



The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index



The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index: Survey 39

# The declining wellbeing of Australians in 2022

Our wellbeing in challenging times

# Wellbeing in the aftermath of the pandemic

An annual snapshot of our collective wellbeing, the 39th Australian Unity Wellbeing Index found us continuing to deal with the effects of COVID-19—among a host of other challenges.

**H**ow are you doing? No, how are you *really* doing? If you're anything like the 2,000 people aged 18-plus that we interview each year as part of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2022 was challenging. In fact, the results show that Australians are having a difficult time—individually and as nation.

And with mental health issues at an all-time high, cost-of-living pressures and the looming threat of climate change, our young adults are among those who have been finding it the hardest.

## Why our wellbeing matters

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, conducted in collaboration with Deakin University, tracks how people are feeling about their personal lives and how they believe the country is going as a whole.

“We're talking here about subjective wellbeing, so that's how satisfied people are with

certain aspects of their lives,” explains lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett, from Deakin University's School of Psychology.

“And with the Wellbeing Index, we're specifically concentrating on seven key domains of wellbeing—relationships, achieving in life, standard of living, health, community connectedness, personal safety and future security.” The survey sees respondents answer questions across the seven domains, with a focus on a topical issue too—this time, it was climate change.

“How we're feeling matters,” says Kate. “At the national level, we'll measure things like economic outcomes, productivity and all those things, for example. But it's also really important to find out how Australians are feeling. We could have GDP soaring at record highs, but if the population is actually feeling stressed and depressed it could impact on practical productivity.”

Australians are a resilient bunch, but after years of lockdowns and economic uncertainty, the cracks are starting to show. In this survey, two of the domains—health and community connectedness—were outside the average range for the first time ever.

## The context: a challenging year

The 39th Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey took place in May and June 2022, just after a federal election that saw Labor achieve a majority government for the first time since 2013.

Having weathered two years of the pandemic, the timing of the survey also coincided with a spate of illnesses—COVID-19 was still causing havoc, as were outbreaks of the flu and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). “It was a challenging time in the community,” recalls Kate.

Meanwhile, the issue of climate change is looming larger than ever. But how is that existential threat impacting people's actual wellbeing? The Wellbeing Index data explores that subject in detail. “It was the perfect opportunity to get a pulse on how people are really feeling about climate change,” says Kate.

We might also be in for some tough times ahead, with increasing pressures around the cost of living, and a growing unease around the nation's economic situation.

But if we've learnt one thing from more than two decades of research, it's that Australians' wellbeing is resilient. It's something that bodes well for any stormy times ahead.



## Learn more

1. [What is Real Wellbeing?](#)
2. [The science of wellbeing](#)
3. [Why measure wellbeing?](#)

## A brief history

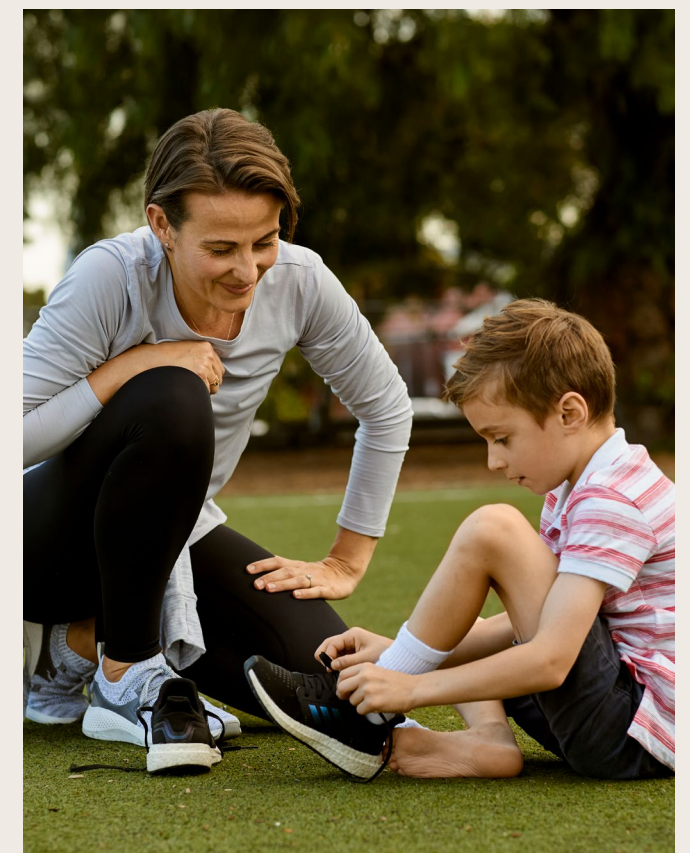


For more than 20 years, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has tracked both the personal wellbeing and national wellbeing of Australians.

The Personal Wellbeing Index tracks how satisfied Australians are with their own lives across a range of “domains” or areas: standard of living (finances), health, achieving in life (sense of purpose), relationships, personal safety, community connectedness and future security. In addition, the National Wellbeing Index measures our satisfaction with our life in Australia, across the economy, the environment, social conditions, government, business and national security.

The first national survey was conducted in 2001 by Robert A Cummins, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Deakin University. Since then, more than 70,000 Australians have been interviewed and the Personal Wellbeing Index has become the pre-eminent survey of its kind, informing and influencing the concept of wellbeing across academia, government, business, media and the community.

Today, the Personal Wellbeing Index has been adopted for use by both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), while countries like New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, Iceland and Finland are now incorporating wellbeing measures into their national budgets and policies.





# Key findings: it's been a year of challenges

Our wellbeing is usually very resilient—but the latest research from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index shows drops across a number of measures. So what does this tell us?

**M**odern life can be messy and unpredictable. Yet, for all these changes, whether they bring personal fortune or leave us feeling a little worse for wear, our subjective sense of wellbeing tends to hold remarkably steady.

During the years that we've been measuring the pulse of our nation through the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, we've found that subjective wellbeing has remained a resilient life measure that's rarely prone to dramatic fluctuations.

But the results from our 39th national survey bucked that trend. For the first time in its history, several measures of wellbeing fell below the average range—a measure of what's considered “normal” based

on past results—reflecting the unprecedented challenges Australians are facing, both as a nation and as individuals.

“We've seen a really steep drop since 2020,” admits lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett. “We were surprised, as this is what we expected in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

## The largest downturn in 21 years

The measure that asks people to rate how satisfied they are with their lives as a whole, Global Life Satisfaction, fell to its lowest level in 21 years. “That's basically a reflection of how satisfied people are feeling with their lives in general,” explains Kate. “And people are clearly quite unsatisfied compared to other years.”

And that wasn't the end of the bad news either, with our Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) scores—which measure our satisfaction across the seven key domains of wellbeing—were towards the bottom of the average range, reflecting a notable drop from relatively high scores in 2020.

So what exactly is behind this downturn? While multiple factors are at play, Kate believes the specific timing of the survey—undertaken in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic in May and June 2022—was significant.

At the time, cases of COVID-19 were still popping up. In addition, cost-of-living pressures were rising, the war in Ukraine had recently started, and we had just experienced devastating floods across Queensland and New South Wales.

## Young adults are facing a host of challenges

Viewed from a demographic perspective, one trend was how PWI scores declined steadily with age. For the first time since 2006, all adults under 56 reported PWI below the average range, while young adults (aged 18–25) posted their lowest scores in 21 years. “If we think about what that means, it suggests they're not really thriving,” says Kate.

The unease engulfing young adults is a complex issue. There's no doubt that COVID-19 lockdowns deprived many young people of defining life experiences, therefore affecting their mental health and general wellbeing. “It's not surprising that young adults are struggling to readjust,” Kate says.

“For many young people, things fell by the wayside during COVID-19,” Kate says. “And they're now still trying to get back on track. Plus that

generation is also facing so much uncertainty in terms of jobs, housing and climate change. They're finding life harder than ever.”

## Reduced satisfaction with health and connectedness

While PWI scores did manage to stay just within the average range, we recorded marked declines when it came to our satisfaction in two key areas: our health and our sense of community connectedness, which both fell to their lowest levels in 21 years.

“The community connectedness domain had a significant fall. And that's concerning because we know people get so much benefit from community. That'll be an interesting one to watch and see what happens in the future.”

When it came to our own health, Kate says, Australians felt vulnerable on multiple fronts.

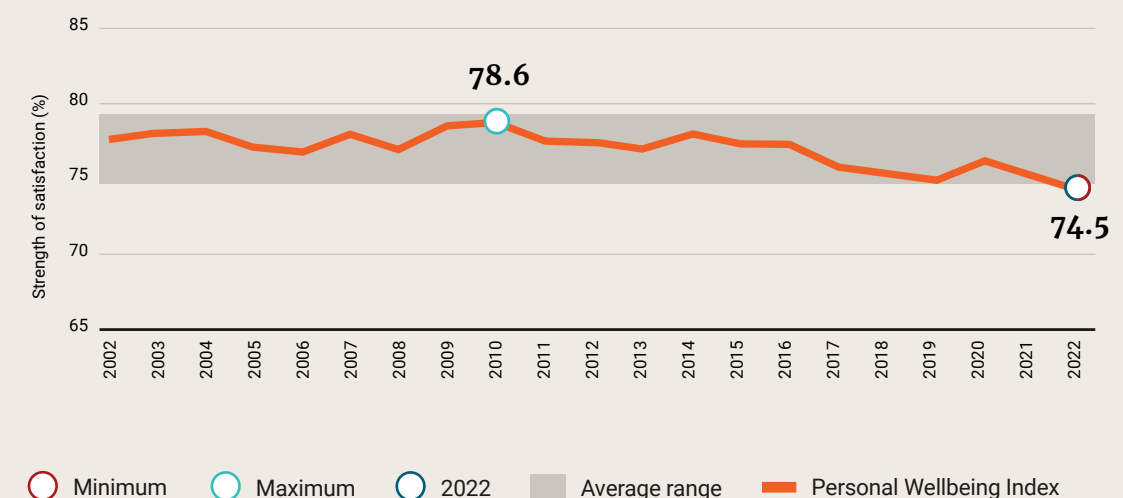
“Right now, there are long waiting lists to see GPs,” she says. “But around the time the survey took place, there was also a lot of COVID-19, flu and sickness. People were struggling, health-wise.”

But the research shows that perhaps the biggest concern is how we're feeling about our mental health. The research recorded high feelings of anxiety and depression. It's no wonder, then, that the issue of mental distress is a hot topic.

## The impact of increasing financial pressures

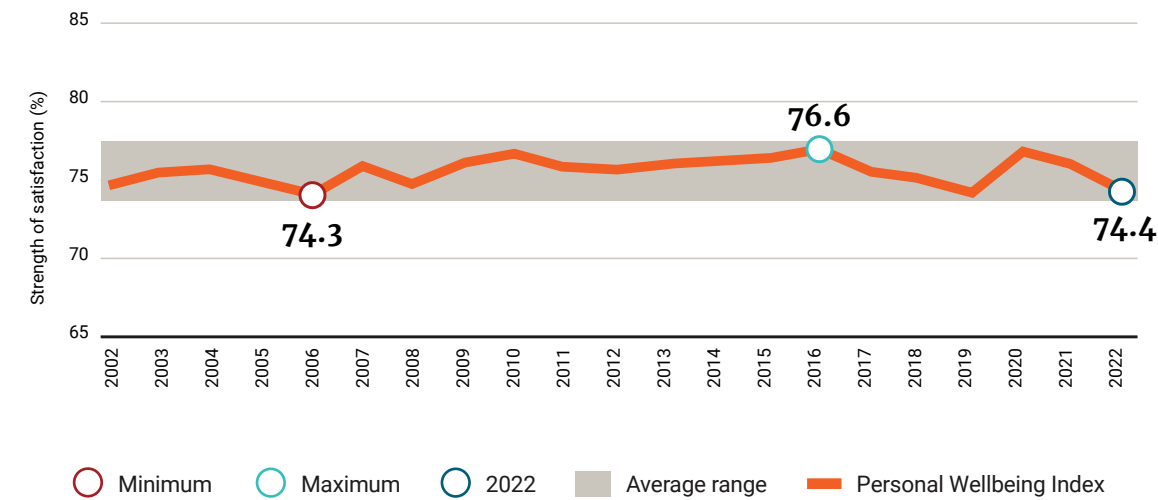
Another reason for the decline in our PWI scores from 2020 and 2021 levels is that Australia actually weathered the early stages of the pandemic fairly well. Kate believes that many Australians felt united by a sense of solidarity in the face of the challenge. “There was that feeling that we were all in it together,” she says. “Plus there were generous government supports in place.”

## Satisfaction with life as a whole





The personal wellbeing of Australians



Since then, rising interest rates and steep increases in the cost of living has led to greater financial pressures. Not surprisingly, this has hit marginalised groups the hardest. Unemployed people and those living on a household income of less than \$30,000 reported their lowest PWI levels in 21 years. People who were separated or living alone also fared poorly, recording notably lower PWI scores in 2022.

“People are currently not feeling very satisfied,” Kate admits of their financial situation. “And the cost-of-living crisis is probably contributing there.”

Climate change: the issue to track

In 2022, Australian Unity Wellbeing Index researchers chose to track one of the most pressing issues of our time—climate change.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, concern about climate change is far higher among young people aged between 18–35 than other age groups.

Understandably, young adults view the issue with far greater urgency and are more conscious of the existential threat it poses to their lives.

“A lot of us won’t see the full impacts of climate change during our lifetime,” says Kate. “But that generation and their children will, so that’s likely why they’re a lot more worried about it.”

Amid the gloom, a glimmer of hope

The “new normal” that COVID-19 left in its wake has turned out to be a difficult environment that continues to pose multiple challenges to us all, with the results suggesting that Australians are yet to fully bounce back.

But while the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index data highlights some daunting issues, we also know that our wellbeing is usually stable and resilient—and it’s that knowledge that offers a glimmer of hope.

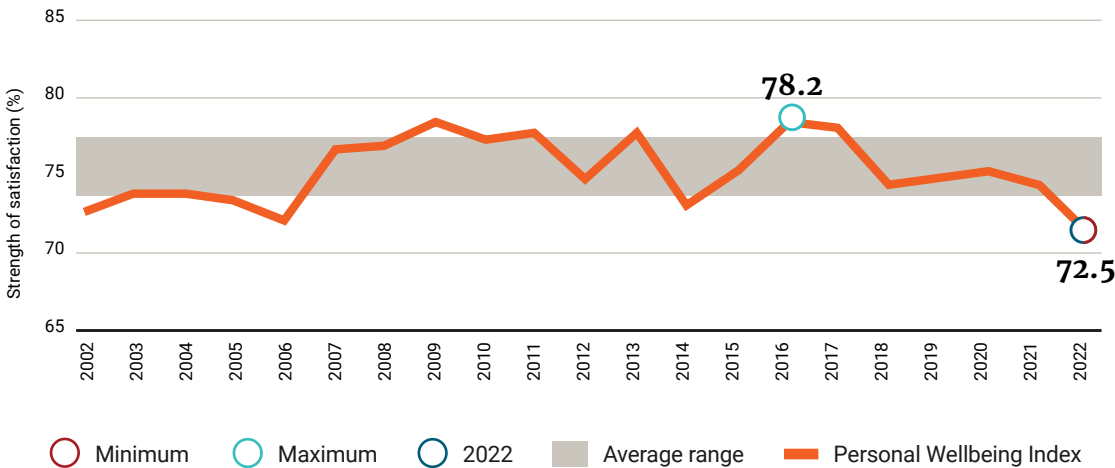
For those experiencing mental health concerns, support is available. You can call Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636, or Lifeline on 13 11 14.



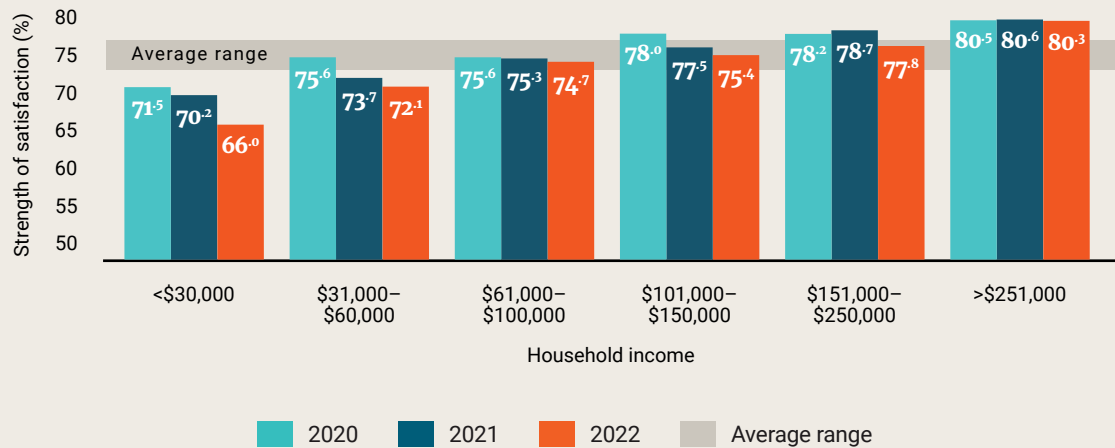
Learn more

[The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index: Survey 39](#)

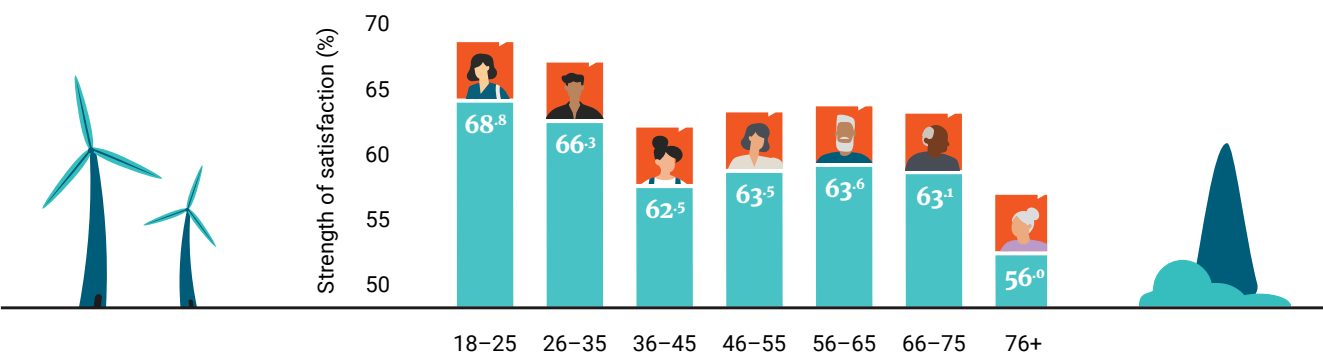
The personal wellbeing for 18- to 25-year-olds

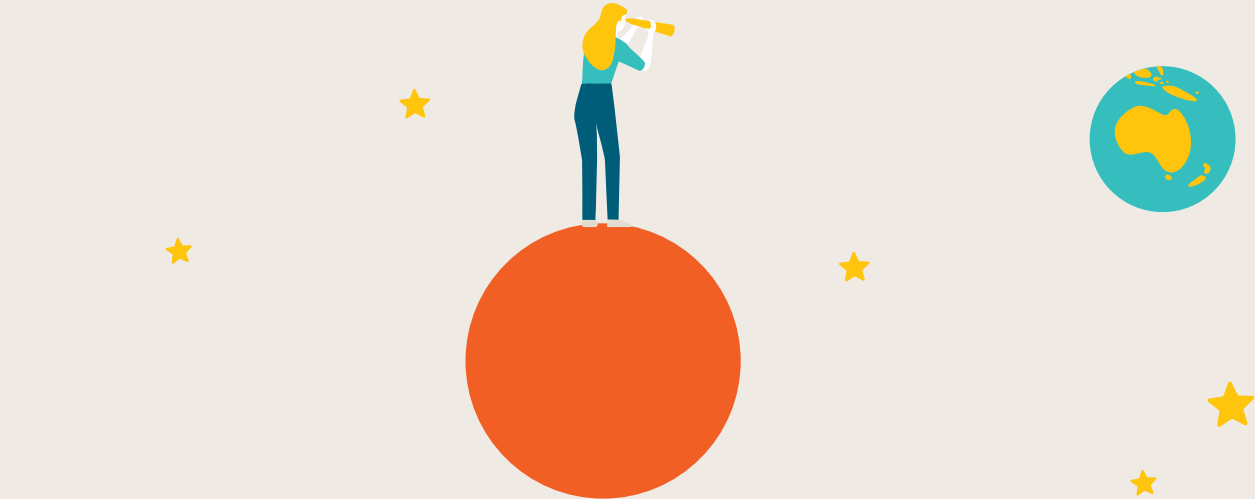


Personal Wellbeing Index scores by household income



Age and concern about climate change





# Our post-pandemic outlook on health

Why has our satisfaction with our health hit the lowest levels in 21 years? Our experts unpack the results.

In March 2020, the Australian government declared a human biosecurity emergency as it scrambled to control the outbreak of COVID-19. It was a health crisis that gripped our nation on a truly unprecedented scale.

And yet, despite all this, Australian Unity Wellbeing Index research conducted in 2020 showed that our satisfaction with our health was particularly high during those early months of the pandemic.

Two years on, when the worst of the pandemic is supposedly behind us, those health satisfaction rates have fallen to the lowest levels in 21 years. So what's caused this dip?

**Post-lockdown challenges**

Timing certainly seems to play a role in the results. Lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett points to the fact that the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey took place in May and June 2022, when COVID-19 was raging and the country was also battling a flu epidemic.

But what may have exacerbated this are medical workforce issues that became more glaring when we entered "COVID-normal".

"I think during the pandemic in 2020, Australians felt quite protected," she says. "We had some of the strictest lockdowns in the world and people felt like that was protecting our health. Since we've come out of the lockdowns, we know that it's been challenging to get into hospitals due to general staff

shortages, and that people are even struggling to get into GPs.

"I think all of that probably adds to people feeling vulnerable about their satisfaction with their health."

**The unfortunate reality of worsening health**

For Dr Jeannie Yoo, Chief Medical Officer at Australian Unity, the plummeting satisfaction levels are primarily a reflection of the unfortunate reality. In short, we're less satisfied with our health because it's actually got worse.

"Objectively speaking, as a community, our mental health and our physical health are not as good in these latter stages of the pandemic, as they were prior," she says. "I do think our satisfaction with health reflects what's going on in the community."

In addition, more deaths were also recorded from cancer, cerebrovascular disease and diabetes. Some of those, Jeannie notes, may have stemmed from delays in receiving routine care during the pandemic, which resulted in missed opportunities to tackle medical problems.

"People may not have been accessing services for diagnosis or treatment in as timely a way. Therefore, we're seeing the negative impact of that through increasing deaths, potentially, in these different areas."

The results of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index also record a worrying spike in mental health issues, with depression, anxiety and stress all somewhat higher in 2022 compared to the start of the pandemic.

Jeannie suggests the spike in rates, while exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects a very real need for help.

**The broader context**

Right now, Australia faces a host of challenges on multiple fronts, with real concerns about the cost of living,

climate change and geopolitical instability. Jeannie points to the impact that these broader concerns can have on our perception of our health.

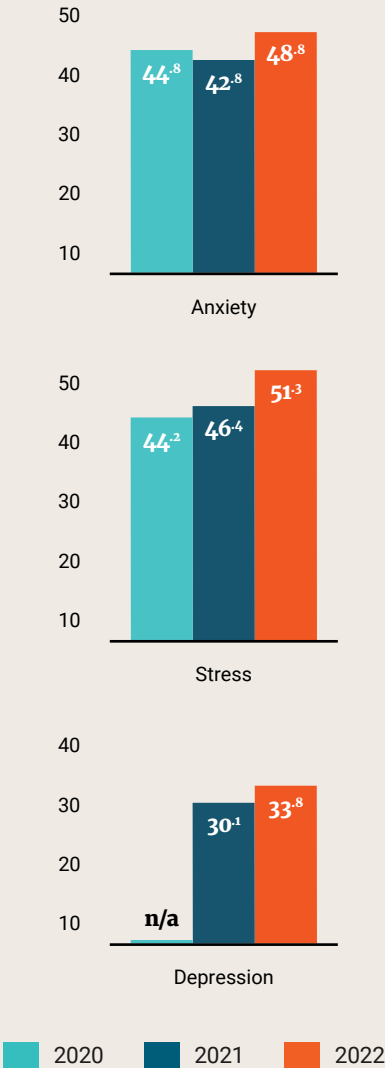
"We've got a lot of other things going on in our world that are affecting our general sense of wellbeing and, therefore, our health as well because they're inter-related," Jeannie says. "As a community, we're moving into a period of significant uncertainty on the back of a very difficult few years dominated by the pandemic."

"With that combination, it's no surprise to me that people's satisfaction with their health might be lower. It's a result of the pandemic, but also, I think, because of the difficulties and the challenges we're now facing as a community."

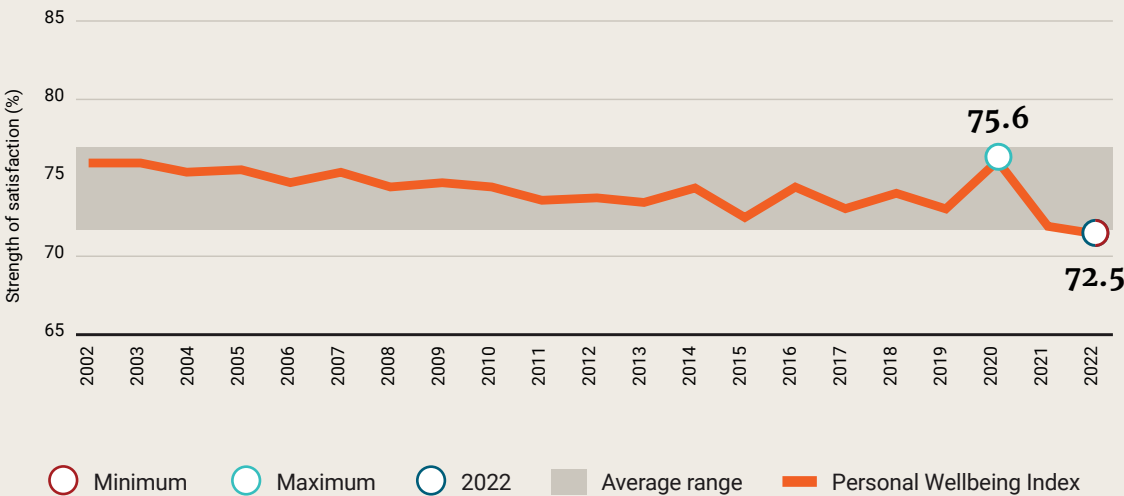
**Learn more**

- [1. How our health affects our wellbeing](#)
- [2. Our post-pandemic outlook on health](#)
- [3. How the pandemic affected our health](#)

## Our increasing mental distress



## Our satisfaction with our health





# Supporting the wellbeing of young Australians

As the latest Australian Unity Wellbeing Index research shows, young Australians are facing wellbeing challenges across multiple fronts.

We're often told our early adult years are "the best years of our lives". Unfortunately, the latest results of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index paint a different picture. Young Australians, it seems, are facing challenges to their wellbeing on multiple fronts.

So what does the research tell us about the wellbeing of young Australians? And, as parents, carers and friends, how can we support the young adults in our lives?

**Wellbeing challenges**

It is, undeniably, a difficult time to be a young adult. In 2022, when the latest Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey took place, 18- to 25-year-olds recorded the lowest Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) scores of any age group and their worst scores since the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index began over two decades ago.

This age bracket also scored poorly when it comes to the three measures of mental distress, posting the highest levels of anxiety, stress and depression of any demographic.

Asked if younger Australians are facing a wellbeing crisis, lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett is blunt. "Yes," she says. "It's a really challenging time for young people."

**Wide-ranging issues and no quick fix**

While there is no doubt about the challenges young adults are facing, there is also no single easy solution.

"Young adults are really struggling with the cost of living and the housing crisis," says Kate. "Their sense of purpose in life has also been affected. Everything got disrupted by COVID-19—a lot of these kids were doing year 11 and 12 during the pandemic. Plus, there is stress and anxiety associated with climate change.

"So there's just all this huge uncertainty about life in general, and this is a major transition period when mental health problems can emerge or be compounded."

## One parent's view on talking about climate change

For parents and carers of young Australians, there is a fine balance between encouraging optimism and action on climate change while avoiding sugar-coating a bleak topic.

As a mother of three teenagers, and a spokesperson and volunteer leader for Australian Parents for Climate Action, Deanna Hayes is learning to navigate this subject with her kids. She admits that the environmental situation is often discussed in her household, but she's careful not to put too negative a slant on the subject.

Instead she's consciously decided to maintain a calmer, more considered approach. Rather than force a discussion, Deanna prefers to wait until her children bring up the subject. "I'll talk to them about it if they want to talk about it."



At the same time, she has made a concerted effort to empower her kids with a sense of hope. "With my son who's 18, for example, it's about helping him to feel like you can actually do something, you can take some kind of action yourself and play your tiny little part to make things a bit better."

Ultimately, however, it is actions that speak louder than words. That's why, as a parent, Deanna feels obliged to be mindful of her own habits. "It's just about doing your bit within your own little scope," says Deanna. "For me, it's just about leading by example."

increase our children's capacity for adaptability. But we also need to ensure we provide nurturing policy environments for them to thrive."

### The climate change conundrum

One daunting challenge is the increasingly urgent issue of climate change—and it's a problem that's particularly apparent to the younger generations. The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index results show that the two youngest age groups (18 to 25 and 26 to 35) are the most worried about climate change, with levels of concern decreasing with age.

"Young people have grown up in an era where climate change is front and centre," Kate points out. "They're experiencing disasters, they're seeing floods, they're seeing fires and they've been living through all that from a young age."

There is, however, a sliver of positivity in the fact that this group is also the most optimistic about tackling the issue. The youngest adults in our survey felt most strongly that climate change can still be kept under control.

There's little doubt that young Australians are facing significant and unprecedented challenges to their wellbeing. There's no quick fix—but targeted policy decisions, a focus on resilience and the support of loved ones all offer the potential for optimism.

So, is there anything that can be done to support young Australians' wellbeing?

On one level, Kate suggests, policies have to adapt. For her, two key priorities are creating opportunities to get young people into the workforce and ensuring they have access to affordable housing and healthcare, particularly mental health support. But she also sees a need to foster resourcefulness and resilience in our kids.

"We certainly need to invest in children and young people and future generations. And it's delightful to see that young people are very high on the policy agenda at the moment, but there's a lot that we need to do.

"Young people are just being dealt so much at once," continues Kate. "So I think the biggest skill they need is being able to adapt in life to be able to deal with all these challenges. It's key that we



**Learn more**

[Life in an uncertain world: young adults and their wellbeing](#)



# Income, cost of living and a wellbeing economy

Australian Unity Wellbeing Index research shows that cost-of-living pressures and a turbulent economy are really starting to have an impact on our wellbeing.

**R**ight now, the cost of living is one of the biggest issues dominating the news agenda. So it's not too surprising to learn that the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index reveals that our satisfaction with our standard of living continues to decline, alongside our satisfaction with the economic situation in Australia.

But what's really worrying is that the survey that produced these results took place in May and June 2022. That's before the cost-of-living pressures really began to bite. In other words, if our financial wellbeing was on the low side last year, it's likely to worsen in the months ahead.

## Absorbing shock when things get tough

Esther Kerr, Australian Unity's CEO of Wealth and Capital Markets, sees first-hand the critical role finances play in our wellbeing, noting that they give us a solid foundation to weather storms in other areas of our lives.

"Real Wellbeing covers all aspects of your life," Esther says, "But if you're worried about having a roof over your head, or where you're going to live in retirement, or you don't think that you can provide for your children—then this challenges your capacity to have a strong sense of financial wellbeing."

It's a sentiment that was borne out in this year's Australian Unity Wellbeing Index results, where the most financially vulnerable groups

fared worse. Although Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) scores dropped across all household income groups compared to 2020 and 2021, the impact was most severe for households on less than \$30,000. These households saw their PWI scores fall to the lowest levels on record, while the next financial cohort—households with an income between \$31,000 and \$60,000—also recorded PWI scores below the average range.

"Low-income households have much less capacity to absorb shocks," explains Esther. "Financial wellbeing is not about who actually loses the most money. It will be about who's been taken closer to that moment of financial panic."

## Get set for rocky times

"What we're seeing now is that, while middle-income people are

definitely feeling the cost-of-living pressures, it's actually shifting people in low-income brackets into completely different positions of vulnerability," says lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett.

Esther believes rocky times lie ahead, now that the safety cushions the government initially put in place to shield us from the pandemic have been removed. As a result, it's only now that we're being exposed to the full brunt of COVID's disruption to businesses and the workforce.

"We artificially buffered for a few years, but I think we now have a perfect storm for financial wellbeing," she admits. "All of the drivers of financial wellbeing are being hit at once—absolute wealth is being hit, assurance and certainty are being hit, and confidence in the future is being hit."

Inevitably, Esther adds, the people who are most vulnerable to this situation are those who are living off their income rather

than their assets.

"If you're living hand to mouth, then you are right at the crunch point of the challenges that we're experiencing as an economy."

## Building a "wellbeing economy"

It's shaping up to be a huge challenge for Australia as a whole. But when it comes to building a "wellbeing economy"—that is, an economy that takes a more holistic, and wellbeing-focused, view of national progress—the information that Australian Unity and Deakin University have collected over the past two decades could help shape policy responses in the future.

For Kate, one of the key insights from the 2021 survey highlighted how our wellbeing responds to fluctuations in incomes. Significantly, wellbeing levels for people who reported income rises stayed the same, whereas those whose incomes

fell scored much lower.

"That's consistent with the economic theory of losses hurting more than gains," says Kate.

"The economy shouldn't just be an end in itself. It should be about people and the planet, and putting their needs back into the heart of the decisions we're making."

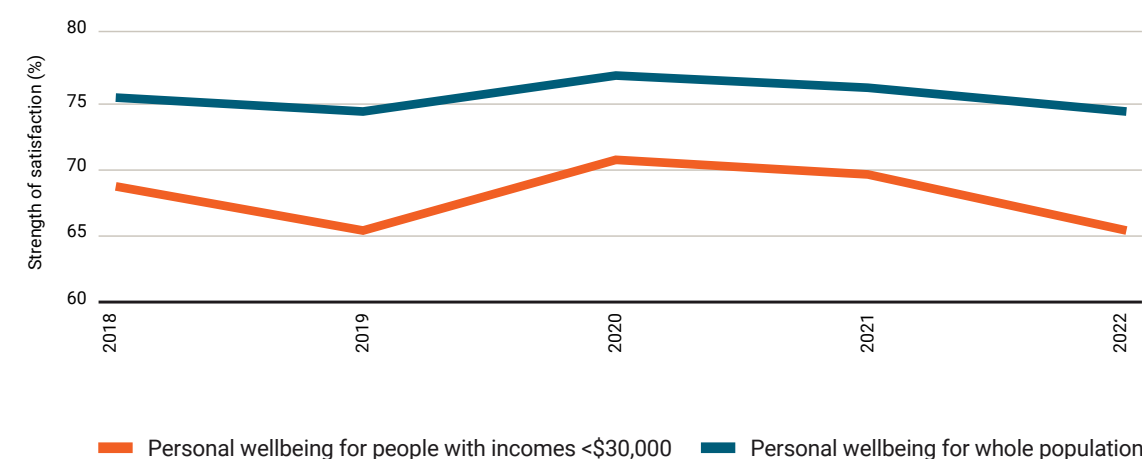


## Learn more

1. [How our finances affect our wellbeing](#)
2. [Income, cost of living and a wellbeing economy](#)



## Wellbeing for people on a household income of <\$30K





# Contributors



**Dr Kate Lycett**  
is NHMRC Research Fellow at Deakin University's School of Psychology, and the lead researcher of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index.



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**Robert A. Cummins**  
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**Delyse Hutchinson**  
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**Craig A. Olsson**  
is a Professor of Child and Adolescent Health (Psychology) and Director of the Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development at Deakin University. He is a scientific adviser for the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index.



**Esther Kerr**  
is the Chief Executive Officer of Wealth and Capital Markets at Australian Unity. On pages 12 and 13, she discusses the impact our finances have on our wellbeing.



**Dr Jeannie Yoo**  
is the Chief Medical Officer at Australian Unity. On pages 8 and 9, she discusses the state of our physical and mental health on our wellbeing.

# Methodology

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is conducted by Deakin University using the following methodology to ensure the integrity of our research.

## Academic rigour

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is one of the world's leading measures of subjective wellbeing conducted at a national level. It is an academic study that adheres to rigorous recruitment and statistical standards, with each survey being approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Deakin University. A team of academics within the School of Psychology at Deakin University is responsible for the recruitment of participants and data analysis.

## Research method

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is a national survey of a random, geographically representative sample of English-speaking Australian adults, aged 18 years and over.

An even gender split is sought to reflect the national population in all surveys. 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.



For the first 14 years of data collection, surveys were conducted between two and four times per year, and have subsequently been conducted once per year.

Approximately 2,000 participants are contacted via phone at each wave, with interviews typically lasting around 10 minutes. In 2018, the recruitment methodology changed from calling mostly landline numbers to calling only mobile phones, in accordance with the latest changes in telecommunication trends.

## Presentation and type of analyses

All personal and national wellbeing data have been converted to a percentage of scale maximum score, which standardises the results to a 0-100 percentage point scale.

In this report the term "average" has been used in place of "normative" for ease of understanding.

These normative ranges have been calculated for the Personal Wellbeing Index, National Wellbeing Index, and each of their domains, by combining data across surveys. Analyses were conducted using Stata IC version 16.

A report for each survey, together with raw data and a data dictionary are available from "Cross-sectional surveys" at the Deakin University Australian Centre on Quality of Life website: <http://www.acqol.com.au/publications#reports>

## Report organisation

All information presented herein is sourced from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index data, unless indicated otherwise.





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Real Wellbeing

[australianunity.com.au/wellbeing](https://australianunity.com.au/wellbeing)