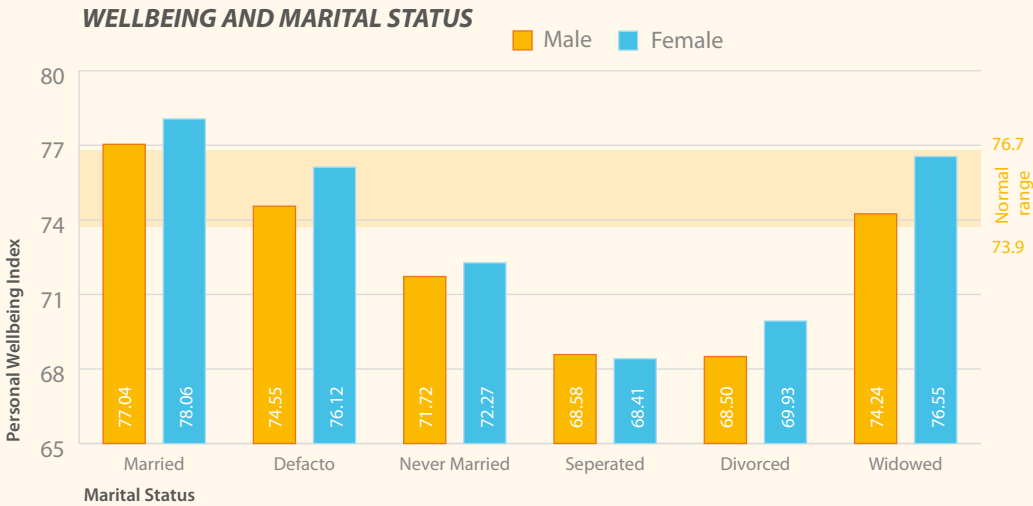


## Married or de facto is best for wellbeing

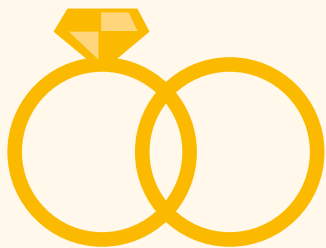
Being in a meaningful relationship is one of three key elements of the golden triangle of happiness. The relationship isn't necessarily a romantic one, but it has to be intimate, someone upon whom you can rely, with whom your fears and successes can be shared. One of the keys to maintaining our wellbeing is to work on nurturing our relationships.

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has consistently shown that people who are married exhibit the highest wellbeing, followed by those in de facto relationships. Those who are separated, divorced or who have never married sit below the normal range (73.9–76.7) for wellbeing, though there are considerable variations depending on age. Older widows are happier, as are younger singles.

Over the course of a marriage wellbeing tends to remain at the top of, or above the normal range, dipping slightly at the 11–15 year mark and being strongest from 30 years of marriage on. The exception is in a couple's first year of marriage, where wellbeing falls below the normal range. The reason is unclear, but perhaps it is due to a change in their financial situation, such as the purchase of a new home and bearing the costs of the wedding. The same dip in wellbeing does not occur for de facto couples in their first year.



One of the keys to maintaining our wellbeing is to work on nurturing our relationships.





# Are people with children happier?

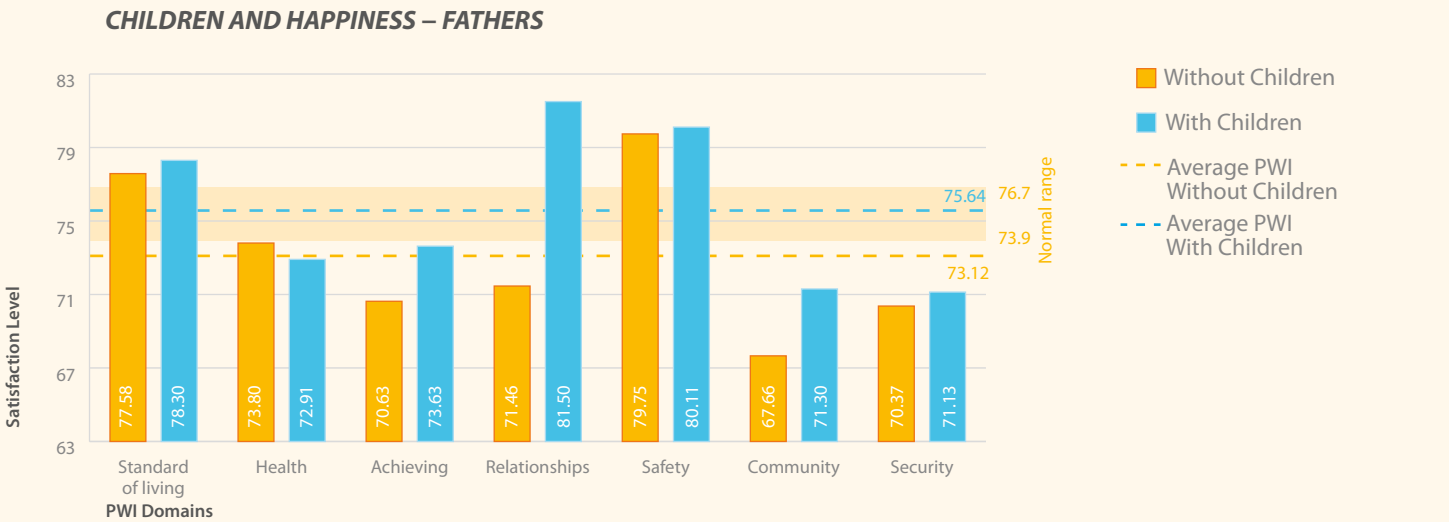
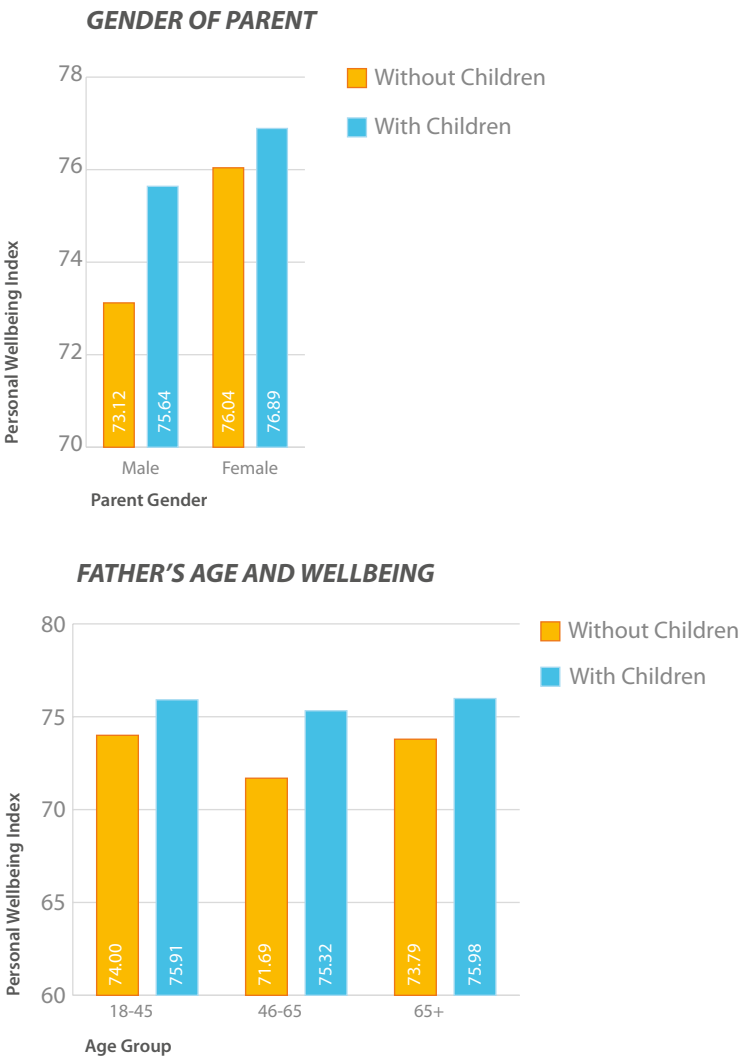


**Dads happier, no difference for mums**  
Fathers tend to be happier than men without children, while women’s wellbeing is much the same whether they are a mother or not.

What differentiates the wellbeing of fathers from other men is their satisfaction with their relationships and their sense of community. Wellbeing for men is closely associated with these two domains, and fathers are more likely to have these connections than men with no children.

While family appears to be the most important source of relationship and community satisfaction for men, women seem able to more successfully maintain social connections in other areas of their lives beyond the family unit.

It is interesting that this difference between fathers and other men continues throughout their lives. Fathers consistently record higher average PWI scores than other men, the difference being most pronounced in the 46–65 age bracket.



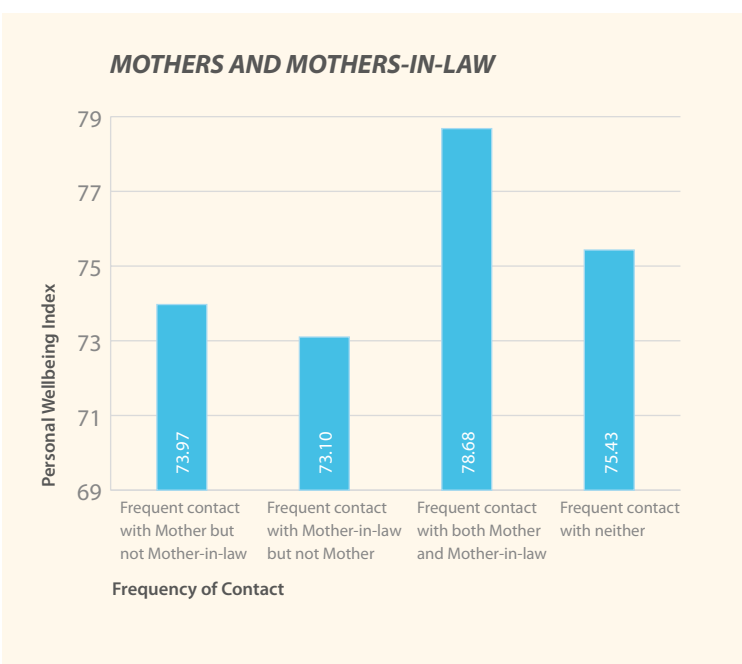
# What about mothers-in-law?



**It's complicated**  
Mothers-in-law have a reputation for driving us crazy, but married people who have regular contact with both their own mother and their mother-in-law actually have wellbeing above the normal range.

However the story is a little more complicated, because those who see neither their mother nor mother-in-law are happier than those in contact with just one or the other.

Mothers-in-law appear to be an important resource in a person’s life, perhaps providing extra support beyond the expected assistance of their mother. But regular contact, and balance, is the key. If a family is free of maternal influence from either side, it is likely to be free to develop its own equilibrium, and with it increased wellbeing.





# What price happiness?



Money is important, up to a point

*"If I had more money, my life would be so much better."*  
How many of us have had this thought? It is true that money is linked to wellbeing. Wellbeing broadly increases with rising income level. But that rise is at its steepest for those on lower incomes. As household income hits the six-figure mark the correlation with increased wellbeing starts to taper off.

To shift wellbeing by one point for those in households earning \$15,000–\$30,000 annually, an extra \$18,750 of income is required. But for households earning \$150,000–\$250,000 an extra wellbeing point will cost more than \$147,000.

The wellbeing of women is somewhat less tied to household income, with women entering the normal range of wellbeing at lower levels than men (\$15,000–\$30,000 v \$31,000–\$60,000), and being slightly lower than men at the top income ranges.

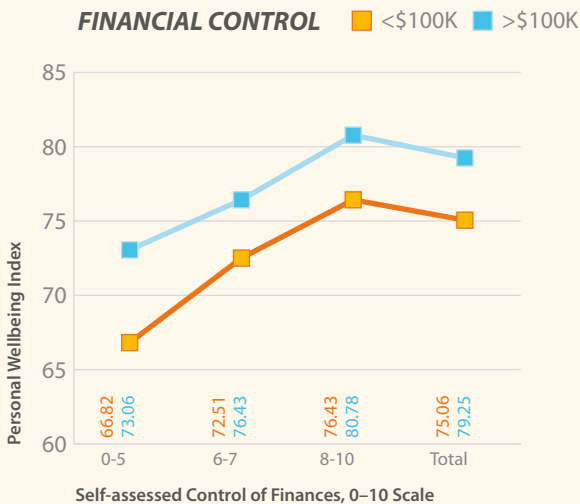
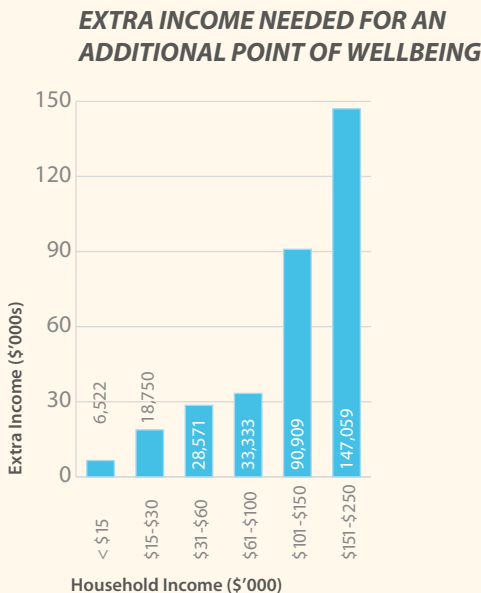
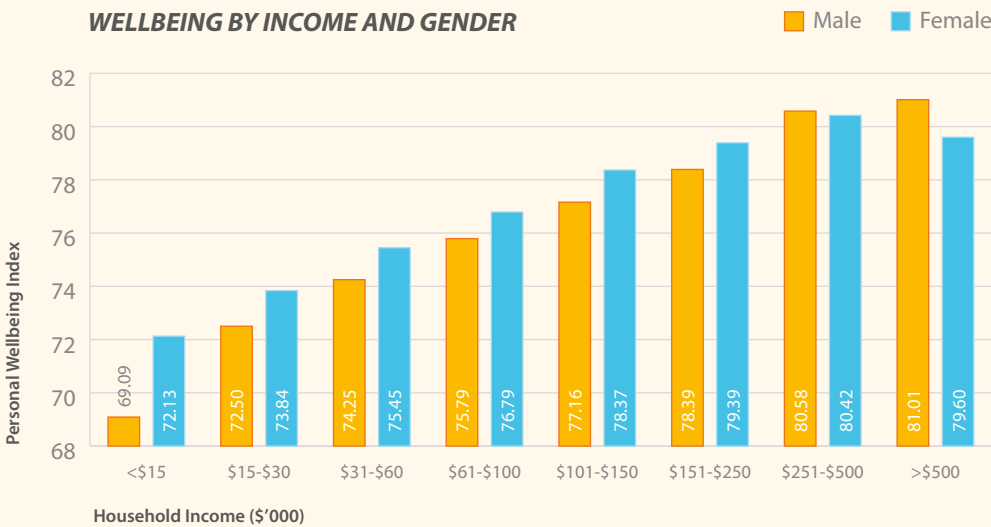
Individually, the wellbeing of those earning over \$100,000 is on average about 4 points higher than for those earning below \$100,000

Financial control is the key

One of the pillars of the golden triangle of happiness is being in control of your finances. A comfortable level of income will depend on demographic (mainly numbers of children) and geographic (where you live) factors.

But whatever your income level, there is a clear link between being in control of your finances and wellbeing. The wellbeing of people who earn less than \$100,000 a year but rate themselves at least 8 out of 10 for being in control of their finances is higher (76.48) than those who earn more than \$100,000 but assess themselves 5 or below out of 10 in terms of financial control (73.06).

*The wellbeing of people who earn less than \$100,000 a year but rate themselves at least 8 out of 10 for being in control of their finances is higher (76.48) than those who earn more than \$100,000 but assess themselves 5 or below out of 10 in terms of financial control (73.06).*





# Is there a link between work and wellbeing?



## Paid work means more than money

A key to wellbeing is having purpose in life, and paid work is for some the pathway to that purpose. Work can offer a sense of achievement, a boost to self-esteem and financial security.

The link between work and wellbeing is clearer when viewed in the negative. Average wellbeing for people who are unemployed is clearly lower than for others, including full and part-time workers, retirees, students and people involved in full-time home duties.

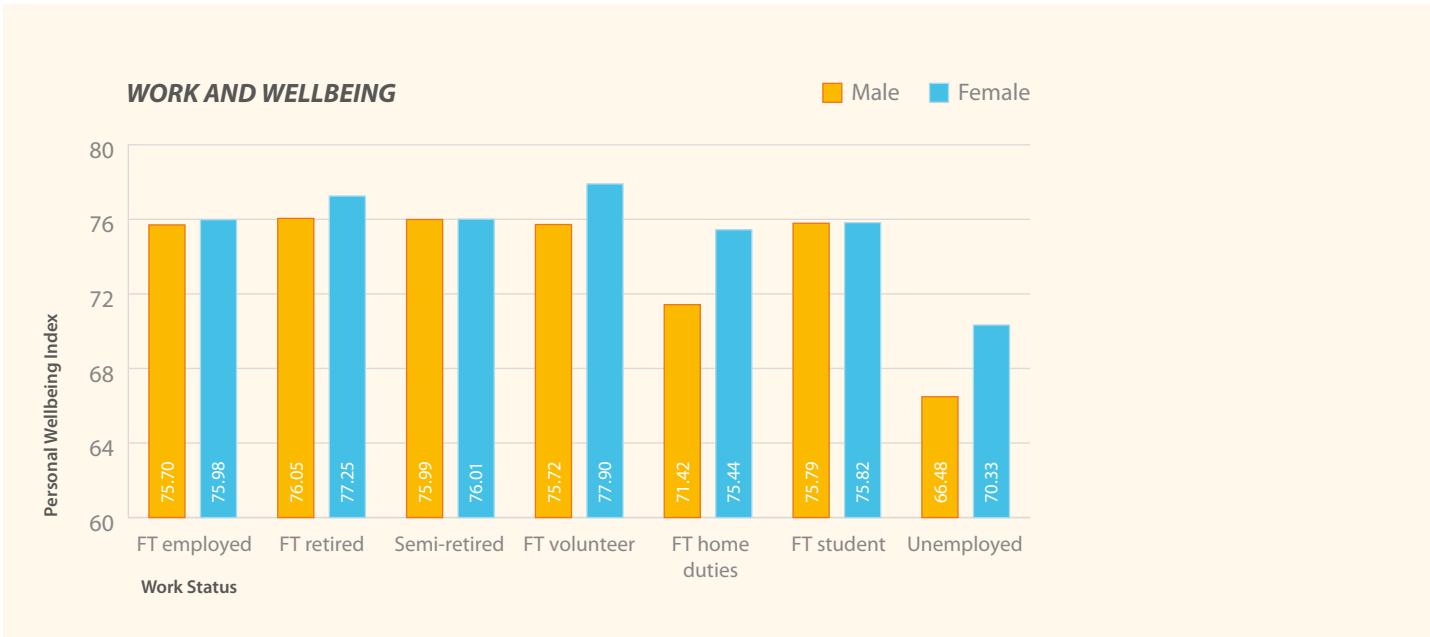
## Men work on Mars, Women on Venus

There are dramatic differences in the wellbeing of men and women in the various categories of work. Unemployment is the most telling. Men aged between 26 and 55 who are unemployed are significantly less satisfied with their lives than employed men, but they are also less happy than unemployed women of the same age.

The wellbeing of women who work full-time is equivalent to women who are full-time at home, but full-time male workers are more satisfied with life than those men who are at home full-time. The average PWI of men at home full-time is well below the normal range.

## Shift work, income and wellbeing

For shift workers, those who work on call and overnight workers, it would be tempting to conclude their wellbeing would suffer because of the irregularity of their employment arrangements. However, at low incomes, the link between wellbeing and these irregular working arrangements is a positive one. Those earning less than \$30,000 a year report higher wellbeing if they are on call, doing shift work, working overnight or if their earnings vary than those who have regular work hours. The wellbeing of those earning \$150,000 a year and over is less vulnerable to changing work conditions.



*A key to wellbeing is having purpose in life.*





# Does non-paid work make a difference?



## Volunteers are among the happiest

Whether volunteering makes us happy, or whether it's happy people who tend to volunteer, the fact is that people who are full-time volunteers tend to have very high wellbeing, above the normal range for the general population. The domain where this is most apparent is 'satisfaction with community', where full-time volunteers average 6.1 points higher than the normal range for the population.

Volunteering is no panacea for happiness however. When unemployed people do part-time volunteer work, their average wellbeing is only marginally affected, and remains well below the normal range.

*The fact is that people who are full-time volunteers tend to have very high wellbeing, above the normal range for the general population.*

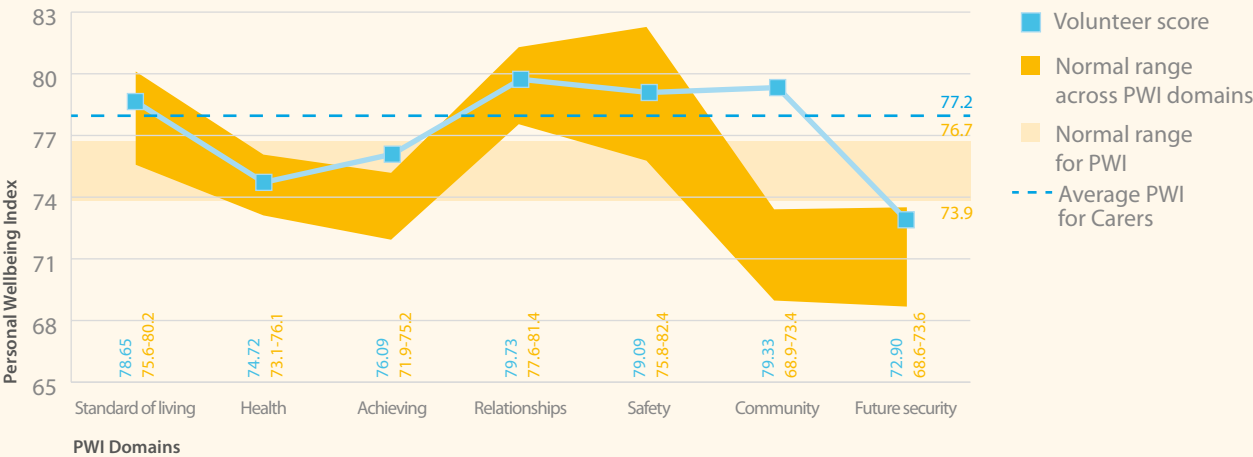
## But voluntary carers are suffering

Many people find themselves outside of full-time or part-time work because they are caring for a loved one. There are millions of Australians in this position, and while their support provides enormous comfort and benefit for those in their care, they are sacrificing a great deal in terms of their own happiness.

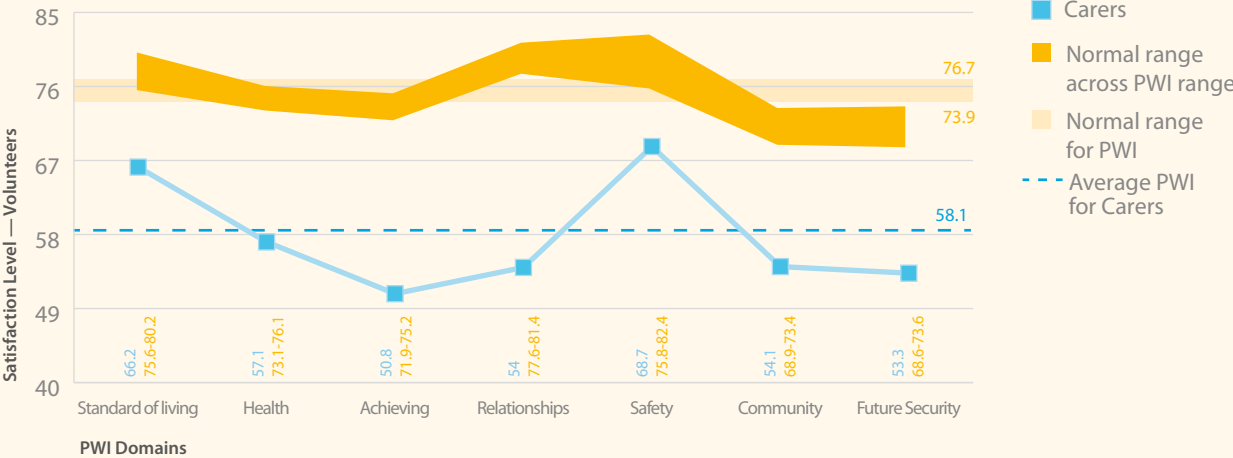
Since 2007, through special surveys, Deakin University Emeritus Professor Robert Cummins has, in coordination with Carers Australia, used the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index to track carer wellbeing. The consistent finding is that they have the lowest wellbeing of any group, including the unemployed.

In 2014 the latest carer survey found an average PWI score of 58.1, nearly 15 points below the bottom of the normal range for the national population. The domain of 'achieving in life' sat at just 50.8, more than 20 points below the normal range. One likely reason for these disturbing findings is the sheer relentlessness of their responsibilities. Another is the income foregone to care for their loved one.

## VOLUNTEERS



## CARERS COUNSELLING INTERVENTION STUDY





# Does age matter?

## Oldest are the happiest

We are reasonably happy when we are young and our lives stretch out before us, but happiest when we are in our sunset years.

From a slight wellbeing dip in middle age, satisfaction with life trends consistently upward through to retirement and into old age, with those aged 76 and over reporting the highest average wellbeing score of any age cohort. The middle age happiness slide is mainly driven by those who don't have a partner. This disparity in wellbeing between those with and without a partner disappears after the age of 66.

The 18–25 age group sits marginally higher than the age categories above until people reach the 56–65 bracket, when wellbeing begins its climb.

## Factors driving older Australians' wellbeing

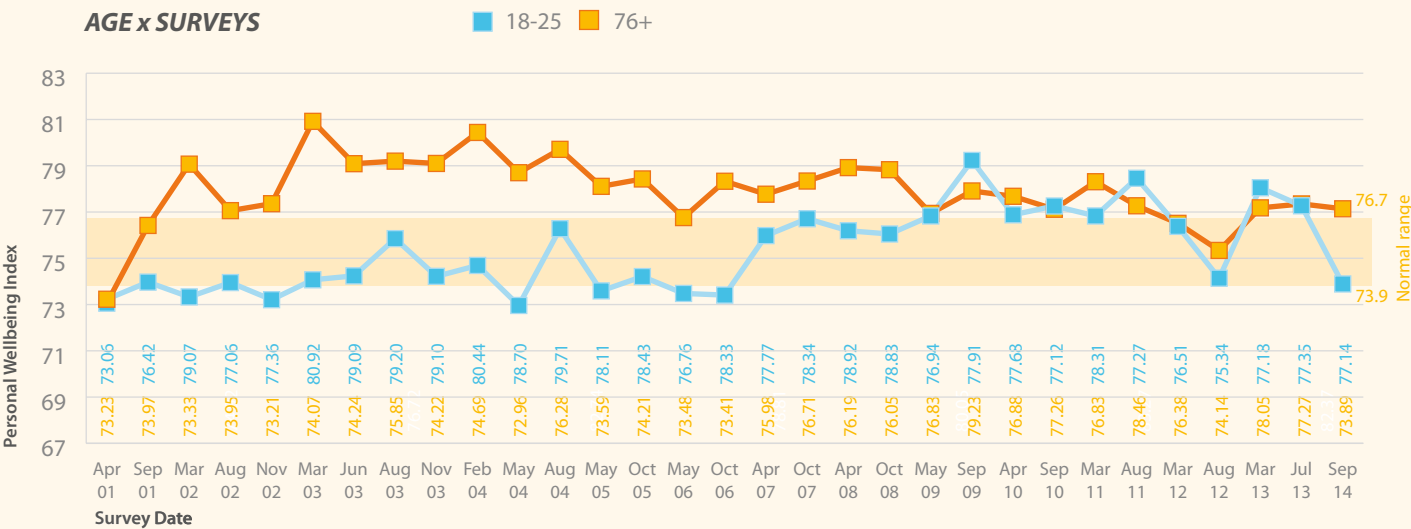
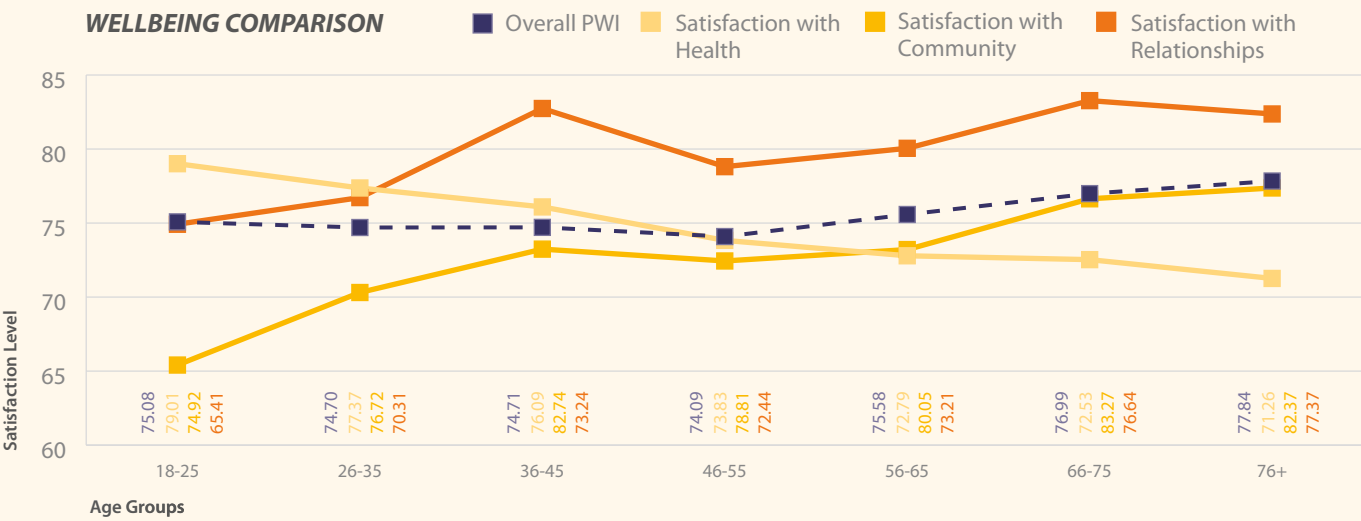
Nowhere does it become clearer that overall personal wellbeing means more than simply good health than when looking at the factors driving wellbeing for older Australians.

Satisfaction with health drops consistently as people age. But that is offset by a positive correlation between getting older and higher satisfaction with standard of living, relationships and community.

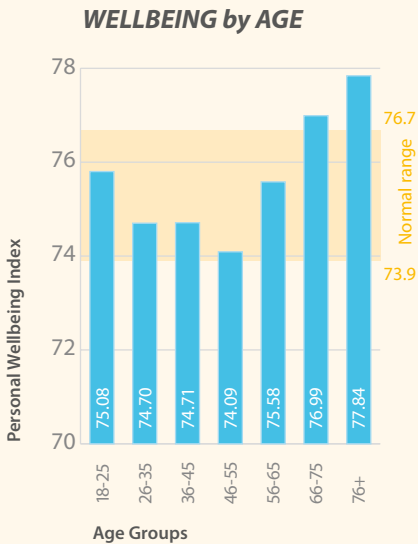
## Why a recent jump in wellbeing for younger Australians?

For the first 16 surveys from 2001 the personal wellbeing of 18–25 year old Australians was considerably lower than that of the 76+ group. But all that changed around 2007, when the younger group's satisfaction with life bounced up to just slightly less than the levels of the older group.

While this is somewhat difficult to explain, it is noted that the wellbeing domain exhibiting the biggest change among 18–25 year olds between 2006 and 2007 was 'satisfaction with community'. This coincides with the emergence of social networking among younger Australians, which may have provided them with greater connections among their peers. This domain has remained constant for those aged 76+.



We are reasonably happy when we are young and our lives stretch out before us, but happiest when we are in our sunset years.





# Are our best days still ahead?

When asked if we believe our best days are behind us, ahead of us, or right now, we once again reveal our overall sense of optimism. More than seven in 10 say our best days are either right now or in the future.

Responses to this question vary significantly depending on age. At 18–25 the vast majority of us, 85 percent, think our happiest days lie ahead, but this number drops to around 44 percent for the 46–55 year age bracket. At 56–65 as many of us believe our happiest days are behind as ahead. The average wellbeing of 56–65s who say their best days are behind is significantly lower than those who say it is now or ahead.

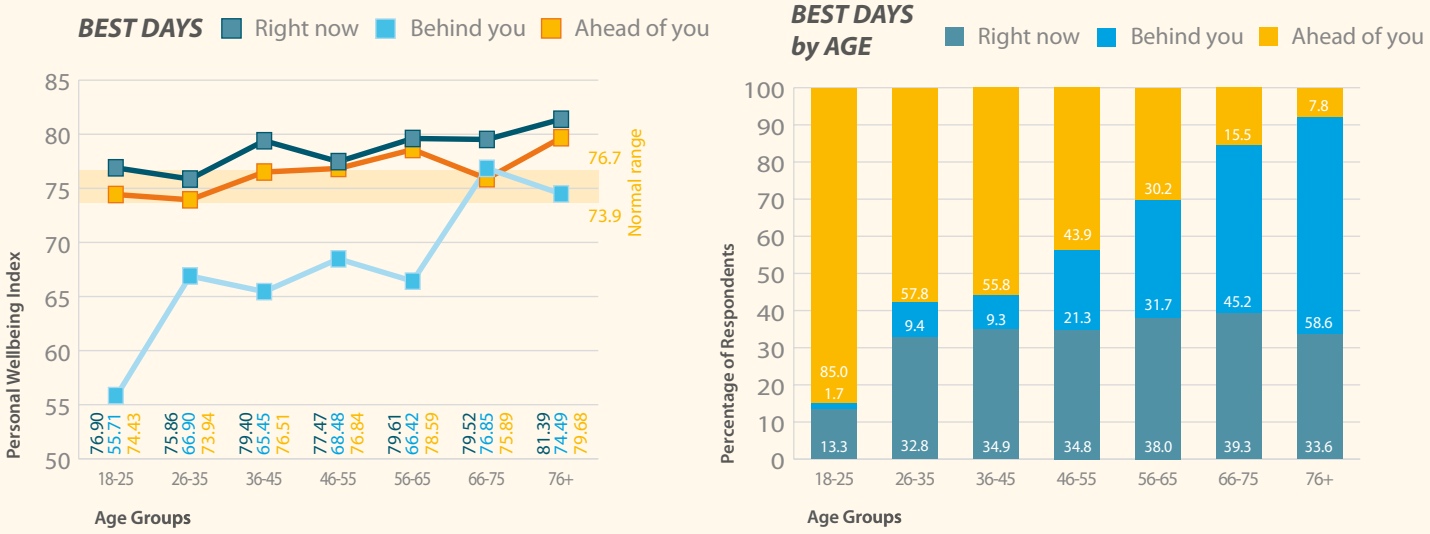
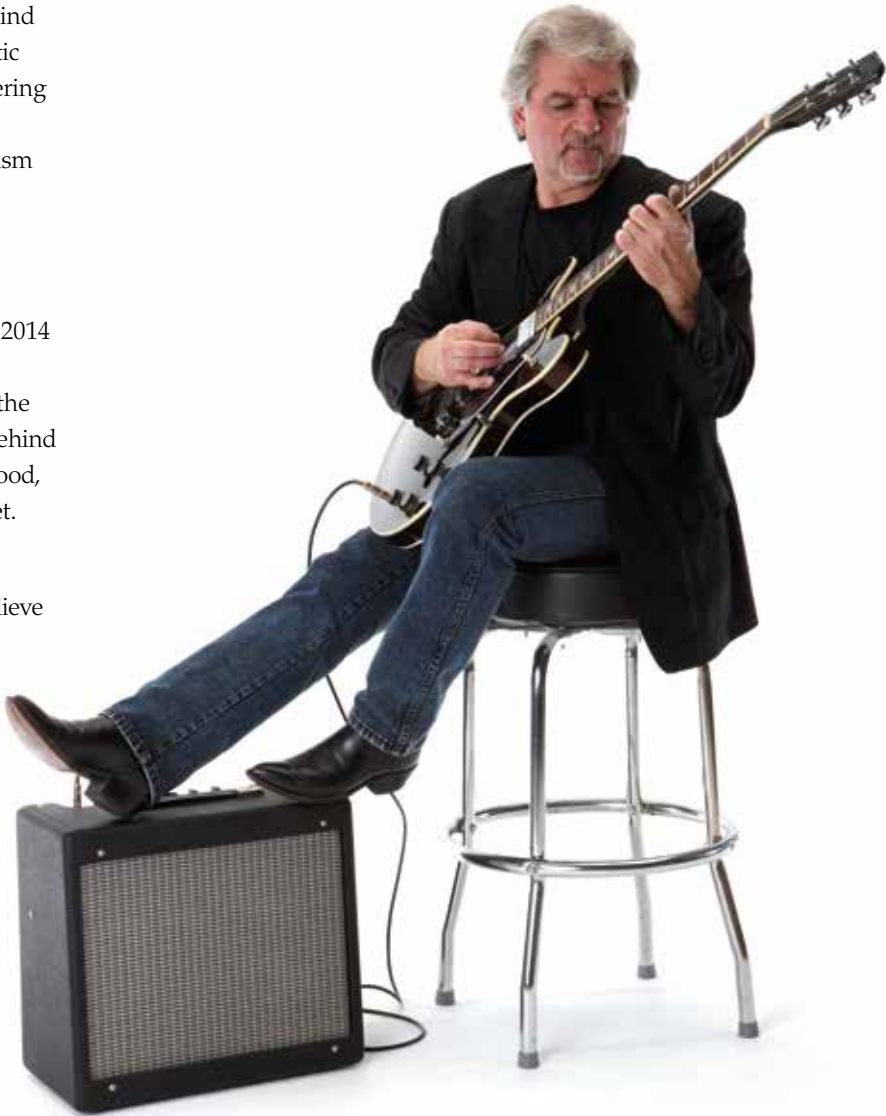
However when we reach 65, a change emerges, and the sense our best days have gone by makes little difference to how happy we feel. By then, with greater awareness of our own mortality, feeling that our best days are behind us reflects more of a realistic, rather than an optimistic outlook. The sense of nostalgia generated by considering what a satisfying life we’ve had to this point is as beneficial to wellbeing as retaining a sense of optimism toward the future.

What may be surprising is just how many of us are enjoying the moment rather than looking ahead or behind. More than a third of those in the September 2014 survey answered their best days are “right now”. This group reported wellbeing scores considerably above the normal range. Those who said their best days were behind them had very low wellbeing scores in young adulthood, and lower than normal up until the 56–65 age bracket.

### How far ahead are our best days?

Those of us who say our best days lie ahead don’t believe we will have to wait too long. For those aged 18–35, the majority believed their best years would be before 35 years of age. Years of research has shown that satisfaction with life is highest in the oldest age groups, so it turns out we are poor predictors of our future happiness!

What may be surprising is just how many of us are enjoying the moment rather than looking ahead or behind.





# How intertwined are health and happiness?

Perhaps not as much as we think

When we wander through the chemist or down the supermarket aisles, we could be forgiven for confusing the notion of ‘health’ with ‘wellbeing’. Whatever it may suggest on the side of a muesli packet, they are certainly not interchangeable. As we have seen on previous pages, wellbeing is a concept that extends beyond good health. The evidence is clear when we look at our average wellbeing across the life course. Our satisfaction with health, one of the wellbeing domains, falls away on average as we age, yet our overall wellbeing tends to rise.

Those suffering some ill-health may still be able to enjoy normal levels of wellbeing if they have at their disposal the three elements of the golden triangle of happiness — financial control, good relationships and a sense of purpose. As an example, a 2014 study using the PWI of people on dialysis shows health satisfaction was less important to their overall wellbeing than what they are achieving in life. That said, ill-health can in some circumstances be enough to defeat homeostasis for some individuals, and in that circumstance wellbeing can remain low for long periods of time.

*Our satisfaction with health, one of the wellbeing domains, falls away on average as we age, yet our overall wellbeing tends to rise.*

It may depend on your gender

Across their lives, men and women report satisfaction with their health very differently. Men start out very strong, with 18–25 year olds reporting an average health satisfaction rating of almost 80, before their satisfaction with health steadily falls away. Women maintain their satisfaction with health for longer, until they hit about the 46–55 year mark, when it falls away sharply.

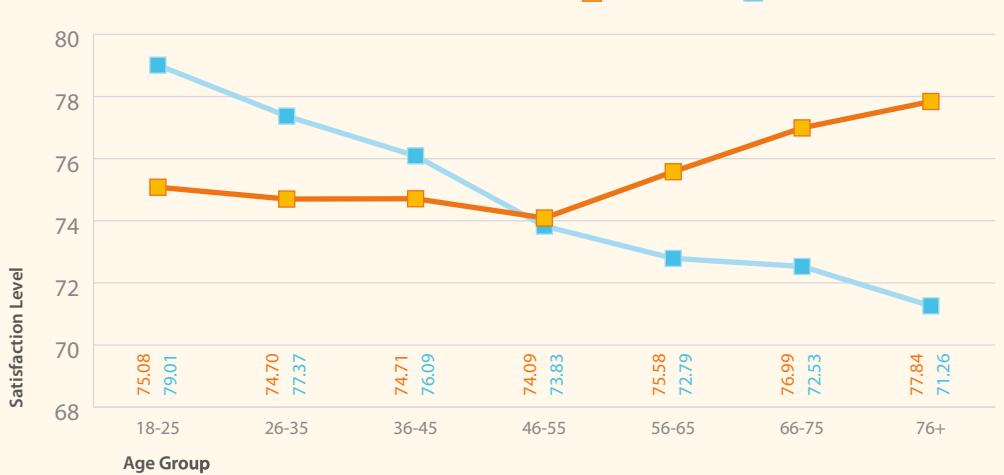
Or just how sick you are

Some significant medical issues, for example elevated blood pressure, have little impact on wellbeing, likely because they are manageable and in many cases do not restrict a person from engaging in most of their ordinary activities. But when pain and stress heightens, for instance for those with conditions such as diabetes, cancer or asthma, satisfaction with life sits below the normal range. And for mental illness including depression and anxiety, this has a clear and direct correlation to reduced life satisfaction.

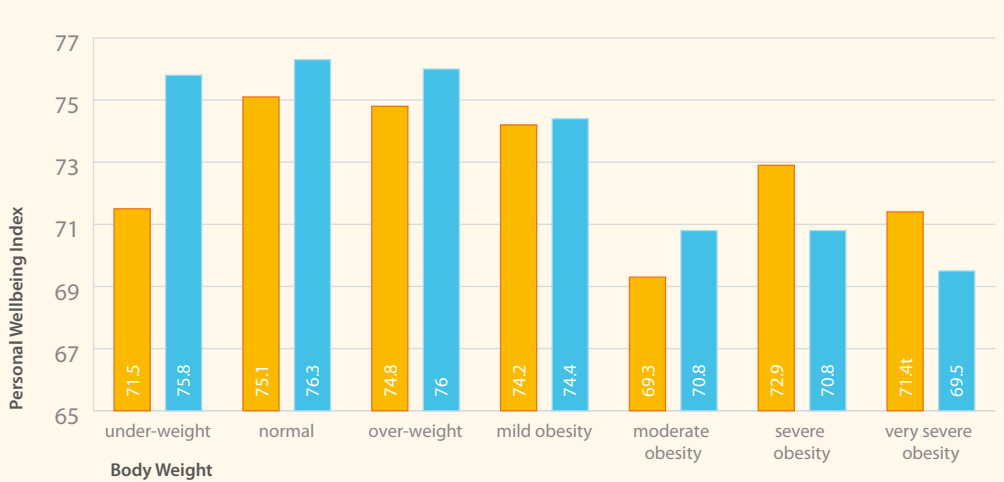
Or how heavy we are

At the extreme ends of the weight spectrum, satisfaction with life is different than for those in the middle. Moderate to very severe obesity is linked to lower wellbeing for men and women, though those considered overweight or even mildly obese still sit in the normal range of life satisfaction. Underweight men have low average wellbeing, but not women, suggesting there are societal issues at play in terms of expectations about women and weight.

WELLBEING AND HEALTH SATISFACTION



BODY WEIGHT AND SATISFACTION





# Does it matter where we live?

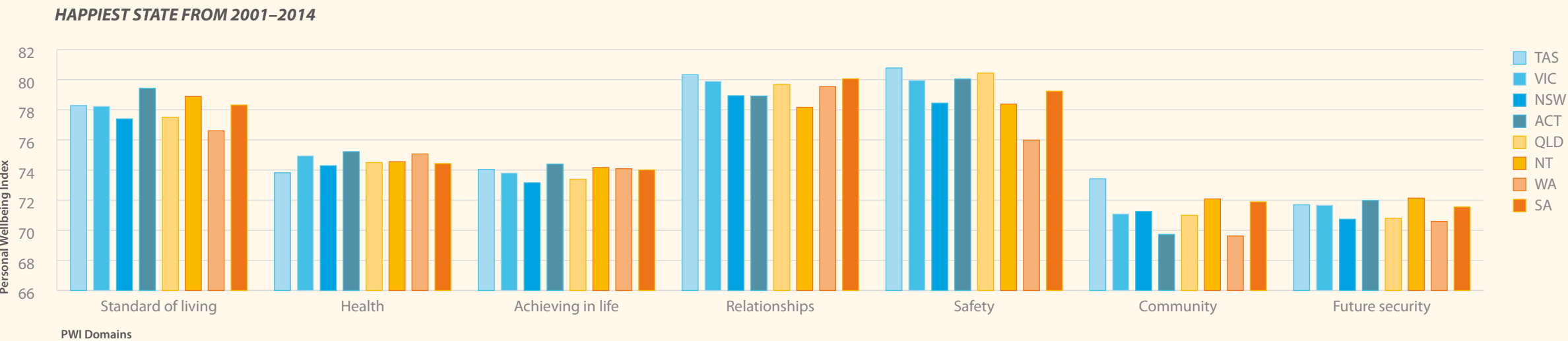
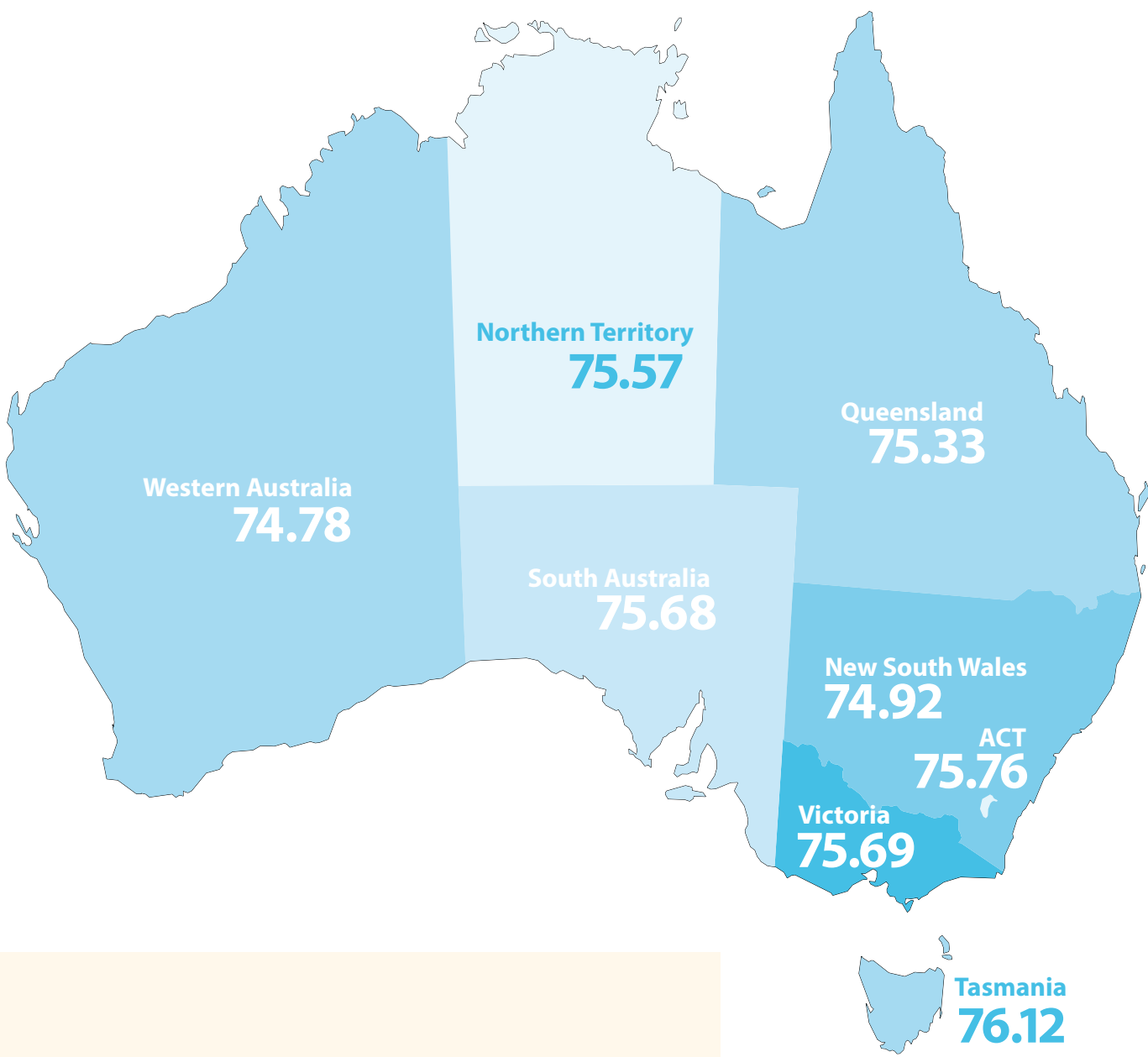
## Subtle differences between the states

When it comes to our overall satisfaction with life, it makes little difference where in Australia we live. Based on cumulative data across the life of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, Tasmania has the highest average wellbeing score at 76.12, while Western Australia has the lowest at 74.48, just below New South Wales.

The picture becomes a little more complex as we delve into the various domains of wellbeing. For instance, Western Australians score at the high end on the measures of standard of living and achievement in life, but toward the bottom in the domains of safety, community and future security. High incomes in Western Australia may explain the standard of living measure, but a more transient population and isolation from other major urban centres could be the reason for a comparatively less cohesive community, with the feelings of safety and security that engenders.

Tasmanians report the highest levels of community connection of any state, perhaps due to a lower population, which makes much of the state feel like a country town. Other data from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has shown those who live in rural and regional areas tend to be the happiest Australians.

The cost of housing and the effect of high density living appears to have a negative effect on the most populous state, New South Wales, which scores lower than its rival Victoria on five of the seven domains of wellbeing.





# What happens after a natural disaster?

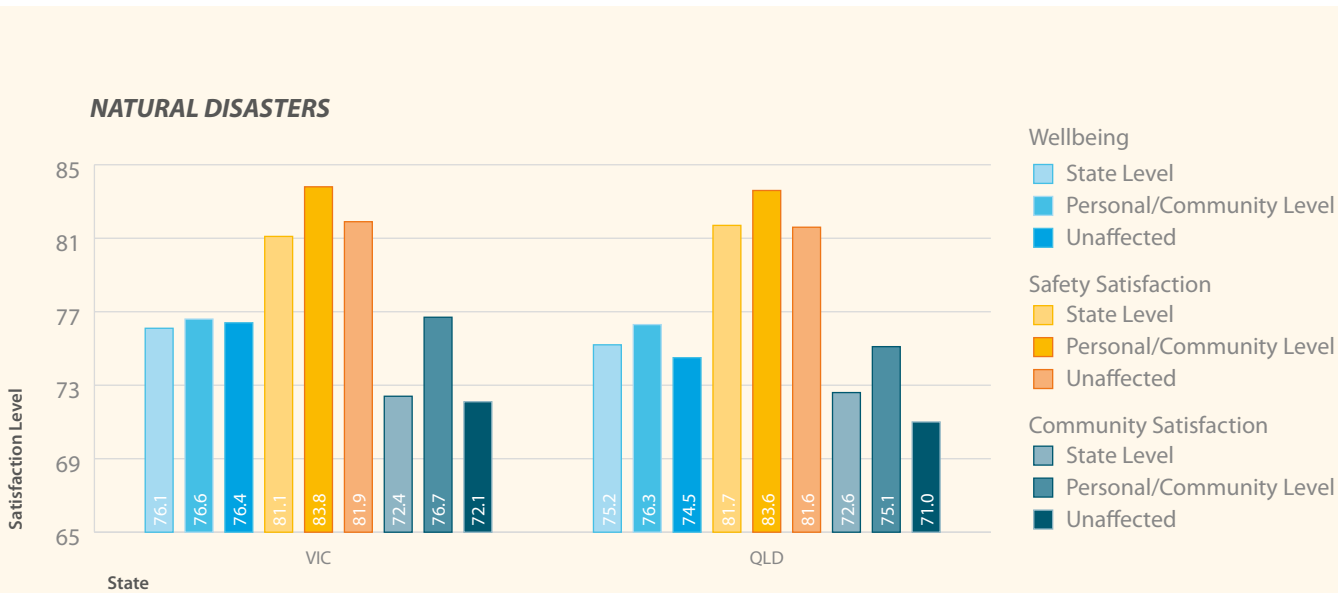
## Satisfaction with safety and security increases

In the aftermath of a natural disaster it would be reasonable to assume that the wellbeing of residents in affected areas suffers for a considerable time afterwards. In fact, the opposite is true for all but the most seriously impacted by the disaster. A special 2011 Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey of residents in areas hit by the 2009 Victorian bush fires and the 2010–11 Queensland floods revealed that overall life satisfaction, even for those who personally suffered home damage, remained in the normal range.

People who lived in affected areas but had no personal property damage reported increased satisfaction with personal safety and sense of community. Why? The disasters triggered a wave of support and assistance both at government and community level. New safety measures such as upgraded warning systems were put in place after each event. And it is also likely that the shared trauma of the floods or fires, and the neighbourhood cooperation shown in the aftermath forged a common bond among residents.

Though their overall life satisfaction scores remain within the normal range, those who personally suffered home damage do still feel the effects of the disaster in specific domains. Satisfaction with health, achieving in life, and future security falls below the normal range over two years on from the Victorian fires and nine months after the Queensland floods.

*A special 2011 Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey of residents in areas hit by the 2009 Victorian bush fires and the 2010–11 Queensland floods revealed that overall life satisfaction, even for those who personally suffered home damage, remained in the normal range.*





# Do we use our time wisely?

## Lack of sleep affects our happiness

Almost one in three of us sleep six hours or less each night, and this is associated with lower wellbeing, no matter how young or old we are. But those who turn off the reading lamp or late night TV just an hour earlier and achieve seven hours of sleep are toward the top of the normal wellbeing range.

The link between sleep deprivation and low levels of wellbeing is a growing field of research. As Sydney University Professor of Sleep Medicine Ron Grunstein says, we need to better understand whether it's a lack of sleep that leads to lower wellbeing, or the symptoms of lower wellbeing such as stress and anxiety that lead to the lack of sleep. "There's the possibility it's a vicious cycle," Professor Grunstein says.

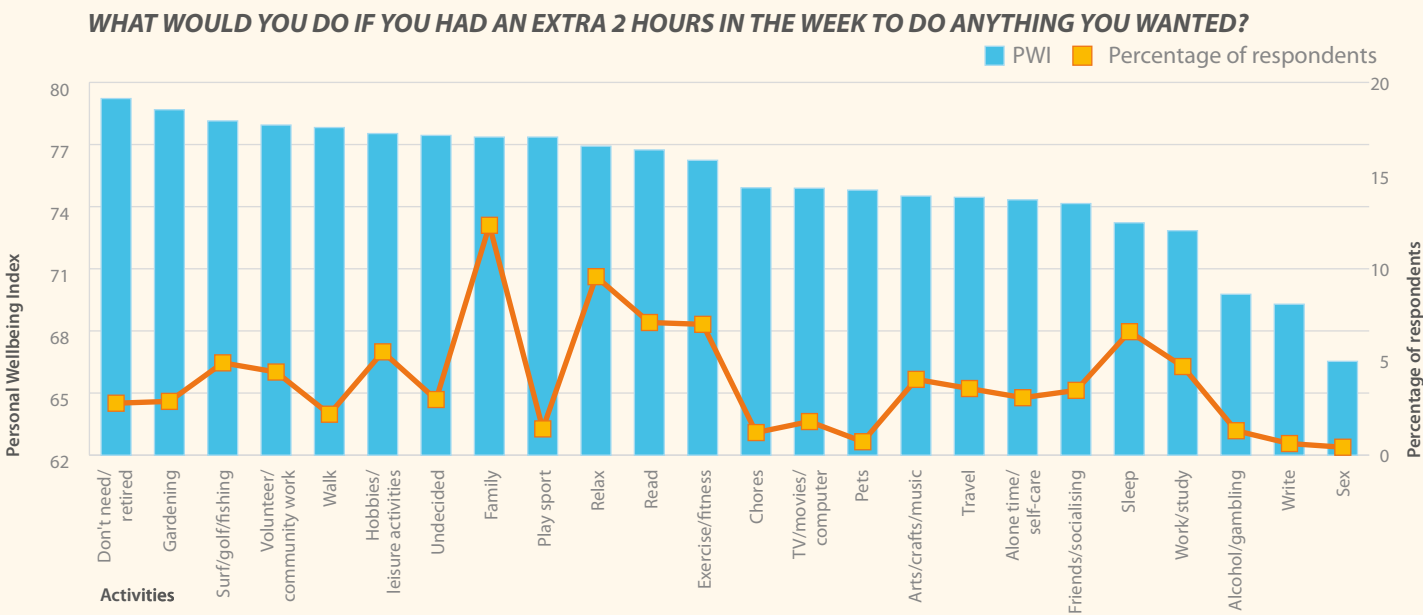
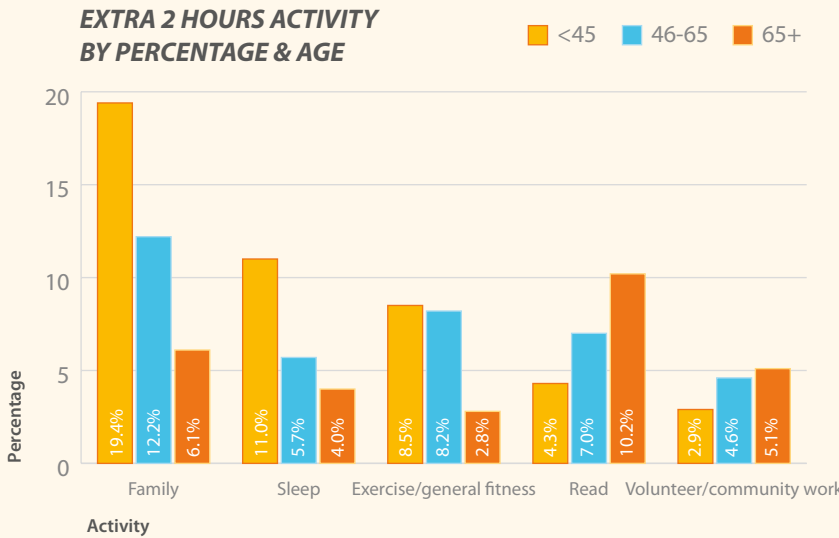
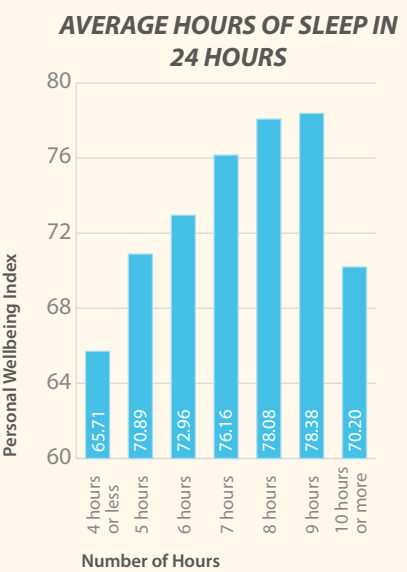
Those who consistently sleep 10 hours a night or more also record lower than normal levels of wellbeing, with over-sleeping a potential indicator of conditions such as depression.

## What if we had more time?

When asked how we would spend an extra two hours a week doing anything we wanted, most of us nominated activities normally associated with high wellbeing, such as relaxing, spending time with our family, doing volunteer work or engaging in our hobby or leisure pursuit. For many, these pursuits include activities such as golf, fishing or surfing.

More concerning is that about one in five of us said we wanted to spend the time doing things associated with a more stressful lifestyle. Opting to spend the time working may be an indication of life not in control, and opting for an extra two hours sleep may suggest that recovery is needed from a highly stressful life.

Considerable differences are apparent between the ages, with time-poor younger people preferring to spend time with family, exercise or sleep, while older people are looking to spend additional time reading or doing community work. It seems we generally think we know what we would like to do to feel happier, but time limits us in this pursuit.





# Social media and the internet. Friend or foe?

## No change in wellbeing for social media users

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites are becoming increasingly prevalent in our lives, and this has led to dystopian concerns about the demise of human to human contact, conversation and intimacy. But contrary evidence emerges in the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, which finds that wellbeing remains within the normal range across the spectrum from people who say they spend no time on social media to those who report spending more than one hour a day.

The exception to this is people who say they spend about 30 minutes each day on social media, who have a level of wellbeing slightly above the normal range. This may indicate moderate exposure to this form of communication may be associated with optimal wellbeing. Perhaps moderation is the key.

## Lower wellbeing for men who don't use internet

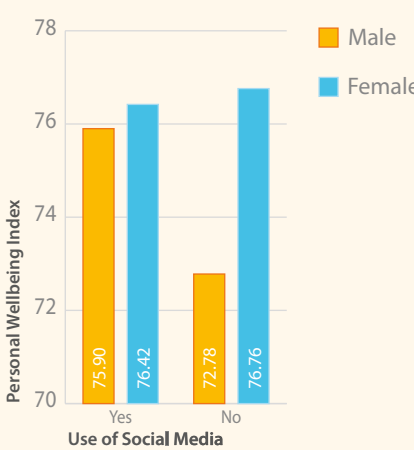
Women's wellbeing differs little whether they are internet users or not. But men who don't use the net at all report below normal levels of wellbeing compared to the normal range of wellbeing for men who do. This finding may be associated with factors other than internet use itself. For instance, men who don't access the internet may be elderly and socially isolated, suggesting lower wellbeing. The lack of financial resources suggested by not having access to the internet doesn't appear to be a factor given that women's life satisfaction is the same whether they are online or not.

An alternative explanation is that often the internet can be used to efficiently perform daily tasks that might otherwise be a hassle. For example, if people are using the internet to quickly access information, read the news, or perform ordinarily time-consuming tasks like banking, they may have more time to spend doing the things they really enjoy. Perhaps it has more to do with what we use the internet for rather than how long we spend on it.

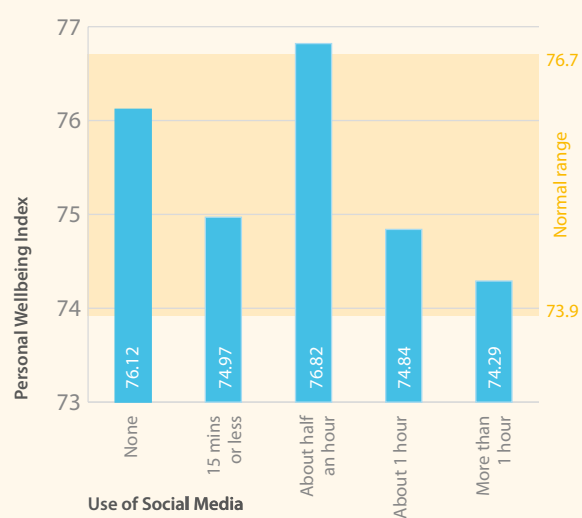
People who spend about 30 minutes each day on social media have a level of wellbeing slightly above the normal range.



DO YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA?



DAILY TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA



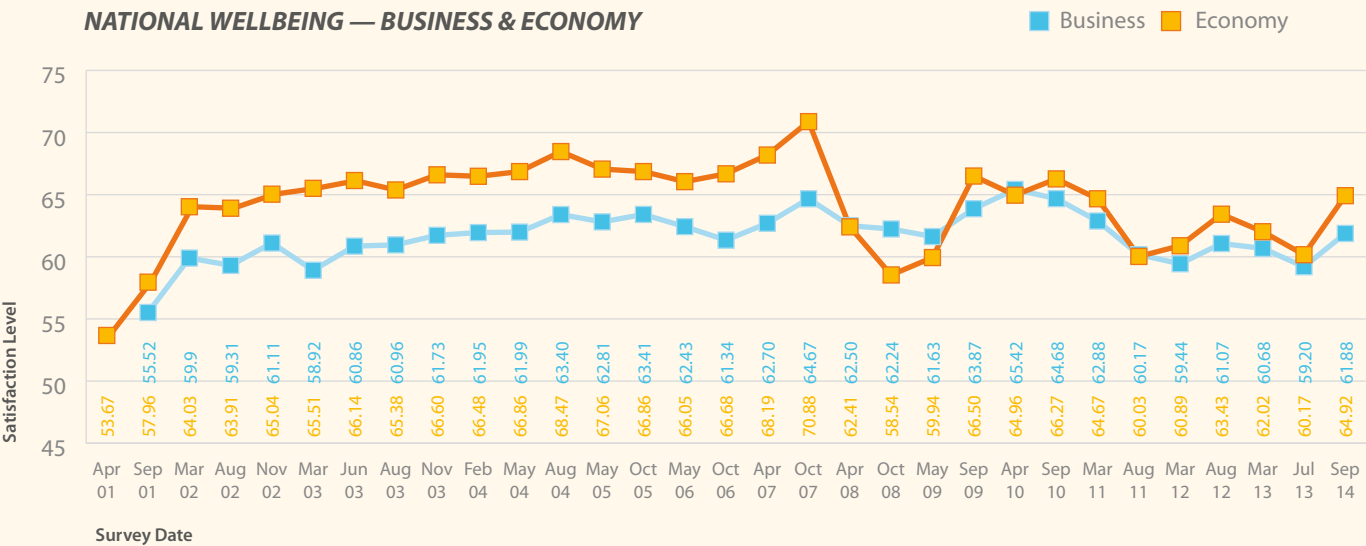


# Satisfaction with the economy and business

Beyond their personal wellbeing, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has also tracked our satisfaction with a range of national indicators — economic and business conditions, social conditions, government, national security and the environment. These form part of the National Wellbeing Index.

The varying economic conditions over the last 15 years makes the measure of our satisfaction with the economy the most volatile of all the domains considered in the National Wellbeing Index. After an initial rise following September 2001, perhaps because the doomsayers who talked up a global meltdown in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States were proven wrong, our satisfaction levels remained reasonably strong and stable until April 2008. The measure then plummeted for 18 months as we endured a huge stock market fall and the onset of the Global Financial Crisis.

A series of federal government emergency economic stimulation measures throughout 2009 may have played a part in quickly returning satisfaction with the economy almost to pre-GFC levels. Political instability through the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd years was likely the reason for satisfaction with the economy bouncing around from 2010, though it stayed on the low side of long-term average until September 2014, when there was a bounce of more than 4.5 points. This may have reflected a combination of continued low interest rates, high house prices and the optimism engendered by a change in government.



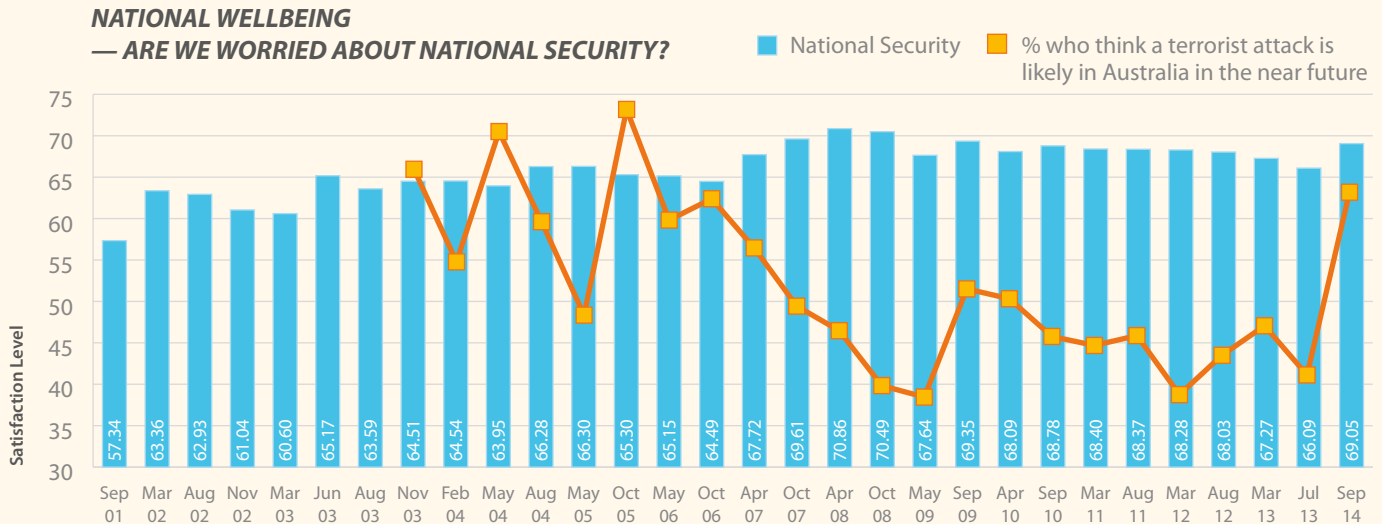
# Satisfaction with national security

Given the birth of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index coincided with the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, it is little wonder that the first gauge of our satisfaction with national security was the lowest. From there our strength of satisfaction quickly rose.

Between 2002 and 2008 our satisfaction with national security continued to rise, particularly after 2006. It is interesting that the second Bali bombing occurred during this time, in 2005.

Satisfaction with national security has tracked along fairly steadily since 2008, despite the increase in arrivals of illegal immigrants by boat through to 2013.

In 2014, in a security environment affected by instability in the Middle East, and particularly by the rise of the terrorist organisation Islamic State, there was a significant jump (from 41 percent to 63 percent) in the number of Australians who believed a terrorist attack was likely on home soil in the near future. Despite this spike, satisfaction with national security increased to levels not seen since 2008, an indication of the comfort we take in our government and our institutions to deal with the threat.





# Satisfaction with government

There have been some dramatic fluctuations over the last 15 years in our levels of satisfaction with government. While this question is a generic one, and doesn't refer to a specific layer of government, political party or individual, significant movements have tended to reflect the prevailing politics of the day at the federal level.

It is worthy of note that the prevailing trend in our subjective assessment of satisfaction with government is a downward one, which may reflect a growing community concern about the standard of governance in Australia and a perception our politicians are becoming less effective in advocating on our behalf.

Initially our satisfaction levels were high, as the first survey came in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks when we put our faith in government to keep us safe. But the measure quickly fell from 59 to 53 points in the survey that coincided with the re-election of John Howard's Coalition government.

The election of Labor's Kevin Rudd in November 2007 and his honeymoon period coincided with the Index's April 2008 peak. Satisfaction with government tumbled through the following few years at a time the country was seeing political instability at the federal level and a number of state government changes.

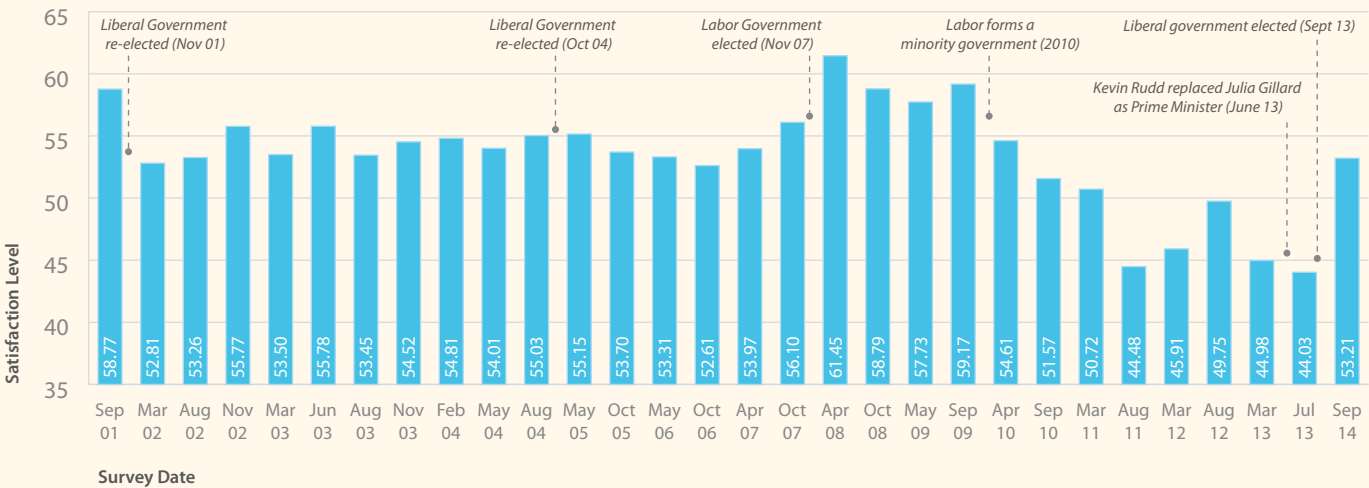
At the time of Julia Gillard's ascension to the prime ministership in July 2010, an additional Personal Wellbeing Index survey was commissioned, which found women's average wellbeing increased, driven by higher scores in the domains of community connection and achieving in life.

Satisfaction with government briefly rallied again as the Rudd-Gillard saga continued when Mr Rudd returned as Prime Minister after a leadership spill in June 2012. But again the measure fell, this time to an all-time low of 44.

The survey taken in September 2014 reveals a significant 9.2 percent jump in satisfaction with government (to 53.2). This is another example of significant movement in the Index coinciding with a political change at the federal level, with a change of government to Tony Abbott's Coalition administration.



NATIONAL WELLBEING — GOVERNMENT SATISFACTION





## Methodology

### Academic rigour

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is an academic study that adheres to rigorous implementation and statistical standards. It is one of the world's leading measures of subjective wellbeing conducted at a national level. A team of academics within the Department of Psychology at Deakin University is responsible for data analysis. All findings presented in the reports are statistically significant—unless otherwise stipulated.

### Research method

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is based on a quantitative methodology. For the first 14 years of data collection, national phone surveys of a random, geographically representative sample of 2,000 Australians were conducted at least twice per year. In 2014 the survey was collected once, with a representative sample of 1,000 Australians. An even gender split is sought to reflect the national population. The age composition of the sample is not actively managed but yields a breakdown similar to that of the national population as determined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The surveys do not include anyone aged under 18 years or non-English speaking persons, and it does not seek to specifically identify Indigenous Australian respondents.

### Presentation and type of analyses

In the presentation of results, the trends that are described in the text are statistically significant. All satisfaction values are expressed as the strength of satisfaction on the 0–100 scale. In situations where homogeneity of variance assumptions has been violated, Dunnett's T3 Post-Hoc Test has been used. In the case of t-tests we have used the SPSS option for significance when equality of variance cannot be assumed. The raw data for each report are available from the Deakin University Australian Centre on Quality of Life website:

<http://www.acqol.com.au/reports/auwbi.php>

### Report organisation

All information presented herein is sourced from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index reports, generated from national surveys conducted since April 2001, unless indicated otherwise. Complete reports, data files and further information on the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index are available at:

[www.australianunity.com.au/wellbeingindex](http://www.australianunity.com.au/wellbeingindex)

<http://www.acqol.com.au/reports/auwbi.php>

## Community Wellbeing Index

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has been customised to assist community groups better understand their collective wellbeing. We call this the Community Wellbeing Index (CWI).

The CWI allows groups to collate the wellbeing of each individual to determine an overall community wellbeing Index score. The results can be further analysed by both age and gender.

The value to community groups is that they can present the survey at a point in time and receive feedback, then introduce a program they hope might have an impact on the groups' satisfaction with life. At an appropriate interval afterward, the survey can again be forwarded, and the scores compared both across the board, and by age and gender. Wellbeing can also be compared over time in the absence of any intervention.

This has tremendous value in providing an evidence base for programs introduced into a group.

For further information please visit: [australianunity.com.au/about-us/Wellbeing/Community-wellbeing](http://australianunity.com.au/about-us/Wellbeing/Community-wellbeing)

## A word from the Index's author

In 2000, Australian Unity conceptualised the creation of a national index that would track social progress. Myself, and Richard Eckersley from the Australian National University, devised the instrument. I became the Index's author, and the first Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey was conducted in April 2001. Since that time, over 40 national surveys have been conducted, with the most recent in September 2014.

Just six months after our first survey came the September 11 terrorist attacks which fundamentally changed the world. Our second survey quickly followed, and results were surprising. While, as expected, Australians generally felt saddened by the event, paradoxically, the Personal Wellbeing Index rose 1.2 points, while the National Wellbeing Index rose 3.3 points. Both results were statistically significant.

They showed that feeling sadness at some distant event could make people feel better about themselves by way of contrast. This result was interesting, and with our measures proving reliable, garnered much public interest.

From that time the public have engaged enthusiastically with the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index. There have been many hundreds of media stories and numerous conference presentations and workshops, both nationally

and internationally. The success of this venture can importantly be traced to the management of data and information at various levels as:

- In collaboration with the Australian Unity team, constructing media releases on our results.
- As first-level evidence of scientific integrity, presenting all results and tests of significance in a report for each survey. This has allowed journalists and students access to material by which they can verify the results we are claiming.
- As second-level evidence of scientific integrity, raw data and the associated data dictionary from each survey, are made available for free download, on a designated page of the Australian Centre on Quality of Life.
- As our measure of scientific relevance, around 150 peer-reviewed publications have been created, based on these data and the theory of subjective wellbeing homeostasis, for the international community of scholars.

The Index has also been highly influential in shaping public policy. In 2004 I was the primary author awarded 'Best paper published in Social Indicators Research 2003' and in that same year, along with research colleagues and staff from Australian Unity, won the Victorian Public Health Award for Capacity Building Excellence. In 2013, the Personal Wellbeing Index was adopted as the instrument to measure subjective wellbeing by both the World Health Organisation and the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation. The Index has also been adopted by the International Wellbeing Group, a collective of some 200 researchers from over 70 countries.

**Emeritus Professor Robert Cummins**  
Deakin University

In 2014, Professor Cummins retired, though he retains a role overseeing the Index. Australian Unity thanks Dr Melissa Weinberg for her research and contribution to the writing and editing of this publication.

