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Australian Unity Wellbeing Index
Survey 14.1

Report 14.1
March 2006

Fifth Anniversary Special Report – Summarising the major findings

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1. Introduction

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is a barometer of Australians' satisfaction with their lives and life in Australia. Unlike most official indicators of quality of life and wellbeing, it is subjective – it measures how Australians feel about life, and incorporates both personal and national perspectives. The Index shows how various aspects of life – both personal and national – affect our sense of wellbeing.

The Index is an alternative measure of population wellbeing to such economic indicators as Gross Domestic Product and other objective indicators such as population health, literacy and crime statistics. The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index measures quality of life as experienced by the average Australian.

The Index comprises two numbers. The Personal Wellbeing Index is the average level of satisfaction across seven aspects of personal life – health, personal relationships, safety, standard of living, achievements, community connectedness, and future security. The National Wellbeing Index is the average satisfaction score across six aspects of national life – the economy, the environment, social conditions, governance, business, and national security.

A considerable body of research has demonstrated that most people are satisfied with their own life. In Western nations, the average value for population samples is about 75%, with a normal range from 70% to 80%. We find the Personal Wellbeing Index to always fall within this range. However, satisfaction with aspects of national life are normally lower, falling in the range 55% to 65% in Australia.

The first index survey, of 2,000 adults from all parts of Australia, was conducted in April 2001. Since then 13 additional surveys have been conducted, with the most recent survey in October 2005. Copies of earlier reports can be obtained either from the Australian Unity website (www.australianunity.com.au) or from the Australian Centre on Quality of Life website at Deakin University (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/acqol/index.htm>).

The same core index questions, forming the Personal and the National Wellbeing Index, are asked within each survey. Each survey also includes demographic questions and a small number of additional items that change from one survey to the next. These explore specific issues of interest, either personal or national.

This Report highlights the most interesting findings from the 14 Surveys to date. The selection criteria are presented in Section 1.4.

1.1. Understanding Personal Wellbeing

The major measurement instrument used in our surveys is the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI). This is designed as the first level deconstruction of 'Life as a Whole'. It comprises seven questions relating to satisfaction with life domains, such as 'health' and 'standard of living'. Each question is answered on a 0-10 scale of satisfaction. The scores are then combined across the seven domains to yield an overall Index score, which is adjusted to have a range of 0-100.

On a population basis the scores that we derive from this PWI are quite remarkably stable. Appendix AI presents these values, each derived from a geographically representative sample of 2,000 randomly selected adults across Australia. As can be seen, these values range from 73.2 to 76.3, a fluctuation of only 3.1 percentage points. How can such stability be achieved?

We hypothesize that personal wellbeing is not simply free to vary over the theoretical 0-100 range. Rather, it is held fairly constant for each individual in a manner analogous to blood pressure or body temperature. This implies an active management system for personal wellbeing that has the task of

maintaining wellbeing, which averages about 75%, at reasonably high level. We call this process Subjective Wellbeing Homeostasis (Cummins et al., 2002a).

The proper functioning of this homeostatic system is essential to life. At normal levels of wellbeing, which for group average scores lies in the range of 70-80%, people feel good about themselves, are well motivated to conduct their lives, and have a strong sense of optimism. When this homeostatic system fails, however, these essential qualities are severely compromised, and people are at risk of depression. This can come about through such circumstances as exposure to chronic stress, chronic pain, failed personal relationships, etc.

Having said this, the homeostatic system is remarkably robust. Many people live in difficult personal circumstances which may involve low income or medical problems, and yet manage to maintain normal levels of wellbeing. This is why the Index is so stable when averaged across the population. But as with any human attribute, some homeostatic systems are more robust than others. Or, put around the other way, some people have fragile systems which are prone to failure.

Homeostatic fragility, in these terms, can be caused by two different influences. The first of these is genetic. Some people have a constitutional weakness in their ability to maintain wellbeing within the normal range. The second influence is the experience of life. Here, as has been mentioned, some experiences such as chronic stress can challenge homeostasis. Other influences, such as intimate personal relationships, can strengthen homeostasis.

In summary, personal wellbeing is under active management and most people are able to maintain normal levels of wellbeing even when challenged by negative life experiences. A minority of people, however, have weaker homeostatic systems as a result of either constitutional or experiential influences. These people are vulnerable to their environment and may evidence homeostatic failure. The identification of sub-groups that contain a larger than normal proportion of such people is an important feature of our survey analyses.

1.2. The Survey Methodology

Each of the 14 Surveys has involved a geographically representative national sample of people aged 18 years or over and fluent in English. They are surveyed by telephone over the 3-4 week period of data collection. Interviewers ask to speak to the person in the house who had the most recent birthday and was at least 18 years old. In general, about 14,000 calls are made, about half of which connect with a respondent. The 2,000 people who agree to provide data constitute about 26% of the contacted sample. This response rate reflects, in part, the methodological constraint that an even geographic and gender split was maintained at all times throughout the survey. All responses are made on a 0 to 10 scale. The satisfaction responses are anchored by 0 (completely dissatisfied) and 10 (completely satisfied). Initial data screening is always completed before data analysis.

1.3. Presentation of results and type of analysis

In the presentation of results to follow, the trends that are described in the Figures are all statistically significant at $p < .05$. More detailed analyses are presented both in the designated Report and in the Appendices to that Report.

All satisfaction values are expressed as the strength of satisfaction on a scale that ranges from 0% to 100%.

In situations where homogeneity of variance assumptions has been violated, Dunnetts T3 Post-Hoc Test has been used. In the case of t-tests we have used the SPSS option for significance when equality of variance cannot be assumed.

The raw data for this and all previous reports are available from our website: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/acqol/index.htm>.

1.4. Internal Report Organisation

The results that are presented in this Report 14.1 have been selected according to the following criteria:

1. The data for the Personal Wellbeing Index and the National Wellbeing Index are cumulative across all surveys. The mean value for each survey is presented for each index.
2. The perceived probability of a terrorist attack ‘in the near future’ has been measured over the last six surveys. The result selected for this Report is the aggregated data showing the influence of such perceptions on personal wellbeing.
3. We collect data on eight broad demographic variables and these data are cumulative. One result has been selected for each demographic that best exemplifies its influence on personal wellbeing.
4. Each survey contains a small set of questions that measure some specific aspect of life relevant to personal wellbeing. One or two such results have been selected from each report based on their relevance to personal wellbeing either alone or in interaction with a demographic variable. The full description of these variables can be found in the nominated reports.

2. The National Indexes

The data for the National Indices are cumulative. The complete description of these data can be found in Report 14.0.

2.1. The Personal Wellbeing Index over the past five years

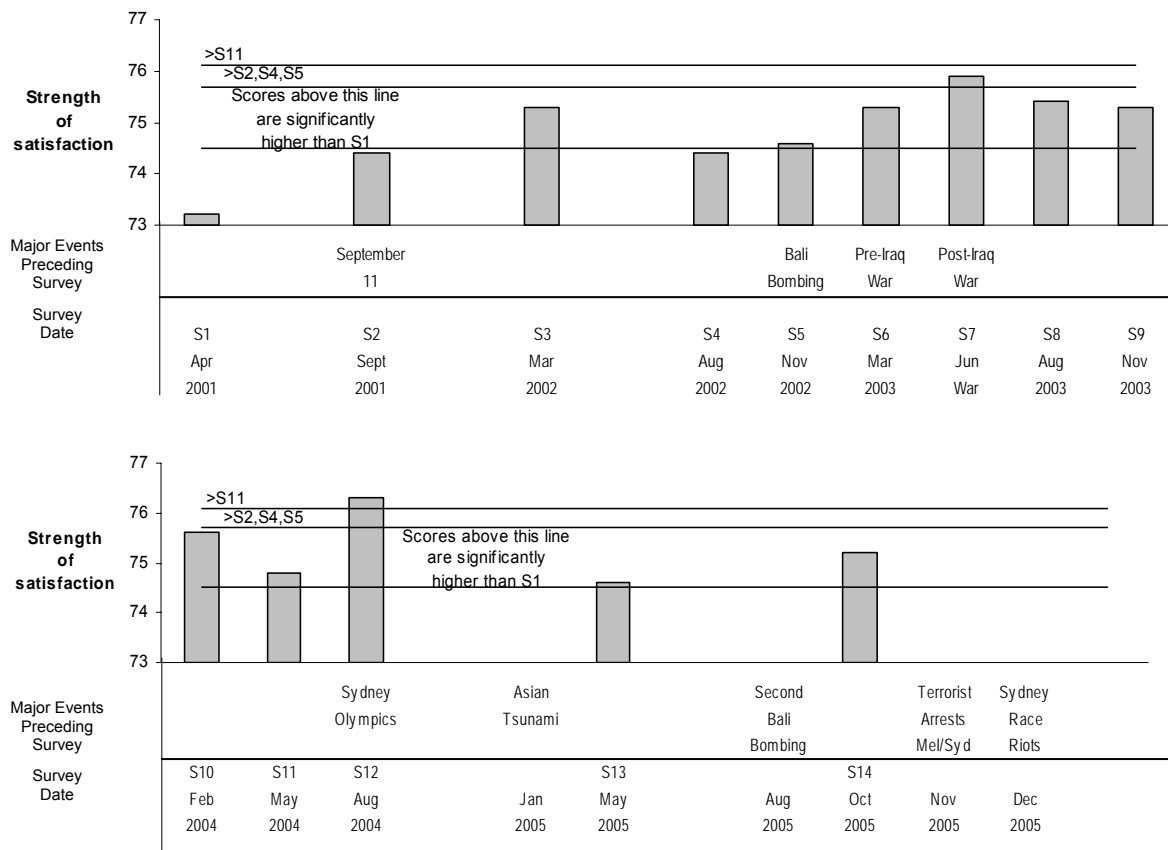


Figure 2.1: Personal Wellbeing Index

It is notable that the Personal Wellbeing Index is so stable. Over the 14 surveys it has varied by just 3.1 points and, except for S1-S2 (September 11), and S11-S12/S12-S13 (Sydney Olympics), the change from one survey to the next is less than 1%. The range of values has been from 73.2 (S1) to 76.3 (S12) and the Personal Wellbeing Index is currently 2.0 points above its level at Survey 1, which is just significant. The recent trend, however, is a decreasing index, and in the absence of any further major events it is likely that the Index will fall back to its baseline at Survey 1.

The most obvious trend is for the Personal Wellbeing Index to have remained higher than Survey 1 since September 11 (4 years). Presumably this has been sustained by the major events listed in Figure 2.1. The changes appear to be coherently related to these events.

Both positive and negative events have acted to raise the personal wellbeing of the Australian population. In terms of the negative events, it appears that the presence of external threat causes the population wellbeing to rise. This occurred first followed September 11 and reached its maximum about 6 months after the event. The second occasion followed the first Bali Bombing and ran into the build-up in tension surrounding the Iraq war. It is possible that the Second Bali Bombing, which

substantially increased the perceived probability of a terrorist attack in Australia prevented the Personal Wellbeing Index continuing its fall back to the baseline value recorded at Survey 1. In Survey 12 the Olympic success caused personal wellbeing to rise. However, this was a brief effect and recordings in the week immediately following the event showed a rapid fall in the Index. The Commonwealth Games (March, 2006) will likely have a similar influence.

The personal domains that have made the most marked contribution to this overall rise are:

- **Standard of living:** It is possible that this has been sustained by the healthy economic circumstances that have prevailed over the period of the surveys.
- **Interpersonal connection (Relationships and Community Connection):** Increased interpersonal bonding due to the perception of an external threat is a well-documented phenomenon.
- **Security (Safety and Future Security):** Increased security may be a consequence of the increased social bonding.

Implications for Australia:

The Personal Wellbeing Index reflects major influences, both positive and negative, that impact on the Australian population. It is a valid diagnostic tool to measure population wellbeing.

2.2. The National Wellbeing Index and Satisfaction with Government over the past five years

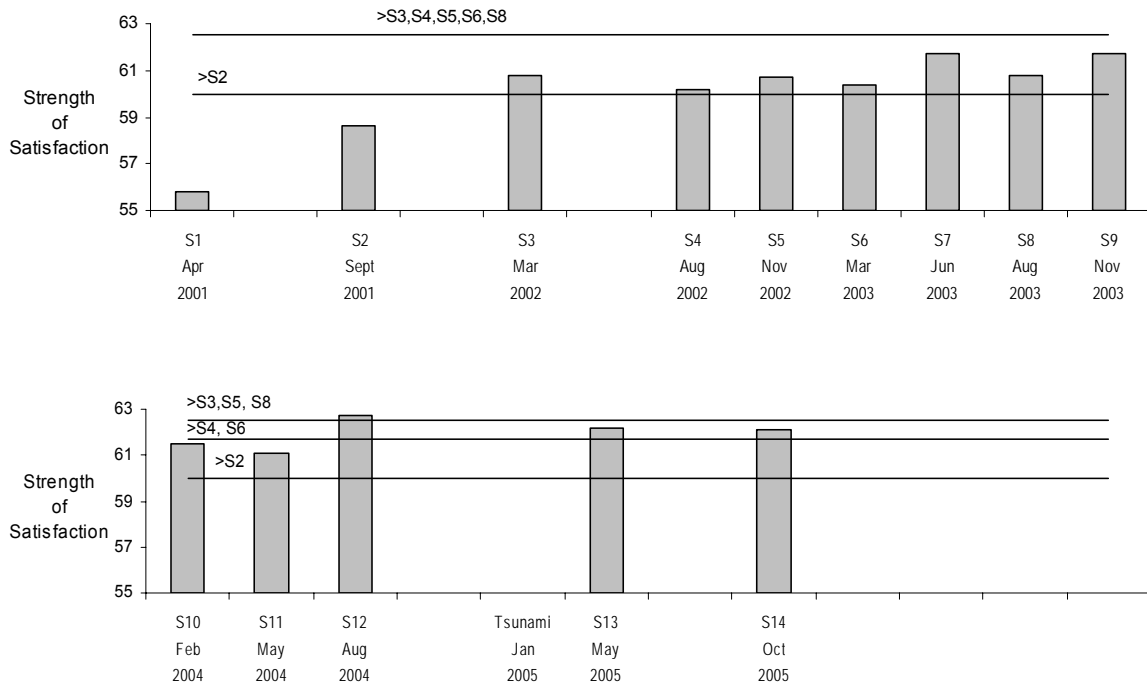


Figure 2.2: National Wellbeing Index

The Personal Wellbeing Index remains significantly higher than it was at Surveys 1 and 2. The National Index is more volatile than the Personal Index due to the relatively low level of homeostatic control. Its range is 6.9 points from April 2001 (S1:55.8) to August 2004 (S12:62.7).

While all of the National domains (except Government) have followed this trend, the most marked and sustained increase has been in satisfaction with the Economic situation which has risen by almost 15 points. They may well reflect the strong Australian economic conditions that have prevailed throughout these five years. This, in turn, is likely influencing the other national domains.

Satisfaction with Government has not simply followed the pattern of the National Index. The results for this measure are shown below.

“How satisfied are you with Government in Australia?”

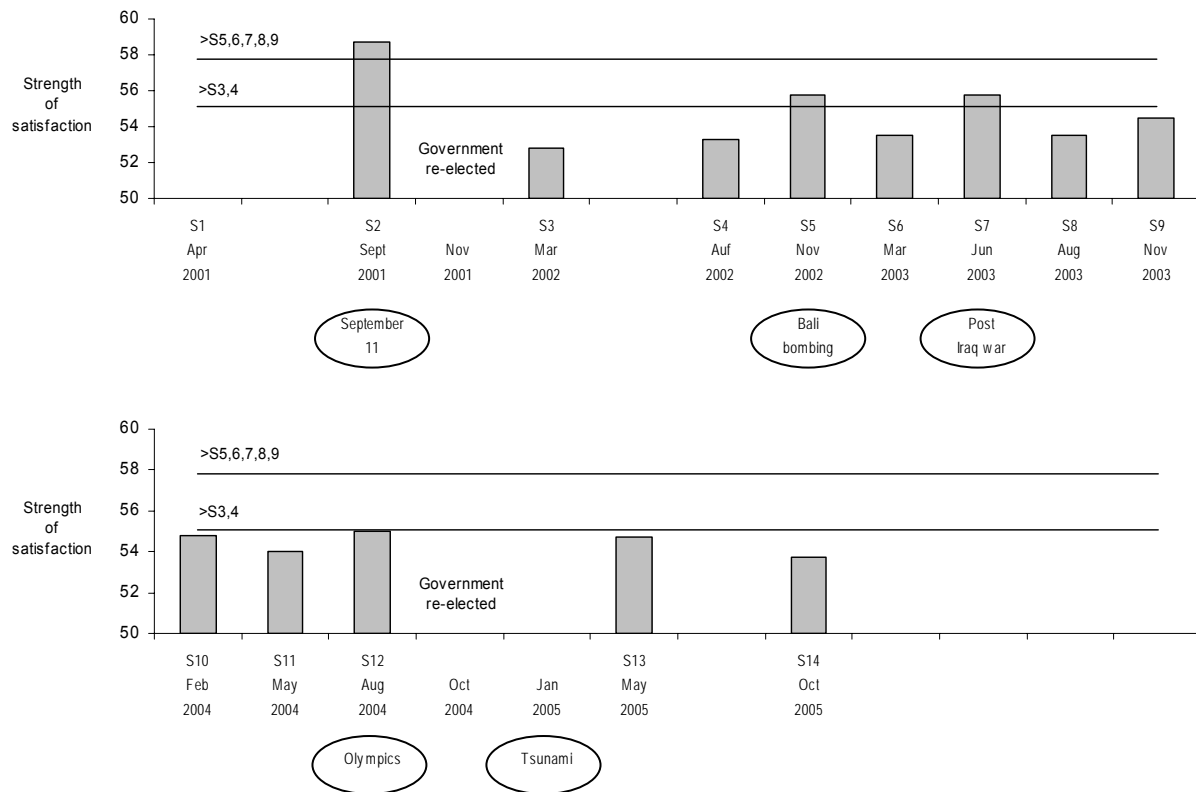


Figure 2.3: Satisfaction with **Government in Australia**

Satisfaction with Government remains at one of its lowest levels. It appears to rise in times of national threat, such that the elevated satisfaction with Government in September 2001 (S2) was a direct result of the September 11 attacks. A similar, but more muted rise is evident in the Bali bombing (S5) survey, and again following the Iraq war (S7).

The most obvious explanation for the September 11 (S2) and Bali (S5) rise is that the perception of external threat causes satisfaction with Government to increase. However the pre-Iraq war situation (S6) was different. While it constituted a threat to Australia in so far as there were fears of Weapons of Mass Destruction being unleashed in Iraq and perhaps elsewhere, Australian troops were committed to fight in the front-line. This involvement divided the nation, with 23% in favour and 53% opposed to the war (Report 6.0). Perhaps because of this division, the rise in satisfaction with Government did not materialise. Moreover, the subsequent rise at S7 may represent an increased satisfaction for a quite different set of reasons, which involve relief at no deaths among the Australian troops and the bolstered American alliance.

It is interesting that none of these rises are sustained over more than three months and that the substantial rise in national wellbeing occasioned by the Olympics was not reflected in Satisfaction with Government.

Implications for Australia:

The sustained high levels of the National Wellbeing Index may reflect the good economic performance of Australia over this period. Satisfaction with Government appears to increase under conditions of national threat.

2.3. Is a terrorist attack likely in the near future?

Over the past six surveys (since November 2004) we have asked people whether they thought a ‘terrorist attack is likely in Australia in the near future’. Of those people who reply ‘Yes’, we ask how strongly they believe such an attack is imminent.

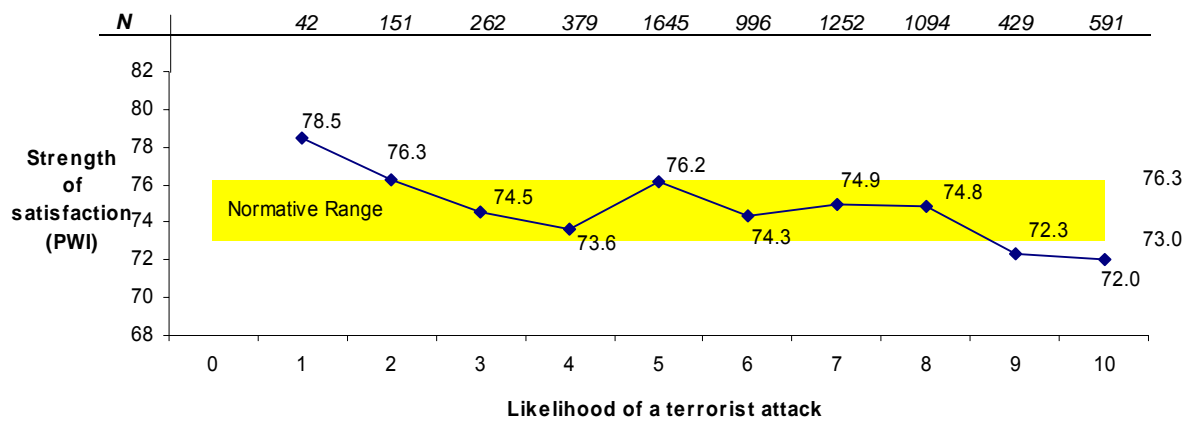


Figure 2.4: Likelihood of Terrorist Attack x Personal Wellbeing Index

Using the PWI mean scores the correlation between the perceived likelihood of a terrorist attack and personal wellbeing is $-.77$ ($p < .01$). The direction of causation is uncertain. However, it can be seen that all groups lie within the normative range with the exception of the 0.6% who consider the likelihood to be extremely low (10% probability), and the 14.9% who regarded the probability as extremely high (90 or 100% probability). This response pattern exemplifies the non-linear nature of the relationship between these variables and the false assumptions that can be drawn by the simple application of linear statistics to such data. That is, the conventional interpretation of a strong $-.77$ correlation would be to assume that the belief that a terrorist attack is likely is inherently damaging to personal wellbeing. However, Figure 2.4 shows this is not necessarily so since even a perceived probability of 8/10 is not sufficient to influence wellbeing.

People who rate the probability at a low 10% have higher than normal wellbeing. Then, over the range of probability from 20% to 80% personal wellbeing does not reliably change and remains within the normative range. However, the 14.9% of the population who believe an attack is almost certain (9/10 or 10/10) have a below-normal level of wellbeing.

Implications for Australia:

These findings raise the issue of the advantages and dis-advantages of issuing national terrorist alerts.

3. Demographic Influences

The data for these demographic influences are cumulative across surveys. The complete description of these data and results can be found in Report 14.0.

3.1. Buying more happiness is cheaper when you are poor

The power of money to influence wellbeing lies not in the purchase of luxury goods (people adapt to them) but as a flexible resource to defend against threats to wellbeing. Rich people can hire people to perform the tasks they do not enjoy, they have access to the best medical treatments when they become ill, and have the resources to access family and friends. As one consequence of this, wealth has a limited, but powerful influence on wellbeing. Its power is concentrated in conditions of low income where the financial resources are insufficient to allow many people to defend themselves against a hostile living environment. This is shown below:

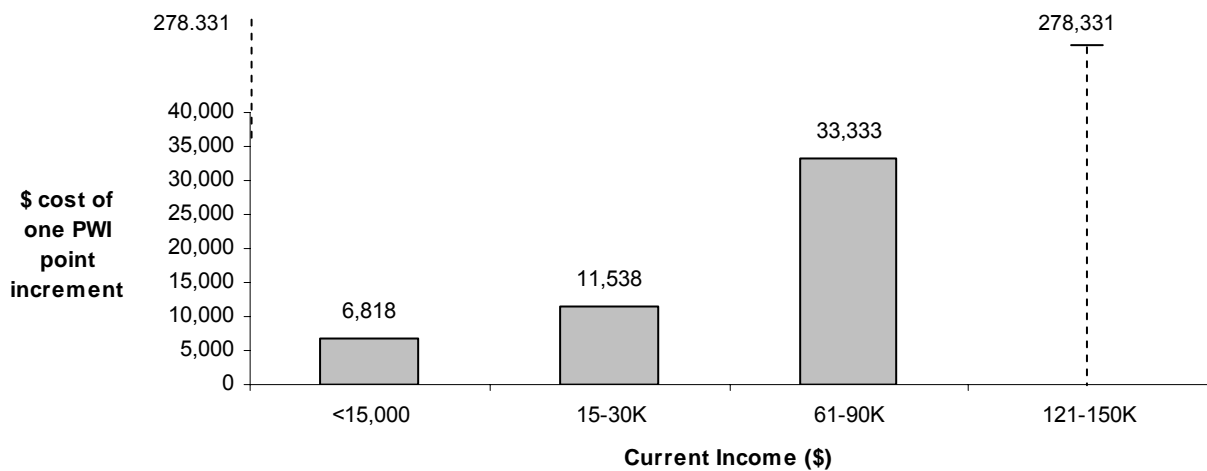


Figure 3.1: The cost of purchasing a percentage point of personal wellbeing

The relationship between income and wellbeing is exponential, as income loses its power to increase wellbeing beyond the genetically-determined set-point ceiling. While an increment of one percentage point of wellbeing costs \$6,818 at a household income of <\$15,000, it costs \$278,331 at a household income of \$150,000 even supposing that such an increase is actually possible given the genetic constraints imposed on elevating wellbeing above each person's set-point.

Implications for Australia:

The average wellbeing of Australians could be effectively raised by providing additional financial resources to the lowest income groups in our society.

3.2. In challenging life circumstances males are more vulnerable than females

On average, females rate themselves as 1.4 percentage points higher than males in terms of their personal wellbeing. However, this difference is exacerbated in potentially difficult living conditions such as low income, unemployment, or the absence of a partner.

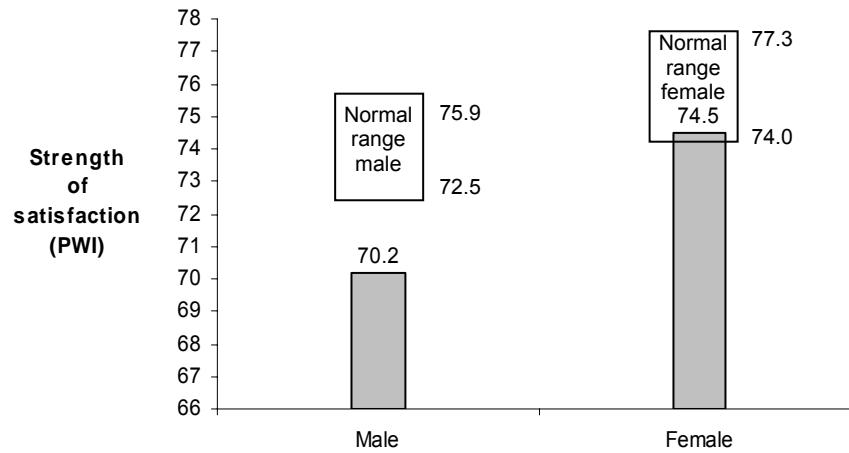


Figure 3.2: **Gender x Living Alone:** Personal Wellbeing Index

While both males and females who live alone experience a relatively low level of wellbeing, the level for females lies within their normal range. This is not so for males who live alone. Their Personal Wellbeing Index value of 70.2 is 2.1 points below their normal range, and 3.8 points below the level of single-living females. This low level for males indicates a higher than normal risk of depression, which is a consequence of wellbeing loss due to homeostatic defeat.

The reason females are more resilient than males under conditions of single-living may be due to the greater ability of females to form emotionally-supportive social relationships outside a coupled-relationship. Males are more inclined to form friendship relationships based on shared activities. These are less likely to provide emotional support in times of personal need.

Other circumstances also exist where our data indicate a disadvantage to male wellbeing. These include conditions of low income and unemployment, most particularly in middle age.

Implications for Australia:

These findings suggest some further investment into the development of more male-specific support groups could be beneficial.

3.3. Middle-age people without partners are a high risk group

It is commonly reported that wellbeing decreases in middle age. Our findings confirm this at the level of the whole sample. However, as shown below, there is no evidence of such a decrease in people who are in a married or defacto relationship.

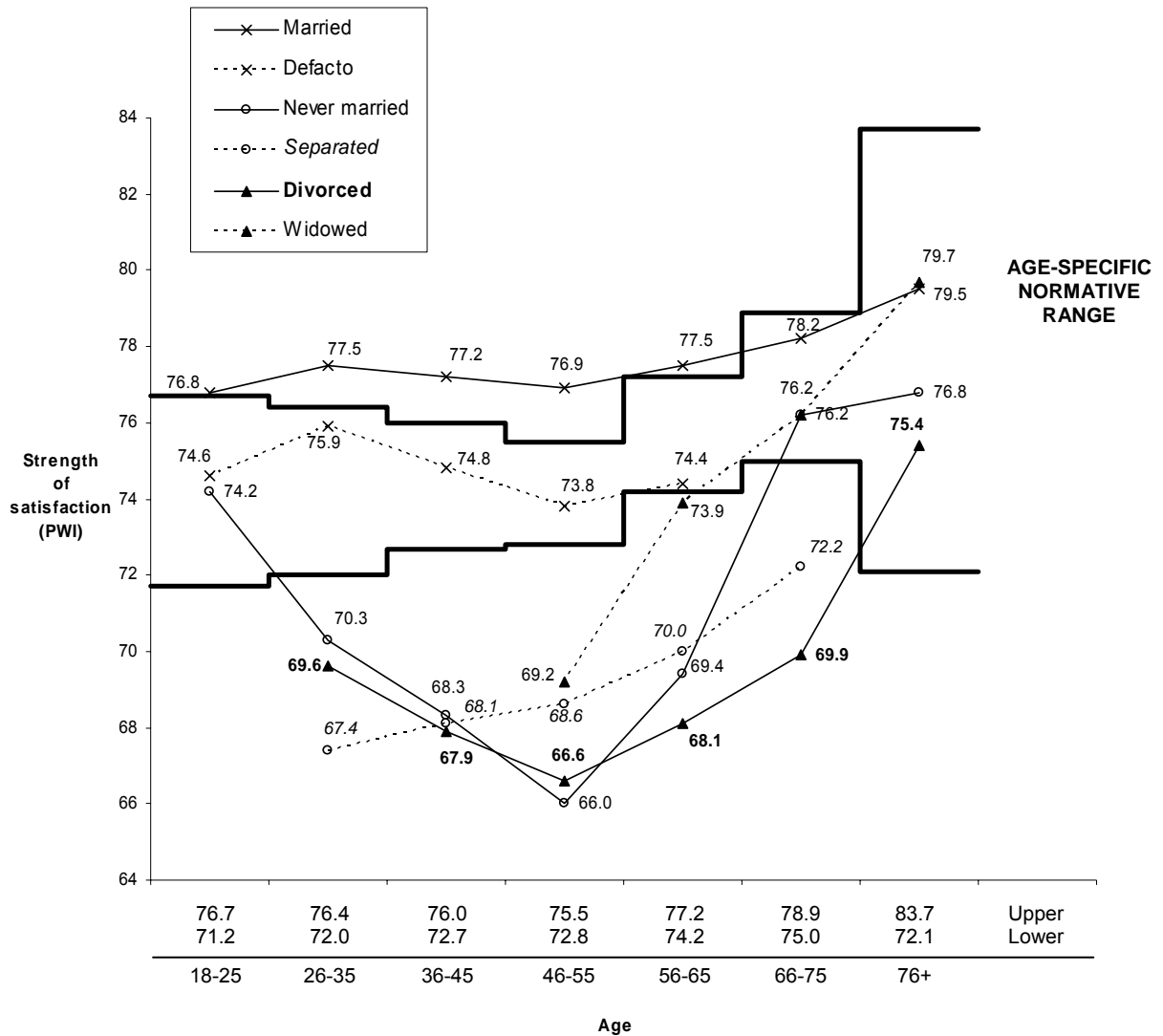


Figure 3.3: Age x Relationship Status: Personal Wellbeing Index

These results show that the middle-age decrease in wellbeing is confined to people who have either no partner to live with or who have lost their partner through separation, divorce, or death. The negative effects of not having a partner are maximal before the age of 55 years. Beyond that age, wellbeing tends to return towards the normative range.

The reason for this recovery in older age is not certain. It may, however, be linked to the increased normality of living without a partner as people age beyond 65 years.

Implications for Australia:

Middle-age people who do not have a partner are highly vulnerable to depression. Additional support services could usefully be directed to these people.

3.4. Income is very important for people without a partner

While it is commonly found that sole parents have low wellbeing, our data indicate this is not necessarily so. The wellbeing of sole parents is highly dependent on their relationship with their partner and income.

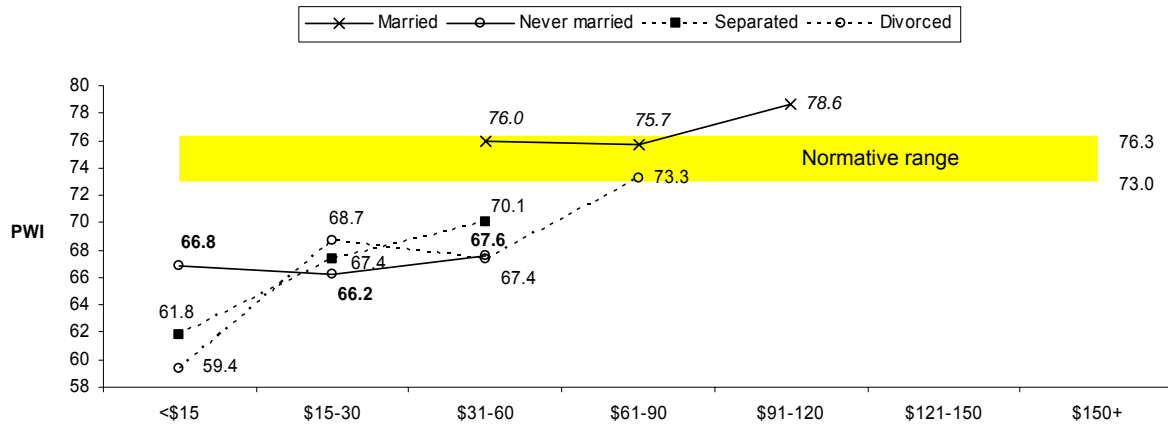


Figure 3.4: **Sole Parent x Relationship Status x Income: Personal Wellbeing Index**

Sole parents who regard themselves as still married have normative wellbeing. These people tend to have household incomes >\$30,000 and are likely receiving instrumental support from their partner.

Sole parents who regard themselves as separated/divorced, or who have never married, have a level of wellbeing that is income-dependent. This is shown most dramatically for people who have divorced. At incomes <\$15K their wellbeing is one of the lowest we have recorded, while at an income of \$61-90K their wellbeing enters the normal range.

Implications for Australia:

People who do not have a partner are at particular risk of depression in circumstances of low income. Their wellbeing can be increased through the provision of additional financial resources.

3.5. Medical health is relatively unimportant to the wellbeing of widows

Widows have a level of wellbeing that lies above the normative range. This is most interesting since they are also generally low income and not in paid employment. They also tend to be elderly and have health problems associated with their older age. Indeed, they have below normal levels of health satisfaction as shown below.

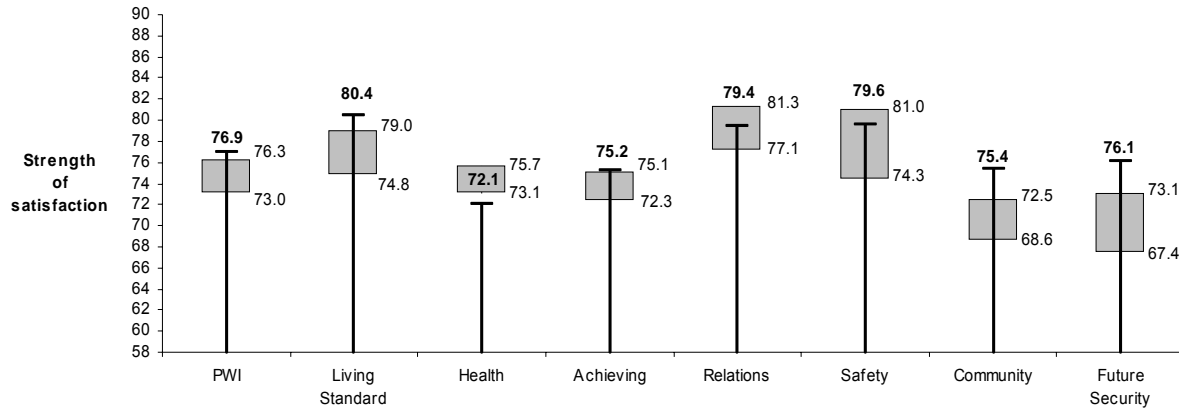


Figure 3.5: **Widows:** Personal Wellbeing Index Domains

As can be seen, despite having below normal health satisfaction, Widows average higher than normal personal wellbeing. This exemplifies the relative unimportance of health as a determinant of personal wellbeing for this group provided that other domains can compensate.

Implications for Australia:

It is often assumed that medical health equates to high life quality, this is not necessarily so in all situations. Provided that people have other resources, financial or relational, some people in ill-health can experience high life quality.

3.6. Job seekers have low wellbeing

People who are unemployed have below-normal wellbeing and it makes no differences whether they are looking for work or not. Moreover, if full-time employed people are looking for work their wellbeing is also below normal.



Figure 3.6: **Looking for Work:** Personal Wellbeing Index

The people who are employed yet looking for work comprise 9.0% of those in full-time work. Their low wellbeing probably reflects their dislike for their current job or the fact that low income is driving their need for additional or alternative employment.

Implications for Australia:

It seems intuitive that these people who are employed yet looking for work will be both generally dissatisfied with their lives and most particularly with their current employment.

3.7. Income influences the experience of life

Prior to any mention of terrorist attacks or war, people are asked “Has anything happened to you recently causing you to feel happier or sadder than normal?” If they answer ‘Yes’, they are then asked whether this was a happy or a sad event, and to ‘rate its influence on a 0 to 10 scale, from very weak to very strong’.

If people were to be severely interrogated along these line virtually everybody would recall an event of some kind that made them happier or sadder than normal. The time frame is loose (‘recently’) and the point of reference (‘normal’) is open to interpretation. But respondents are not interrogated, and if they answer that they have experienced no such event, the interviewer proceeds to the next item. Because of this, the item is either measuring people’s sensitivity to the positive and negative events in their lives, or the extent to which people are willing to identify such events. In either case it is measuring the direction of people’s attention to the positive or negative side of their life.

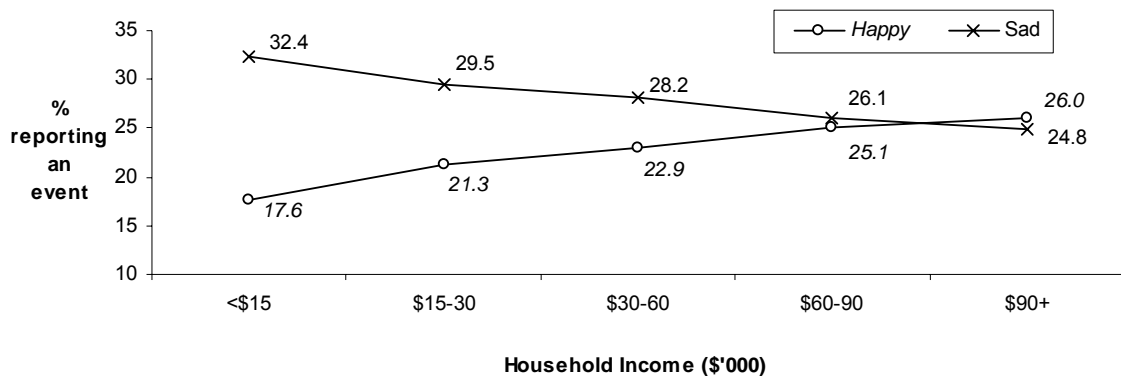


Figure 3.7: **Income x Life Event Frequency**

It can be seen that the income trends for the two life events are opposite. As income increases, the frequency of people reporting sad events decreases, and the frequency for happy events increases up to an income of about \$60,000-\$90,000.

Implications for Australia:

Money is a flexible resource which allows people to avoid many aspects of life which have a negative effect on wellbeing. This permits rich people to maximise their potential for personal wellbeing to a greater extent than people who are poor. It also implies that rich people are less exposed to negative life events.

3.8. Body weight and wellbeing

There is much negative opinion directed to the condition of obesity, much of it prejudicial. We present the cumulative data on Body Mass Index and wellbeing separated by gender.

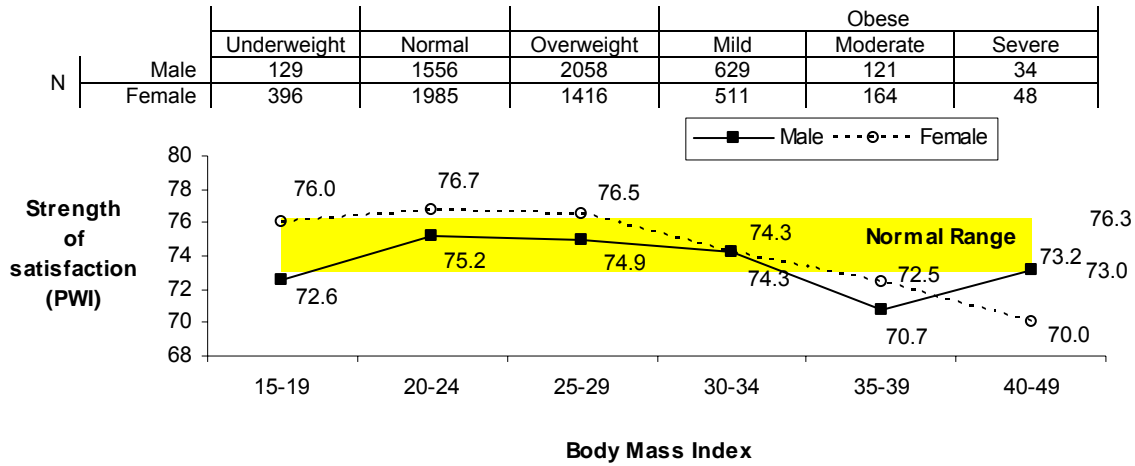


Figure 3.8: **Body Mass Index x Gender: Personal Wellbeing Index**

For both genders, personal wellbeing remains within the normal range between the BMI categories of underweight and mild obesity. At a BMI signifying moderate obesity, the wellbeing of both groups falls below the normal range.

Males who are underweight (BMI of 15-19) and males who are moderately obese (35-39) have significantly lower wellbeing than normal BMI males.

Females who are underweight show no decrease in wellbeing but have lower wellbeing than normal weight at mild obesity.

Implications for Australia:

Personal wellbeing does not significantly change due to being overweight, and even remains within the normal range in conditions of mild obesity. This may be one reason that people are so poorly motivated to persist with weight-loss programs.

4. Special Topics

In addition to the standard wellbeing and demographic questions, each survey asks about some other aspect of life that relates to wellbeing. These data and results are peculiar to a single report. The origin of each data set is indicated in association with each result.

4.1. Low support from a relationship is worse than no support

We asked:

“I am going to ask how much support you receive from the following list of people. Zero means no support. If you do not have one of the named people in your life say ‘pass’”.

From 0 to 10, how much support do you receive from [each of the above five categories rated separately].

In general, receiving a high level of support from any source enhances wellbeing. This is particularly so in relation to support received from Partner. However, if only low-level support is experienced, then this is worse than no support at all.

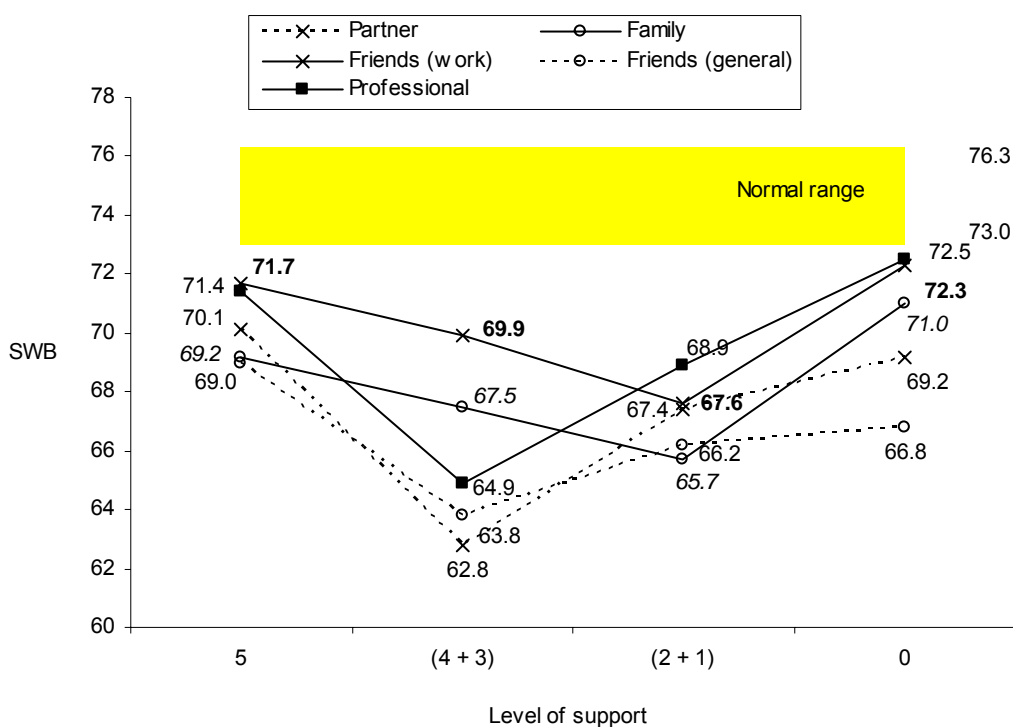


Figure 4.1: **Low-level support drains personal resources and reduces wellbeing**

Low levels of support from all sources are worse for personal wellbeing than no support at all. This may be because low levels of support drain personal resources in relation to reciprocal interaction with the support source, whereas the situation of no support relieves people of this burden.

Implications for Australia:

People who are in a relationship that is providing them with a low-level of support may increase their wellbeing by separating from their partner.

4.2. Distress at the price of petrol (Report 14.0)

In the months prior to this survey the price of petrol had risen by some 30 percent. We asked:

“How much is the price of petrol distressing you?”

“Do you own a car?”

The results for people who owned a car are provided below for those who rated their level of distress as 9/10 or 10/10. The comparison is with people who rated their level of pain at 9/10 and 10/10, and those who rated the probability of a terrorist attack at the same level.

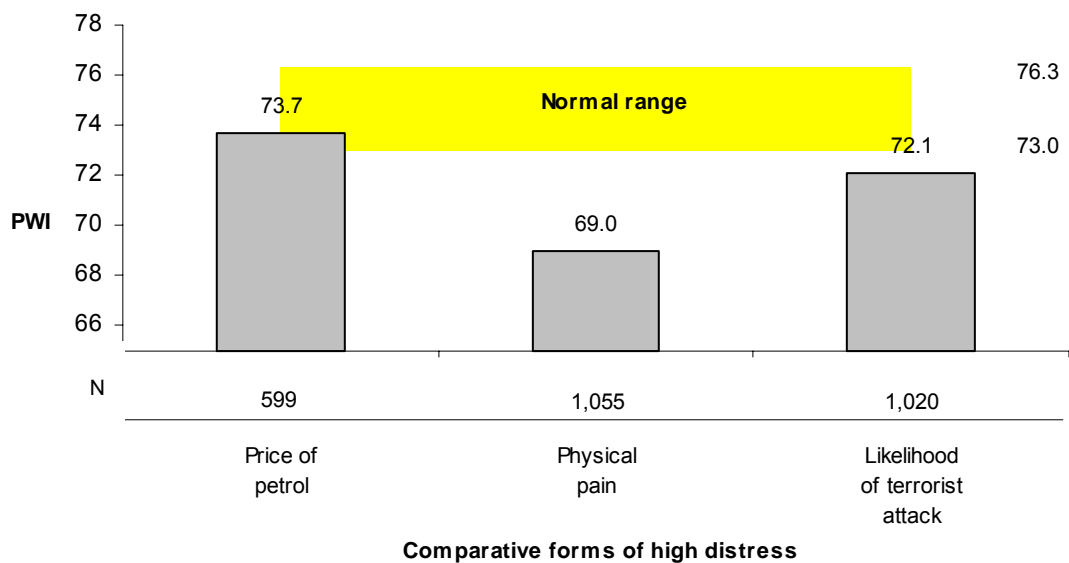


Figure 4.2: **Comparative Forms of High Distress** and Subjective Wellbeing

It is apparent that distress at the high cost of petrol is not of itself, sufficiently powerful to reduce wellbeing. Moreover, it is not as powerful at decreasing wellbeing as either physical pain or an imminent terrorist attack.

Implications for Australia:

The general assumption that high levels of distress are harmful to wellbeing is unfounded. The influence will depend on the source of the distress.

4.3. Home-based caregiving and co-habiting adults (Report 13.0)

It is well documented in the literature that the provision of care in the family home is a potentially stressful process. Many caregivers to people who are disabled suffer depression. In order to investigate the effects of caregiving on all family members we asked:

“Is there a person in your household who needs to be physically cared for due to their age or disability”.

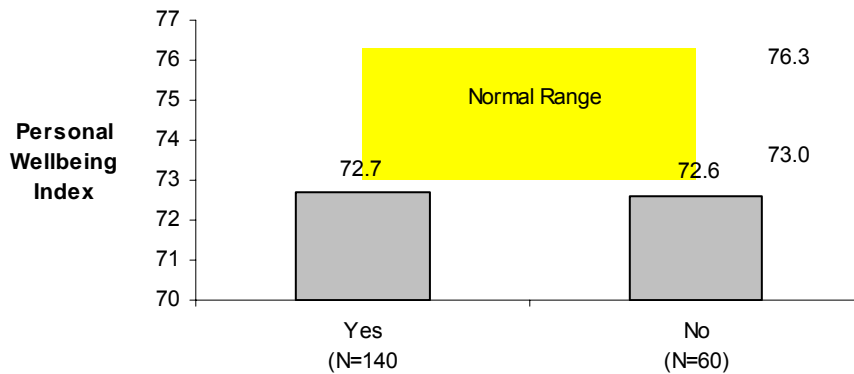


Figure 4.3: **Who Provides the Care** (Personal Wellbeing Index)

It is disturbing to find that the decreased levels of personal wellbeing are experienced equally by both the person who provides most of the care and other adults in the same household.

Implications for Australia:

The provision of home-based caregiving places the adult members of the household under strain. In these conditions more resources are required in order to allow the adult members to achieve normal levels of wellbeing. Such households may well represent a substantial hidden cost to the community. Not only will such adults likely be withdrawn from community involvement but may also be high consumers of medical resources as a result of their generally depressed state of mind.

4.4. **Regional centres support high wellbeing (Report 12.1)**

Geographic locations were defined according to the ARIA index of accessibility and remoteness.

This index interprets Accessibility/Remoteness as the road distance to 201 ‘service centres’ as defined below.

1. **Highly Accessible** (ARIA score 0-1.84) – relatively unrestricted accessibility to a wide range of goods and services and opportunities for social interaction.
2. **Accessible** (ARIA score >1.84-3.51) – some restrictions to accessibility of some goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
3. **Moderately Accessible** (ARIA score >3.51-5.86) – significantly restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
4. **Remote** (ARIA score >5.86-9.08) – very restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
5. **Very Remote** (ARIA score > 9.08-12.0) – very little accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.

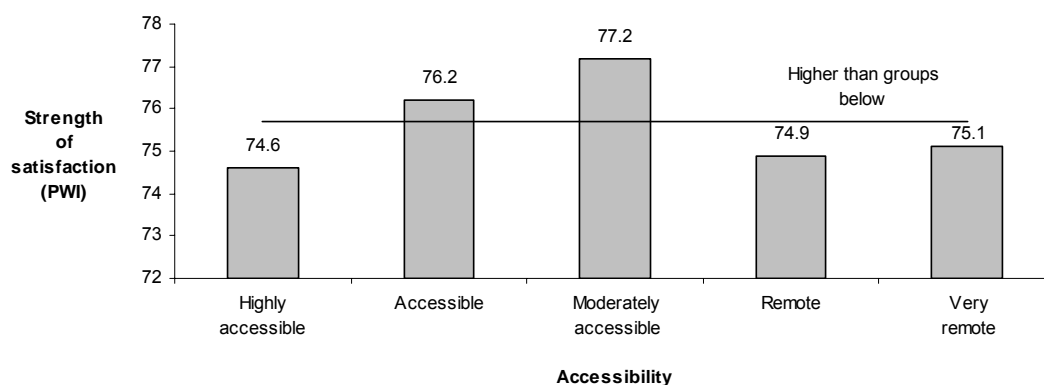


Figure 4.4: **ARIA Location** and Personal Wellbeing

These results suggest that the best place to live in Australia is a rural town. The Accessible and Moderately Accessible groups do not differ from one another, and both are higher than the cities (Highly Accessible) and Remote categories. This 2.6 percentage point advantage is highly significant. This result is not changed by the use of income, age, or gender as covariates.

It is important to note that the 1.0 point difference between the Accessible and Moderately Accessible is not significant. Moreover, this difference is too small to become significant with the addition of more respondents. Thus, in summary, there is no reliable difference in the personal wellbeing of people who live in large regional centres or small rural towns. Both groups, however, have higher personal wellbeing than people who live in large cities.

A trend is also apparent, such that remoteness carries a burden. People who live in remote or very remote regions of Australia have a level of wellbeing no different from people living in the large cities.

Implications for Australia:

In general geographic terms, the people who have the highest levels of personal wellbeing live in regional centres and towns.

4.5. Low wellbeing and social capital (Report 13.1)

All 150 Federal Electorates were compared both in terms of their overall wellbeing (Personal Wellbeing Index) and in terms of the individual domains. The nine lowest Divisions are rank-ordered below (Grayndler the lowest) and a 'x' in the table indicates that the corresponding domain is lower than the national average for that domain.

Table 4.1: Domain Profile of the Lowest Divisions

Division	N	PWI Domains						
		Standard of living	Health	Achieve in life	Personal relationships	How safe you feel	Community connect.	Future security
Grayndler	133	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Parramatta	106		✓	X	X	X	X	X
Reid	124	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sydney	229	X		X	X		X	
Werriwa	115	X	X	X		X	X	X
Rankin	93	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Hasluck	66		X	✓		X	X	X
Perth	84		X			X	X	X
Gorton	108	X		X		X	X	
Total	1,058	6	6	7	5	8	9	7

X denotes that the domain is below the normal range.

The most consistent domain in this table is Connection to Community which is deficient in all nine Divisions. In order to determine whether this consistency would continue into slightly higher level Divisions, the 15 ranks above these nine were also investigated. True to the pattern above, Connection to Community was below the normative range for 11 of the remaining 15 divisions. It appears that low values in the Connection to Community domain are diagnostic of Divisions with very low average personal wellbeing.

These Divisions are also lower on measures of co-operation (survey completion rates and voting rates) and social capital (trust).

Implications for Australia:

Communities with low wellbeing evidence low levels of community co-operation and social capital.

4.6. Credit card debt is a risk-factor for wellbeing (Report 11.0)

We asked:

“Do you have a credit card?” (Yes: 61.7%)

“Can you pay off your credit card fully each month?” (Yes: 77.9%).



Figure 4.5: Percentage of people within each income group who own a credit card they cannot fully pay-off each month

All income groups higher than the lowest (<\$15,000) group are 2 times to 3 times more likely to be living beyond their means (Table A10.9). The personal wellbeing of these groups is contrasted below:

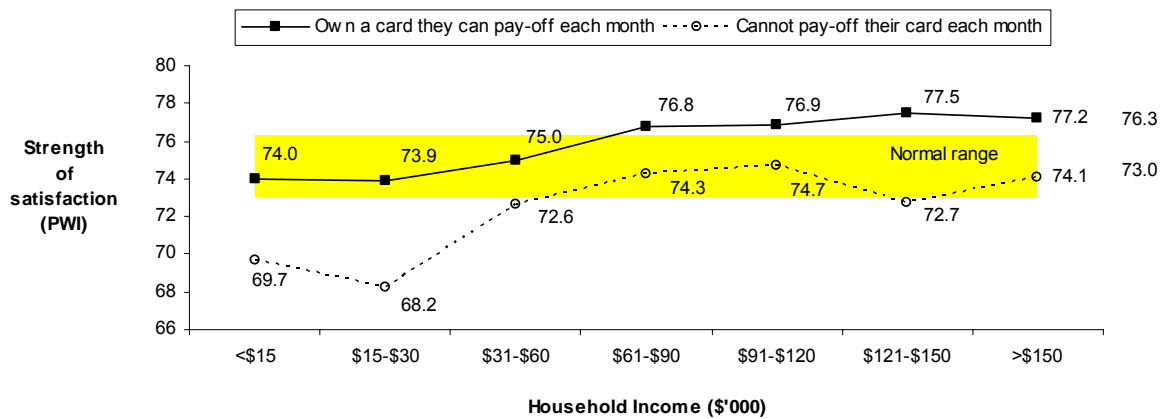


Figure 4.6: People who can, and can not, pay-off their card each month (PWI)

While the wellbeing deficit is largest for the low income groups, it is also substantial in the high income groups. Owning a credit card that cannot be paid-off each month is bad for wellbeing.

Implications for Australia:

The income (interest payments) derived from the supply of credit cards is gained from people whose wellbeing is under threat.

4.7. Poor health exacerbates the stress of separation and divorce (Report 10.0)

We asked:

“Do you have a medical or psychological condition that makes you visit the doctor on a regular basis?”

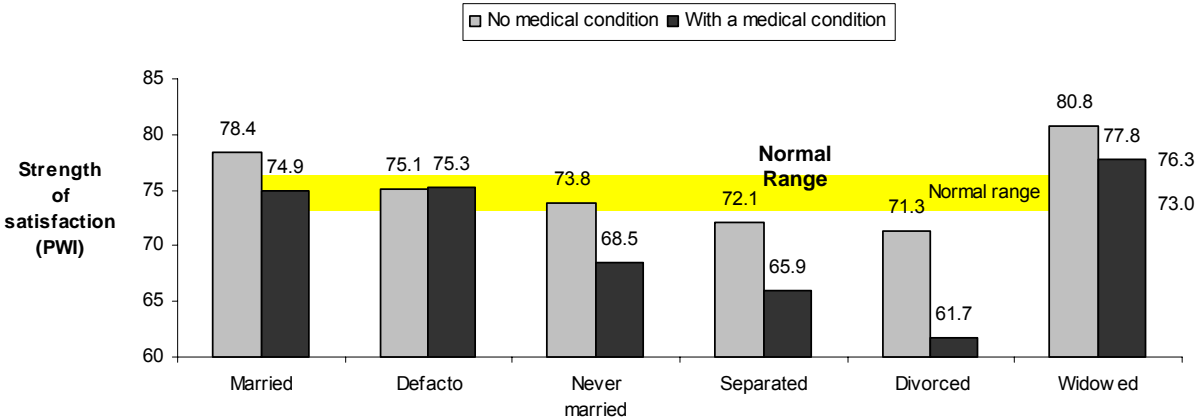


Figure 4.7: Relationship Status x Medical Condition: Personal Wellbeing Index

Within group differences are significant for Married, Never Married, and Divorced. The largest difference is for people who have divorced (9.6 percentage points). It is interesting that the Personal Wellbeing Index for both Separated and Divorced lie above 70 provided that they do not have a health condition. The presence of a health condition takes their wellbeing well below this range.

Implications for Australia:

The negative influence of a medical condition is greatly enhanced in people who are experiencing the additional stress of separation or divorce.

4.8. **Pet ownership does not increase wellbeing (Report 9.0)**

We asked:

“Do you have an animal as a pet?” [If ‘yes’]

“What kind of animal is your pet?” [Dog, Cat, other]

‘How much do you care about your pet?’

To our surprise we found that the effect of pets on subjective wellbeing are very weak. There is no evidence that pets can mitigate the negative influences of living alone, low income, broken relationships, unemployment, becoming elderly, being widowed, etc. On no occasion did the addition of pets to such groups reliably increase personal wellbeing.

There is evidence that insecure people are more likely to own pets. Additionally, pet owners in potentially stressful conditions tend to have lower wellbeing than non-owners:

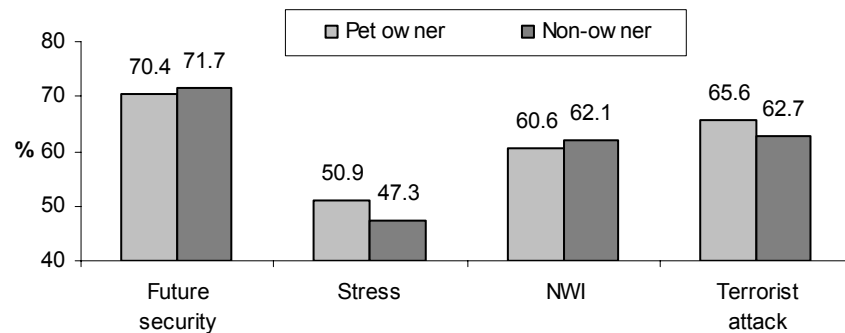


Figure 4.8: **Pets and Wellbeing**

- Owners (N=2295) have lower satisfaction with Future Security ($p=.044$) than non-owners (N=1,579).
- Owners (N=2295) have lower satisfaction with the National Wellbeing Index ($p<.003$) and $5/6$ domains including National Security ($p=.004$) than non-owners (N=1579).
- Owners with low household income (less than \$15,000) (N=259) have a lower Personal Wellbeing Index than non-owners (N=303; $t(560) = 2.904$; $p<.01$). This difference does not apply at higher incomes. In terms of domains this low-income disadvantage to pet owners applies to Future Security ($p<.001$) (but not to safety), standard of living ($p<.01$) and personal relationships ($p<.001$).
- Pet owners (N=2295) feel more stressed with their life in general ($p=.004$) and consider a terrorist attack more likely ($p=.016$) than non-owners (N=1,579).
- Female (but not male) owners (N=1,235) have lower scores than female non-owners (N=735) on Personal Wellbeing Index ($p=.000$), future security ($t(1,919) = 2.483$, $p<.02$) and Standard of living ($p=.000$).

Implications for Australia:

Pet ownership does not appear to confer any benefit to personal wellbeing.

4.9. Feeling predominantly connected via sport is a risk-factor in later life (Report 8.0)

We asked:

“Which of the following makes you feel most connected to Australia?”

- Our natural environment
- Our sense of democracy
- Our life style
- Our sporting culture
- Our multicultural society

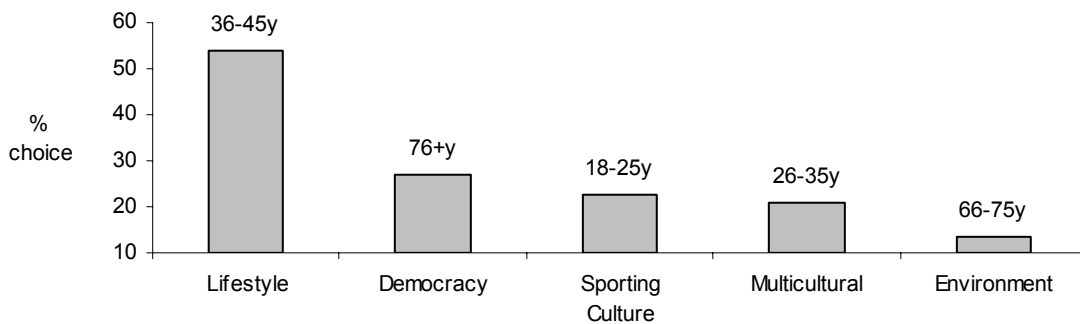


Figure 4.9: **Most Popular Reason for Connection to Australia x Age**

In this Figure, the age-range at the top of each column signifies the most dominant age group for that particular choice. For example, 54% of people chose ‘Lifestyle’ as their primary reason for feeling connected, and this choice was most common within the 36-45 age group.

The wellbeing of these choice groups does not change much with age except for ‘sporting culture’ shown below.

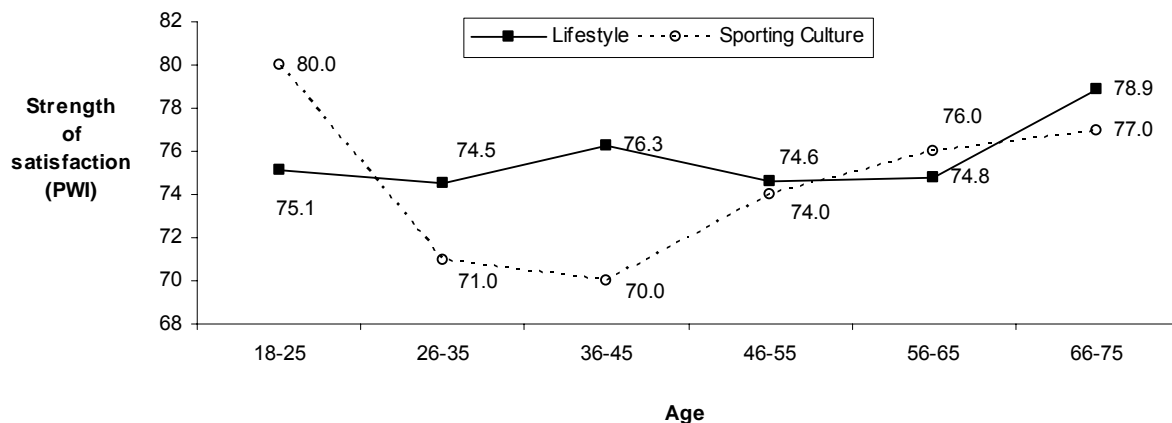


Figure 4.10: **Reason for Connection x Age Interaction: Personal Wellbeing Index**

The Sporting Culture group shows a response pattern that is against the normal age trend. The youngest group has a score (79.5) that is substantially higher than any of the other reason-groups at this age. Wellbeing then falls over the next two decades to reach to lowest group mean at age 36-45.

The explanation for high Personal Wellbeing at 18-25y seems pretty straightforward. These are probably people actively engaged in sport and gaining a great sense of social belonging as a consequence. Many of the people in this age group would be single. For example, Report 7.0 found that only 26% of people in this age group lived with their partner. Thus, social attachment to a peer group would be highly adaptive for their wellbeing.

Why wellbeing falls so markedly for this group over the next two decades is harder to understand. It may be that injury or a loss of fitness has deprived them of active involvement in their chosen sport, and that they miss the social connection that has weakened. It is notable that the majority (69.8%) of all people who nominated Sporting Culture are male and males without partners are a particularly vulnerable group (Figure 3.2).

Implications for Australia:

Feeling connected mainly through the sporting culture is beneficial for people aged 18-25 but not over the next two decades of life.

4.10. Earning money from work is crucial to the wellbeing of males (Report 7.0)

We asked:

“Do you earn money from the work you do?”

There is a significant interaction between earning money, age, and gender.

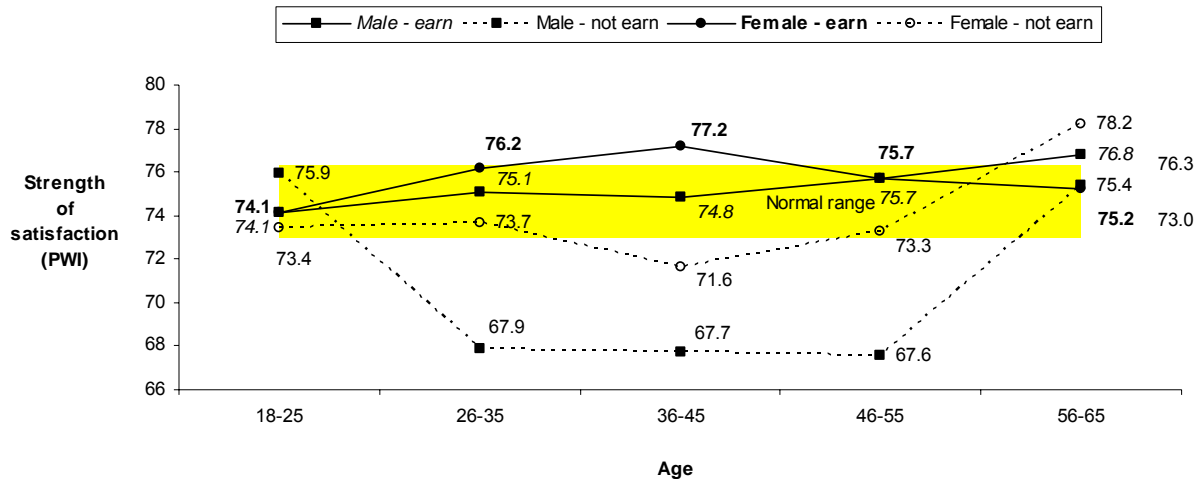


Figure 4.11: **Earning Money x Gender x Age: Personal Wellbeing Index**

The significant interaction is caused by the age group 26-55 years, where the personal wellbeing of non-earning males drops down significantly below their equivalently-aged peers who are working for money. While some slight drop is also evident for females, this is not statistically significant.

It appears that males aged 18-25 years are maintaining their normal levels of wellbeing despite the fact that they are not working for money. This may be because they have optimism about their future life. This may be because they are students or because they simply have faith that things will get better. However, past 26 years this optimism is no longer sufficient to maintain normal levels of wellbeing, and this persists over the normal working life period, up to age 56+ years. At this age many people have retired and, so, it becomes more normative not to work for money. When this occurs, the group of people not-working for money includes those who were previously unemployed together with those who have retired from work, and the group wellbeing goes up. We cannot know for certain from these data whether the wellbeing of the people who were formally not working for money rises after 56 years of age, but we have circumstantial evidence this has happened.

If the wellbeing of the previously non-earning group remained low, then the group variance should increase as they are joined by the retirees. The reverse has occurred. Between 46-55 years and 56-65 years, the mean of the male not-earn group has risen from 67.5 to 75.4, yet the standard deviation has dropped from 15.4 to 12.1. This is consistent with a rise in the personal wellbeing of people who were non-earners when they were 46-55 years old.

Implications for Australia:

Earning money from work between the ages of 26 to 55 is highly relevant to the wellbeing of males and of less relevance to the wellbeing of females.

4.11. War anxiety results in heightened community connection (Report 6.0)

This survey was conducted immediately prior to the Iraq war. We asked:

“What about the general situation concerning Iraq? Does this make you feel anxious?” [If ‘Yes’]

“How strong would you rate your anxiety about the situation in Iraq?”

The level of anxiety people felt failed to change personal wellbeing. However, we found evidence for ‘domain compensation’. That is, when one or more domains decrease, other domains increase to keep wellbeing within the normal range. This is demonstrated below by dividing people into two groups based on levels of anxiety. The ‘low anxiety’ group rated their anxiety as 7 or less, while the ‘high anxiety’ group rated 8 or more.

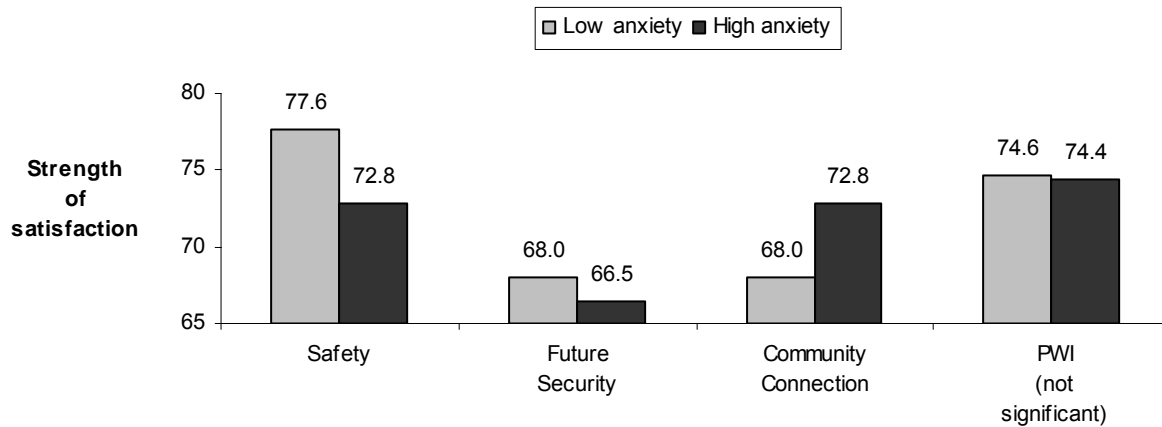


Figure 4.12: High and Low Anxiety: Personal Domains

It is evident that personal safety and future security are lower in the highly anxious group, and this poses a direct threat to personal wellbeing management.

In order to counteract this threat, satisfaction with community connection goes up. This is called ‘Domain Compensation’ and has been described by Best et al., (2000). The rise in satisfaction with Community Connection probably results from increased social interaction fuelled by the anxiety.

The end result is that the negative feelings of anxiety can be compensated by feeling a greater sense of satisfaction with other personal domains. The net result is no change in personal wellbeing.

Implications for Australia:

While war anxiety diminishes satisfaction with security, it enhances the sense of being connected to the community. This ‘domain compensation’ is one of the mechanisms used to achieve a steady state of wellbeing.

4.12. Worry about paying bills is a risk factor for wellbeing (Report 5.0)

We asked:

“Do you ever worry that your household income will not be enough to meet your household expenses and bills?”

As expected, the 38.6% of people who answered ‘Yes’ to this question had a much lower personal wellbeing (70.4 points) than those who answered ‘No’ (76.8 points). More interesting, however, is that the ‘worriers’ were distributed throughout the income categories as shown below:

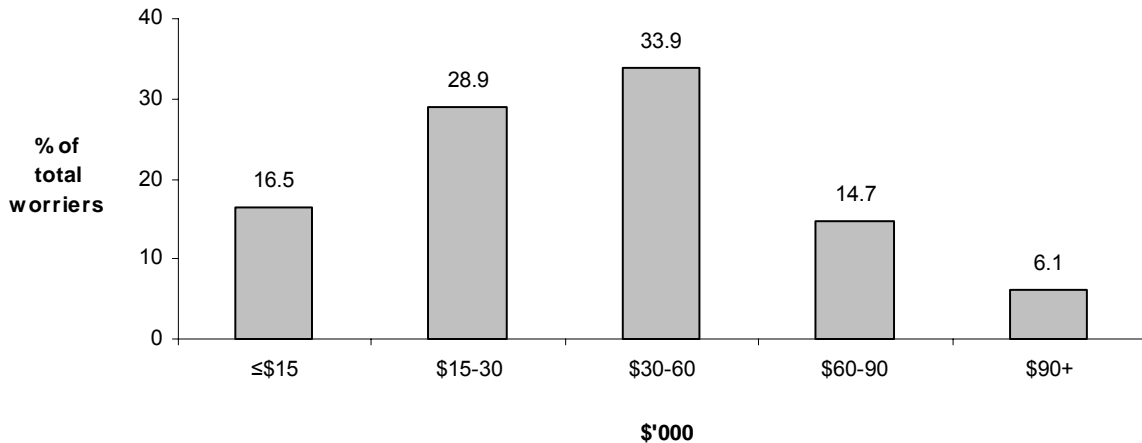


Figure 4.13: Percentage of bill-paying ‘Worriers’ x Income

This seems either to be a demonstration of Parkinson’s Second Law (Expenditure rises to meet income) or an indication that this ‘worry’ question is tapping into a personality characteristic related to anxiety, which exists at all income levels. It is interesting, however, that 62.8% of the worriers are earning between 15-60K. This income range includes the basic wage and 55% of our sample fall within this income range (Table 3.3). These may well be the ‘Aussie Battlers’ who are managing to raise a family and pay a house mortgage on a modest income.

Implications for Australia:

Worrying about having enough money to meet household expenditure is bad for wellbeing at incomes up to \$90,000 per year.

4.13. Leisure quality does not depend on income (Report 4.0)

We asked:

“How satisfied are you with the amount of leisure time you have?”

“How satisfied are you with the way you spend your leisure time?”

Overall we found a stronger relationship between personal wellbeing and satisfaction with the quality of leisure time (‘the way you spend your leisure time’) ($r = .47$) than with the quantity ($r = .31$). The difference between these correlation coefficients is such that whereas quantity of leisure can explain 9.6% of the variation in personal wellbeing, this rises to 22.1% for quality.

This is important because, in the absence of this understanding, it would be easy to misinterpret the quantitative data as shown below:

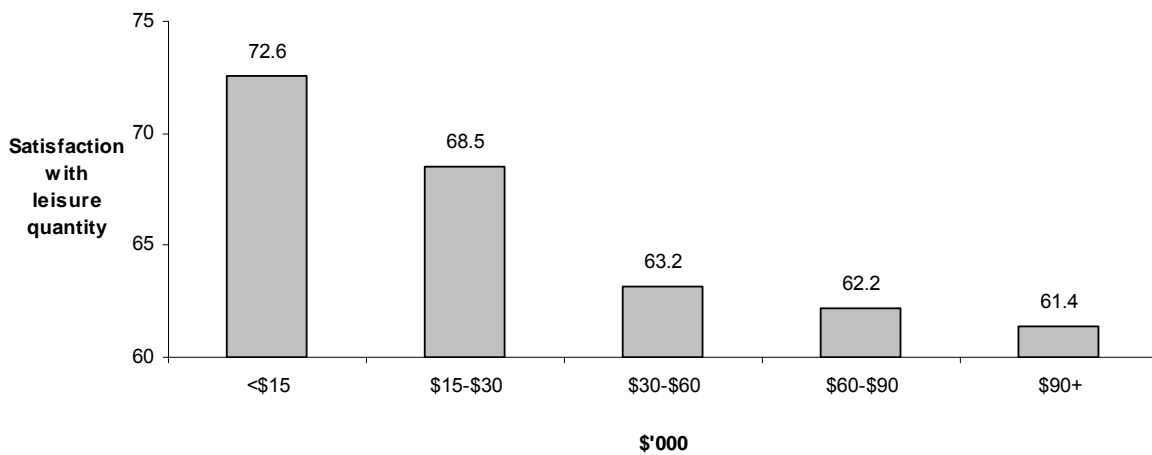


Figure 4.14: Satisfaction with **Leisure Quantity** and Income

This decreasing satisfaction with leisure quantity as income increases is significant. In contrast, satisfaction with low leisure is spent (leisure quality) did not change with income. Thus, it could easily be concluded on the basis of the above Figure that high income households are disadvantaged in terms of their leisure experience. This, however, is not so. It is the quality of leisure, not the quantity, that makes the most substantial contribution to wellbeing, and the quality of leisure does not change with income.

This lack of quality change with income is also notable.

The downside of a high income is less satisfaction with the time that is available for leisure (quantity). However, leisure quality does not show the same since people in high incomes can spend so much more on their leisure pursuits.

Implications for Australia:

The quality of leisure bears little relationship to the money spent in its pursuit. People adapt to most of the material aspects of a leisure experience. Far more important to leisure satisfaction are such income-neutral factors as personal choice of activity and interpersonal sharing of the experience.

4.14. Spiritual and Religious Wellbeing makes a minor contribution to overall wellbeing (Report 3.2)

One notable omission from the seven domains that comprise the Personal Wellbeing Index is a domain covering the area of spiritual or religious satisfaction. The criterion for the admission of an additional domain is that it makes a significant and unique contribution to the explained variance in 'Satisfaction with Life as a Whole' beyond the seven existing domains.

The item concerning satisfaction with spiritual or religious beliefs was included in this survey to determine whether it was able to explain variance in addition to that explained by the Personal Wellbeing Index. The reason this item does not normally form part of the Index is that a significant proportion of people state that they do not have this dimension in their life.

In this survey people were allowed to skip this item if it had no relevance for them. As a consequence, 1,576 people provided a satisfaction response to this S/R item, representing 77% of the total sample. These respondents provided a degree of satisfaction with this item (73.4) very similar to the mean for the Personal Wellbeing Index (75.2).

The first analysis sought to determine the extent to which spiritual/religious could be predicted from the other items making up the Personal and National Index. The spiritual/religious item was found to be most independent of these other items and in a Multiple Regression analysis was found to make no unique contribution to life as a whole. Subsequent studies have confirmed this result.

Implications for Australia:

Within an Australian context, satisfaction with spiritual/religious beliefs would not be a useful addition to the Personal Wellbeing Index.

4.15. Is Life Changing for the Better? (Report 2.2)

We asked:

“Now I am going to ask you whether life is getting worse or getting better.

Again there is a scale from Zero - 10.

Zero means it is getting much worse, 5 means it is not changing, and 10 means it is getting much better.

Would you like me to go over this scale again for you?

*So, on a scale from 0 - 10, how is **your own life** changing?”*

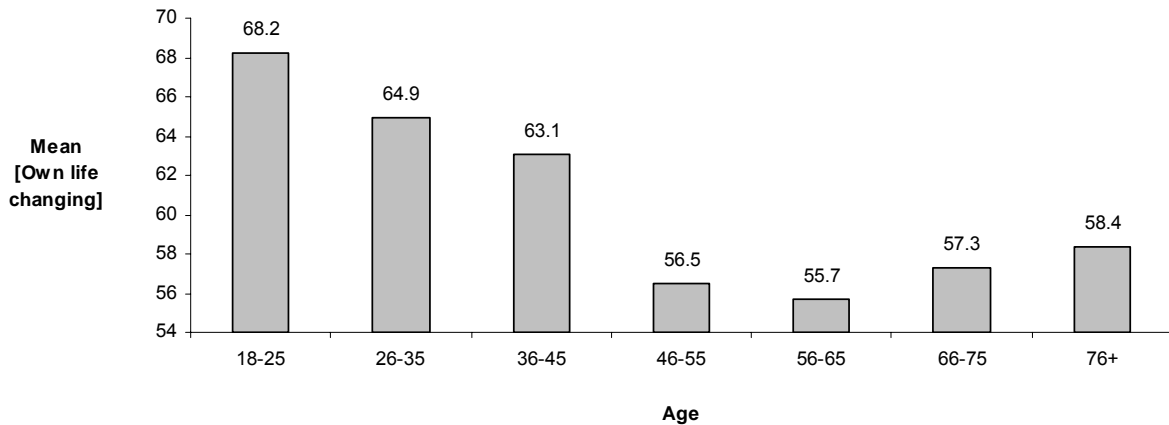


Figure 4.15: Perception of **Life Change** and Age

As might be expected, Australians in 2002 saw their lives as getting better. This was most marked in the youngest group and progressively declined with age up to 46-55 years, at which point it bottomed-out at around 55-58 points.

Implications for Australia:

The sense of life getting better persists even into the oldest age group (76+ years). This reflects the optimistic bias or ‘rosy glow’ that the homeostatic management system imparts to all semi-abstract ideas concerning the self.

4.16. Satisfaction with health persists into old age (Report 1.0)

As part of the Personal Wellbeing Index people are asked:

“How satisfied are you with your health?”

The results by gender and age group are shown below:

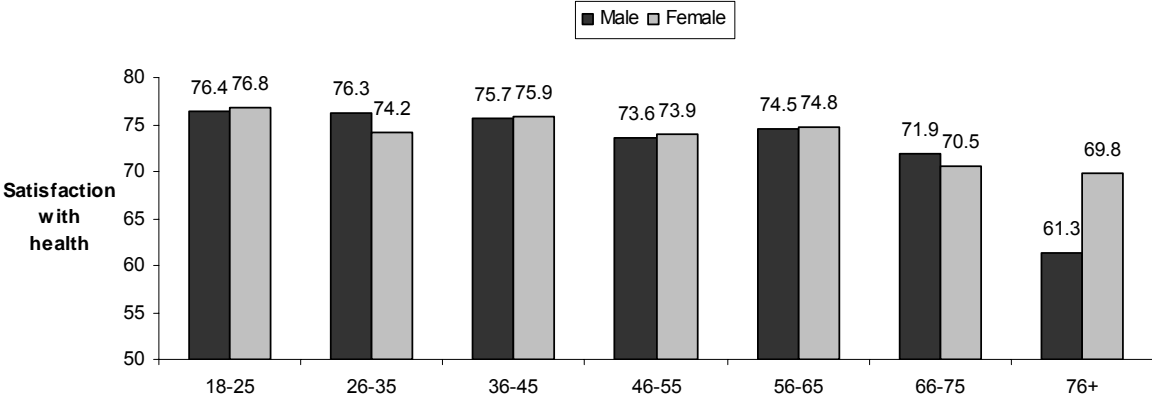


Figure 4.16: Satisfaction with Health by Gender and Age

There are two notable observations from these results as:

1. Even in old age people generally continue to regard themselves as satisfied with their health. This occurs despite the fact that most, if not all of these people, would have substantially reduced physical health from when they were younger, and many will have significant medical conditions and reduced mobility. This shows the power of adaptation and exemplifies the poor association between personal wellbeing and medical health, especially when health deterioration is slow.
2. Males, but not females, experience a marked deterioration in their health satisfaction beyond the age of 75 years. This is consistent with the more rapid development of age-related morbidity in males.

Implications for Australia:

People tend to adapt to the fact that their physical health is deteriorating as they get older. They change their expectations concerning their health such that as they become elderly they still regard themselves as being generally satisfied with their health.