



How Happy are Canadians?

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This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

Introduction

A key question pervading our politics is: how are Canadians doing?

Different voices have drawn on different evidence and sources of data to try to answer that question. We have recently pointed to Canada's declining GDP per capita as evidence that the country has effectively experienced "a lost decade."¹ University of Calgary economist Trevor Tombe has similarly [cited](#) stagnant growth in total worker compensation per hour (adjusted for inflation) as a sign that a sustained period of slow productivity has led to the "Great Canadian Slump."² Well-known American economist Tyler Cowen by contrast has argued that Canada's GDP per capita hasn't fallen as much as some have claimed.³ Former Trudeau adviser Tyler Meredith has referred to income gains over the past eight years—even though government transfers have played a significant role in producing such gains.⁴

These different assessments of the country's economic and social outcomes are further complicated by the sentiments of Canadian themselves. Polls indicate that about half of Canadians are living paycheck-to-paycheck⁵ and more than half are pessimistic about their long-run economic future ⁶and yet about 44 percent still started 2024 with a sense of optimism relative to last year.⁷

The upshot is that an assessment of the material progress and well-being of Canadians is somewhat complicated. Although we believe that on balance the data and evidence clearly point to a story of stagnation, we acknowledge that one can conceive of alternative facts. There are also distributional dynamics across age, class, and geographic lines that must be accounted for. The median person doesn't actually exist.

In light of these type of analytical limitations, it's increasingly been advanced by various economists and social scientists that conventional economic metrics—including GDP, employment, income, and so on—don't necessarily convey a textured understanding of what's sometimes referred to as "human flourishing." The argument here is that material well-being is a necessary yet insufficient condition for assessing one's circumstances or outlook. Some scholars and thinkers instead point to happiness as the proper measure for socio-economic progress and even public policy itself.

This line of thinking has spawned a new body of research that one might describe as "happiness studies." Although it itself is the subject of scholarly debate, the goal of the happiness scholarship is to draw on a diverse set of empirical metrics such as the Human Development Index, survey measures of subjective well-being, and human capabilities to evaluate and compare happiness between different societies and over time.

¹ Sean Speer and Taylor Jackson, "Canada cannot afford another lost economic decade," The Hub, March 11, 2024. <https://thehub.ca/2024-03-11/sean-speer-and-taylor-jackson-canadas-lost-decade/>

² Trevor Tombe, "The 'Great Canadian Slump' is back," The Hub, April 4, 2024. <https://thehub.ca/2024-04-04/trevor-tombe-the-great-canadian-slump-is-back/>

³ Tyler Cowen, "The Canadian economy is a worthwhile Canadian initiative," Marginal Revolution, March 13, 2024. <https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2024/03/the-canadian-economy-is-a-worthwhile-canadian-initiative.html>

⁴ Tyler Meredith, "Canada is not broken, but our problem-solving mindset is," The Hub, February 3, 2024. <https://thehub.ca/2024-02-03/tyler-meredith-canada-is-not-broken-but-our-problem-solving-mindset-is/>

⁵ "Federal Politics and the Economy," Leger, February 28, 2024, <https://leger360.com/federal-politics-and-the-economy/>

⁶ "Economic Outlook 2024," Pollara, January 2024, <https://www.pollara.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Pollara-Economic-Outlook-2024.pdf>

⁷ "The year ahead: Challenges from 2023 linger, but Canadians enter 2024 more optimistic," Angus Reid Institute, January 4, 2024, <https://angusreid.org/2024-canada-optimism-pessimism-expectations/#gsc.tab=0>

One of the best-known and most widely-regarded sources of happiness data is the *World Happiness Report*, which is an annual report produced by a consortium including Gallup, the Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and WHR editorial board.⁸ The latest report was released in late March 2024.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of happiness scholarship in general and Canada's performance in the World Happiness Report in particular. The ultimate goal is to better understand the interrelationship between economic outcomes and happiness. Put differently: we aim to see if Canada's "lost economic decade" has correlated with a decline in Canadians' levels of self-reported happiness.

⁸ John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Schs, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Lara B. Akinin and Shun Wang (eds.), *World Happiness Report 2024*, (Oxford: University of Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre, 2024), <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2024/>.

From GDP To Happiness

Measures of economic well-being like Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita are important for understanding how a jurisdiction's economy is performing in absolute and relative terms. But they also have their limits. They can be a bit crude and simple. Although they can tell us about the overall economy or even the socio-economic circumstances of those in different income groups, jobs, or places, they're mostly silent on issues that define the human experience such as love, belonging, or purpose.

For instance, GDP may rise when there's a lot of traffic congestion due to increase gasoline consumption, but if one asks drivers, more traffic jams invariably don't improve their overall well-being. Similarly, certain types of economic activity such as online pornography may boost economic output but still have a deleterious effect on happiness, life satisfaction, and human flourishing.

In 2008, in the face of these inherent limitations of conventional economic metrics, French president Nicholas Sarkozy commissioned Nobel Prize-winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, as well as French economist Jean-Paul Fitoussi, to study the limits of GDP as an overall indicator of economic and social well-being. What became known as the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP) sought to identify what data and evidence would be needed for alternative measurement tools to better assess social progress and individual well-being.⁹

The CMEPSP's main recommendation was that governments should work toward assessing *current well-being* and its *sustainability* over time. Specifically, the Commission set out the following:

Current well-being has to do with both economic resources, such as income, and with non-economic aspects of peoples' life (what they do and what they can do, how they feel, and the natural environment they live in). Whether these levels of well-being can be sustained over time depends on whether stocks of capital that matter for our lives (natural, physical, human, social) are passed on to future generations.¹⁰

To capture this broader conception of human flourishing, its report, crucially, didn't recommend a wholesale rejection of economic indicators or material living standards like GDP per capita. Instead, it argued that such indicators should be augmented with other data on health, education, personal activities, including work and social connections, political voice and governance, the state of the environment, as well as insecurity, both economic and physical. The goal in effect was to conceive of a new, richer, and more textured conception of social progress and individual well-being that one might succinctly describe as a happiness.

Although the goal of the CMEPSP and others who've since sought to build on its work has been to improve on the limits of conventional economic metrics, these efforts aren't without their own challenges.¹¹ It's not theoretically clear whether and what weights should be applied to indices based on several quite distinct indicators. Another challenge is that most, if not all, of these metrics aren't specific to a single

⁹ Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, (Brussels: Eurostat, 2009), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/8131721/8131772/Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission-report.pdf>

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

¹¹ Marc Flerbaey, "Beyond GDP: The Quest for a Measure of Social Welfare," *Journal of Economic Literature* 47, no. 4 (2009): 1029-75.

individual. They themselves are an aggregate index of individuals. They in effect sum up various types of metrics—including everything from overall life expectancy to education levels—to try to capture a sense of individual well-being. The inherent challenge is that these different indices can miss important correlations between indicators at the individual level.

There's also the argument made by economist Russ Roberts and others that happiness isn't something susceptible to economic tools.¹² It reflects human emotions and relationships that are diminished when we try to subject them to quantitative analysis.

Notwithstanding these scholarly issues with happiness studies, they've made tremendous progress in terms of their methodologies and growing acceptance in academic scholarship over the past decade or so.

Perhaps the leading scholar in the field is University of British Columbia economist John Helliwell. His longstanding work on personal happiness has been rooted in a couple of key axioms: namely, that (1) subjective well-being and self-assessments are "authentic measures that deserves to be taken very seriously by anyone trying to see how a community or society works" and (2) at a certain point, higher incomes don't correlate with higher levels of happiness.¹³

Helliwell and his coauthors' definition of happiness moves beyond measures of income rooted in GDP. Instead, they harken back to the logic of philosophers like Aristotle who argued that the ultimate goal of a human being was to achieve "eudaimonia," which is a combination of well-being, flourishing, and virtue. Virtuous "pro-social" behaviours are an important part of developing a social and institutional environment that is conducive to widespread human happiness. As Helliwell and his coauthors write in the 2023 *World Happiness Report*:

A society where the average citizen exhibits strong virtues and high eudaimonia will also be one where the average citizen experiences high life satisfaction. To see why this is true we have only to consider how far our own life satisfaction depends on the behaviour and attitudes of others. So to have a society with high average life satisfaction, we need a society with virtuous citizens and with supportive institutions. At the level of society, the two terms go hand-in-hand. Effective institutions support character development; virtuous citizens promote effective institutions.¹⁴

Overall, Helliwell's conception of happiness is rooted in an understanding of the limits of income as a measure of human progress. At a certain level, income and other measures of material well-being starts to lose its explanatory power for individual happiness and in fact there is some evidence that higher incomes alone may even come at the expense of those social connections.

¹² Russ Roberts, "Adam Smith, Loneliness, and the Limits of Mainstream Economics," *Medium*, March 11, 2019, <https://russroberts.medium.com/adam-smith-loneliness-and-the-limits-of-mainstream-economics-f0be78940e17>.

¹³ Nathaline R. Miraval, "Happiness is More Than GDP," *The Harvard Crimson*, October 26, 2010, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2010/10/26/happiness-helliwell-canada-community/>.

¹⁴ John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey D. Sachs, "The Happiness Agenda: The Next 10 Years," in *World Happiness Report 2023*, (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2023), 17–18, https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2023/WHR+23_Ch1.pdf.

Measuring World Happiness

One of Helliwell's various projects on the subject of personal happiness is the *World Happiness Report*, which tracks ratings of subjective well-being across 143 countries using self-reported polling data from Gallup. The report, which has been released virtually every year since 2012, is based on a representative sample of individuals within countries to evaluate how satisfied they are with their lives, in addition to an assessment of their positive and negative emotions (see Box 1). These results allow the report's authors to assess how happy countries are at an aggregate level, in addition to assessing potential inequalities in life satisfaction between age and gender.

Box 1: Measuring Subjective Well-Being In The World Happiness Report¹⁵

The World Happiness Report's measurement of subjective well-being relies on three main well-being indicators: life evaluations, positive emotions, and negative emotions (described in the report as positive and negative affect).

Its happiness rankings are based on life evaluations, as the more stable measure of the quality of people's lives.

Life evaluations: The Gallup World Poll, which remains the principal source of data in this report, asks respondents to evaluate their current life as a whole using the image of a ladder, with the best possible life for them as a 10 and worst possible as a 0. Each respondent provides a numerical response on this scale, referred to as the Cantril ladder. Typically, around 1,000 responses are gathered annually for each country. Weights are used to construct population-representative national averages for each year in each country.

The report bases its usual happiness rankings on a three-year average of these life evaluations since the larger sample size enables more precise estimates.

Positive emotions: Positive affect is given by the average of individual yes or no answers about three emotions: laughter, enjoyment, and interest.

Negative emotions: Negative affect is given by the average of individual yes or no answers about three emotions: worry, sadness, and anger.

Comparing life evaluations and emotions:

- Life evaluations provide the most informative measure for international comparisons because they capture quality of life in a more complete and stable way than do emotional reports based on daily experiences.
- Life evaluations vary more between countries than do emotions and are better explained by the diverse life experiences in different countries. Emotions yesterday are well explained by events of the day being asked about, while life evaluations more closely reflect the circumstances of life as a whole.
- Positive emotions are still more than twice as frequent as negative emotions, even during the years since the onset of COVID.

¹⁵ Helliwell, et al, *World Happiness Report 2024*, 13.

These self-reporting methods to capture happiness are far from perfect. They have in some ways the inverted problem of more conventional economic metrics. If the latter are more precise yet crude, the former are more representative yet subjective. There can be challenges for instance that arise when social scientists aggregate individual measures through averaging. As Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser from *Our World in Data* explain:

If we look at happiness by age in a given country, we may see that older people do not appear to be happier than younger people. Yet this may be because the average-by-age figure from the snapshot confounds two factors: the age effect (people from the same cohort do get happier as they grow older, across all cohorts) and the cohort effect (across all ages, earlier generations are less happy than more recent generations). If the cohort effect is very strong, the snapshot can even give a picture that suggests people become less happy as they grow older, even though the exact opposite is actually true for all generations.¹⁶

Another possible challenge that is raised by cross-country surveys is whether language and culture influence self-reported results. Put differently: “happiness” or “life satisfaction” may not mean the same in different cultures and languages. There is, however, evidence to suggest that there is a general human understanding of what it means to be happy.

Notwithstanding these various challenges or limits, survey-based measures of life satisfaction are now generally well-regarded. They offer useful windows into social progress and individual happiness within and across jurisdictions.

Because the *World Happiness Report* has been released virtually every year since 2012, it also increasingly provides for a comparison over time. The overall picture is somewhat complicated. While there has been a slight improvement in average worldwide happiness evaluations for the young and old from 2006–2010 to 2021–2023 (little change in middle age groups), over time variation varies greatly by region. In the latest report relative to previous years, Central and Eastern Europe saw the largest increases in their life evaluation scores across all age groups. East Asia saw large increases in their happiness levels, particularly for older populations. However, happiness fell in South Asia in all age groups, especially those in middle age. Life evaluations fell significantly in the group that includes the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with the decline being twice as old for the young as for the old. Happiness levels have also fallen from 2006–2010 to 2021–2023 in the Middle East and North Africa, with much larger declines in the middle age groups.

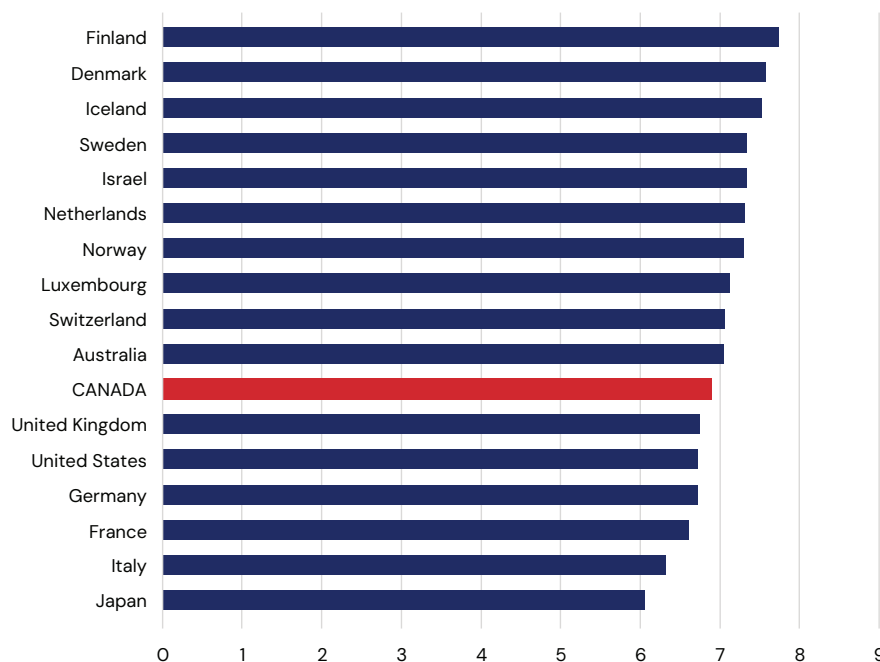
¹⁶ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, “Happiness and Life Satisfaction,” *Our World in Data*, February 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction>.

How Does Canadian Happiness Rank?

The recently released 2024 edition of the *World Happiness Report* provides an important assessment of Canadian life satisfaction in absolute and relative terms. The data in the 2024 report derive from surveys conducted between 2021 and 2023. The key finding is that, overall, Canadian life satisfaction is deteriorating—particularly for younger generations.

Let's start with Canada's global comparison in this year's overall rankings of life satisfaction. Canada received a score of 6.90, which ranks it as the fifteenth happiest country in the world.¹⁷ **Figure 1** shows Canada's position relative to the top 10 countries in this year's report as well as its G-7 peers. Although we're outside the top 10 in overall terms, Canada is still the top among G-7 countries.

Figure 1: Country Rankings by Life Evaluations in 2021-2023, Top-10 and G7



What is notable however for Canada is that there has been a decline in aggregate life satisfaction scores in recent years (**Figure 2**). Canada's self-reported score peaked in 2010 at 7.65.¹⁸ It has since dropped to 6.84 in 2023.

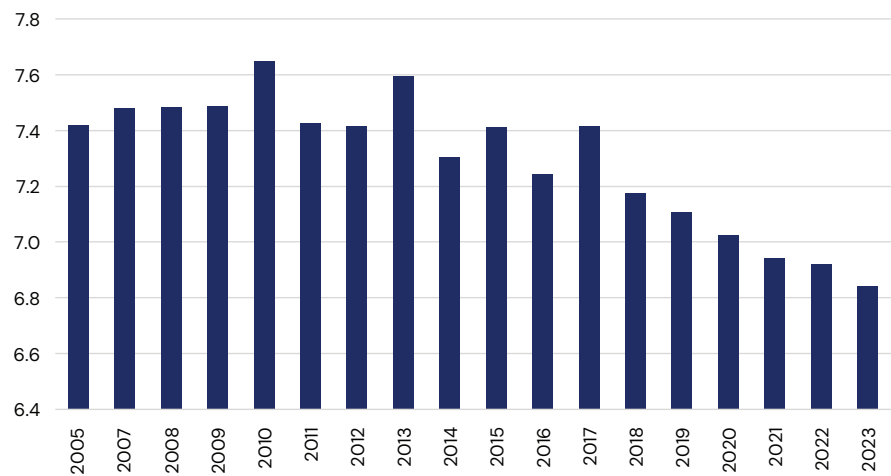
Much of this steady decline began after 2017, with each subsequent year representing a further deterioration in the country's life evaluation score. To put this decline in perspective, the *World Happiness Report* has assessed changes in average life evaluation scores over two separate periods—2006 to 2010 and 2021 to 2023. Serbia, which saw its score increase by 1.85 points, was the country with the largest improvement over this period. Canada's change was negative 0.60 points, which gives it a rank of 121 out

¹⁷ This measure is calculated on a 0–10 scale. See Box 1 for a detailed description of how life evaluations are measured using the Cantril Ladder.

¹⁸ While the *World Happiness Report* was established in 2012, the Gallup World Poll was tracking life evaluations using the Cantril Ladder earlier, with data beginning in 2006.

of 134 countries in terms of the change in its average life evaluation over this timeframe. The result is that Canada’s overall rank has experienced a mark decline from being as high as the top five in 2012 and 2015 to fifteenth in 2024.

Figure 2: Canada Life Evaluation Scores, 2005-2023



The report doesn’t offer a detailed picture of what’s driving changes in each country’s score. However, a considerable part of the decline in Canada’s overall score appears to be age-driven. Canadian youth now rank much more poorly in their life evaluations than older Canadians. This stands in contrast with the global norm where the young tend to be as happy or even happier than older respondents.

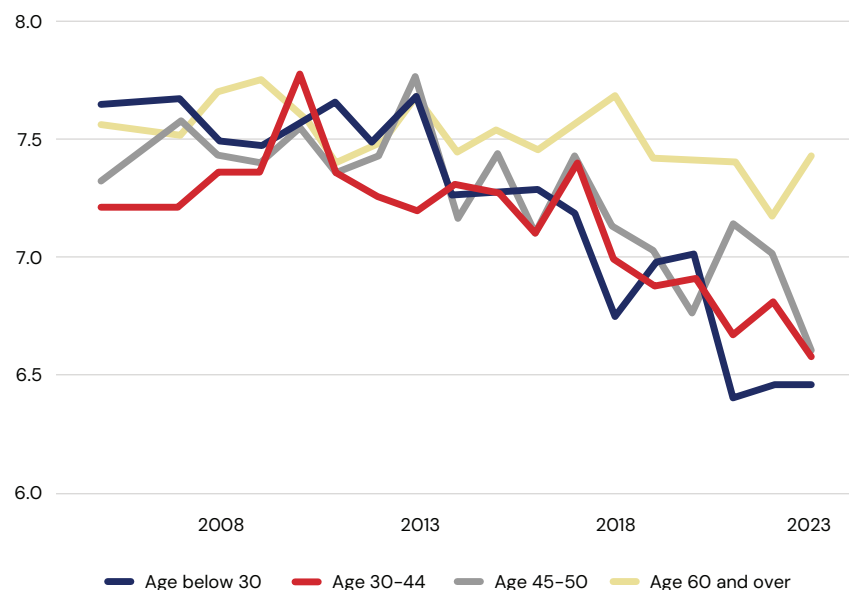
If one just considers the life satisfaction scores of older Canadians (age 60+) in isolation relative to older populations in other countries (see **Table 1**), Canada’s life evaluation rank would be eighth overall. Yet, if one carried out the same comparison for younger Canadians (under age 30), Canada ranks number 58 out of 134 countries. The 50-spot gap between older and younger Canadians is one of the largest among any participating country.

Table 1: Ranking of Life Evaluations by Age Group 2021-23, Select Countries

Country	All	The Young (Under 30)	Lower Middle (30-44)	Upper Middle (45-59)	The Old (60+)	Gap in Rank between Old and Young	Happiest	Least Happy
Finland	1	7	1	1	2	-5	Old	Young
Denmark	2	5	3	4	1	-4	Old	Young
Iceland	3	4	4	2	5	1	Young	Lower Middle
Sweden	4	18	8	3	4	-14	Old	Young
Israel	5	2	2	7	18	16	Young	Old
Netherlands	6	9	5	5	7	-2	Old	Young
Norway	7	20	6	6	3	-17	Old	Young
Luxembourg	8	6	11	8	12	6	Young	Lower Middle
Switzerland	9	13	9	11	14	1	Young	Upper Middle
Australia	10	19	14	10	9	-10	Old	Lower Middle
CANADA	15	58	28	12	8	-50	Old	Young
United Kingdom	20	32	27	19	20	-12	Old	Lower Middle
United States	23	62	42	17	10	-52	Old	Lower Middle
Germany	24	47	16	28	21	-26	Lower Middle	Young
France	27	48	23	26	25	-23	Lower Middle	Old
Italy	41	41	31	39	38	-3	Young	Old
Japan	51	73	63	52	36	-37	Young	Lower Middle

Figure 3 further highlights these generational developments. While there has been a slight deterioration in the life satisfaction scores of older Canadians over time, the decline for other age groups is much more precipitous. The finding that older Canadians have much higher levels of life satisfaction relative to younger Canadians shouldn't be assumed as a given over time either. For instance, prior to 2015, there were years in which the scores across age groups were quite similar, and even at some points, the average life evaluations of young Canadians were actually higher than those of older Canadians.

Figure 3: Canadian Age Time Trend in Life Evaluation Scores, 2006-2023



While the report doesn't offer specific explanations for individual trends within countries, it does offer some general insights into what drives overall life satisfaction. Six variables —GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, having someone to count on, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption—are found to explain more than three-quarters of the variation in average national life evaluation scores across countries and over time, based on data from 2005 to 2023. Although a deeper evaluation of these metrics within Canada over time is beyond the scope of this analysis, recent declines in real GDP per capita, rising housing unaffordability, the lack of affordable childcare and a deteriorating healthcare system could plausibly explain the deterioration in Canada's overall life satisfaction score and its performance on intergenerational inequality.

The *World Happiness Report* also offers some insight into generational differences with respect to social behaviour and values, with a particular focus on social interactions, support social, and loneliness. The findings are reported across regional categories and Canadian values are averaged with those of Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. Across these jurisdictions, millennials generally have lower levels of social support and higher levels of loneliness than older cohorts. These findings may also offer some explanation for why younger Canadians express lower life evaluation scores.

Key Takeaways

The happiness research which was borne out of a dissatisfaction with conventional economic metrics is increasingly building awareness and audience among academic scholars and policymakers. Happiness scholarship doesn't seem to supplant conventional economic metrics such as GDP, income, or employment. It aims to augment them with a combination of non-economic metrics and survey measures of subjective well-being.

The evidence and data tell us that Canadians—particularly younger Canadians—have self-reported lower levels of happiness over the past decade or so. The overall level of self-reported happiness has fallen consistently since 2017. The most marked change is among younger Canadians who used to report higher levels of life satisfaction than older Canadians but today are now below them. Consider for instance that although Canada's global ranking is fifteenth in this year's World Happiness Report, it falls to number 58 if limited to younger populations. There are various factors behind these trends but, according to research produced by the World Happiness Report, GDP per capita is typically a major determinant of life satisfaction and of course Canada has experienced a decline in its GDP per capita over the past several years. Moreover, Canadian policymakers should also give pause to assess what the long-term impacts of declining happiness are on our society and economy. While a strand of economic research finds that economic growth influences happiness, other recent research suggests that happiness can also influence GDP per capita.¹⁹

It brings us back to the question posed at the beginning of this analysis: How are Canadians doing? The answer from the *World Happiness Report* is that we're less happy than we were 7 years ago.

¹⁹ Yok-Yong Lee and Kim-Leng Goh, "The Happiness-Economic Well-Being Nexus: New Insights From Global Panel Data," *Sage Open* 13, no.4 (2023): 1–17.

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