Office for National Statistics

Statistical bulletin

Personal well-being in the UK: April 2019 to March 2020

Estimates of life satisfaction, feeling that the things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety at the UK, country, regional, county and local authority level. Covering the period in the build up to the national lockdown of the UK in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

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1 . Main points

- In the year ending March 2020, average ratings of life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety, in the UK, all deteriorated; this is the first time since we started measuring them, in 2011, that these three measures have significantly worsened when compared with the year before.

- In the UK, average ratings of anxiety increased by 6.3% in the year ending March 2020 when compared with the year before, from 2.87 to 3.05 (out of 10); this was the largest annual increase in anxiety since we began measuring personal well-being and there has been no significant improvement for any country or region in any of the four personal well-being measures, compared with last year.

- Average ratings of happiness in the UK fell by 1.1% in the year ending March 2020, compared with the year before, falling in both Scotland (1.2%) and England (1.1%) during this period; at a regional level, average ratings of happiness fell in the North East (2.3%), London (1.7%) and the South East (1.6%).

- England was the only country of the UK to experience a significant reduction in average life satisfaction ratings (0.6%) between the first quarter (Jan to Mar) of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, with the most significant deterioration in the North East (1.6%) and South East (1.2%).

- Although we have seen a significant reduction in average life satisfaction in the first quarter of 2020, this continued a gradual decline in life satisfaction observed over the previous year.

- There was sharper deterioration in aspects of well-being reflecting our daily emotions, anxiety and happiness and during this period, average anxiety in the UK jumped to its highest level since we began measuring well-being and average happiness levels also declined steeply and significantly.

Estimates are intended for local authorities to compare over time and with other local authorities of a similar population size and structure that face similar challenges. Because of small sample sizes and large confidence intervals they should not be used to rank all local authorities against each other.

2 . Personal well-being interactive maps

The period covered in this release includes the build up to the national lockdown of the UK, on 23 March 2020, in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The data tables accompanying the bulletin provide break-downs for each local authority in the UK, presenting a baseline picture of well-being in local authorities prior to the national lockdown.

Figure 1: Personal well-being interactive maps

Average ratings of personal well-being, UK, years ending March 2012 to March 2020

Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Notes:

1. Data are weighted mean averages.

2. The personal well-being measures were first collected in England, Scotland and Wales at local level in April 2011 while in Northern Ireland in April 2012. The first year from which we have a full UK baseline at local level is the year ending March 2013.

3 . Quarterly personal well-being estimates

As well as annual data, we also track changes in personal well-being on a quarterly basis to provide a more timely and detailed understanding of change. In this section, we focus on how personal well-being changed in the UK over the course of the 2019 calendar year and the first quarter (Jan to Mar) of 2020, leading up to the national lockdown on 23 March 2020. We also place this in the context of longer-term trends in personal well-being going back to 2012.

Figure 2: Personal well-being deteriorated across the year ending March 2020

Average personal well-being ratings, UK, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2012 to Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020

Notes:

1. The axis has a break in it.

2. Quarterly data are seasonally adjusted – see Personal well-being quarterly estimates technical report for more information.

3. Q1 equals Quarter 1 (January to March), Q2 equals Quarter 2 (April to June), Q3 equals Quarter 3 (July to September) and Q4 equals Quarter 4 (October to December).

Download this chart

.XLSX

In the year ending March 2020, there was a gradual deterioration in the longer-term "evaluative" measures of personal well-being, including life satisfaction and feeling that the things done in life are worthwhile. These evaluative measures of well-being require a step back to make a general assessment of how things are going in our lives.

Life satisfaction ratings decreased by 0.9% over the year from an average rating of 7.72 (out of 10) in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2019 to 7.65 in the same quarter of 2020 (see Figure 2). Although life satisfaction declined in the first quarter of 2020, it was still well above the lowest levels observed in 2012.

Average ratings that the things done in life are worthwhile remained unchanged over the year ending March 2020. At this point, pre-lockdown, life satisfaction was deteriorating gradually and on the same trajectory as it had been during the previous year, but there was no sharp pre-lockdown decline in life satisfaction and feelings that the things done in life are worthwhile remained stable.

By contrast, there were more pronounced changes in the "affective" measures of well-being, which reflect our day-to-day emotions such as anxiety and happiness and give a snapshot of how people feel right now. There was a gradual decline in average ratings of happiness between Quarter 1 and Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec) of 2019, and a steeper decline in happiness ratings into the first quarter of 2020.

Average happiness ratings decreased by 2.4% from 7.57 (out of 10) in Quarter 1 2019 to 7.39 in Quarter 1 2020. Average anxiety ratings increased gradually by 3.4% from 2.90 in the first quarter of 2019 to 3.00 in the last quarter of 2019. Average anxiety ratings then increased steeply by 7.3% between the last quarter of 2019 into the first quarter of 2020, rising to an average rating of 3.22. This pre-lockdown level of anxiety is the highest seen since the time series began in 2012 with average happiness ratings at their lowest level since early 2014.

During the first quarter of 2020, the UK left the EU on 31 January 2020 and there were increasing concerns about the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and lockdown in the UK, with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring a public health emergency of international concern by the end of January 2020. These issues may have contributed to the steep increase in anxiety and reduction in happiness during the first quarter of 2020.

For further information about well-being during the lockdown and beyond, we are collecting weekly data from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN), which was set up by the Office for National Statistics to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Great Britain. Results are published weekly in the Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain bulletin.

We also published Personal and economic well-being in Great Britain in May and June 2020. We plan to publish another update in August 2020. Please see the Measuring the data section for further information on both the Annual Population Survey (APS) and the weekly OPN findings and how they can be used.

4 . Glossary

Personal well-being

Our personal well-being measures ask people to evaluate, on a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied they are with their life overall, whether they feel they have meaning and purpose in their life, and about their emotions (happiness and anxiety) during a particular period.

Thresholds

Thresholds are used to present dispersion in the data. For the life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness questions, ratings are grouped in the following way:

- 0 to 4 (low)

- 5 to 6 (medium)

- 7 to 8 (high)

- 9 to 10 (very high)

For the anxiety question, ratings are grouped differently to reflect the fact that higher anxiety is associated with lower personal well-being. The ratings for anxiety are grouped as follows:

- 0 to 1 (very low)

- 2 to 3 (low)

- 4 to 5 (medium)

- 6 to 10 (high)

Mode effects

Testing has shown that people respond more positively to the personal well-being questions when interviewed by telephone rather than face-to-face. As people are interviewed using both methods on the Annual Population Survey, this will have some effect on the personal well-being results.

5 . Measuring the data

Since 2011, we have asked personal well-being questions to adults aged 16 years and over in the UK to better understand how they feel about their lives. This release presents headline results for the year ending March 2020, along with changes over time since we started collecting well-being data in 2011. It provides data at a national level, country and local authority level. The four personal well-being questions are:

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?

- Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?

- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

People are asked to respond on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely". We produce estimates of the mean ratings for all four personal well-being questions, as well as their distributions.

Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) and Annual Population Survey (APS)

It is important to note that direct comparisons cannot be made between the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) and the Annual Population Survey (APS) because of the difference in coverage and sample size.

The OPN is a monthly omnibus survey. In response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we have adapted the OPN to become a weekly survey used to collect data on the impact of the coronavirus on day-to-day life in Great Britain. Since May 2020, the ONS has been reporting on personal and economic well-being in Great Britain using these weekly data. More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey QMI.

The annual APS used in this analysis provides the timeliest data on well-being at the granular level by local authority. The quarterly APS also allows us to consider how the UK's well-being was faring over the last few years.

The APS is a continuous household survey, covering the UK, with the aim of providing estimates between censuses of important social and labour market variables at a local level. The APS is not a stand-alone survey but uses data from two waves of the main Labour Force Survey (LFS) with data collected on a local sample boost. The data comprise 12 months of survey data and are disseminated quarterly. The achieved sample size is approximately 320,000 respondents.

Measuring National Well-being programme

The four personal well-being questions are included as measures for the wider Measuring National Well-being (MNW) programme. The programme began in November 2010 with the aim of developing and publishing an accepted and trusted set of National Statistics, which help people understand and monitor well-being. The statistics in this bulletin are displayed through our well-being dashboard, which reports how the UK is doing for the different areas of life that people in the UK said matter most to their well-being.

Quality and methodology information

The Personal well-being in the UK Quality and Methodology Information report contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data and how it compares with related data

- uses and users of the data

- how the output was created

- APS data reweighting

- the quality of the output including the accuracy of the data

For more information on personal well-being, please see:

- Personal well-being user guide

- Harmonised principles of personal-well-being

Feedback and future publications

Our users expressed a need for more information on lower geographies and more analysis on factors associated with personal well-being, which this release aims to provide. Our users also requested more timely reporting of data; this release aims to fulfil this desire, hence the condensed nature of the release, and we plan to publish a more in-depth analysis in October 2020.

If you would like to provide additional feedback about this specific work at local level or any opinions you might have about our well-being outputs, please contact us at QualityOfLife@ons.gov.uk.

6 . Strengths and limitations

Accuracy of the statistics: estimating and reporting uncertainty

The personal well-being estimates are from the Annual Population Survey (APS), which provides a representative sample of those living in private residential households in the UK. People living in communal establishments (such as care homes) or other non-household situations are not represented in this survey. This may be important in interpreting the findings in relation to those people reporting lower personal well-being.

The sample is designed to be as accurate as possible given practical limitations such as time and cost constraints. Results from sample surveys are always estimates, not precise figures. This can have an impact on how changes in the estimates should be interpreted, especially for short-term comparisons.

As the number of people available in the sample gets smaller, the variability of the estimates that can be made from that sample size gets larger. Estimates for small groups – for example, respondents from a single local authority (LA) – which are based on small subsets of the APS, are less reliable and tend to be more volatile than for larger aggregated groups.

From year ending March 2018, the sample for Northern Ireland received a boost, resulting in greater accuracy in a set of LAs that had had relatively small sample sizes compared with other LAs in the UK.

If the sample size of an estimate is less than 50 or if a corresponding threshold has a sample size less than 5, then the estimate is suppressed. Additionally, we assess each estimate's critical value (or coefficient of variance) and colour code the estimates in the Headline Estimates download. If the critical value exceeds a score of 20, indicating that there is too much variance in the data to constitute a reliable estimate, then this estimate is suppressed. For more information on suppression, see the [Personal well-being in the UK QMI](#).

APS data reweighting

Weighting answers to survey questions ensures that estimates are representative of the target population. Each person in the survey data has a "weight", the number of people that person represents in the population, which is used to produce estimates for the population.

More accurate weighting is based on the latest available population estimates for that time period. When new population estimates become available, data can be reweighted to ensure better representation and so precision of estimates. For greater accuracy, it is common practice to revise previously published estimates when new weights become available.

Statistical significance

Please note that:

- any changes mentioned in this publication are "statistically significant"

- the statistical significance of differences noted within the release are determined based on non-overlapping confidence intervals

- comparisons have been based on unrounded data

7 . Related links

Measures of National Well-being Dashboard
Dashboard | Released on 23 October 2019
Latest data, times series data and detailed information for the measures of national well-being.

Personal and economic well-being in Great Britain: June 2020
Bulletin | Released on 18 June 2020
Estimates looking across both personal well-being (April 2018 to March 2019) and economic well-being (January to March 2019) in the UK. This bulletin is part of a new series on "people and prosperity" introduced in February 2019.

Coronavirus and anxiety, Great Britain: 3 April 2020 to 10 May 2020
Article | Released on 15 June 2020
The number of people reporting high levels of anxiety has sharply elevated during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This article provides insights into which socio-demographic and economic factors were most associated with high levels of anxiety during the first weeks of lockdown.

Beyond GDP: How ONS is developing wider measures of well-being
Article | Released on 4 February 2019
A summary of how the ONS is continuing to develop new ways of measuring and reporting the UK's economic and social progress and an introduction to the Personal and economic well-being publication.

Optimism and personal well-being: technical report
Methodology | Released on 12 March 2020
Exploratory analysis of the relationship between optimism and personal well-being using questions from the 2019 Opinions and Lifestyle (OPN) Survey.

Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain
Bulletin | Released weekly
Indicators from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) to understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on people, households and communities in Great Britain.