The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index: Survey 38

Our wellbeing and the COVID-19 pandemic

Measuring subjective wellbeing in Australia

Wellbeing in a global pandemic

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index offers an annual snapshot of our collective wellbeing. In 2021, it had to contend with COVID-19 yet again.

How do you take the pulse of an entire nation? For many years, two standard measurements have been used as a barometer: a country's GDP (gross domestic product) and its unemployment rate. There's no denying these are important criteria, yet solely focusing on economic metrics fails to consider the more intimate nuances of our daily lives.

From our close relationships and financial stability to our sense of personal safety, there are myriad factors that contribute to how satisfied we are.

Piecing these multiple strands together to form a clear overview is, of course, a formidable task. But for more than 20 years, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has met this challenge.

Understanding subjective wellbeing

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is a collaborative partnership between Australian Unity and Deakin University that explores Australians' wellbeing and how we're faring.

The unique aspect of the research is that it homes in on "subjective wellbeing", explains lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett, from Deakin University's School of Psychology. "That means asking people how they're feeling and how satisfied they are with their lives."

There's a reason why the Wellbeing Index considers subjective wellbeing to be such a revealing benchmark.

"Higher levels of subjective wellbeing not only make for happier and healthier people, but also help drive economic progress by increasing productivity and allowing more people to fully participate in society," says Kate.

Tracking what matters

Since 2001, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has collected data on more than 70,000 Australians aged 18-plus from across the country. Each year, some 2000 Australians are quizzed on how they're feeling about their personal lives and how they believe the country is going as a whole.

While the research does encompass financial details like household income, it also takes a more holistic view. In the process, it gets to the heart of how Australians are feeling about the big topics that colour their lives. Respondents answer questions on everything from their standard of living to their health and sense of future security. Each survey includes a focus on a topical issue too.

The context of the 38th survey was more dramatic than normal as it took place in the middle of the second year of COVID-19, from 20 May to 17 June 2021, with many of us in lockdown. The pandemic affected the lives of us all as we were forced to grapple not only with COVID's health implications but also with the disruption to our social, professional and family lives.

"For this survey, we were particularly interested in people's mental health and resilience, as well as exploring their sense of purpose in life and their community connectedness," says Kate.

Suddenly Australians had to contend with what would become not only the worst economic crisis in a generation, but also the worst health crisis in a century. These trials obviously affected our national wellbeing, but they did so in some unexpected and illuminating ways.

As we continue to deal with the fallout of COVID, the insights from the latest Australian Unity Wellbeing Index are perhaps more valuable than ever.

A brief history

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

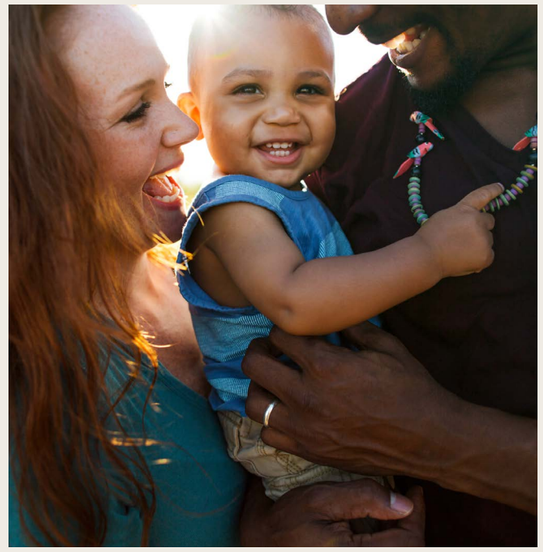
The Personal Wellbeing Index tracks how satisfied Australians are with their own lives across a range of "domains" or areas: standard of living (finances), health, achieving in life (sense of purpose), relationships, personal safety, community connectedness and future security. In addition, the National 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.

Learn more

1. The science of wellbeing
2. Why measure wellbeing?



Key findings: the pandemic's second year

The latest Australian Unity Wellbeing Index offers profound insights into COVID-19's effect on life in Australia.

Super-spreader. Quarantinis. You're on mute. Chances are, you didn't use these phrases much before the arrival of a certain global pandemic. But COVID-19 didn't just impact on our language in Australia—it also affected our wellbeing in ways both big and small.

Suddenly, Australians had to deal with a host of fresh challenges, from the claustrophobia of lockdown(s) to the balancing act of combining homeschooling with working from home. COVID's special ability to sabotage the most carefully laid plans also meant that many of the things that bring us particular joy—whether it was a wedding, a birthday party or a holiday—were forcibly cancelled or indefinitely postponed.

Given all this disruption, you'd expect our wellbeing levels to have plummeted during the pandemic. But the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index reveals the reality was both different and more complex.

Steady as she goes

"We thought if anything was going to topple the Personal Wellbeing Index, and how people were feeling at this time, it was the pandemic, given the life changes that people underwent," says lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett. "But what we actually found was that across Australia, the average level of wellbeing remained high and stable."

Not only that, but there were positive results too. The National Wellbeing Index, which tracks our satisfaction with life in Australia, rose to a record high in 2020 and, despite dropping slightly, remained at the upper end of the average range in 2021.

The research also found that our satisfaction with our personal safety rose above the average range in 2020 and 2021—a result that Kate suggests might be "because people weren't going places and were staying at home, so they felt safer".

Money makes a difference

Despite all the limitations that COVID imposed, our satisfaction with our standard of living increased during the pandemic, with scores sitting above the average range in 2020 and at the top of the average range in 2021. "That's the one we found the most interesting," says Kate. "From 2019 to 2020, this rose a lot, reaching the highest score on record in 2020, right in the middle of the pandemic."

Central to this lift, Kate believes, was the financial help provided by COVID support schemes such as mortgage holidays, childcare fee waivers, JobKeeper and JobSeeker.

"These supports gave people extra financial resources. For those who were struggling on very low incomes or unemployment, these supports lifted many out of poverty and, at the same time, appear to have boosted overall feelings of wellbeing," she says.

Unprecedented health challenges

Despite increased satisfaction around personal safety and standard of living, the pandemic was extraordinarily difficult for many people. So it's unsurprising that the research shows that levels of mental distress increased significantly, soaring about 10 points higher (i.e. worse) during the pandemic compared to 2013.

"That really peaked during the pandemic, particularly in young people," says Kate.

"Mental health service use and calls to services like Lifeline—they went through the roof during the pandemic."

It wasn't just mental health either. The research found that satisfaction with our health overall fell outside the average range for the first time in the history of the survey and recorded a sharp drop from high levels in 2020. "It's a huge shift—we don't normally see that," says Kate.

Drawing on our emotional resources

The research also showed how important our emotional resources were in this challenging time.

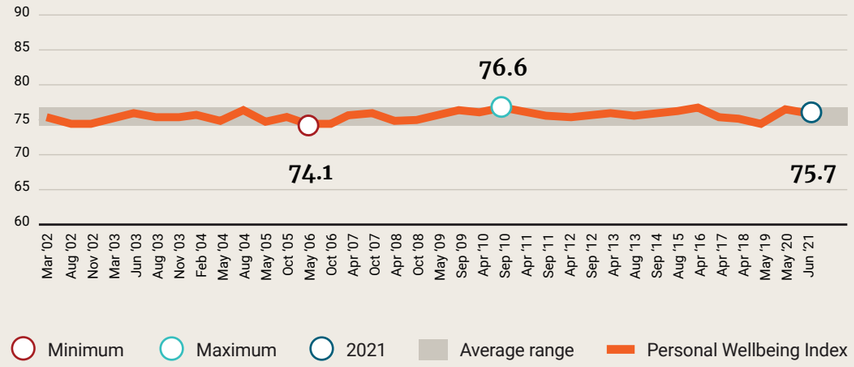
After assessing a range of "life areas", the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index found that people with high levels of social connectedness, resilience or "sense of achieving" all had stronger wellbeing than those without high levels.

Similarly, of the life areas, social connectedness, sense of achieving and depression stood out as being most strongly associated with personal wellbeing, giving us a clear insight into what really mattered when it came to wellbeing in 2021.

Looking forwards

The research findings offer important learnings about Australians' wellbeing during a time when our everyday lives changed dramatically. As life begins to return to "the new normal", how will it affect our wellbeing and life satisfaction? In Kate's words, "it will be fascinating to see what happens."

Wellbeing of Australians



Learn more

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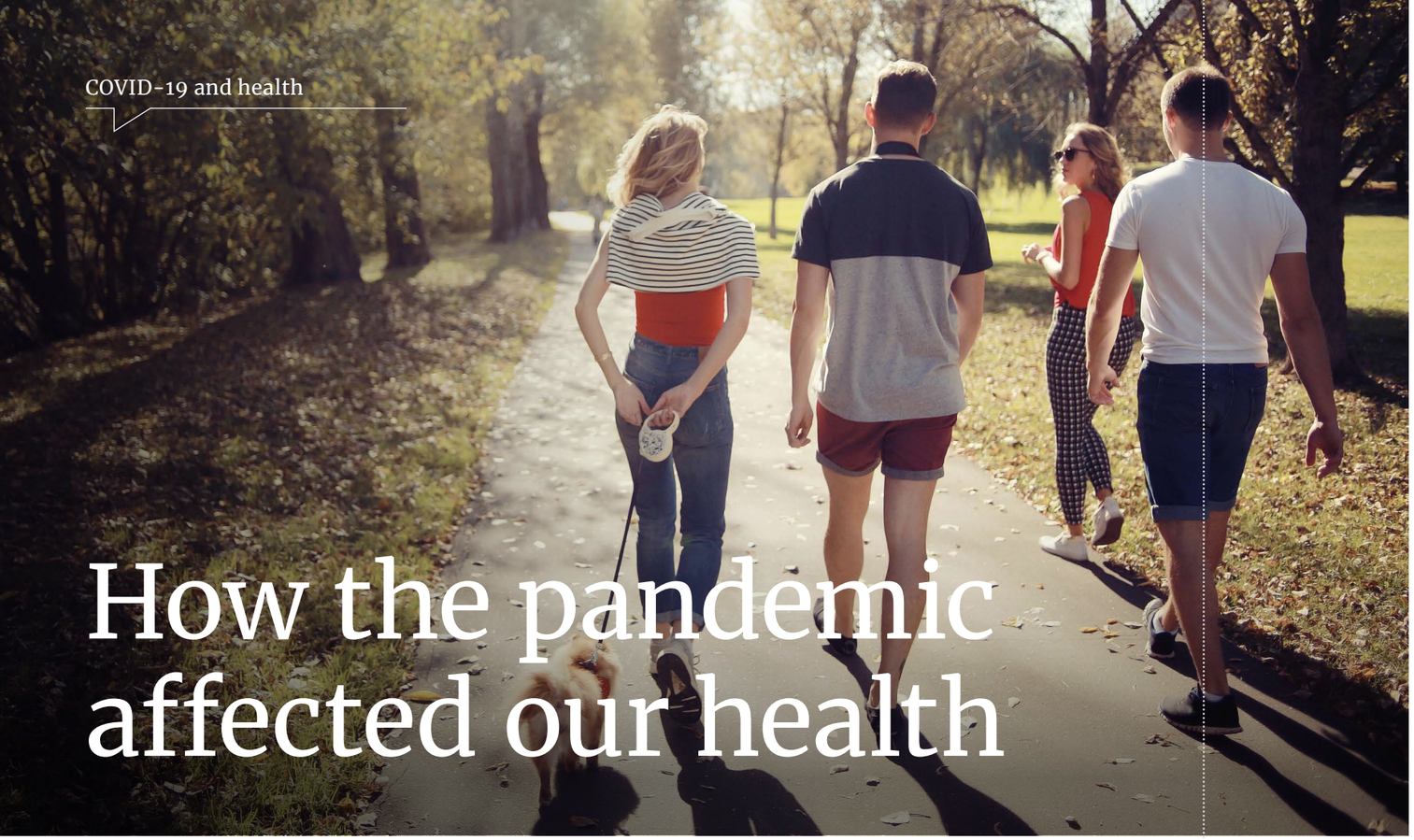


How the pandemic affected our health

In 2021, Australians' satisfaction with their health fell for the first time in the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index's 20-year history.

From our relationships to the way we work, few areas of life were left untouched by COVID-19. But ultimately what we were—and indeed still are—grappling with is a highly infectious disease. Whatever other repercussions continue to rattle through the nation, COVID remains first and foremost a health issue.

"The pandemic is a once-in-a-lifetime event," says Dr Nancy Huang, Australian Unity's Chief Medical Adviser. "For many of us it's the most significant health event we have ever experienced."

It's no surprise, then, that the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index found that Australians' satisfaction with their health in 2021 suddenly dropped from above the average range to below it. It was the first time in history that such a result had occurred.

"We don't normally see a huge shift like that," says lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett. "The results might go up a couple points or down a couple points. But this year we saw this a massive shift and it really indicates that something big was happening."

The inevitable reality

Nancy believes this plummeting satisfaction with our health was grimly inevitable. Not only have a vast number of Australians been directly infected with COVID but, as she points out, "as of July 2022, we are still experiencing around 40,000 new cases per day".

But the consequences of the pandemic are by no means limited to these direct infections, insists Nancy. "That's just the acute illness—there are other widespread ramifications that are affecting our community."

In fact, COVID has had a profound effect on Australians' health, partly due to the unintended effects of the public health measures designed to curb the rate of transmission. Elective surgery was put on hold for months on end, and people suddenly had limited access to health services.

"Whatever condition you were trying to manage or work through, your treatment is likely to have been delayed or pushed backwards from a physical health point of view," says Nancy.

The unseen fallout from COVID

Unfortunately, the impact of COVID was by no means limited to physical health, with the pandemic also exacting a heavy toll on the nation's psyche.

Scores on all three measures of mental distress—anxiety, stress and depression—were about 10 points higher (i.e. worse) during the second year of the pandemic compared to the 2013 survey. People suffering from mental distress also recorded markedly lower wellbeing scores.

"The pandemic had a traumatic effect on people's mental health," notes Dr Grant Blashki, a lead adviser at Beyond Blue and a practicing GP.

Social isolation and loneliness were aggravated by a series of lockdowns and the limited face-to-face contact that eventuated from remote working. Indeed, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index found that social connectedness scores were markedly lower during the pandemic years compared to 2019.

The mental health epidemic

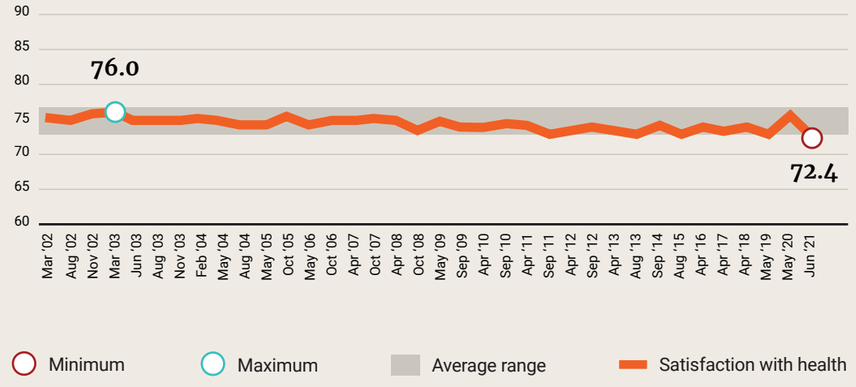
Nancy also credits a host of other COVID-related factors for contributing to rising levels of mental distress. Public anxiety was fuelled by the uncertainty over the vaccine rollout and rapidly changing guidelines. The strain of lockdowns affected many relationships. And many parents faced the stress of trying to juggle homeschooling with work commitments.

"It was triple whammy on people's lives," says Grant. "It affected their home life. It affected their work life. And there was for many people a sense of loneliness and disconnection."

In essence, COVID created a multi-car pile-up of destructive conditions when it came to mental health. Having analysed the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index's data, Kate is clear-eyed about the extent of the damage.

"We're in a mental health crisis," she says matter-of-factly. "But that really peaked during the pandemic. There's no doubt that for people who were already experiencing mental health difficulties, the pandemic only exacerbated them."

Our satisfaction with our health



Learn more

How the pandemic affected our health

The impact of COVID-19 on marginalised people

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index found that the pandemic had a surprisingly positive impact on some of our most marginalised groups.

At first glance, one of the headline findings from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index seems totally baffling. From the mind-numbing grind of lockdown to the challenges of homeschooling, no-one escaped the trials of COVID-19. Yet somehow our wellbeing barely dipped over the course of the pandemic.

But while our personal wellbeing is undoubtedly resilient, it can still be derailed if we are deprived of three key things. Over the years, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index has found that finances, relationships and a sense of purpose play a particularly important role in supporting our wellbeing. There's even a name for it: the golden triangle of happiness.

So how did the pandemic affect marginalised groups, who may struggle with these key elements?

Exposing society's fault lines

The latest Australian Unity Wellbeing Index results show that the pandemic had a significant effect on Australia's most marginalised people, but not in the way you might expect. Groups who typically post low wellbeing scores—people on household incomes under $60,000, people who live only with children or people who are unemployed—all recorded markedly higher scores in 2020 than in 2019.

How can we explain this initial wellbeing hike? Unemployed people, for example, notched results that were nine points higher than 2019. Lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett offers a couple of explanations for this. Firstly, she says, "more people became unemployed during the pandemic, so that became a different kind of cohort".

But the second reason could be the clincher when it comes to the wellbeing of Australia's most marginalised people: in 2020, the government doubled the JobSeeker payment from $550 to $1,100 a fortnight.

"One of the main reasons we think this uplift occurred is probably due to all the government supports that were in place," says Kate.

"We know that some of those groups went from government subsidies of $550 a fortnight to suddenly having their financial support doubled overnight. And we also know that having enough money is one of the absolute key things that drives our personal wellbeing."

Yet this positive uplift suddenly changed in the second year of the pandemic.

In 2021, the JobSeeker payment was almost halved again to about $620 a fortnight. Wellbeing for people on household incomes under $60,000 dropped during this period, with the wellbeing of unemployed people tumbling to an even lower level than in 2019. Kate points out that this is consistent with the economic theory of loss aversion, with people feeling income losses more acutely than gains.

Prioritising financial aid for wellbeing

The impact of these financial cutbacks makes sense to Jessica Stott based on her experience as a Service Delivery Manager helping marginalised people at the Women's Information and Referral Exchange (WIRE), an Australian Unity community partner. At WIRE, Jessica noticed the JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments had an immediate benefit for people's wellbeing.

"That support brought people up from not being able to afford rent and not having enough money to live on, to having the financial baseline upon which they could build other things in their life that promote wellbeing," she says.

As she points out, when it comes to the hierarchy of needs for Australia's most marginalised, financial support—along with safety—is often the most urgent priority. Significantly, however, extra money doesn't give the same boost to other demographic groups.

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index found that when household income increased during the pandemic for people on the whole, their wellbeing levels were identical to those whose income remained the same. In other words, the cash boost made a negligible impact.

For Kate, it's a finding that has real-life policy implications when it comes to prioritising financial aid. Extra support can be life-changing for marginalised groups, she says, but is far less meaningful for others who already have their needs met.

"From our data, it does look like if you increase the incomes of people who are marginalised and who have low incomes then that can make a big difference to their wellbeing."

Wellbeing of unemployed people

2019
58.9

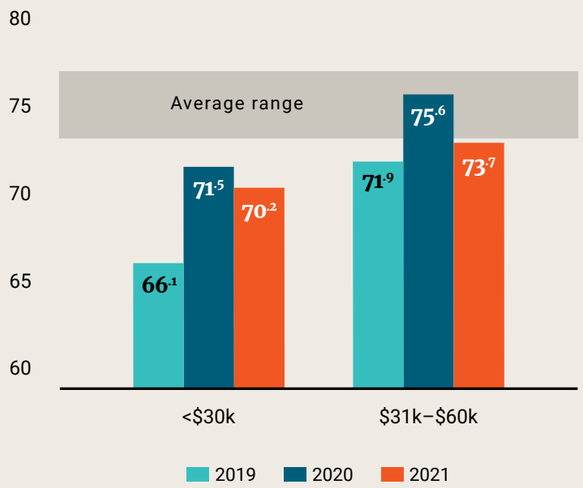
2020
67.8

2021
57.0

Learn more

1. The golden triangle of happiness
2. How the pandemic affected Australia's most marginalised people

Wellbeing of low-income households



Age and our experience of the pandemic

In 2021, young Australians reported lower satisfaction with their wellbeing than their older counterparts.

Everyone knows the physical transformation that ageing brings. Wrinkles emerge, joints stiffen and hair starts to turn grey. Yet our outlook and priorities are also liable to change as the years tick by. As a result, it's probably not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic affected different age groups in very different ways.

Across age groups, those aged 66 years and over had notably higher wellbeing scores than those aged 18–35 years and 46–55 years.

A period of upheaval

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index found that younger Australians, aged less than 35 years old, were more likely to have struggled during the pandemic. In 2021, this age group recorded personal wellbeing scores at the bottom of, or below, the average range, and were more likely to have high levels of mental distress.

They also had low levels of resilience, social connectedness and sense of achieving.

Lead researcher Dr Kate Lycett believes that one contributing factor was that young people were particularly susceptible to income loss because they were disproportionately represented in jobs with less security, like hospitality.

"We know that many young adults work in the gig economy or casual employment," she says, "and they were the ones that often lost their jobs overnight."

This was reflected in the research, which showed that Australians aged 35 and under were most likely to have suffered loss of income; it also showed that people who experienced decreased income had notably lower wellbeing scores.

Younger people were also more likely to find successive lockdowns hard due to their stage of life. Your twenties, for example, are often a time of partying, travel and hijinks—so being forcibly deprived of those opportunities was particularly challenging.

"COVID was a period of real upheaval for young adults," says Kate. "We also know that this is an age group where mental illness often peaks."

"Not being able to connect with people probably exacerbated some of these problems. They're supposed to be out experiencing the world, socialising with friends. So I think that explains why we see the higher levels of distress in those groups."

Dr Grant Blashki, lead adviser at Beyond Blue and a practicing GP, agrees: "The research certainly identifies loneliness as an important precipitant of mental health issues, which is not surprising given we are very social beings."

Grant is blunt in his assessment of the impact of the pandemic on our youngest.

"We can't be Pollyanna about it," he says. "It's been horrible for lots of people, and particularly for some of our young people, it's been really hard."

Age and welbeing in 2021

ⓘ The average range for the Personal Wellbeing Index in 2021 was between 74.2 and 76.8.

18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–65	66–75	76+
75.9	73.3	76.0	74.8	76.3	78.8	78.9

Older and happier?

Conversely, people aged 66 and over registered very different results during the pandemic. Their personal wellbeing scores rose above the average range and were markedly higher than their 2019 scores.

Kate concedes this significant rise left her slightly puzzled, even allowing for the fact that older people were probably less impacted than younger folk by the deprivation of certain forms of nightlife and entertainment.

"For example, some grandparents couldn't see their grandkids for a whole year or two. You think that would've had a negative impact. So I honestly don't know why we saw such a bump in that age group."

The bigger picture

Beverly Smith finds these results less confounding. In her role as Australian Unity's Executive General Manager Residential Communities, she works closely with the 66-plus age group on a daily basis.

"My observation would be that the resilience in our customers has been very evident, and I think that often comes down to them having an extraordinary lifetime of experience to put the events of the pandemic into context," says Beverly. "There was that sense of this too shall pass."

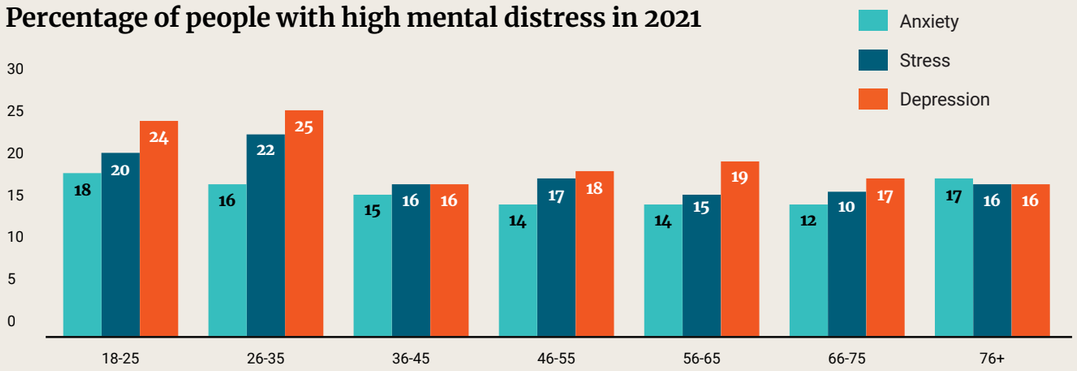
Beverly talks of team members drawing genuine solace and inspiration from the example of the older residents' positivity and stoicism. "Some of our own team members took a lot of comfort and reassurance from that resilience of the residents and how they thought in terms of that bigger picture of life," she says.

"For the younger team members, that gave them a certain reassurance, even if the pandemic was the worst thing they had experienced in their young lives."

Learn more

1. Age and our experience of the pandemic
2. Dont worry, age happy

Percentage of people with high mental distress in 2021



Contributors

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Sarah Khor
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Craig A. Olsson
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Dr Nancy Huang
was Chief Medical Adviser at Australian Unity. On page 6 and 7 she discusses the impact the pandemic has had on Australians' health.

Beverly Smith
is Australian Unity's Executive General Manager of Residential Communities. On page 10 and 11, she draws on her experience of working in aged care to explore the impact of ageing on wellbeing.

Dr Grant Blashki
is the lead adviser at Beyond Blue, a GP and an academic at the University of Melbourne. On page 6 and 7, he talks about mental health and the pandemic; on page 10 and 11, he talks about COVID's impact on younger Australians.

Jessica Stott
is Service Delivery Manager at the Women's Information and Referral Exchange (WIRE). On page 8 and 9, she discusses what she found when working with marginalised groups during the pandemic.

Suggested reference:

Cummins, R. A., Mead, R. and the Australian Unity-Deakin University Wellbeing Index Partnership* (2022). The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index Survey 38 Report. Australian Unity and Deakin University, Melbourne. Retrieved from Australian Centre on Quality of Life, School of Psychology, Deakin University: acqol.com.au

*Including authors from Deakin University: Lycett,K., Olsson, C., Capic,T., Khor, S., Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, M., Hutchinson, D., Cummins R. A.; and Australian Unity: Little, J., Stamatescu, M., Falkingham, W.

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 2000 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. The report flags notable differences between groups that were defined as an average PWI score difference of ≥4 percentage points and were also statistically significant (i.e. p-value ≤0.05).

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.

Australian Unity
Real Wellbeing

australianunity.com.au/wellbeing