

Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI) – Survey 38.0 June  
2022

# Subjective wellbeing in Australia during the second year of the pandemic



**Report 38**

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# ERRATUM JULY 2022:

Shortly after publishing this report in June 2022, we identified a small data error across mean scores reported for five of the seven PWI domains. We have now amended this in the report and we outline these changes below. The revised data lead to slight adjustments in the mean scores for these five domains and required updates to five graphs that look at average domain scores overtime.

Please note that this issue did not impact the overall PWI score. However, the changes did require updates to the normative ranges reported in Figures on pages 27-29, along with small updates to the Appendices. Below we outline these changes in the Erratum Table.

## Erratum Table: Summary of changes

Domain	Incorrect mean	Correct mean	Relevant page (p.); Figure/Section	Original text	Updated text
<b>MAIN REPORT</b>					
Achieving in life	71.13	72.35	p.28; Figure 3-5 Achieving in life over time	"Average satisfaction with achieving in life was at the lower end of the normative range during the pandemic, which was similar to scores since 2015."	"Average satisfaction with achieving in life was in the middle of the normative range during the pandemic, trending steadily close to this level since 2016."
Personal relationships	77.65	78.19	p. 28; Figure 3-6 Personal relationships over time	"Average satisfaction with personal relationships was within the middle of the normative range during the pandemic, which was a rise from its lowest point on record in 2019."	"Average satisfaction with personal relationships was in the middle of the normative range in 2021, similar to 2020 and a rise from its lowest point on record in 2019."
Personal safety	83.36	83.73	p. 29; Figure 3-7 Personal safety over time	"Average satisfaction with personal safety was above the normative range during the pandemic and has shown a rising pattern across the past 21 years."	No change required.
Community connectedness	70.39	70.99	p. 29; Figure 3-8 Community connectedness over time	"Average satisfaction with community connectedness fell within the middle of the normative range during the pandemic and was similar to scores over the last 5 years."	"Average satisfaction with community connectedness was in the top half of the normative range in 2021, rising slightly during the pandemic from 2019 levels."
Future security	70.31	71.96	p. 30; Figure 3-9 Future security over time  p. 11; Executive summary	"Average satisfaction with future security was at the upper-middle normative range during the pandemic, which represented an increase from 2019 levels."	"Average satisfaction with future security in 2021 reached the highest level since 2002, at the top of the normative range."  <b>Added text:</b> "In 2021, future security reached the highest level since 2002 which is at the top of the normative range."
<b>APPENDICES</b>					
All domains			p. 7; Appendix Table 4-1	Table 4-1 Normative ranges calculated from aggregated survey mean scores (2002-2021)	Table 4-1 Normative ranges calculated from aggregated survey mean scores (2002-2021)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Australian Centre on Quality of Life at Deakin University, in partnership with Australian Unity, has been monitoring the Subjective Wellbeing (SWB<sup>1</sup>) of Australians aged 18 to 90+ years for the past 21 years. This monitoring has been achieved through 38 national surveys and the results recorded in a series of reports which are available for download from: <http://www.acqol.com.au/publications>. In addition to charting the natural history of SWB, the key associations of SWB have also been measured.

In the latest 2021 survey, data collection was conducted between 20 May and 17 June 2021. It is notable that at the start of this data collection phase there was no identified community transmission of COVID-19 in Australia, and a number of income support measures provided by the Australian Government had ended (e.g. JobKeeper wage subsidy and some social security measures) (Klapdor & Lotric, 2022). However, five days after data collection commenced, COVID-19 was reported in the community in Victoria, triggering a lockdown, lasting throughout the remainder of the data collection period.

This context is important when comparing results obtained during this second year of the pandemic (2021) with those during the first year (2020). During the earlier data collection period, Australia was experiencing its first COVID-19 wave and the Australian Government COVID-19 income support measures had recently been introduced. Across both data collection periods during the pandemic, Australia's international border was closed to almost all non-Australian citizens (Kapon et al., 2021), and in world-comparative terms (Department of Health, 2021), the country had been relatively protected from COVID-19 deaths.

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<sup>1</sup> Subjective Wellbeing was measured using two methods, both of which measure satisfaction on a 0 to 10 choice scale. The first is a single item (GLS: Global Life Satisfaction): 'How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?' The second is the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), which averages the level of satisfaction across seven life domains – standard of living, health, achieving in life, relationships, safety, community connectedness, and future security (International Wellbeing Group [IWG], 2013).

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## RESULTS OVERVIEW

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### Subjective wellbeing in Australia during the pandemic and pre-pandemic times

**Global Life Satisfaction** fell below the normative range in 2021 for only the second time in the last 21 years, the first time being in 2019, when it reached its lowest point. Scores on this measure have been declining since 2010 and all five of the lowest values occurred over the past five years.

**Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)** remained within the normative range during the pandemic. However, within the 7 PWI domains, average satisfaction fell outside the normative range for some domains. Notably, satisfaction with health fell below the normative range in 2021 for the first time on record; this was a sharp fall from high levels at the top of the normative range in 2020, but was similar to the lower levels recorded in 2019. Satisfaction with personal safety, on the other hand, rose above the normative range in 2021 and 2020, which followed its rising pattern over the past 21 years. In 2021, future security reached the highest level since 2002 which is at the top of the normative range. There also appeared to be some key differences for satisfaction with standard of living during the pandemic, with scores increasing from 2019, to above the normative range in 2020, and the top of the normative range in 2021.

**Global National Wellbeing** satisfaction was within the middle of the normative range during the pandemic. Scores on this measure rose during the pandemic from their lowest point in 2019.

**National Wellbeing Index (NWI)** remained at the upper end of the normative range in 2021, close to 2020's highest score on record. This pattern was reflected in the NWI domains, which were mostly above or at the upper end of the normative range during the pandemic.

### Notable differences in PWI scores across socio-demographic groups during the pandemic, compared to pre-pandemic times (i.e. 2019)

#### Gross household income

- People with incomes of <\$30k, had notably higher PWI scores in both 2020 and 2021, compared to 2019.
- Similarly, for those with incomes of \$31k to 60k, their higher PWI scores occurred only in 2020.

#### Marital status

- People who were never married or widowed in 2020, had notably higher PWI scores compared to 2019, while 2021 PWI for these groups fell to levels similar to 2019.

#### Household composition

- People in households with children only, had notably higher PWI scores in 2020 and 2021, compared to 2019.
- Similarly, those who lived alone had notably higher PWI scores in 2020, compared to 2019.

#### Full time occupation

- People who were unemployed in 2020, had a markedly higher PWI scores than in 2019, while in 2021 PWI for this group fell to low levels, similar to 2019.

- 
- Those who were in full time retirement in 2020 and 2021 had notably higher PWI scores compared to 2019.

#### **States**

- In the Australian Capital Territory, PWI scores were higher both in 2020 and 2021, than in 2019.
- In South Australia, PWI scores were higher in 2020 than in 2021 and 2019.
- In Tasmania, PWI scores were higher in 2021, than in 2019.

#### **Life events**

- People who experienced a sad event had lower PWI scores in both 2019 and 2021 than in 2020.

### **Life areas and subjective wellbeing during the pandemic and pre-pandemic**

The relationship of **five key life areas** with subjective wellbeing was examined during the pandemic and pre-pandemic (if available). The life areas included: ***change in income during the pandemic, mental distress (depression, anxiety and stress), resilience, social connectedness, and a sense of achieving***. Even though Victoria was in lockdown during most of the 2021 data collection period, average life area scores were similar to national levels. We then studied each life area by age and household composition groups, given that COVID-19 has been reported to impact these groups differentially.

#### **Life areas by age and household composition in 2021**

- Income loss and high levels of mental distress were more common in the youngest age groups (i.e. <35 years of age), and those living with other non-family members, with parents only, or alone.
- These same groups had low levels of resilience, social connectedness, and sense of achieving.

#### **Change in household income since the start of the pandemic (2020 and 2021)**

- In 2021, people who experienced a decrease in income had meaningfully lower PWI scores across four domains when compared to those without income change.
- The relationship between income decrease and PWI was different in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, PWI scores were similar between those without income change and those with a decrease in income. However, in 2021, those who lost income had meaningfully lower PWI scores compared to those with no change in income.

#### **Mental distress (2013, 2020 and 2021)**

- Average scores on anxiety and stress (depression not asked in 2020) were similar across both years of the pandemic. However, scores on all three measures of mental distress were about 10 points higher (i.e. worse) during the pandemic, compared to 2013 data.
- In 2021, PWI and all domain scores were markedly lower in those with 'high levels' on all three mental distress measures, compared to 'others' (i.e. without high mental distress).
- Those with high levels of stress had higher PWI scores in 2020 compared to 2021. This pattern was also seen for high levels of anxiety, where PWI scores were higher in 2020 compared to 2021.

#### **Social connectedness (2019, 2020 and 2021)**

- Social connectedness scores were highest in 2019 and lowest in 2020.

- 
- For those with high levels of social connectedness in 2021, PWI and all domain scores were meaningfully higher, compared to 'others' (i.e. without high social connectedness).
  - In 2019 and 2021, PWI scores for 'others' were low, but in 2020 they were slightly higher.

#### **Resilience (2021)**

- For those with high levels of resilience, PWI and all domain scores were meaningfully higher compared to 'others' (i.e. without high resilience).

#### **Sense of Achieving Index (2021)**

- A single index with acceptable scale reliability was established using four items that assess a sense of achieving in life.
- People with high Sense of Achieving Index scores also had higher scores on the PWI and all domains compared to 'others' (i.e without high Sense of Achieving Index scores).

#### **The most important life aspects for subjective wellbeing in 2021**

- When all five life areas were combined with key demographics, a sense of achieving, social connectedness and depression were most strongly related to participant PWI scores in 2021.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI) is a barometer of Australians' subjective wellbeing (SWB). It measures both SWB using the Personal Wellbeing Index (International Wellbeing Group, 2013), and the National Wellbeing Index (NWI: Cummins, Eckersley, Pallant, Van Vugt, & Misajon, 2003). The PWI determines the average level of satisfaction across seven domains of personal life – standard of living, health, achieving in life, personal relationships, safety, community connectedness, and future security. The NWI determines the average satisfaction with six domains of national life – the economy, the natural environment, social conditions, government, business, and national security.

Thirty-eight cross-sectional surveys of the Australian adult population have been conducted between April 2001 and June 2021 (Cummins, Mead, & The Australian Unity-Deakin University Wellbeing Research Partnership\*, 2021). The same core questions, forming the PWI and the NWI, were asked in each survey. In addition, two items ask about 'Satisfaction with Life as a Whole' (Global Life Satisfaction: GLS) and 'Satisfaction with Life in Australia' (Global National Wellbeing: GNW).

Results from each of these scales are reported in a standardised form of 'percentage points' (pp) in which the results from the 0-10 response scales are converted into a 0-100 format. This pp format allows a simple comparison between different measures and across time.

Each survey also includes a small number of additional items that change from one survey to the next. These explore specific issues of interest, either personal or national. Such questions allow further exploration and understanding of theoretical frameworks supporting the wellbeing construct.

Our 2021 Report has a focus on the second year of the pandemic. Of note, the state of Victoria was in lockdown for most of the data collection period. We compare these 2021 data to data collected in the first year of the pandemic (2020), and to pre-pandemic surveys.

To further explore this area of interest, we examined the additional questions in the 2021 Survey that focused on five key areas of life and their relationship to subjective wellbeing during the second year of the pandemic. This included changes in household income since the start of the pandemic, as well as levels of mental distress (i.e. stress, anxiety and depression), resilience, social connectedness and questions on people's sense of achieving.

## 1.1.1.1 PART 1: OVERVIEW OF SURVEY 38 SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING RESULTS

- Summary data on the in SWB across 36<sup>2</sup> national surveys, as well as PWI results broken down by socio-demographic factors in 2021, 2020 and 2019.

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<sup>2</sup> Issues with data fidelity from surveys 1 and 2 and unavailability of their raw data for validity checks resulted in their exclusion from presentation in this report.

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## 1.1.1.2 PART 2: QUESTIONS RELATED TO LIFE AREAS AND PWI

Table 1-1 Part 2 research questions

<b>Topic 1: Change in household income and subjective wellbeing</b>	
RQ1	Was the change in household income related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?
RQ2	Was the relationship between decreased income and PWI different in 2020 and 2021?
<b>Topic 2: Mental distress and subjective wellbeing</b>	
RQ3	Was mental distress related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?
RQ4	Was the relationship between mental distress and PWI different across 2021, 2020 and 2013?
<b>Topic 3: Social connectedness and subjective wellbeing</b>	
RQ5	Was social connectedness related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?
RQ6	Was the relationship between social connectedness and PWI different in 2021, 2020 and 2019?
<b>Topic 4: Resilience and subjective wellbeing</b>	
RQ7	Was resilience related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?
<b>Topic 5: Sense of achieving and subjective wellbeing</b>	
RQ8	Is a sense of achieving related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?
<b>Topic 6: All aspects of life examined and subjective wellbeing</b>	
RQ9	Was there an aspect of life that was more strongly associated with PWI levels in 2021?

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## 2 METHODS

### 2.1 Participants

Data for the 38th Australian Unity Wellbeing Index Survey was from a geographically representative national sample, based on population distribution. The sample comprised 2,000 Australians aged 18 or over and fluent in English, who accepted an invitation to respond to the survey. Data collection was carried out by [I-view](#), a social research data collection agency. All participants were contacted via randomly generated mobile numbers, obtained by attaching randomly generated digits to valid mobile prefixes. Participant matching within states and territories also took place at the area level (e.g. metro, regional and remote) according to the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics population distributions. Phone recruitment took place until a total of 2000 participants had taken part in the study. Interviews were held between 20 May and 17 June 2021.

### 2.2 Data preparation

Average levels of satisfaction with the PWI and the NWI were calculated as described in the Personal Wellbeing Index Manual (International Wellbeing Group, 2013). Data cleaning revealed that 46 participants answered consistently (i.e. the same response) across all domains of the PWI and the NWI. Their responses were removed from the sample prior to statistical analysis. Such responses are likely due to misunderstanding or false reporting. Additionally, PWI and NWI scores are calculated only for those participants who responded to all domains. The proportion of participants excluded from the main analyses due to missing domain responses was 2.6% ( $N=52$ ) and 5.8% (114) for the PWI and NWI, respectively.

### 2.3 Measures

Demographic items asked in this and past surveys were: gender, age, marital status, household composition, occupation (full time, part time and seeking work), and household income.

Geographic region and Socio-economic Indexes of Areas were calculated based on the postcodes.

Demographic items specific to the current survey were: Indigenous origin, number of children per household, and caregiving status.

#### 2.3.1 Standard survey questions

##### 2.3.1.1 Personal and National Wellbeing Indices

Subjective Wellbeing was measured using the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI; International Wellbeing Group, 2013). The PWI score represents the mean of the seven domains of satisfaction with: standard of living, health, achieving in life, personal relationships, safety, community connectedness, and future security.



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Similarly, the NWI score represents the mean of the six national domains of satisfaction with: economic situation, state of natural environment, state of social conditions, government, business, and national security.

The responses for both PWI and NWI are recorded on a unipolar, numerical scale, ranging from 0 (no satisfaction at all) and 10 (completely satisfied).

### 2.3.1.2 Gender

Unlike previous surveys where the interviewer coded participant gender as either male or female (Survey 1-36), participants were asked *"How would you describe your gender?"*. Respondents were given a choice of four categories: 1) Male; 2) Female; 3) Non-binary/Gender diverse; and, 4) Other. For the purpose of this report, researchers coded the last two categories as 'other'.

### 2.3.1.3 Indigenous origin

Participants were asked to respond to the question: "Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Origin?" with either yes, no or declined to answer.

### 2.3.1.4 Age

Participants were asked *"Can you tell me your age?"* as an open-ended question and, as with previous surveys, responses were grouped into six categories (18-25, 26-35, 46-55, 56-65, 66-75, and 76+ years of age).

### 2.3.1.5 Marital status

Participants were asked: *"Which of the following categories best describes your relationship status?"*, with six response options (never married, de facto/living together, married, separated, divorced, or widowed).

### 2.3.1.6 Household composition

Participants were asked to indicate who lives with them in their household, and were given a list of five response options (no one, you live by yourself, you live with your partner, with one or more children, with one or both of your parents, or with one or more adults who are neither your partner nor parent). Participants could select multiple options for all except the first. For the purpose of this report, the household composition was structured into five categories: alone, with partner only, with partner and children, with children only, with parents, and with others only.

### 2.3.1.7 Number of children

Participants were asked *"How many children under 18 years old living in your house are you currently primary caregiver for?"* and were given an open-ended response option.

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### 2.3.1.8 Occupation

Occupation was measured using three questions, assessing full time and part time occupations independently, as well as a separate question about work seeking behaviour.

Full time occupations were assessed by asking: *“Please tell me which of the following full time occupational categories best applies to you at the present time. Are you engaged in—?”*. The response options were: full time paid employment, full time retirement, full time volunteer, full time home or family duties, full time study, or none of these.

Part time occupations were assessed by asking: *“Please tell me whether any of the following part time occupational categories applies to you”*, The response options were: semi-retirement, part time paid employment, casual employment, part time volunteer, part time study, unemployed or none of these. For the purpose of this report, only those who responded to a single part time or casual category were included.

Finally, all participants were asked: *“Are you currently looking for paid work?”* and were given the response options of yes, no or declined to answer.

### 2.3.1.9 Household income

Household income was examined using two questions. First, participants were asked a standard question: *“Thinking now about your household’s total income over the past year, what was your total household income before tax?”*. Participants were presented with a range of income categories: <\$15,000, \$15,000-\$30,000, \$31,000-\$60,000, \$61,000-\$100,000, \$100,000-\$150,000, \$151,000-\$250,000, \$251,000-\$500,000, >\$500,000.

Given the small number of people in response options at either end of the scale, <\$15,000 was collapsed with the \$15,000-\$30,000 category, while >\$500,000 was collapsed with the \$251-\$500,000 category.

### 2.3.1.10 Geographic region

Postcode was recorded for each participant and their geographic location was coded into a 5-category variable by merging the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) derived geographic region structure variable (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018) with the participants’ postcodes. Geographic regions assigned by the ABS are: 1) Major Cities, 2) Inner Regional, 3) Outer Regional, 4) Remote and 5) Very Remote. Given the small sample representation from the latter two areas, these were grouped into a combined category named ‘Remote’, thereby creating 4 geographic categories.

### 2.3.1.11 Socio-economic indexes for areas (SEIFA)

The SEIFA score was calculated based on each participant’s postcode using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) data, collected as part of the 2016 Census of Population and Housing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This is referred to the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD). The SEIFA-IRSAD has a national mean 1000 (SD 100); where higher scores represent less disadvantage.

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### 2.3.1.12 Follow up for longitudinal study

At the end of each survey, participants were asked if they wanted to join a longitudinal follow-up survey, which is also conducted annually. The question was worded: “*We are going to carry out another survey like this in about 12 months. But this time it will be by email. Would you be willing to help us again if we email a copy to you at that time?*” and participants were asked to respond either yes or no.

### 2.3.1.13 Life events

The influence of recent life events was examined with two branching questions. Participants were first asked: “*Has anything happened to you recently causing you to feel happier or sadder than normal?*”. Participants were provided four response options: No; Yes, happier; Yes, sadder; Yes, happier and sadder. Those who responded ‘yes, happier’ or ‘yes, sadder’ were asked to rate: “*On a scale from zero (Very weak) to 10 (Very strong), how strongly do you feel this influence on you now?*”.

## 2.3.2 Additional survey items

### 2.3.2.1 Change in income

After the standard household income question, participants were also asked: “*Has your household income increased or decreased since March last year, when the COVID virus started in Australia?*” and were given three response options: increased, decreased, and did not change.

### 2.3.2.2 Sense of achieving

Participants were asked to rate their agreement with four statements concerning their sense of achieving on a scale from zero (Do not agree at all) to 10 (Completely agree). The statements included: “*I am satisfied with how I spend my time*”, “*The things that I do are worthwhile*”, “*My life is under my control*” and “*I feel a sense of purpose in my life*”.

### 2.3.2.3 Mental distress and social connectedness

Participants were asked to respond to four questions about how they feel and rate them on a scale from zero (Not at all) to 10 (Extremely). The questions were: “*How anxious do you feel?*”, “*How stressed do you feel?*”, “*How depressed do you feel?*” and “*How connected do you feel to others?*”.

### 2.3.2.4 Resilience

A question was also asked about personal resilience. Participants were asked to rate on a zero (Not at all) to 10 (Extremely) scale: “*How quickly do you normally recover when something goes wrong?*”.

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### 2.3.2.5 COVID-19

Participants were asked to rate their response on a zero (Not at all) to 10 (Extremely) scale in relation to the questions: “How much have the COVID-19 related changes made your life worse?” and “How much have the COVID-19 related changes made your life better?”.

The 2021 Survey also asked whether participants had been tested for COVID-19 in the past with the following response options: yes, no or multiple times. Those who responded yes, were also asked if they had the virus, to which they could responded as yes, no or multiple times.

### 2.3.2.6 Caregiving status

Caregiving status was assessed with branching questions. First, participants were asked to respond to a question: “Do you provide any unpaid physical or mental care for a member of your family/household?”, with yes or no as response options. Those who responded yes, were then asked to select from a list of people who are being cared for: parent or parent-in-law, partner or spouse, child (including adult son or daughter), sibling, grandparent or other. In addition, they were asked “Why do they require care?”, and were offered response options of: Physical or intellectual disability, sensory impairment (loss of hearing or eyesight), physical illness, mental illness, dementia, ageing and other.

## 2.4 Standardisation and presentation of results

### 2.4.1 Percentage point and standardised differences

All results from measurement scales have been converted to a percentage of scale maximum (%SM) score, which standardises any scale to a 0-100 percentage points. Thus, throughout the report wellbeing levels will be referred to in terms of percentage points (pp).

In Part 1 of the Results, in addition to pp differences, we also report standardised percentage point (std pp) differences<sup>3</sup> for the PWI in the Appendices. We flag notable differences of 0.30 std pp or greater by a red star (\*). This threshold is often used at the population level for meaningful differences. For the PWI, this difference is about 4 raw pp, which will be indicated in the charts as “Difference >4pp”. In Part 2 of the Results, we also report pp differences for the PWI and its domains in the Report, with std pp differences reported in the Appendices.

### 2.4.2 Normative ranges

Normative ranges indicate the range within which a score is considered normal for the population under study. These ranges have been calculated for the PWI, NWI, and each of their respective

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<sup>3</sup> Standardised scores were calculated by converting PWI scores to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Differences in standardised scores have consistent interpretation across disciplines, with  $\geq 0.20$ ,  $\geq 0.50$  and  $\geq 0.80$  standard deviations (SD) interpreted as small, medium and large differences respectively (Cohen, 1992).

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domains. This was done by combining all surveys to date, with the exception of Surveys 1 and 2, due to the unreliability of the data in these two surveys.

The normative ranges are depicted by the yellow areas on figures. This area shows that 95% of average scores fall within the normative range overtime. The table with normative ranges for all SWB measures is shown in the Appendix section 4.1.

## 2.5 Data Analyses

All analyses were conducted using Stata IC version 16 (StataCorp, 2019).

### 2.5.1 Part 1 analyses

Part 1 is descriptive.

First, we examine the 2021 Survey response rates and sample characteristics in relation to population norms. This allows us to consider the generalisability of the results to the Australian population.

Second, we present average scores for the PWI, NWI and their respective domains 2021, relative to normative ranges and over time. This is done visually, with each graph showing the latest 2021 average score (blue circle), as well as the highest (green circle) and lowest average scores (red circle), over time.

Third, we examined whether average PWI scores differed in 2021, compared to 2020 (Khor et al., 2020), and to 2019 (Khor et al., 2019). Of particular interest, was whether PWI scores varied within the following demographic categories: gender, age, marital status, household composition, gross household income, income loss, full time and part time occupation, geographic location (state and geographic region), and life events. To examine this, average PWI scores for 2021 were examined for each of these demographics in relation to:

- 1) the normative range;
- 2) differences between demographic groups; and,
- 3) differences within demographic groups compared to the two previous years (i.e. 2019 pre-pandemic; 2020 first year of the pandemic)).

We flag notable differences of 4 pp (i.e. a meaningful change in average PWI scores) or greater.

Consistent with previous years, we also ran additional reliability analyses for all SWB variables (see Appendix sections 4.3-4.5 for details).

### 2.5.2 Part 2 analyses

Part 2 examines the additional 2021 Survey questions. These questions focused on five key areas of life and their relationship to subjective wellbeing during the pandemic. They included change in household income (1 item), mental distress (i.e. stress, depression and anxiety) (3 items), resilience (1 item), social connectedness (1 item) and a sense of achieving (4 items).

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For each of the five areas of life we examined:

- 1) Basic descriptive statistics. For 2021, this included the response distributions nationally and for the state of Victoria, given that it was the only state in lockdown during data collection. For all continuous variables on a 0-11-point scale (all except income change), we created two groups to ease interpretation. This included those equal of above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile (i.e. 'high levels') on each measure, compared to the rest of the sample (i.e. 'other');
- 2) Differences in response distributions during the pandemic (2020 vs 2021), and where available, prior to the pandemic (i.e. mental distress in 2013 and social connectedness in 2019);
- 3) Differences in response distributions across age groups and household composition;
- 4) Relationships with PWI and domains scores in 2021;
- 5) Whether PWI differed over time (where data were available).
- 6) In a multivariable model that included key demographics, which life area was most strongly related to the PWI in 2021.

For steps 4-6, meaningful relationships were tested statistically<sup>4</sup> and noted in text and/or visually on the relevant figures and tables.

In addition, we explored the four new items measuring a sense of achieving, to see if participant responses followed a fixed pattern (i.e. a factor analysis) and could be used as an index to measure the sense of achieving construct.

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<sup>4</sup>Statistical testing to define meaningful associations with PWI and its domains involved simple linear regression models where the three areas of life were examined as 'predictors' of the PWI or the domain scores ('outcomes'). Meaningful associations has to meet two criteria: 1) involve a difference between groups of at least 0.3 SD pp and be statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. When we compared average scores across domains, we also ran Bonferroni corrections to ensure we dealt with multi tests.

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## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Part 1 - Summary of 2021 Survey results: response rates, sample characteristics and PWI scores by demographic factors

#### 3.1.1 Response rates

After removal of a small number of cases (as noted in section 2.2), a total of 1,969 (98%) participants were included in the 2021 Survey analytic sample. The response rate in 2021 was 30%, this represents the number of participants who agreed to take part in response to the invitational phone call. This was 6% lower than previous years (see Table 3-1). The 2021 interview length was 12.4 minutes in length, which was slightly shorter than in 2020, but slightly longer than 2019.

*Table 3-1 Recruitment and interview data*

	2019	2020	2021
Agreed to take part in response to invitation call, %	36	35	30
Interview length, minutes	10.5	14.1	12.4
Agreed to be followed up longitudinally, %	68.1	72.7	69.5

#### 3.1.2 Sample characteristics

A summary of the sample characteristics for the 2021 Survey are presented in Table 3-1. In 2021, the average participant was 47 years of age (SD: 18; Range: 18 to 94 years), with almost equal distribution of males and females in the sample. Participants were most commonly married (46%), or unpartnered (25%). Households mainly comprised a partner (34%) or partner and children (30%), and most were from major cities (70%). Very few participants were unemployed (3.2%).

Detailed frequencies and proportions are presented in the Appendix section 4.2 for 2019, 2020, 2021 and the aggregated 2002-2018 sample, and where available, details on Australian population norms for each of the sample characteristics.

Table 3-2 Summary of sample characteristics for 2021

Sample Characteristics	% (N = 1,955) <sup>a</sup>
Male	49.0
Age group (years)	
18-25	15.4
26-35	17.1
36-45	15.9
46-55	16.3
56-65	16.2
66-75	13.5
76+	5.7
Marital Status	
Married	46.3
De facto	13.7
Never married	25.4
Separated but not divorced	3.4
Divorced	7.2
Widowed	3.9
Household Composition	
Alone	16.7
Partner	32.2
Children	7.4
Partner and children	26.8
Parents	8.0
Others	8.9
Full time occupation	
Employed	44.6
Retired	18.3
Volunteer	0.8
Home duties	4.6
Student	8.3
Unemployed	2.4
Part time occupation	
Semi-retired	1.8
Employed	11.3
Casual worker	9.8
Volunteer	7.6
Student	3.2
State	
ACT	2.5
NSW	31.1
NT	0.9
QLD	17.9
SA	6.2
TAS	1.9
VIC	29.7
WA	9.7
Gross household income	
<\$30k	16.0
\$31k-\$60k	18.9
\$61k-\$100k	20.1
\$101k-\$150k	18.9
\$151k-\$250k	18.1
>\$251k	7.9

<sup>a</sup> N's varied slightly across sample characteristics in 2021 and are listed in Appendix Table 4.3.



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### 3.1.2.1 Survey data in 2021 vs. previous year

Sample characteristics in 2021 were similar to 2019 and 2020. They were also largely comparable to the aggregated survey data over the years (i.e. 2002-2018). One notable change is that the age of participants taking part in surveys has decreased, with more young adults (<35) included in recent years. This may reflect a sampling methodology change to from landline to mobile phones in 2018.

In addition, the proportion of people identifying as being in a defacto relationship has increased, while those identifying as married has decreased, which may reflect a change in this trend in society. Household incomes have also risen over the last 21 years, with recent surveys showing more participants in the top income groups, and fewer earning \$60k or less.

### 3.1.2.2 Survey data compared to population norms

Comparing the 2021 sample to the population norms, the sample is relatively reflective of the Australian population at large. However, there were three notable differences with population norms and the survey data. Unemployment was lower in our samples (i.e. 3.2% vs. 4.5%). Our sample was slightly less disadvantaged based on the SEIFA neighbourhood score compared to the national average (i.e. 1016 (SD 75) vs 1000 (SD 100) respectively). Our sample also had considerably more people who were in a defacto relationship (14%) and slightly less people who were married (46%), compared to population norms. We were unable to compare household income groups and occupation status to population norms due to measurement differences.

## 3.1.3 Personal and national wellbeing over time

This section shows the mean scores for subjective wellbeing over time: Global Life Satisfaction (GLS), Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) and each of its domains. Similarly, it shows the mean scores for the measures of NWB over time: Global National Wellbeing (GNW), National Wellbeing Index (NWI) and each of its domain. Questions asked:

*Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances...*

1. *How satisfied are you with your life as a whole? (Global Life Satisfaction)*
2. *How satisfied are you with life in Australia? (Global National Wellbeing)*
3. *How satisfied are you with... [each Personal and National Wellbeing domain]?*

Figures 2.3 to 2.21 show the patterns over time for each SBW measure.

### 3.1.3.1 Subjective Wellbeing

Average SBW scores on graphs are presented on a scale between 60 and 90 percentage points, with normative ranges represented by a yellow band.

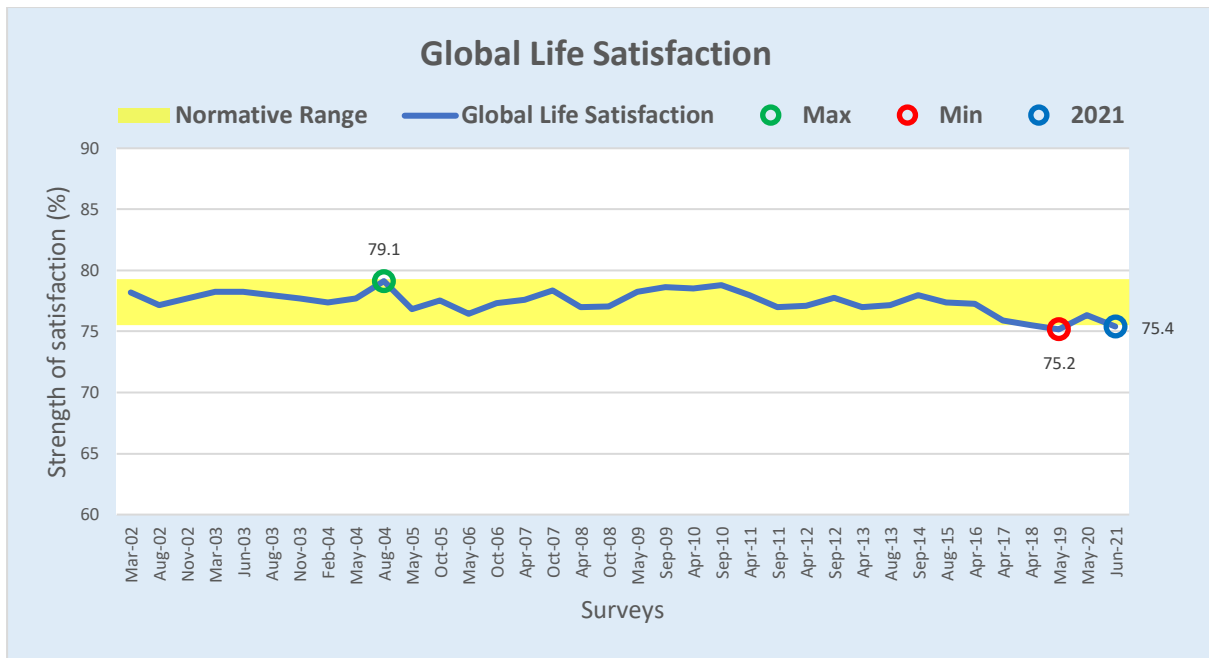


Figure 3-1 Global life satisfaction over time

- Average GLS scores fell below the normative range in 2021 and reached its lowest point in 2019. Average GLS scores have been on a downward pattern since 2010. Moreover, all five of the lowest values have occurred over the past five years.

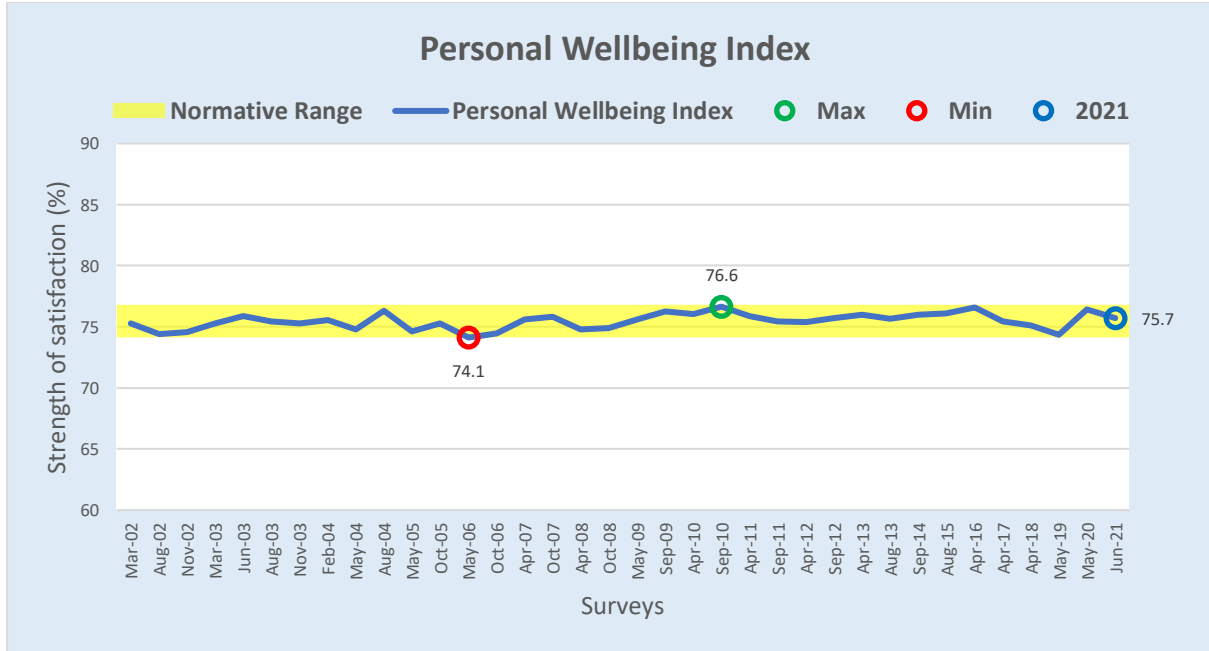


Figure 3-2 PWI over time

- Average PWI scores were within the middle of the normative range in 2021, which was similar to scores in 2020.

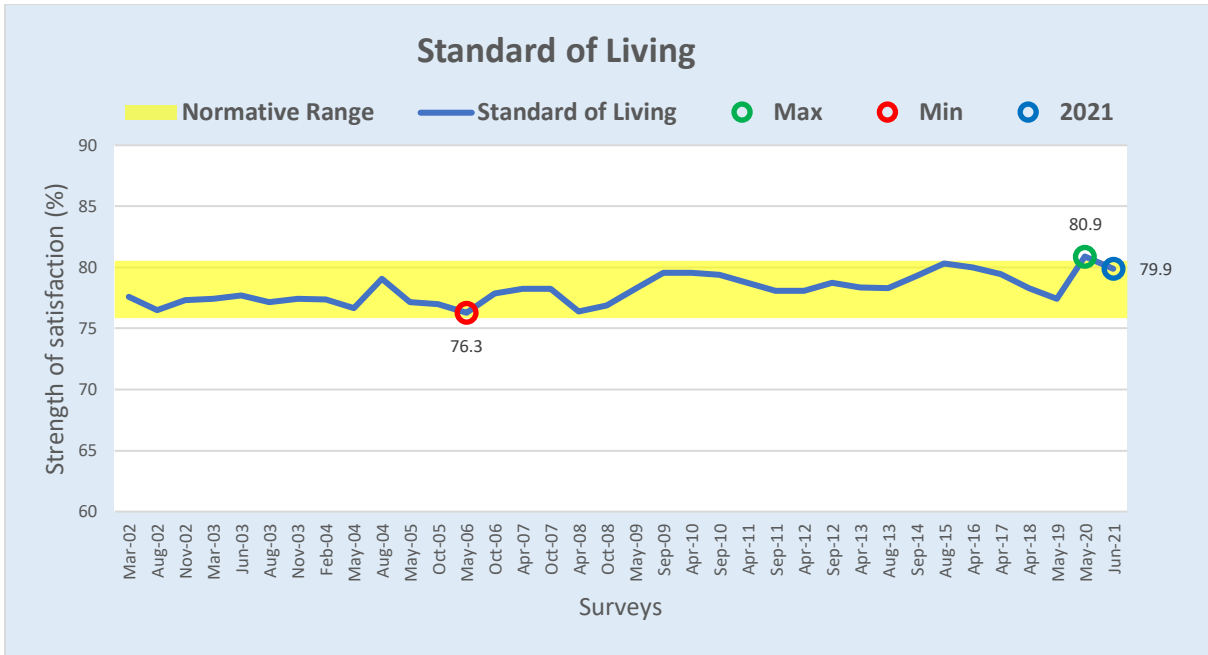


Figure 3-3 Standard of living over time

- Average satisfaction with standard of living remained relatively high in 2021, at the upper end of the normative range and close to the highest score recorded in 2020.

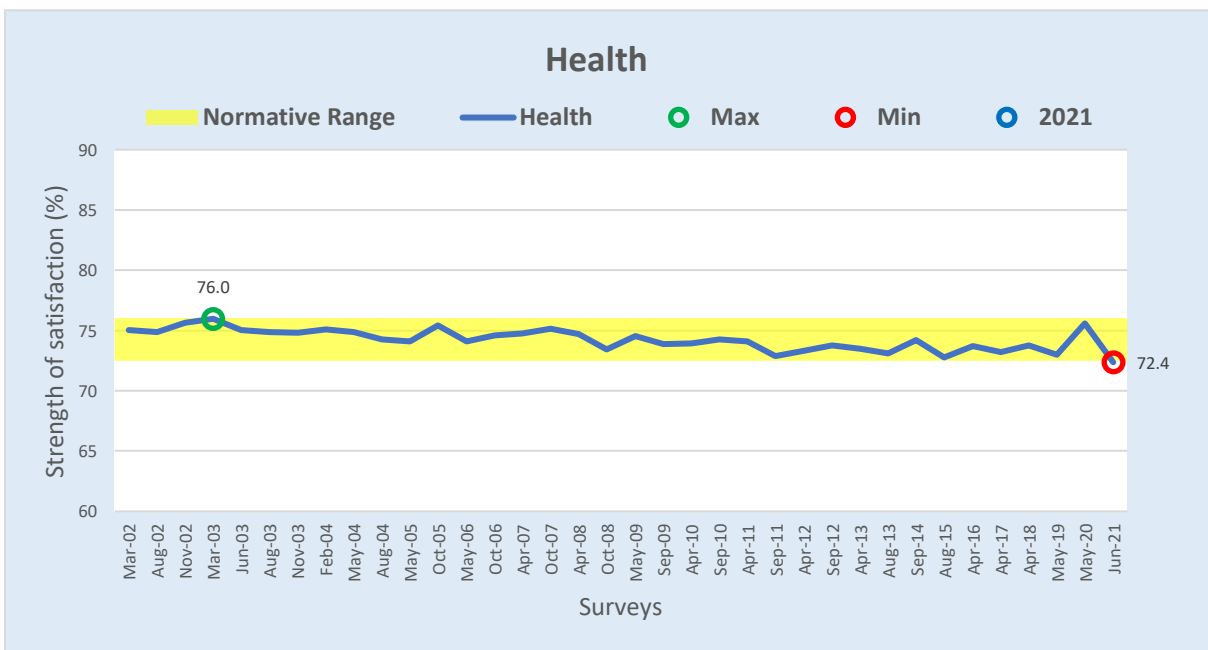


Figure 3-4 Personal health over time

- Average satisfaction with health fell below the normative range in 2021 for the first time on record. This was a sharp fall from high levels in 2020, but similar to lower levels recorded in 2019.

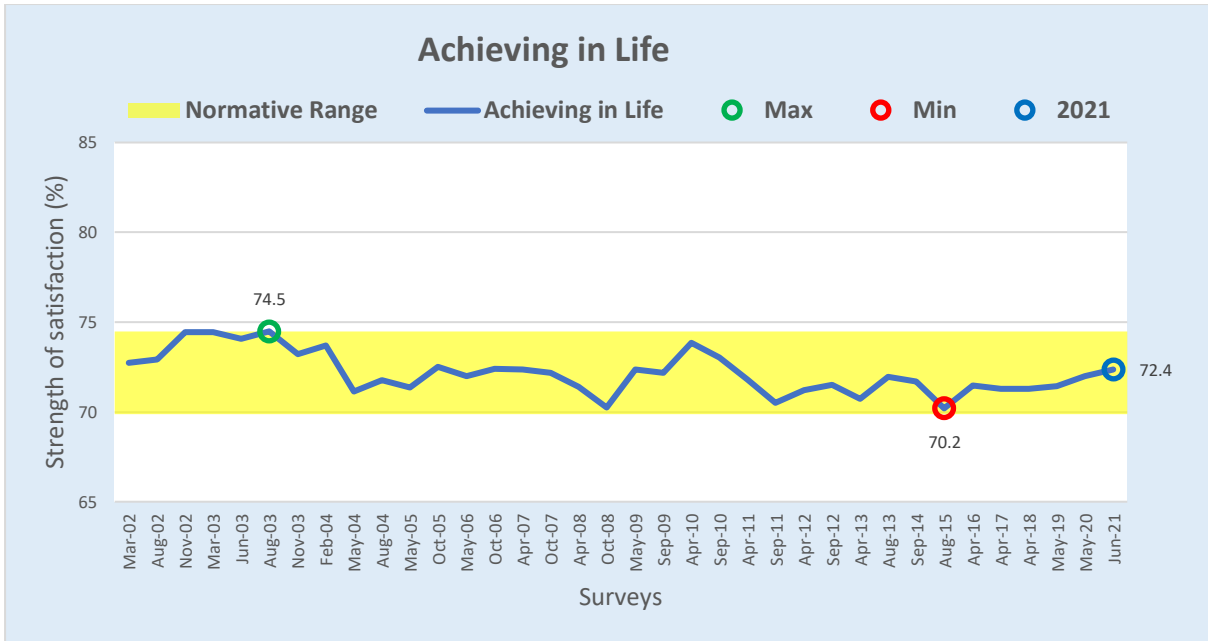


Figure 3-5 Achieving in life over time

- Average satisfaction with achieving in life was in the middle of the normative range during the pandemic, trending steadily close to this level since 2016.

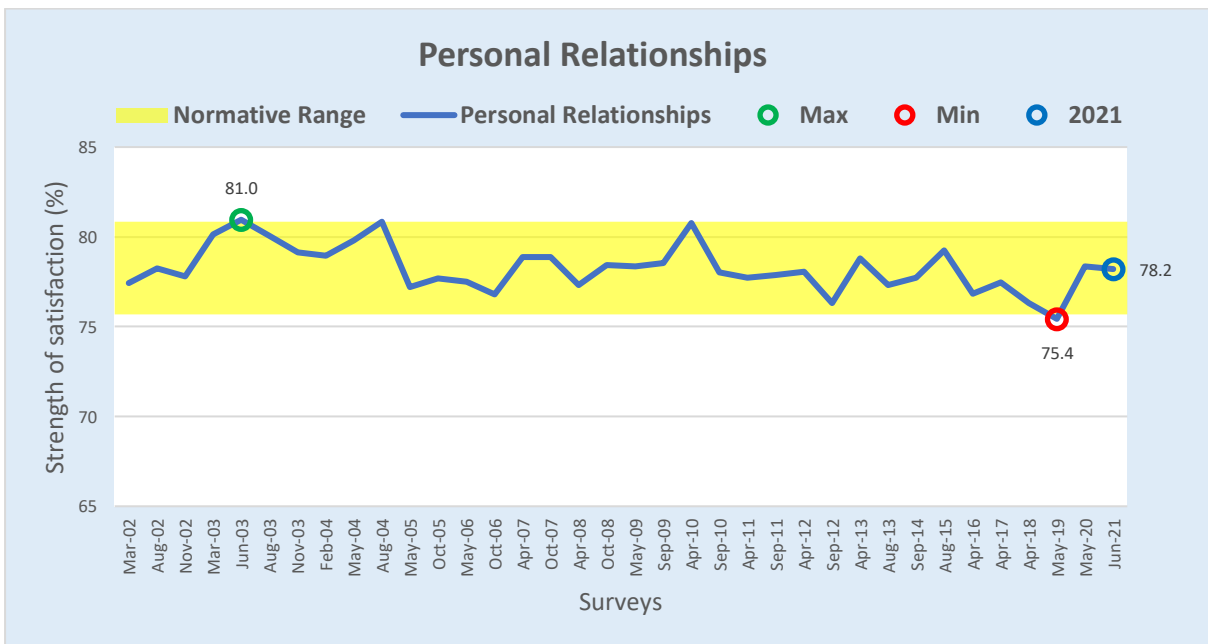


Figure 3-6 Personal relationships over time

- Average satisfaction with personal relationships was in the middle of the normative range in 2021 which was similar to 2020, and a rise from its lowest point on record in 2019.

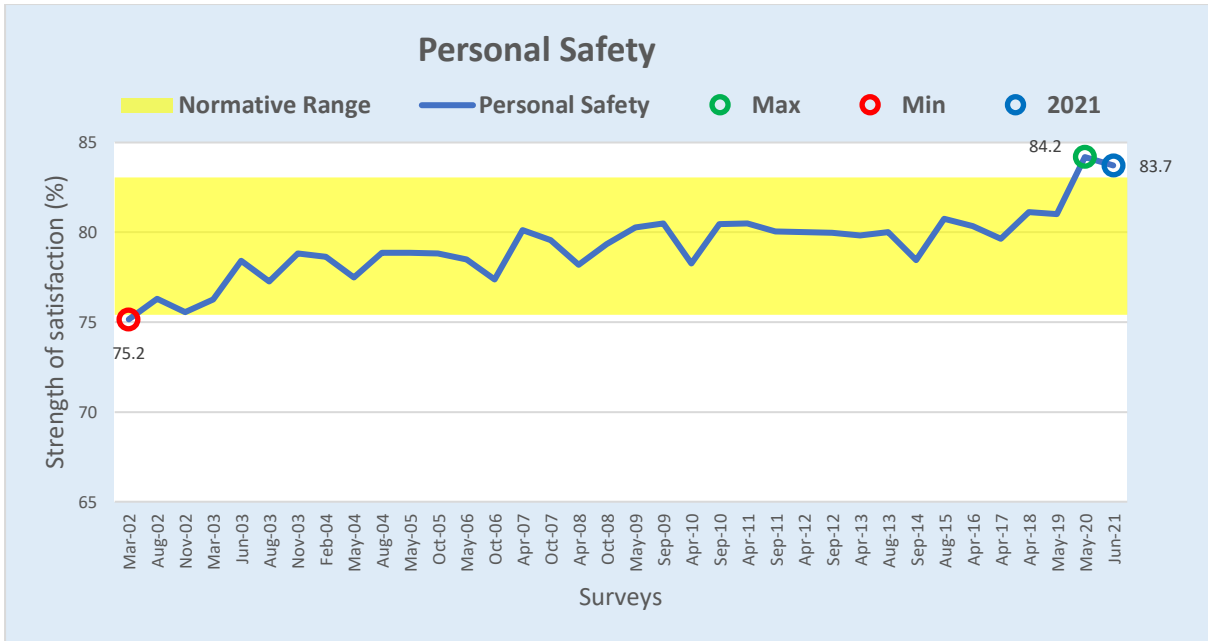


Figure 3-7 Personal safety over time

- Average satisfaction with personal safety was above the normative range during the pandemic and has shown a rising pattern across the past 21 years.

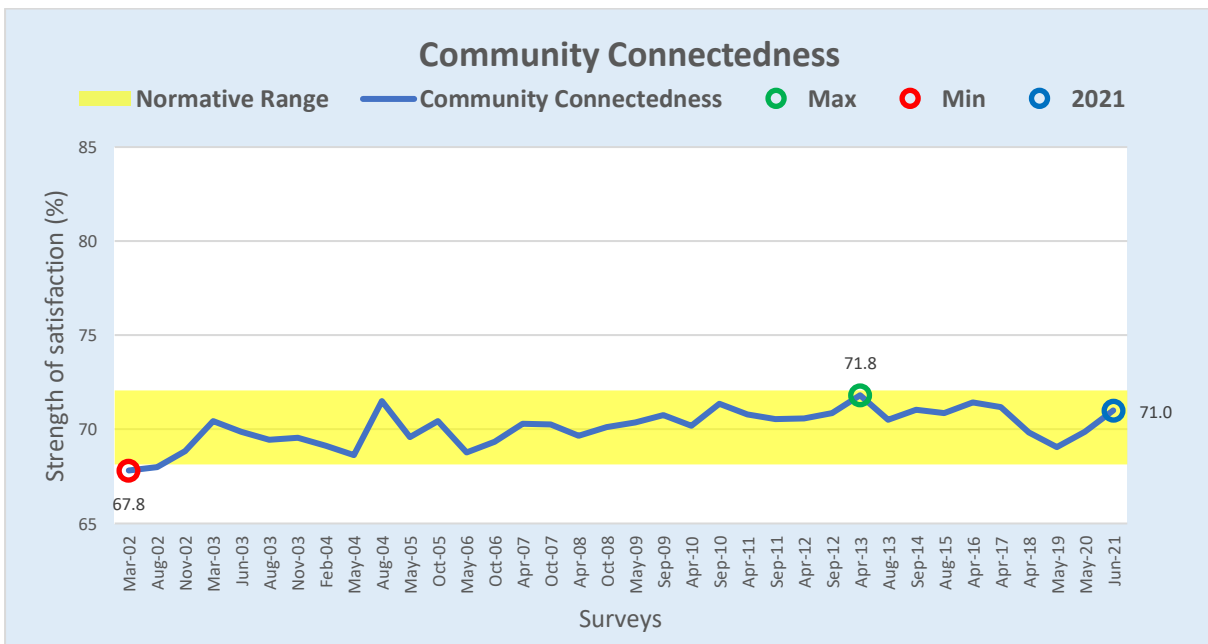


Figure 3-8 Community connectedness over time

- Average satisfaction with community connectedness was in the top half of the normative range in 2021, rising slightly during the pandemic from 2019 levels.

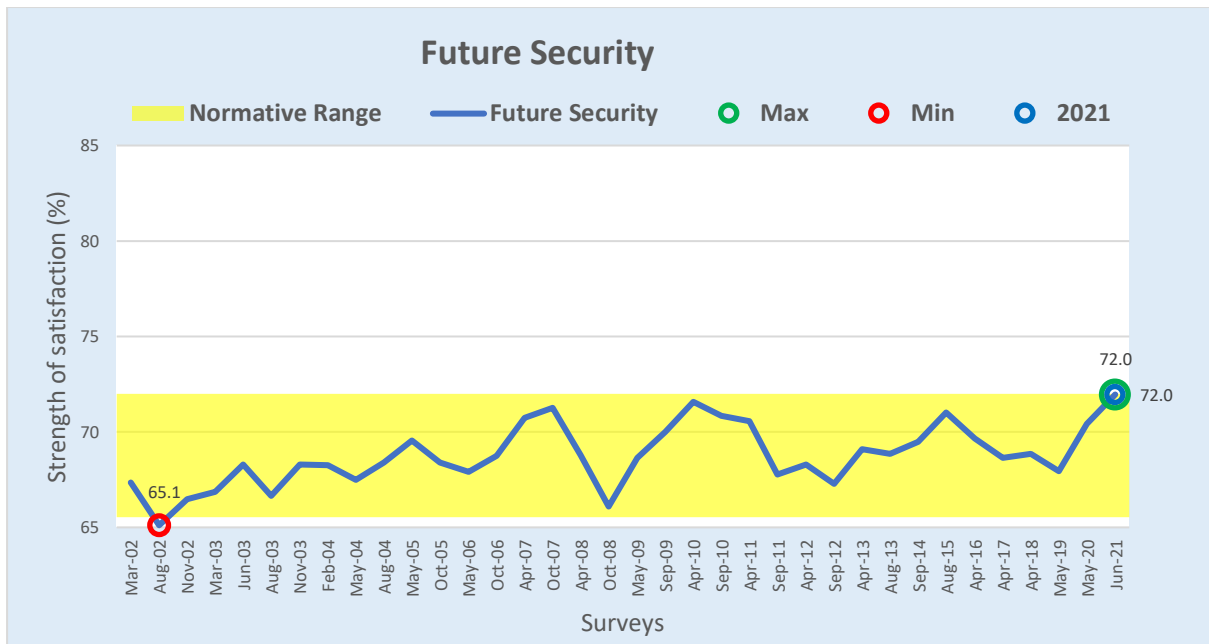


Figure 3-9 Future security over time

- Average satisfaction with future security in 2021 reached the highest level since 2002, at the top of the normative range.

### 3.1.3.2 National Wellbeing

All average national wellbeing scores on graphs are presented on a scale from 40-90 percentage points, with normative ranges represented in yellow.

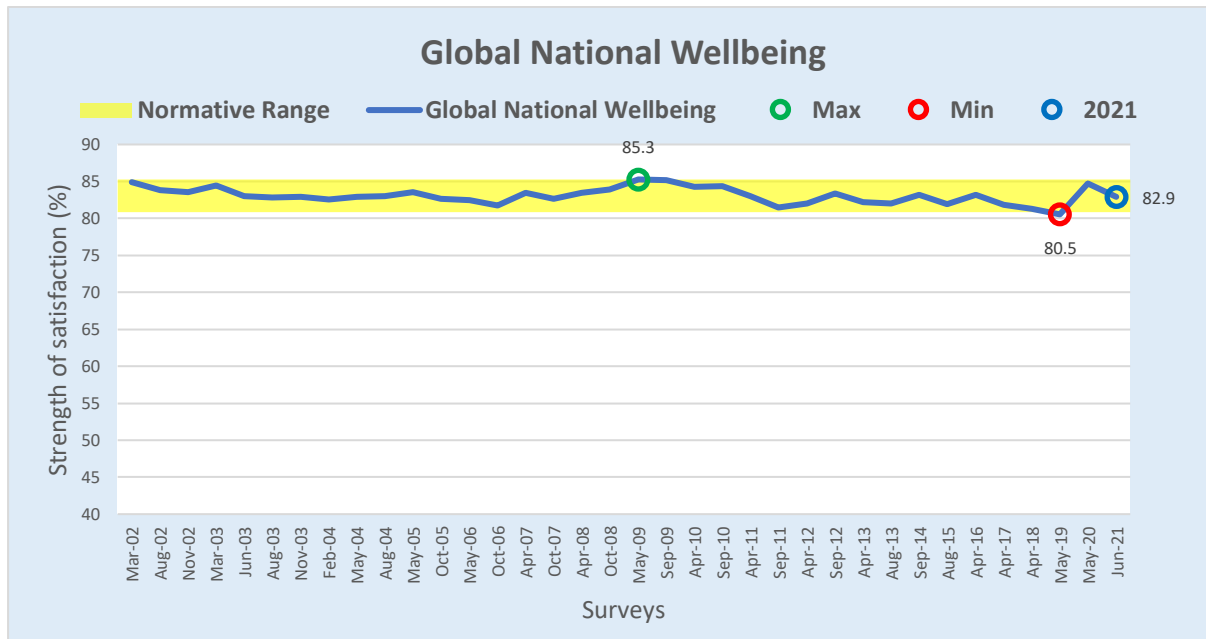


Figure 3-10 Global national wellbeing over time

- Average GNW score was within the middle of the normative range in 2021. Scores on GNW rose during the pandemic from their lowest point in 2019.

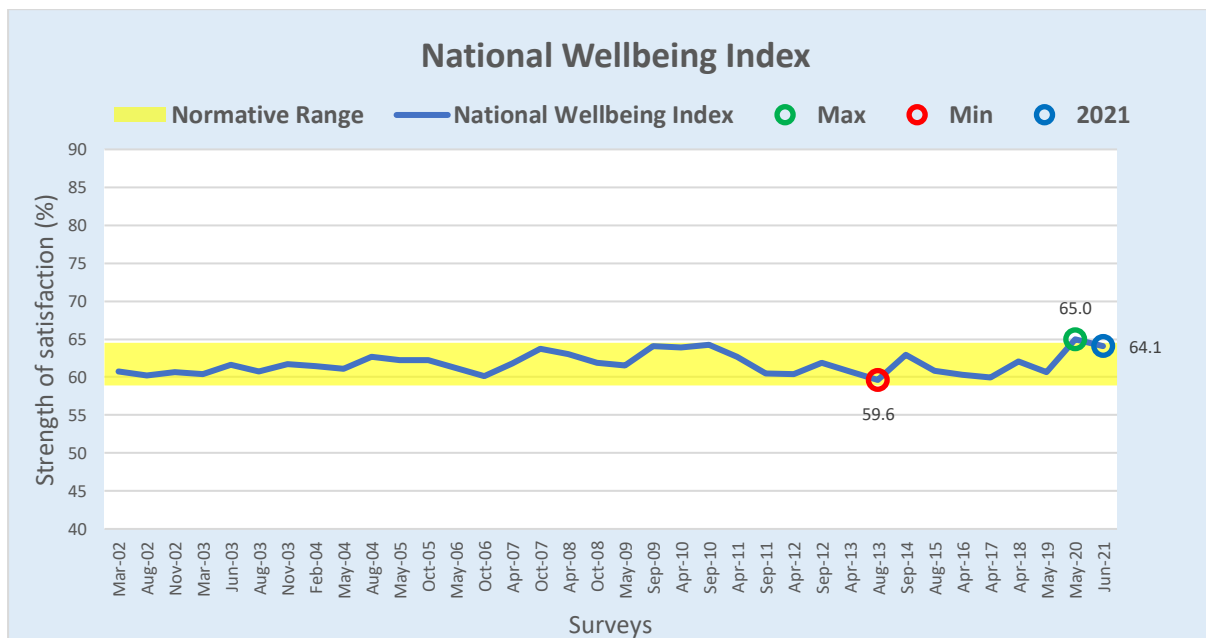


Figure 3-11 National wellbeing index over time

- Average NWI scores were at the upper end of the normative range in 2021 and reached its highest score on record in 2020.





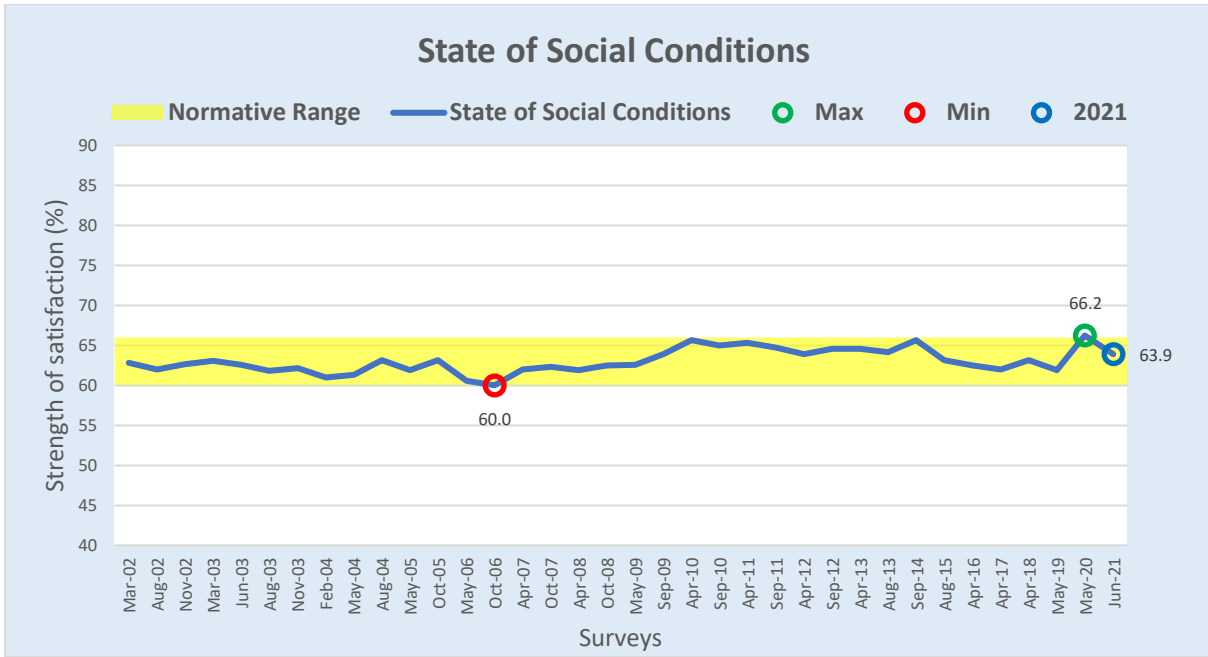


Figure 3-14 Social conditions in Australia over time

- Average satisfaction with the state of social conditions in Australia was within the middle of the normative range, which was lower than 2020 when it was the highest score on record, but was similar to pre-pandemic years.

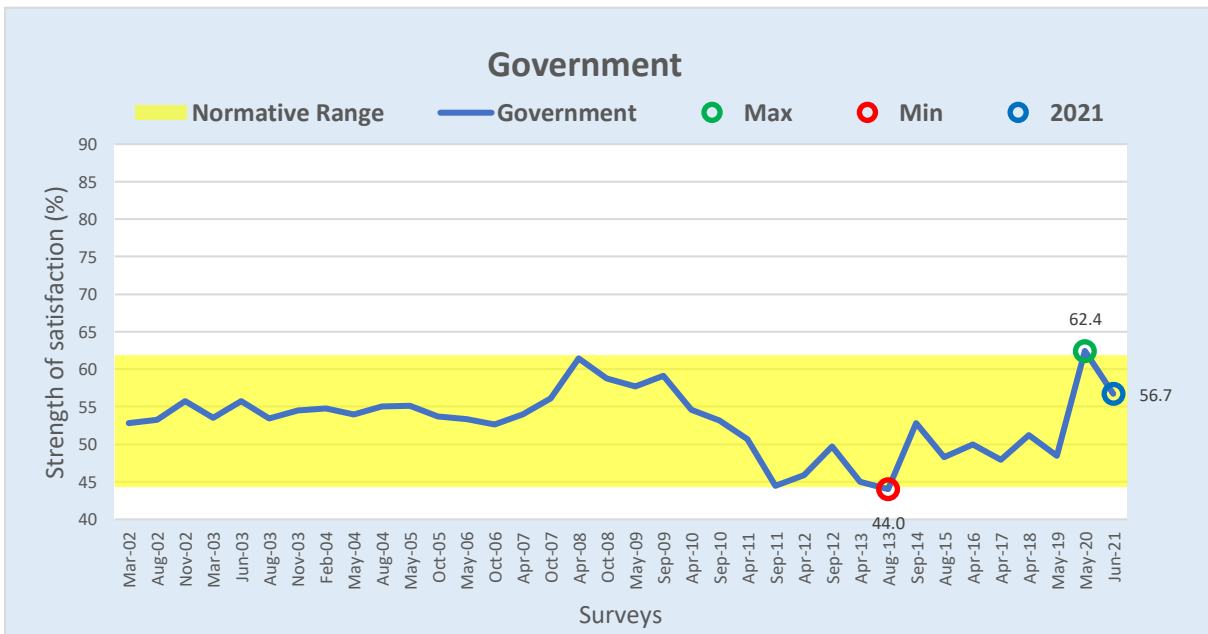


Figure 3-15 Government in Australia over time

- Average satisfaction with the government in Australia was within the upper-middle of the normative range, which was lower than 2020, when it was the highest score on record but was still higher than pre-pandemic times.

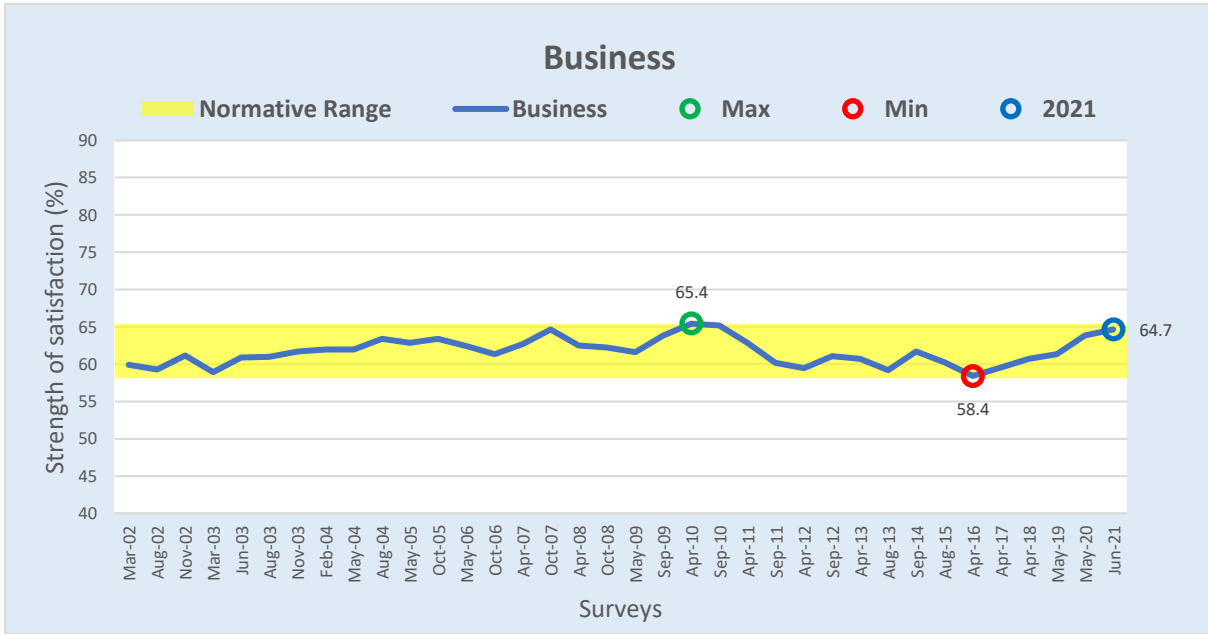


Figure 3-16 Business in Australia over time

- Average satisfaction with business in Australia was at the upper at the upper end of the normative range during the pandemic and has shown a rising pattern since 2015.

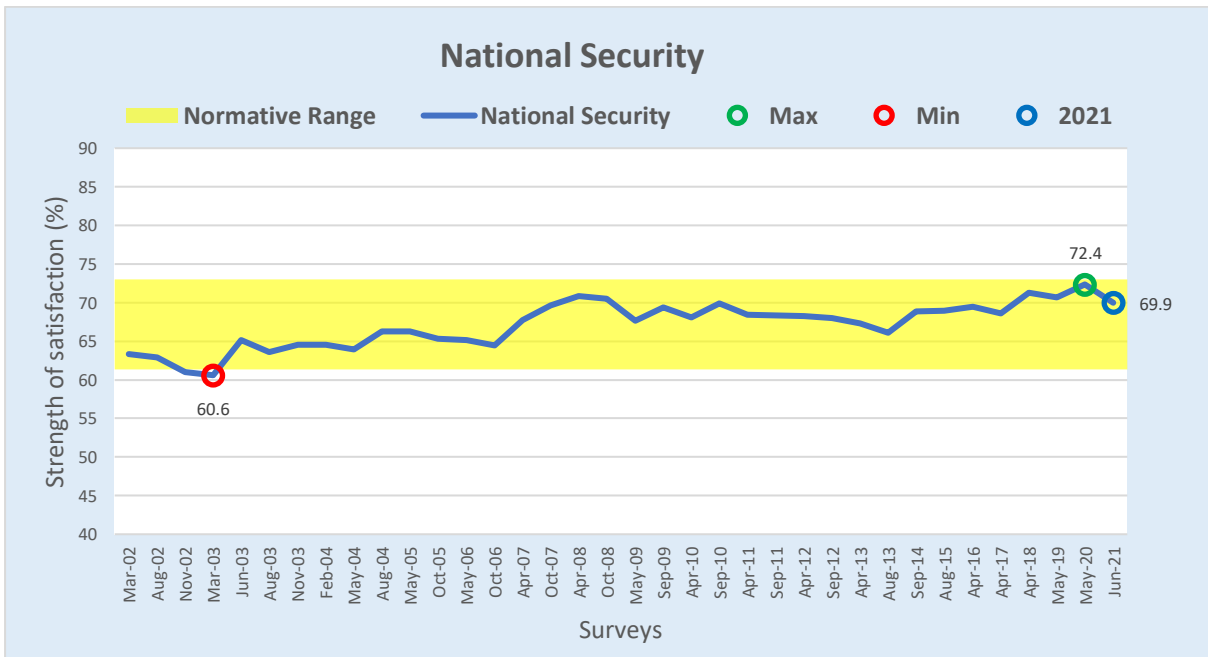


Figure 3-17 National security in Australia over time

- Average satisfaction with national security in Australia was at the upper at the upper end of the normative range during the pandemic, which was similar to scores since 2018.

### 3.1.4 2021 PWI scores for each demographic group

The sections below shows average PWI scores by demographic groups in 2021 and across time (2019, 2020 and 2021). The PWI scores are presented on a scale from 60 to 90 percentage points, except for the full time occupation group which is presented on a 50-90 pp scale.

#### 3.1.4.1 PWI and age

Participants were fairly evenly distributed across age groups, with the exception of those aged over 76 years, who comprised just 6% of the sample (similar to population norms) (see Appendix Table 4.10). In 2021, those aged 26-35 years had average PWI scores below the normative range, while those aged 66+ had scores slightly above the normative range (see Figure 3-18).

Across age groups, those aged >66 years had notably higher PWI scores compared to those aged 18-25, 26-35 and 46-55 years. For example, the average PWI score was approximately 4 to 6 pp lower for those in the 18-25 and 26-35 year-old age groups, compared to those aged 65+ years.

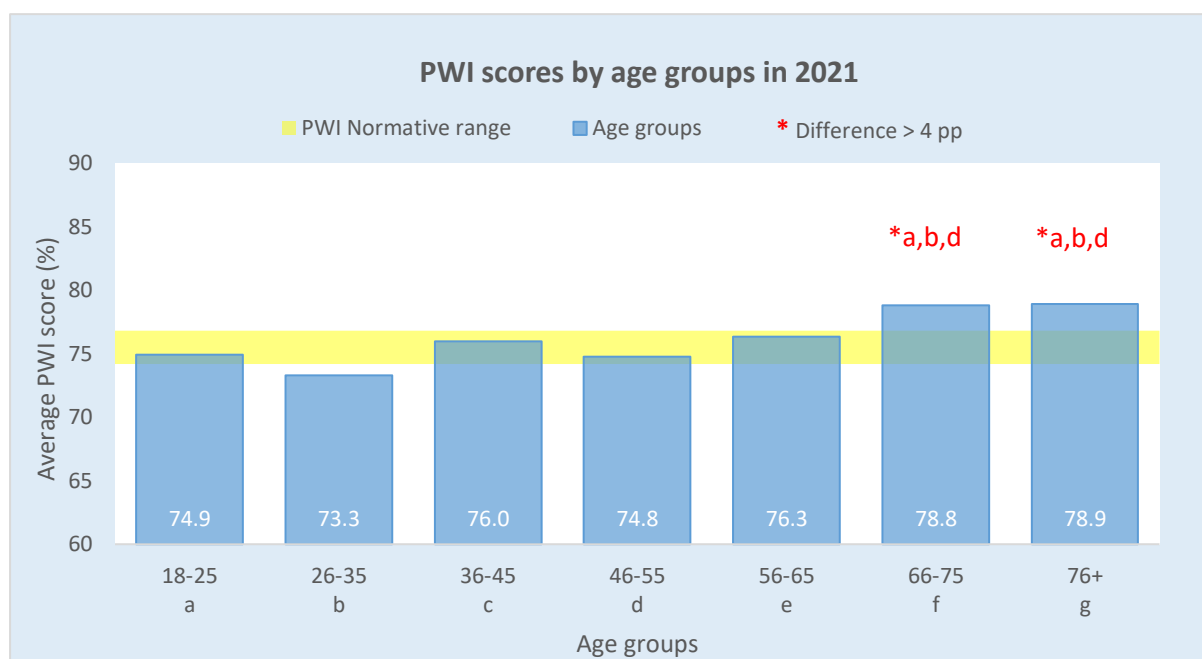


Figure 3-18 PWI scores for each age group in 2021

In 2019-2021, the proportion of participants across age groups was similar (see Appendix Table 4.10). For those under age 46 years, average PWI scores were comparable over the past three years (Figure 3-19). However, for those aged over 46 years, there were some notable differences. Compared to 2019, average PWI scores were 4 to 5 pp higher in 2020 for those aged 46-55, 66-75 and 76+ years. This pattern was only seen in 2021 for those aged 66-75 years, who on average had PWI scores 4 pp higher than in 2019.

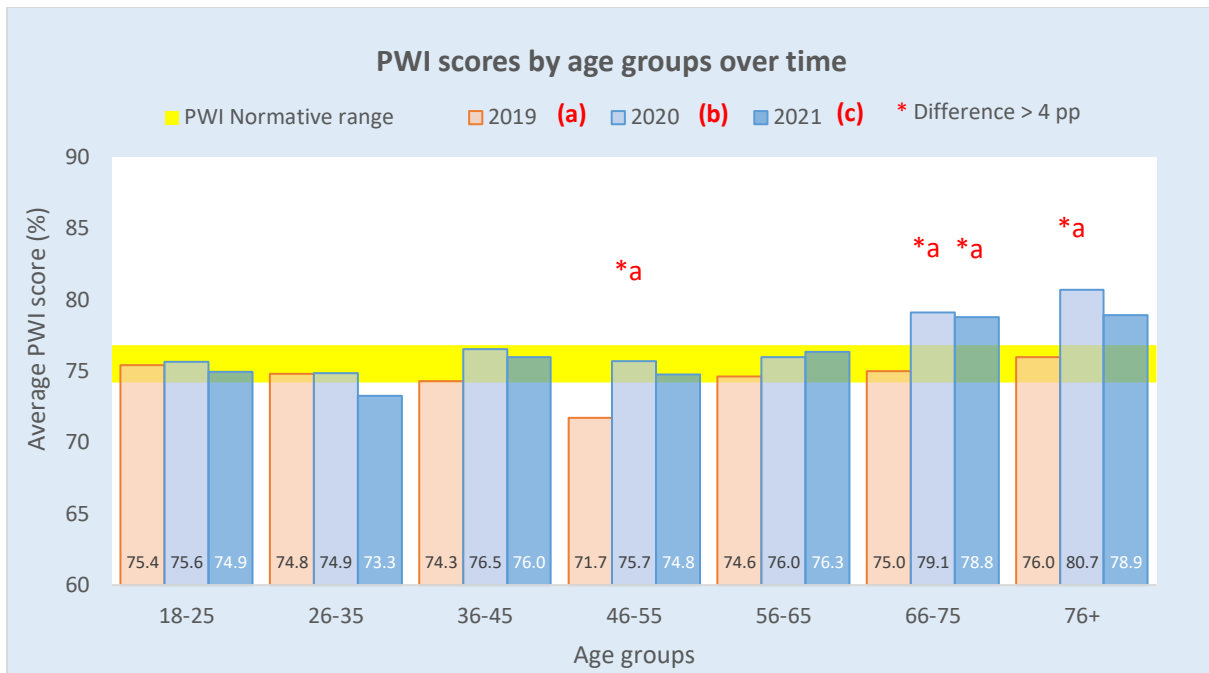


Figure 3-19 PWI scores for each age group over time

### 3.1.4.2 PWI and gross household income

In 2021, the most common household income was \$61-100k (20%), while the least common was >\$251k (8%) (see Appendix Table 4.11). Average PWI scores for those with the lowest household incomes (<\$60k) were below the normative range, while for those with over \$100k, they were above the normative range (see Figure 3-20).

Across income groups, average PWI scores increased as income increased, with close to a 10 pp difference between those in the lowest and highest income brackets. With each income bracket increase, average PWI scores increased by 1.2 to 2.2 pp, with the exception of the two lowest income brackets. Compared to those in the lowest income bracket (i.e. \$30k), average PWI scores were notably higher for those with an income above \$60k. Similarly, compared to those in the \$31-\$60k income bracket, average PWI scores were higher for those with an income above \$100k.

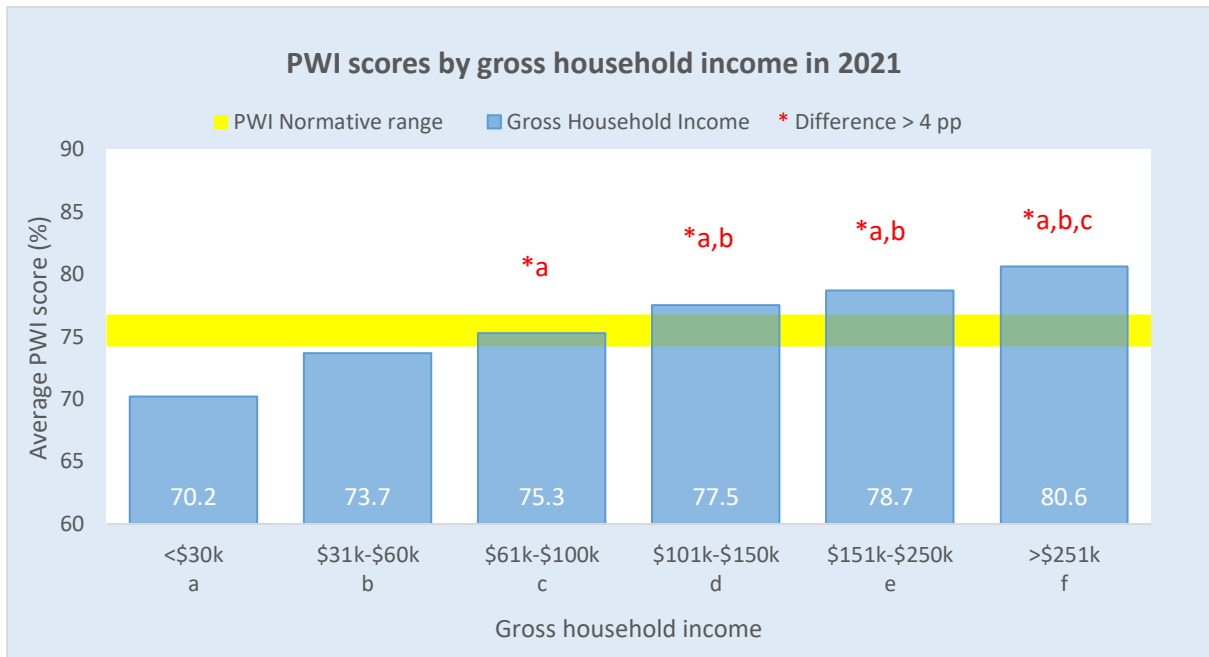


Figure 3-20 PWI scores for gross household income in 2021

Across 2019-2021, the distribution of participants across income brackets was similar. For this period, average PWI scores were also similar for those with household incomes greater than \$60k (see Figure 3-21). However, compared to 2019, those with income of less than \$30k, had notably higher PWI scores in 2020 (5.4 pp) and 2021 (4 pp). This pattern was also seen in the \$31-60K group, but a notable (i.e.  $\geq 4$  pp) difference was only seen for 2019 compared to 2020 (3.7 pp higher in 2020)).

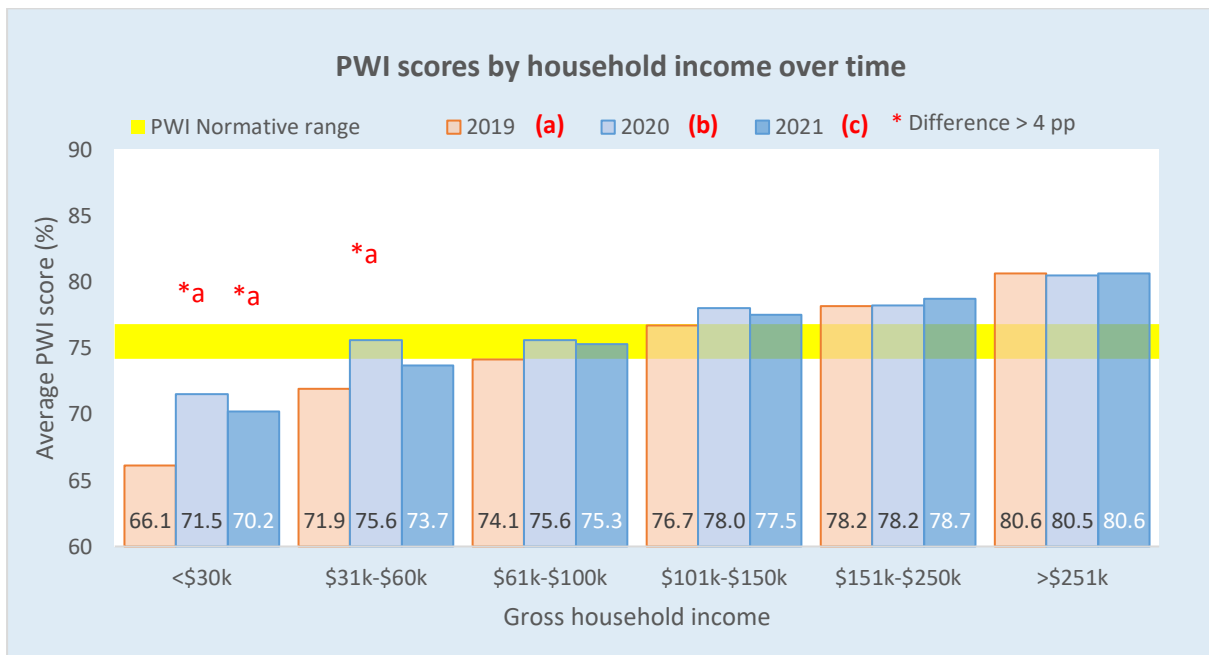


Figure 3-21 PWI scores by gross household income over time

### 3.1.4.3 PWI and gender

Males and females were roughly equally distributed in 2021 and PWI scores were similar for males and females in 2019, 2020 and 2021 (see Appendix Table 4.12) .

A small number of participants self-identified as other than male or female in 2020 and 2021 (i.e. when this question was introduced). However, these groups were too small (0.2% and 0.7%) for subgroup analyses so were not included when looking at differences in PWI scores by gender.

### 3.1.4.4 PWI and marital status

In 2021, a majority of participants were married (47%), with a small number of participants separated but not divorced (4%) or widowed (3.7%) (full details in Appendix Table 4.13).

On average, PWI scores were above or at the top of the normative range for those who were married or in a defacto relationship respectively; while for all other marital status groups average PWI scores fell below the normative range, particularly among those who were separated but not divorced (see Figure 3-22) On average, those who were married or in a defacto relationship had notably higher PWI scores (4-10 pp) compared to all other groups.

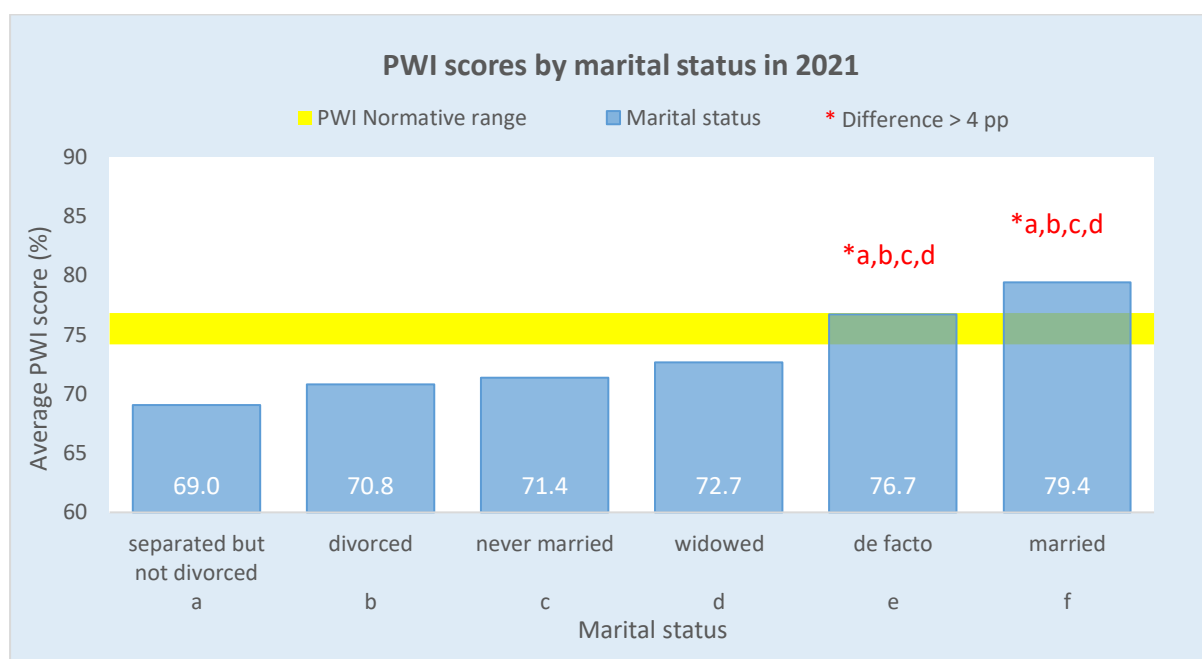


Figure 3-22 PWI scores for marital status in 2021

Across 2019-2021, the distribution of marital status was comparable. Similarly, PWI scores within each marital status group were relatively similar over time. A notable difference was seen for those who were never married or widowed in 2020, who on average had scores 4 pp above those in 2019, albeit this pattern was not observed in 2021 (see Figure 3-23).

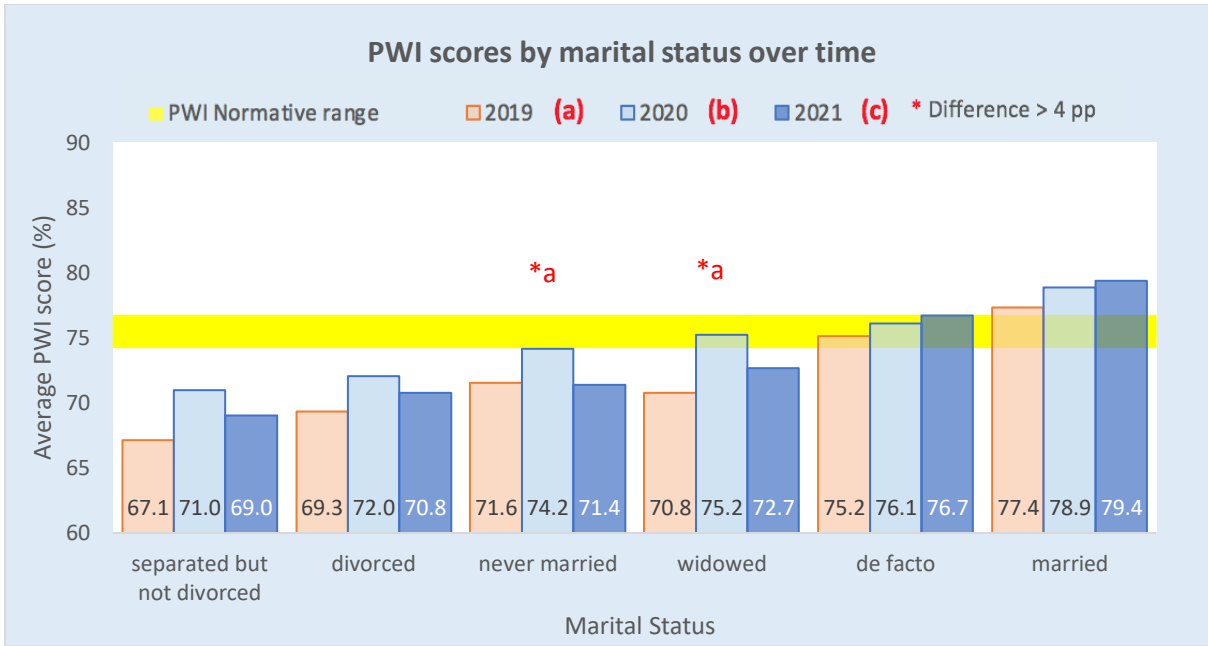


Figure 3-23 PWI scores for each marital status over time

### 3.1.4.5 PWI and household composition

In 2021, households most commonly comprised a partner and children (32%) or a partner only (27%), while the least common household composition was with children only (7%). Average PWI scores were above the normative range for household’s comprising a partner and children or a partner only. These household compositions also had average PWI scores that were notably higher (6-9 pp) compared to all other compositions. In fact, for all other household compositions, PWI scores fell below the normative range (see Figure 3-24).

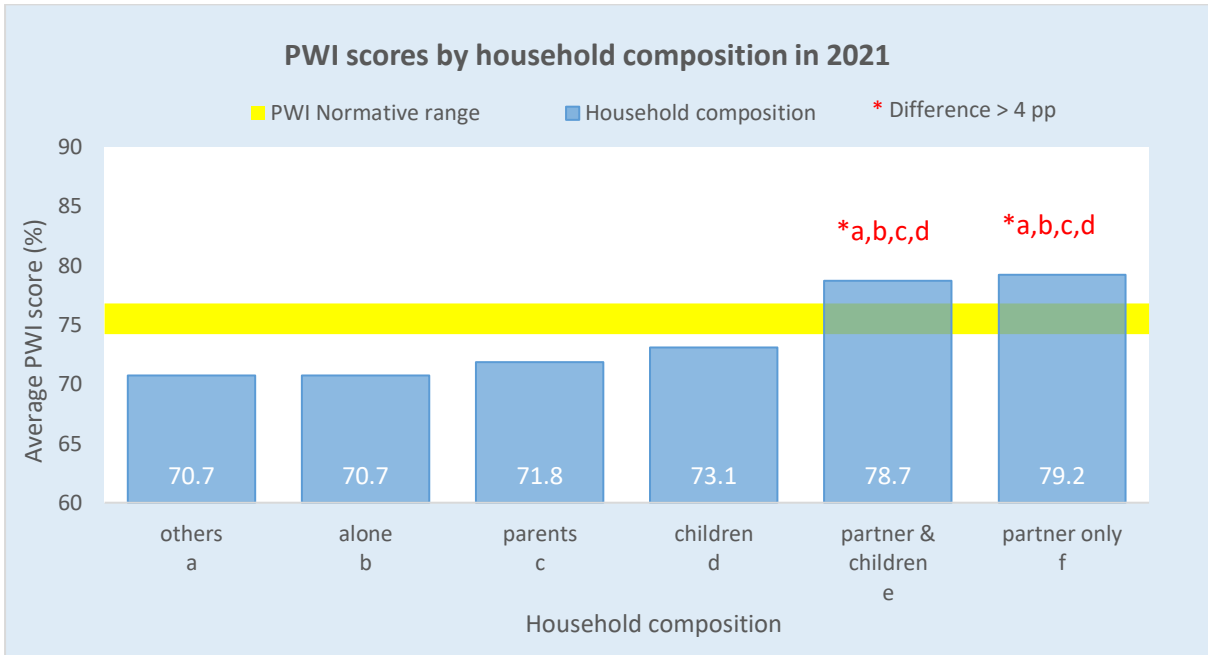


Figure 3-24 PWI scores by household composition in 2021

Across 2019-2021, the distribution of household composition was relatively consistent, as were average PWI scores within each type of household, with just two exceptions (see Appendix Table 4.14). Those in households with children only (7% of the sample), had average PWI scores that were notably higher in 2020 (4.8 pp) and 2021 (4.3 pp) compared to 2019. Similarly, those who lived alone had notably higher PWI scores in 2020 (5.4 pp) compared to 2019, but this wasn't seen in 2021 (see Figure 3-25).

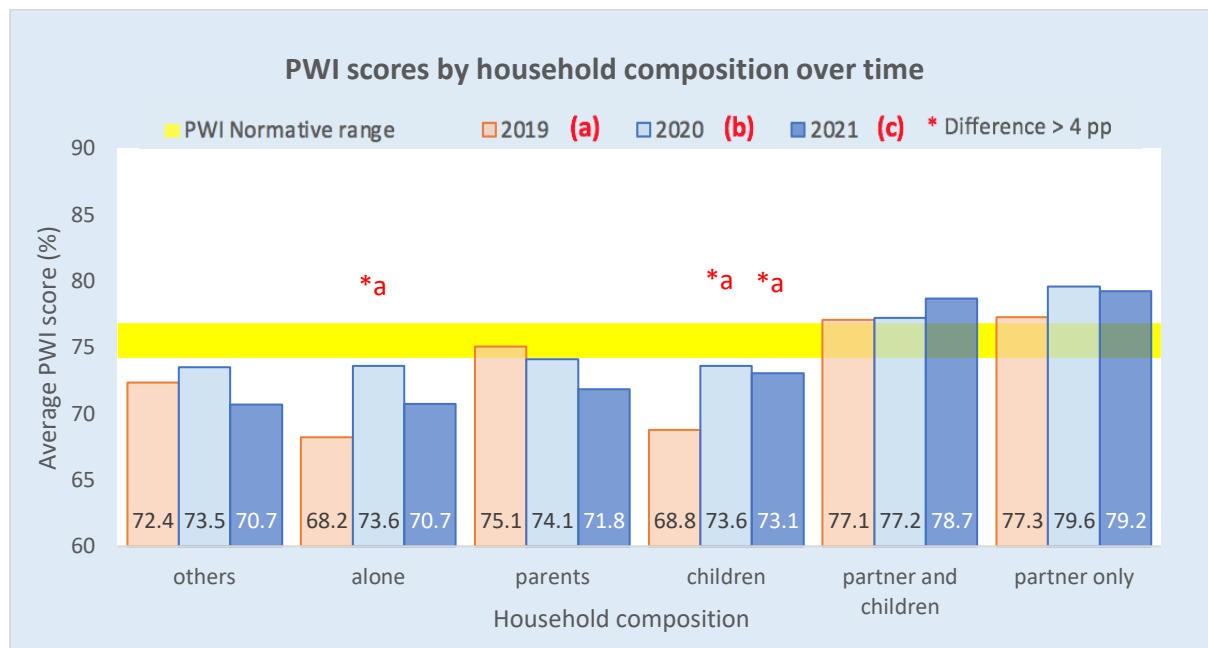


Figure 3-25 PWI scores for each household composition over time

### 3.1.4.6 PWI and full time occupation

The majority (77%) of participants identified as having a full time occupation, most commonly employment (57%). Only a small number were unemployed (3%) and less than 1% were in full time volunteering. However, the latter was too small for subgroup analyses.

Those who were unemployed had average PWI scores well below the normative range and notably lower than all other groups (17-21 pp) (see Figure 3-26). Those in full time home duties or study had average PWI scores at the bottom of the normative range, while those in full time employment or retired had average scores just above the normative range, respectively. PWI scores for those in full time home duties were also notably lower compared to those in full time retirement.



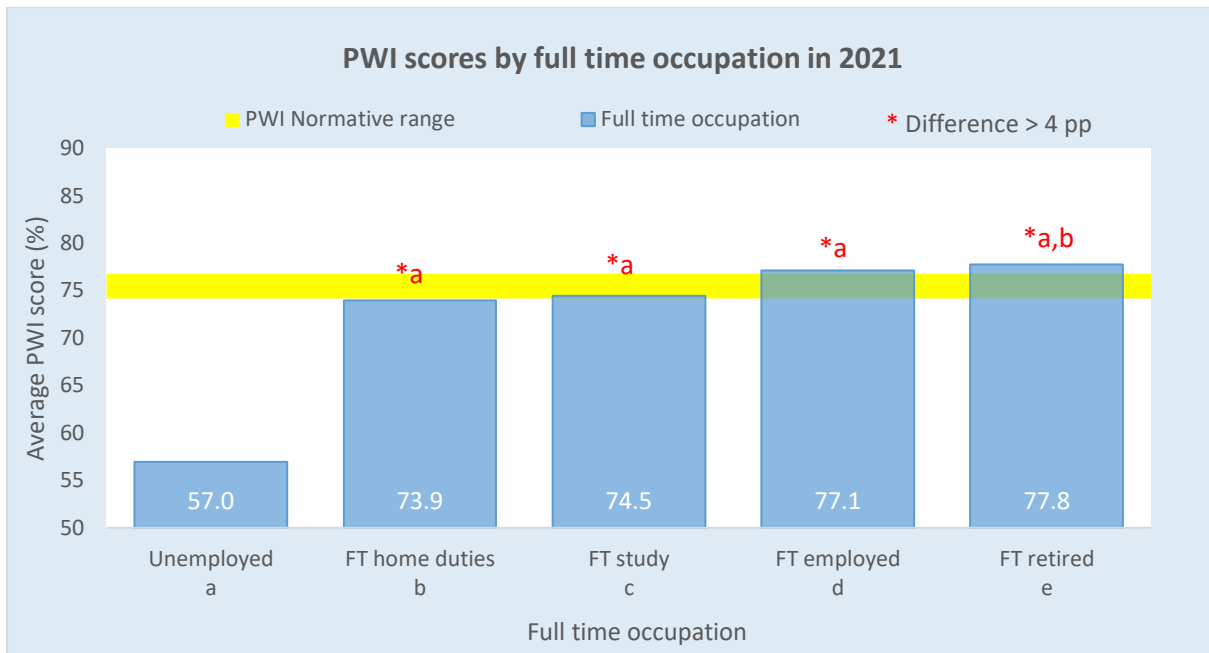


Figure 3-26 PWI scores for full time occupation in 2021

Across 2019-2021, the distribution of full time occupations was relatively consistent, as were average PWI scores within each category, with two notable exceptions (see Appendix Table 4.15). For the unemployed group, PWI increased in 2020 by 10+ pp, but in 2021 dropped back down to low levels similar to 2019 (see Figure 3-27). The retired group also had notably higher average PWI scores in 2020 (5.6 pp) and 2021 (4 pp), compared to 2019.

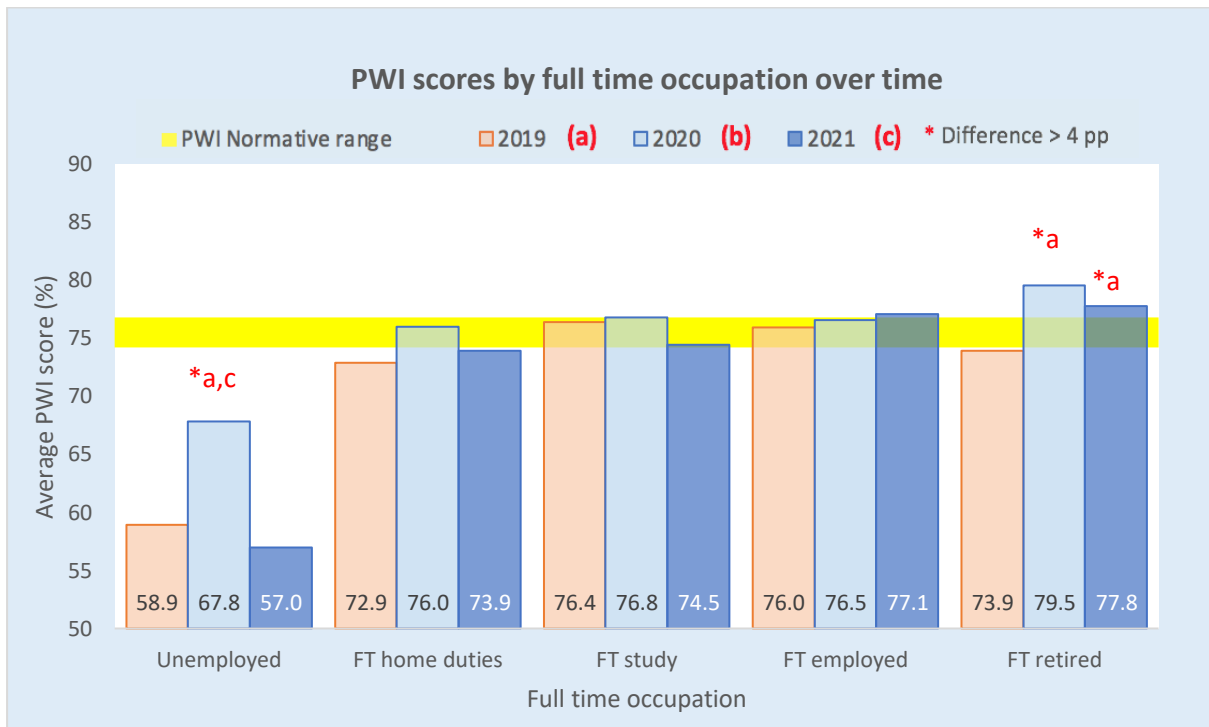


Figure 3-27 PWI scores for each full time occupation over time

### 3.1.4.7 PWI and part time occupation

One-third of participants identified as having a part time occupation and this was most commonly paid part time (33%) or casual work (29%), followed by volunteering (22%), with just a small number of semi-retired participants (6%) (see Appendix Table 4.16).

In 2021, those who were studying or in casual employment had average PWI scores just below the normative range, while those who were semi-retired or volunteering part time had average scores just above the normative range (Figure 3-28). There were also notable differences of >4 pp between these groups (i.e. part time study or casual work vs. part time volunteering or semi-retired).

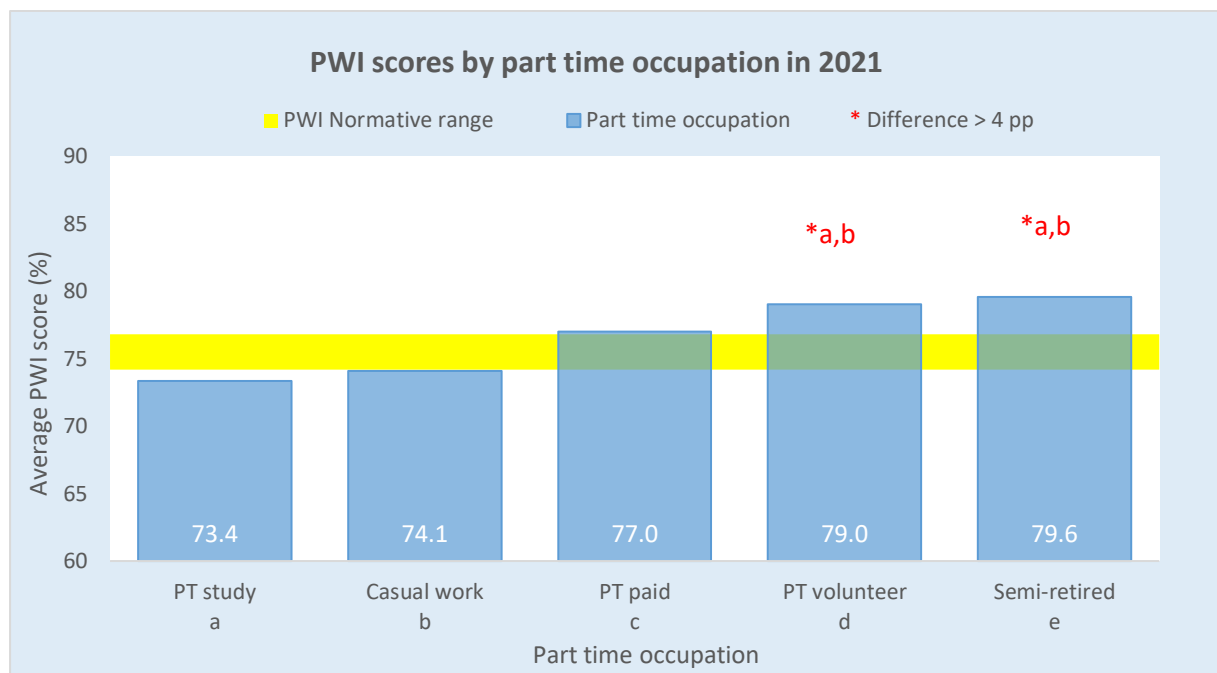


Figure 3-28 PWI scores for part time occupations in 2021

Across 2019-2021, the distribution of part time occupations was similar, as were average PWI scores within each part time occupation group (see Appendix Figure 4.1).

### 3.1.4.8 PWI across states

Participants were most commonly from Victoria (30%) or New South Wales (31%), with the smallest number from the ACT (3%) and the Northern Territory (<1%) (see Appendix Table 4.17). Given the small number of participants from the Northern Territory, this group was excluded from subgroup analyses.

All states had PWI scores within the normative range in 2021, with the exception of South Australia where scores fell just below the normative range (see Figure 3-29).

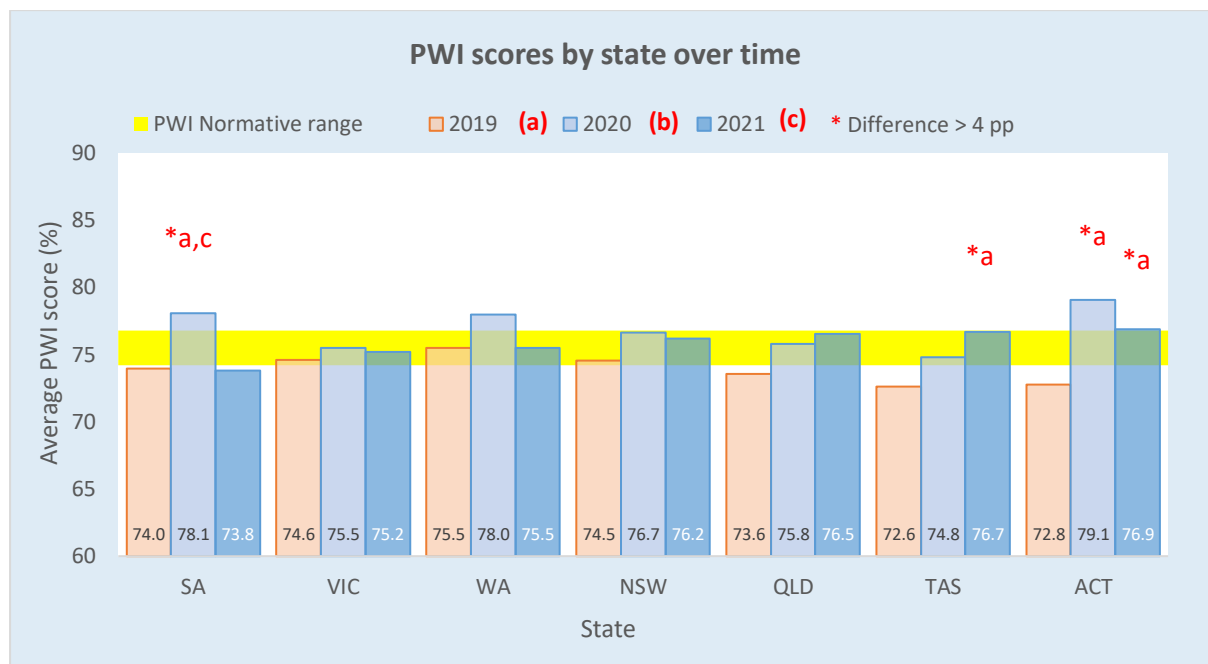


Figure 3-29 PWI scores by state over time

The PWI scores were similar across all states in 2021 (see Appendix Figure 4.2). Across 2019-2021, average PWI scores remained relatively stable in most states, including in Victoria which was the only state in lockdown during the data collection phase for this survey. However, there were three notable differences over this period. In South Australia, average PWI scores were notably higher in 2020 compared to 2021 (4.3 pp) and 2019 (4.1 pp). While in Tasmania, average PWI scores were notably higher in 2021 (4.6 pp), compared to 2019. Similarly, in the ACT they were notably higher in 2020 (6.5 pp) and 2021 (4.1 pp), compared to 2019.

### PWI and geographic region

The majority of the participants came from urban areas (75%), with 18% and 7% from inner and outer regional areas respectively (see Appendix Table 4.18). About 2% came from remote areas and this group was deemed insufficient in size for subgroup comparisons. All PWI scores were within the normative range for these group and there were no notable differences within each geographic region across 2019-2021. (see Appendix Figures 4.3-4.4).

### 3.1.4.9 PWI and life events

Sad life events were experienced by 26% of participants, while 12% experienced both sad and happy events, and 18% experienced a happy event (see Appendix Table 4.19). Those experiencing a sad event had average PWI scores well below the normative range, while those experiencing a happy event or no event had PWI scores just above the normative range (see Figure 3-30). All groups had notably higher PWI scores compared to those experiencing a sad event, while those with no event or a happy event had notably higher scores compared to those who had a happy and sad event.

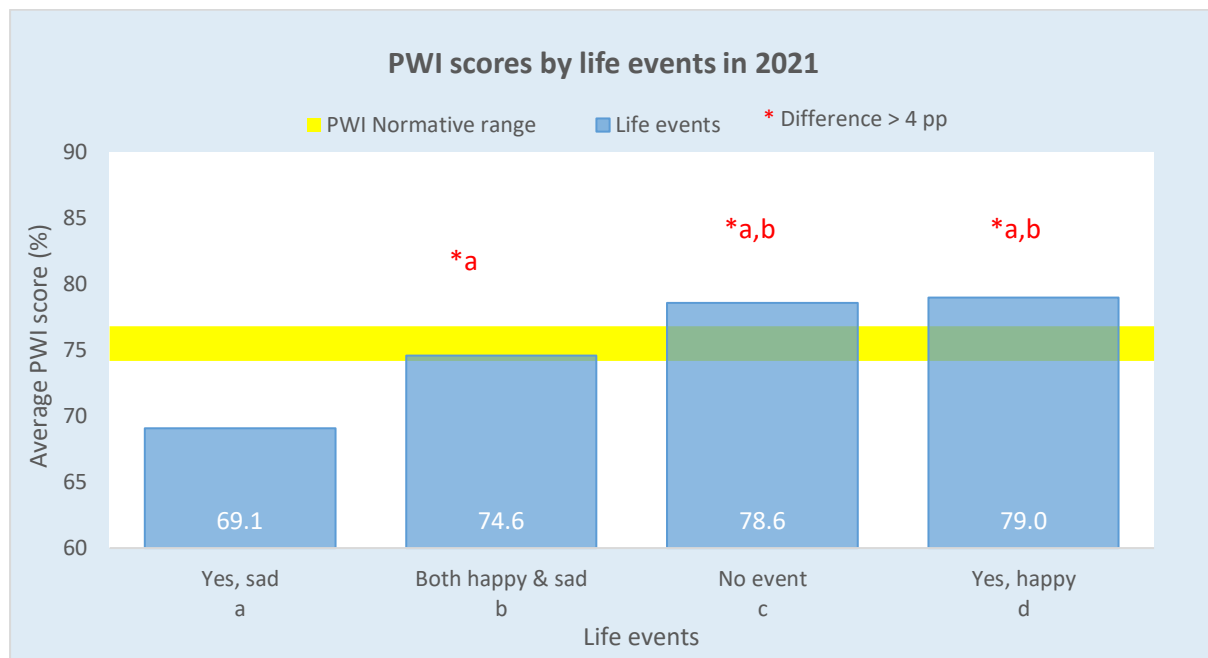


Figure 3-30 PWI scores for life events in 2021

Across 2019-2021, the distribution of life events was relatively similar, although sad events were more common in 2021 (26%) and 2020 (30%), compared to 2019 (21%) (see Figure 3-31). Within each life events group, average PWI scores were similar over the past three years, with one exception. In 2020, those who had experienced a sad event had average PWI scores that were notably higher than in 2019 (5.8 pp) and 2021 (3.8 pp).

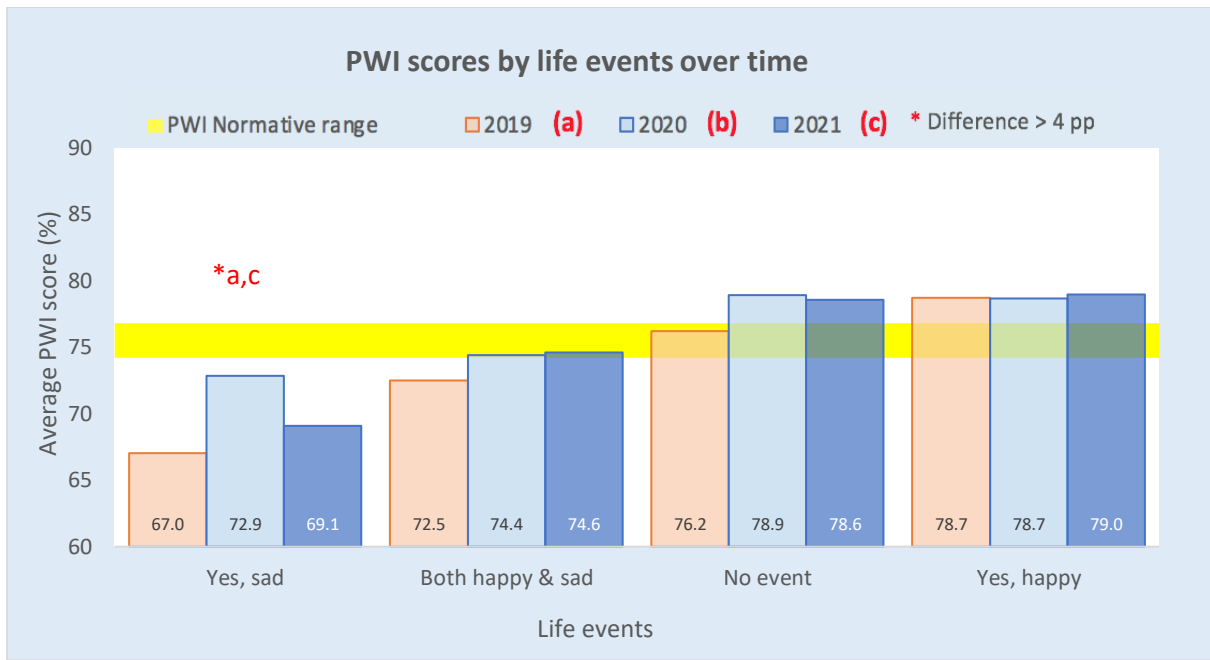


Figure 3-31 PWI scores for each geographic region over time

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## 3.2 Part 2: Life areas and subjective wellbeing during the pandemic and pre-pandemic

This section summarises the findings relating to a series of COVID-19 questions that were specific to the 2021 survey. These questions examined how income change, mental distress, social connectedness, resilience and a sense of achieving are related to subjective wellbeing during the pandemic and in pre-pandemic times (where data were available).

### 3.2.1 COVID-19 questions

In May to June 2021, about one-third of the sample (34%) had been tested for COVID-19 once, while 13% had been tested multiple times. Of those who were tested, the vast majority tested negative (99%). Nearly half of the participants reported that COVID-19 related changes made their lives worse (45%), while a similar proportion reported that these changes made their lives better (37%; See Appendix tables 5.1 and 5.2).

### 3.2.2 Change in household income

#### 3.2.2.1 *Change in household income during the pandemic*

In 2021 we asked participants whether their gross household income had decreased, increased or did not change since the start of the pandemic (March 2020). Across the country, about 30% reported a decrease, 30% reported an increase, and 40% reported no change. Income changes were similar in Victoria (i.e. 33% decrease, 26% increase, 42% no change) to the rest of the country.

The comparable question in the previous survey asked only about decreased income since the start of the pandemic. The proportions of people who reported an income decrease in 2020 and 2021 were 39% and 30%, respectively.

Income decrease was compared across household income categories in 2021 and 2020 (Figure 3-32). In 2021, those on a household incomes of less than \$101k lost a third of their income compared to those on a household income above 101k who had lost about a quarter of their income. This pattern was different in 2020, with all income groups losing more than a third of their household income, with the most severe losses reported in the \$60k-\$100k group (43.7%).

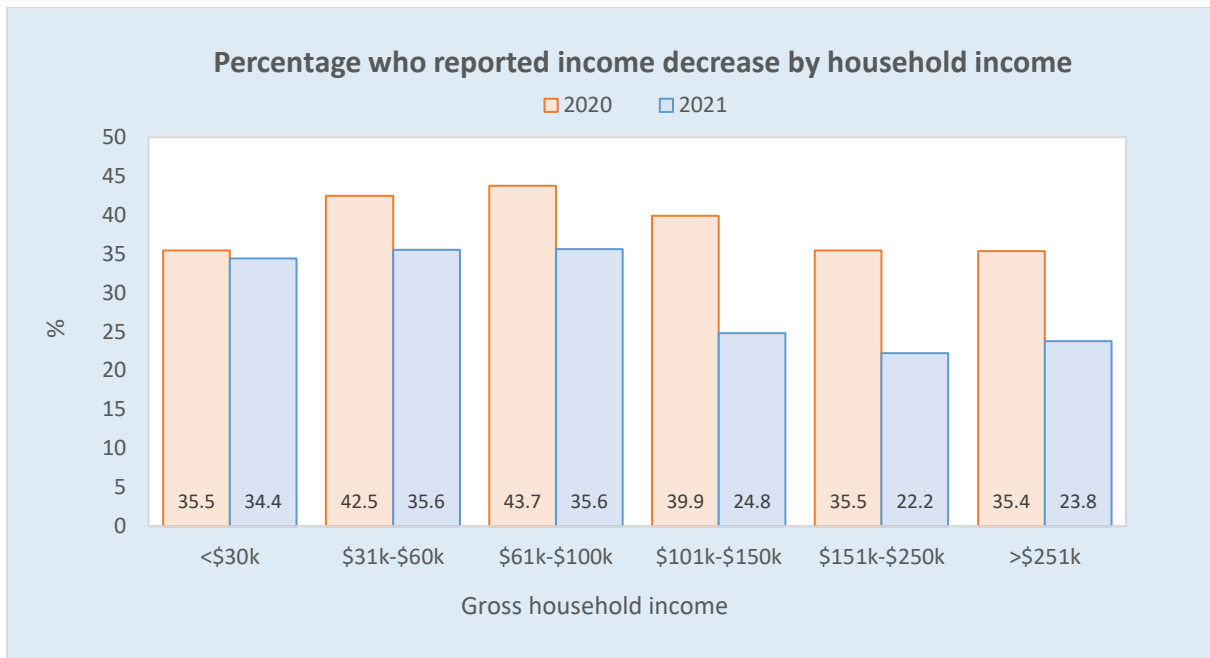


Figure 3-32 Percentage who reported income decrease by household income in 2020 and 2021

In both years of the pandemic, decreased income was most commonly reported in the youngest age groups and less commonly reported in the oldest age groups (Figure 3-33).

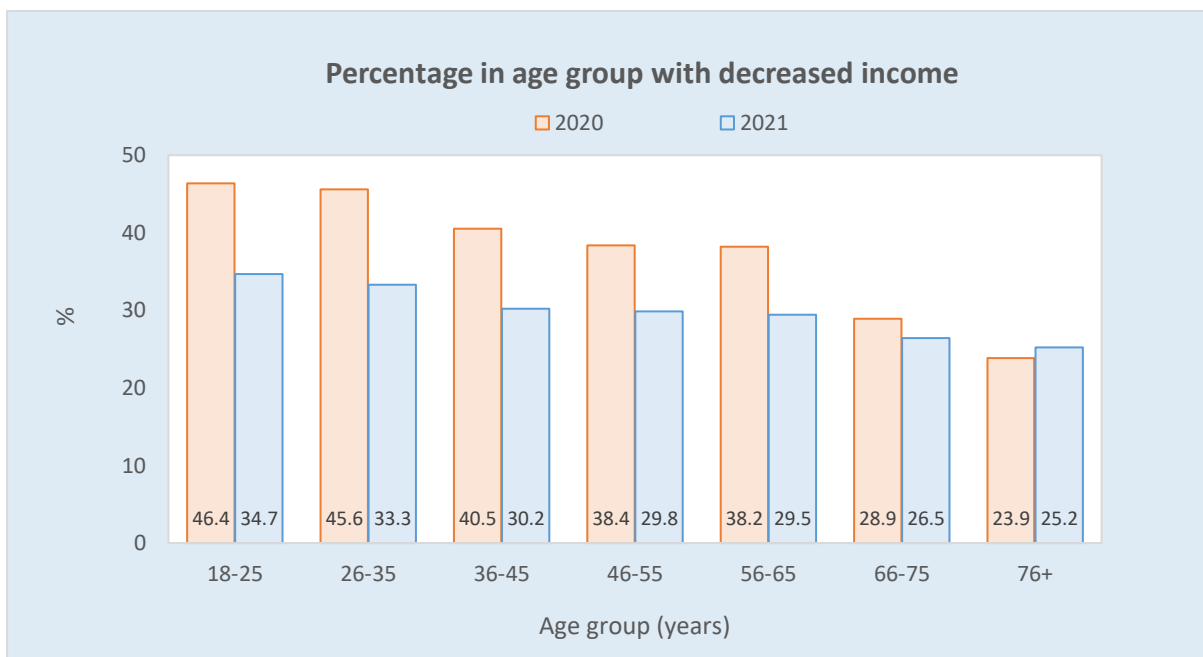


Figure 3-33 Percentage who reported income decrease by age groups in 2020 and 2021

When decreased income was examined by household composition, it was more severe among participants living with other non-family members or with parents, and less severe for participants living alone or with children only (Figure 3-34).

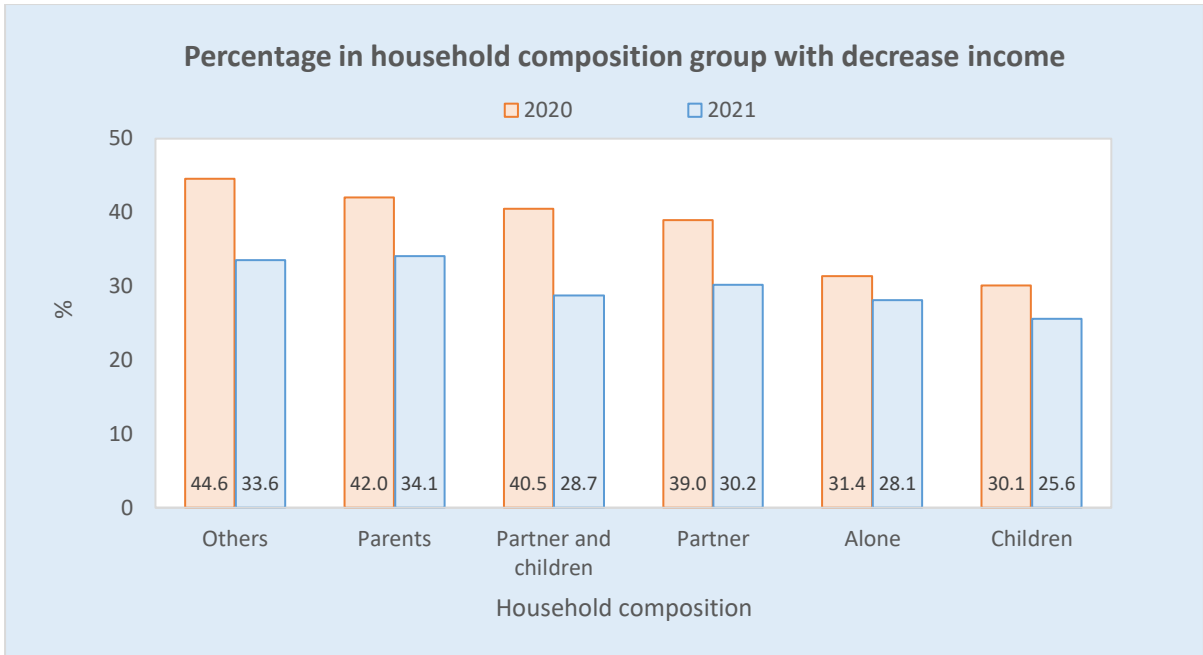


Figure 3-34 Percentage who reported decreased income by household composition in 2020 and 2021



**Research Question 1:**

**Was change in household income related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?**

**3.2.2.2 Income change and PWI**

When we compared household income change (i.e. increased or decreased) to no change, only those who experienced a decreased income had notably different PWI scores. Specifically, those with decreased income had lower PWI scores (4pp) that were below the normative range (Figure 3-35).

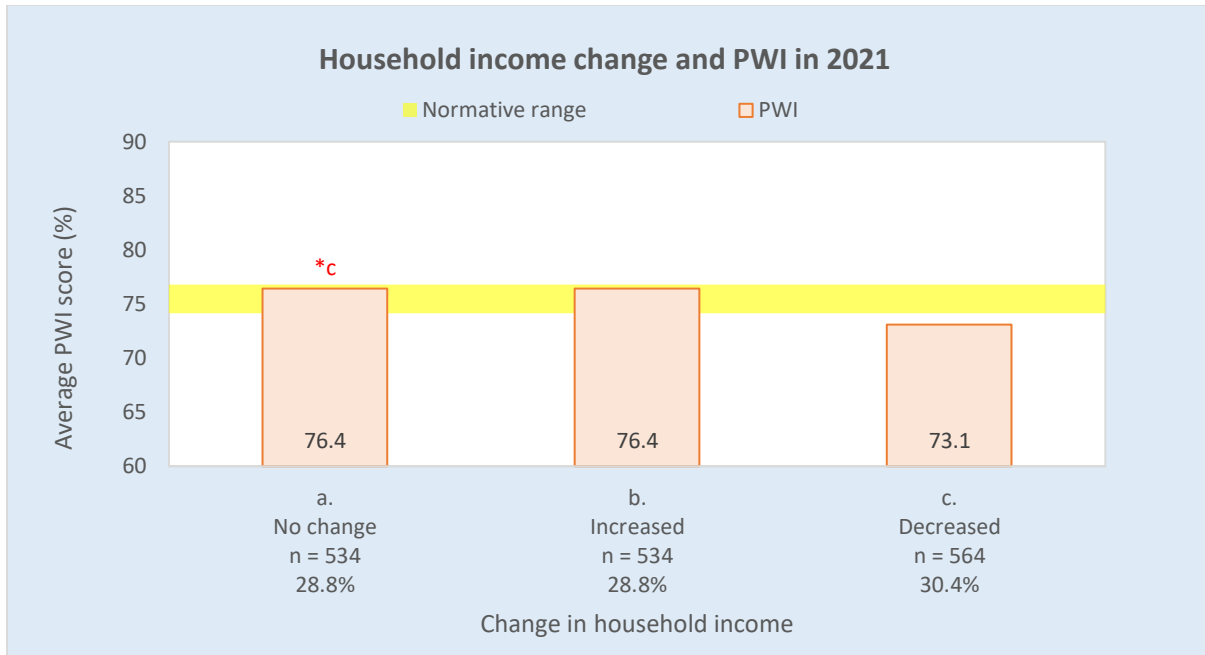


Figure 3-35 Household income change and PWI in 2021

**3.2.2.3 Income change and PWI domains**

Similarly, when we compared the scores on PWI domains by household income change (i.e. increased or decreased) to no change, only those who experienced a decrease in income had meaningfully different scores on the PWI domains. Specifically, compared to those whose income did not change, those with a decreased household income reported a decrease of more than 5 pp on four domains: Standard of Living, Achieving in Life, Community Connectedness, and Future Security (Figure 3-36).

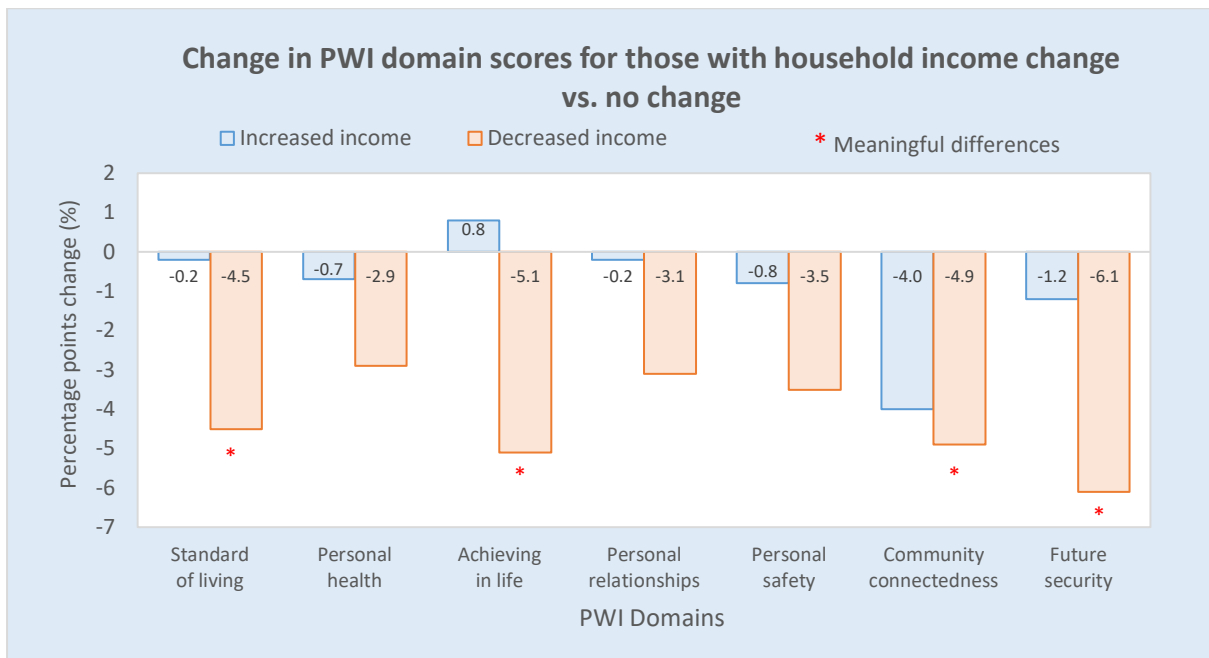


Figure 3-36 Change in PWI domain scores by groups with income change versus those with no income change

**Research Question 2:**

**Was the relationship between decreased income and PWI different in 2020 and 2021?**

Slightly different questions were asked about income change in 2020 and 2021. Thus, we collapsed the ‘increased income’ and ‘no change’ groups from 2021 into a ‘no decrease’ group. This allowed us to compare PWI scores in those without a decrease in income to those with a decrease across 2020 and 2021. In 2020, PWI scores were similar for those whose income did not change and those who lost income. However, in 2021, those who lost income had meaningfully lower PWI scores compared to those whose income did not change (Figure 3-37).

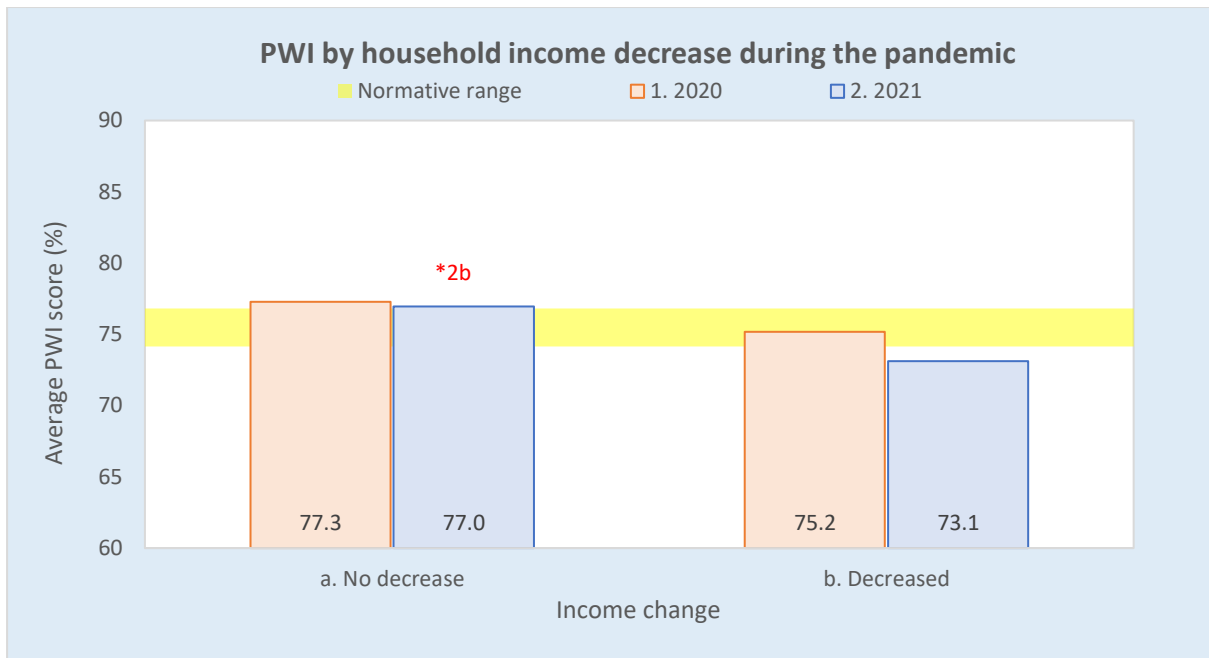


Figure 3-37 PWI scores across by decreased income (yes/no) in 2020 and 2021

### 3.2.3 Mental distress

#### 3.2.3.1 Mental distress over time

Mental distress levels were similar on the anxiety and stress measures in both pandemic years (no depression data collected in 2020). Scores across all three mental distress measures were comparable in Victoria (i.e. the only state in lockdown during most of the data collection period), relative to the rest of the country (Table 3-3). However, scores were approximately 10 points higher (i.e. worse) during the pandemic on all three measures compared to 2013.

Table 3-3 Mental distress in 2021, 2020 and 2013.

	Mental distress (range 0-100)		
	Anxiety	Stress	Depression
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
<b>2021</b>			
Australia	42.8 (28.1)	46.4 (27.4)	30.1 (27.9)
Victoria only	42.6 (28.1)	46.8 (27.9)	30.7 (28.2)
<b>2020</b>			
Australia	44.8 (26.2)	44.2 (27.2)	n/a
<b>2013</b>			
Australia	30.9 (25.8)	35.2 (25.8)	22.6 (24.5)

N's range from 1,959–1,966

**Research Question 3:**

**Was mental distress related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?**

To answer this question, we looked at those with ‘high levels’ (i.e.  $\geq 75^{\text{th}}$  percentile) of mental distress compared to ‘others’ (i.e. reference group).

**3.2.3.2 Mental distress in 2021**

Mental distress across all three measures was most commonly reported in those aged under 35 years (Figure 3-38), particularly for depression.

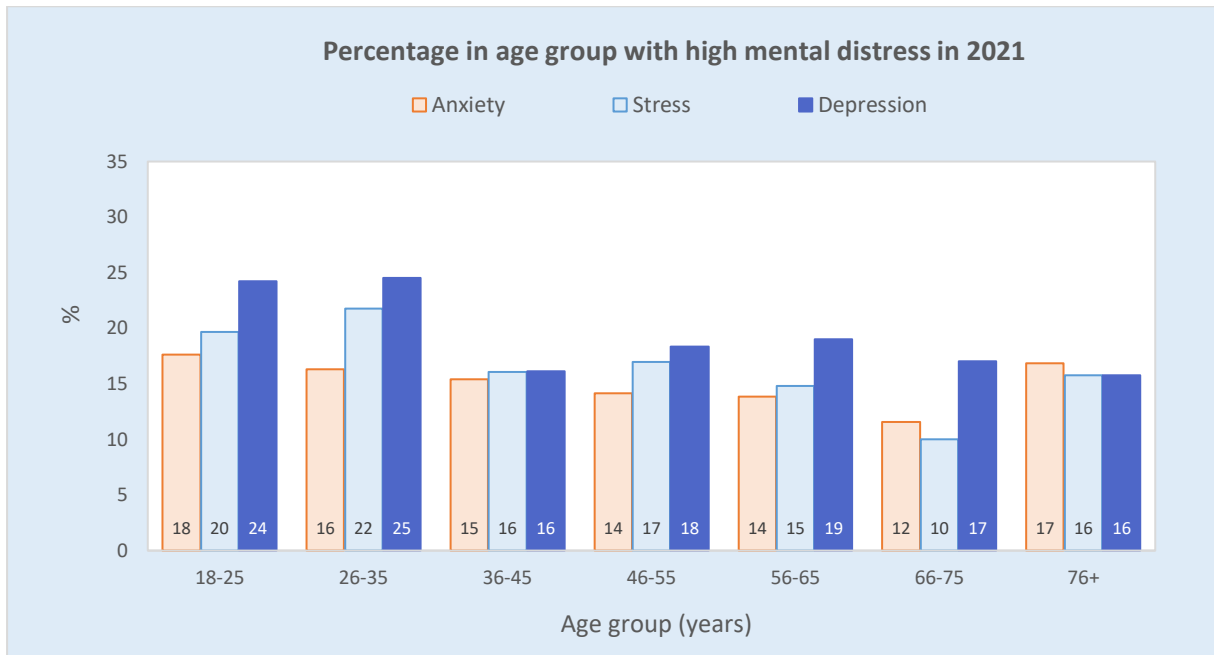


Figure 3-38 Percentage in each age group with high mental distress in 2021

When examined across household composition groups, participants who lived in partnered households consistently had fewer people reporting high levels of anxiety, stress and depression (Figure 3-39). Participants who lived with other non-family members had the largest proportions reporting high anxiety and stress levels. Participants who lived with parents had the largest proportions reporting high depression levels.

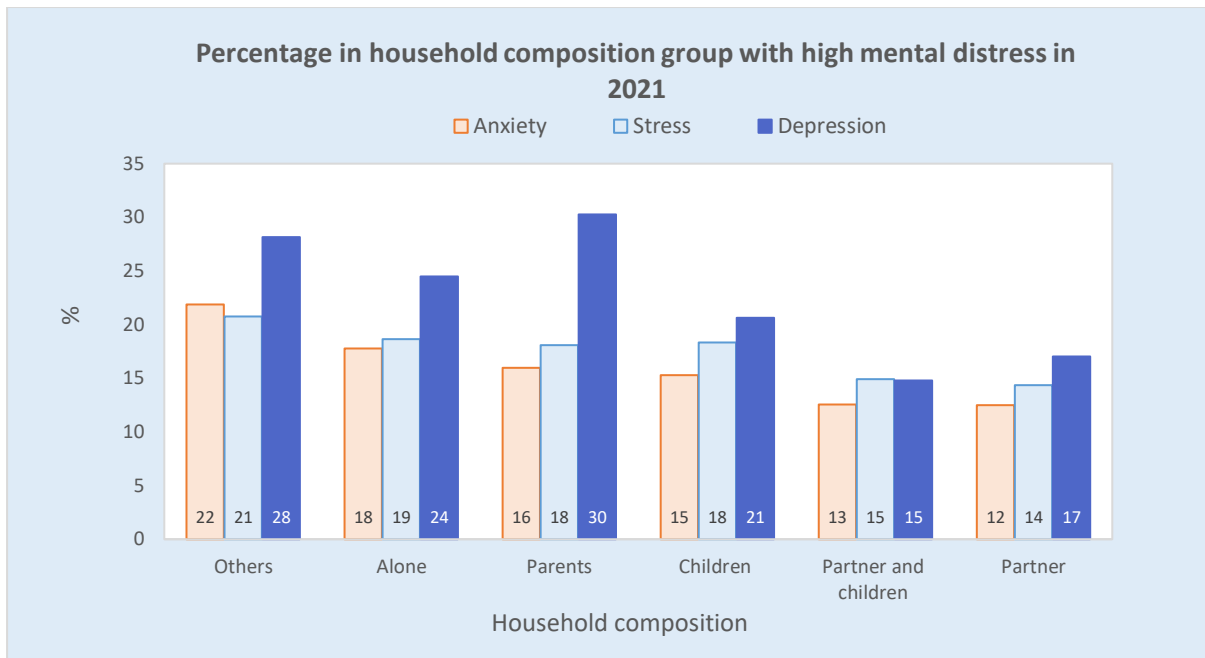


Figure 3-39 Percentage in each household composition group with high mental distress in 2021

### 3.2.3.3 Mental distress and PWI

Across all three types of mental distress, PWI scores were markedly lower in those with 'high levels' of mental distress, when compared to 'others' (Figure 3-40). PWI scores for those with high levels of mental distress were below the normative range on all three measures.

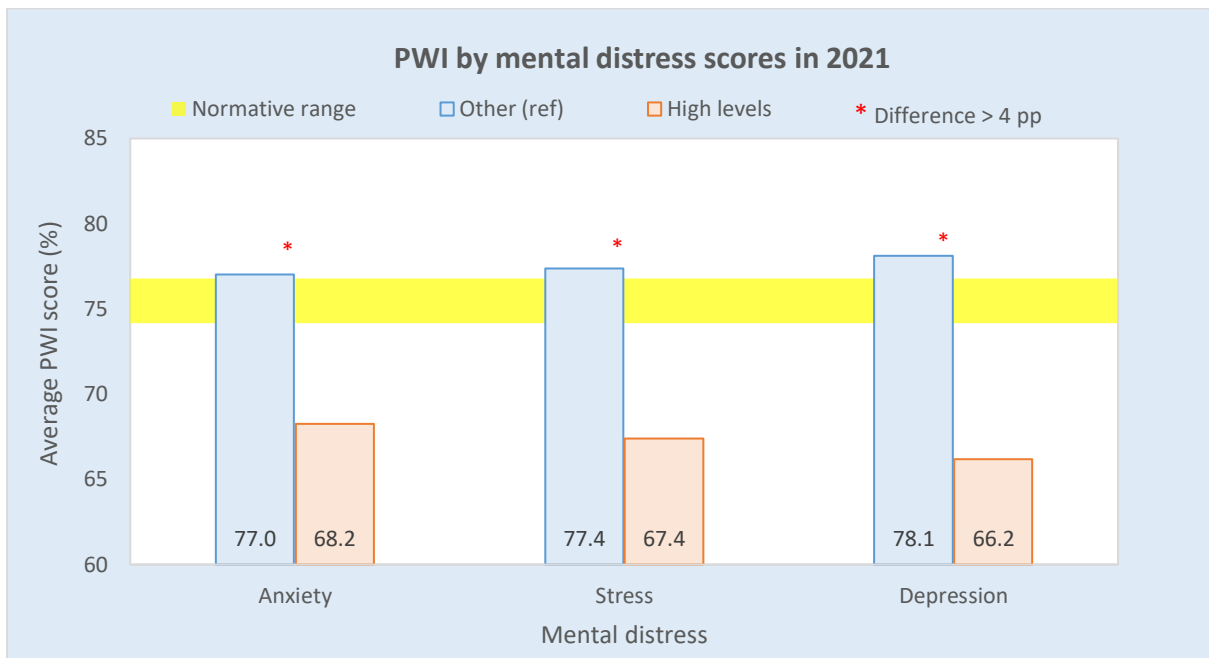


Figure 3-40 Mental distress and PWI scores in 2021

### 3.2.3.4 Mental distress and PWI domains

For all three measures, those with high levels of mental distress had meaningfully lower scores across all PWI domains compared to others (Figure 3-41). The largest difference was in the Achieving in Life domain on all three measures. For anxiety and stress, the second largest difference was observed for the Future Security domain, whereas for depression it was observed for the Personal Relationships domain.

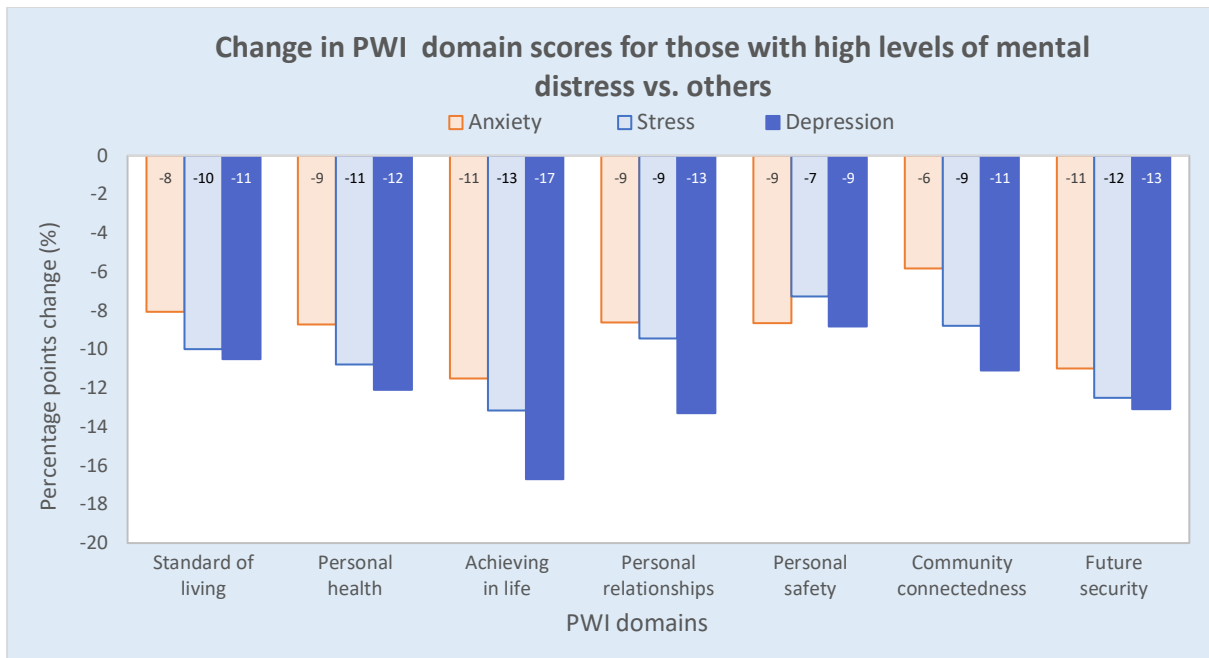


Figure 3-41 Change in PWI domain scores for those with high levels of mental distress vs. others

**Research Question 4:**

**Was the relationship between mental distress and PWI different across 2021, 2020 and 2013?**

At all time points, those with high levels of metal distress had PWI scores below the normative range, with the exception of those with high levels of anxiety and stress in 2020 (Figure 3-42). Those with high levels of anxiety had PWI scores within the normative range in 2020, which was meaningfully higher than other years. Similarly, PWI scores for those with high levels of stress in 2020 were meaningfully higher than in 2021, although they remained below the normative range.

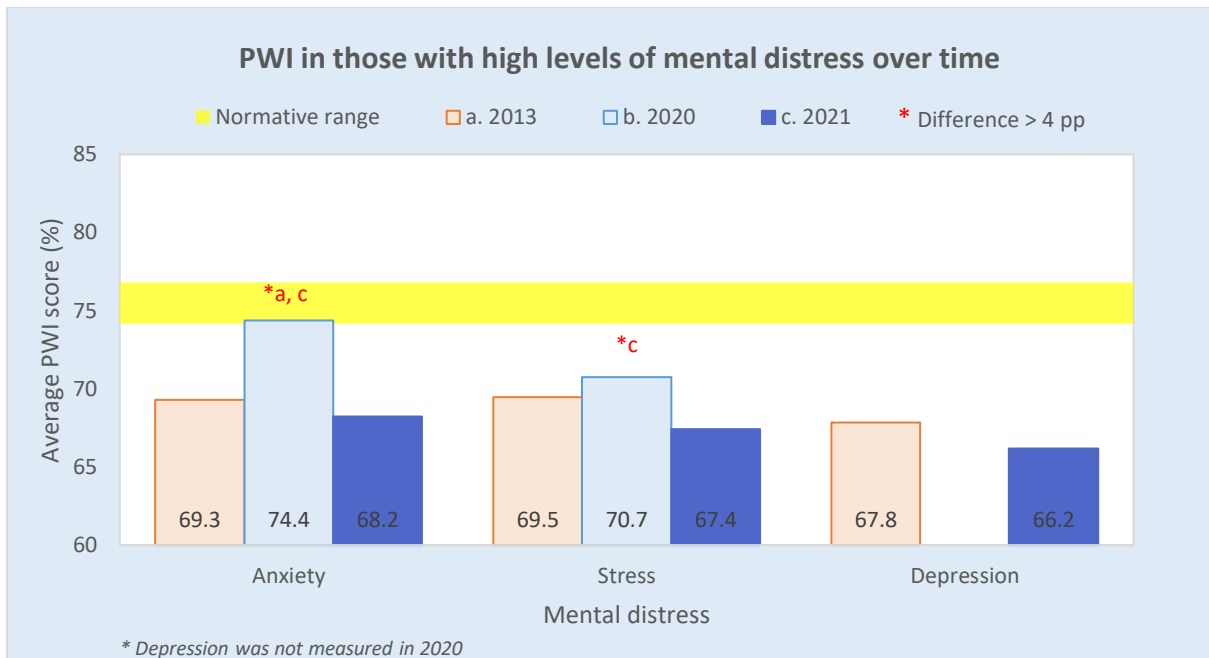


Figure 3-42 PWI scores for the 'high mental distress' group over time

### 3.2.4 Social connectedness

#### 3.2.4.1 Social connectedness over time

In 2021, social connectedness scores were similar in Victoria to the national level (Table 3-4). However, social connectedness did differ overtime, with the highest scores recorded prior to the pandemic. Scores were also lower in 2020 compared to 2021.

Table 3-4 Social connectedness in 2021, 2020 and 2019

Social Connectedness - Mean (SD)	
<b>2021</b>	
Australia	69.2 (21.7)
Victoria only	68.7 (21.4)
<b>2020</b>	
Australia	63.5 (23.3)
<b>2019</b>	
Australia	74.6 (18.5)

N's range from 1961 - 1966,



**Research Question 5:**

**Was social connectedness related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?**

To answer this question, we looked at those with 'high levels' (i.e.  $\geq 75^{\text{th}}$  percentile) of social connectedness compared to 'others' (i.e. reference group).

**3.2.4.2 Social connectedness in 2021**

Those who were aged 55 years and under in 2021 were the least likely to report high social connectedness levels (Figure 3-43).

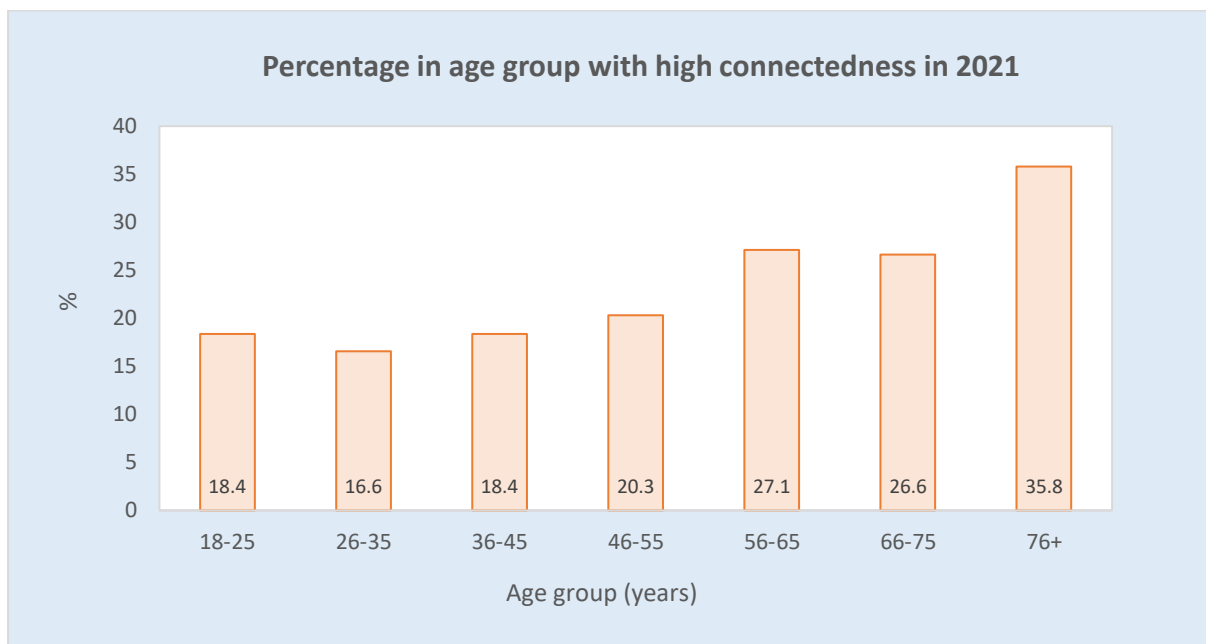


Figure 3-43 Percentage in each age group with high social connectedness in 2021

Participants who reported living with their partner, partner and children, or with children only, were most likely to report high social connectedness (Figure 3-44). Participants who lived with other non-family members were least likely to report high social connectedness.

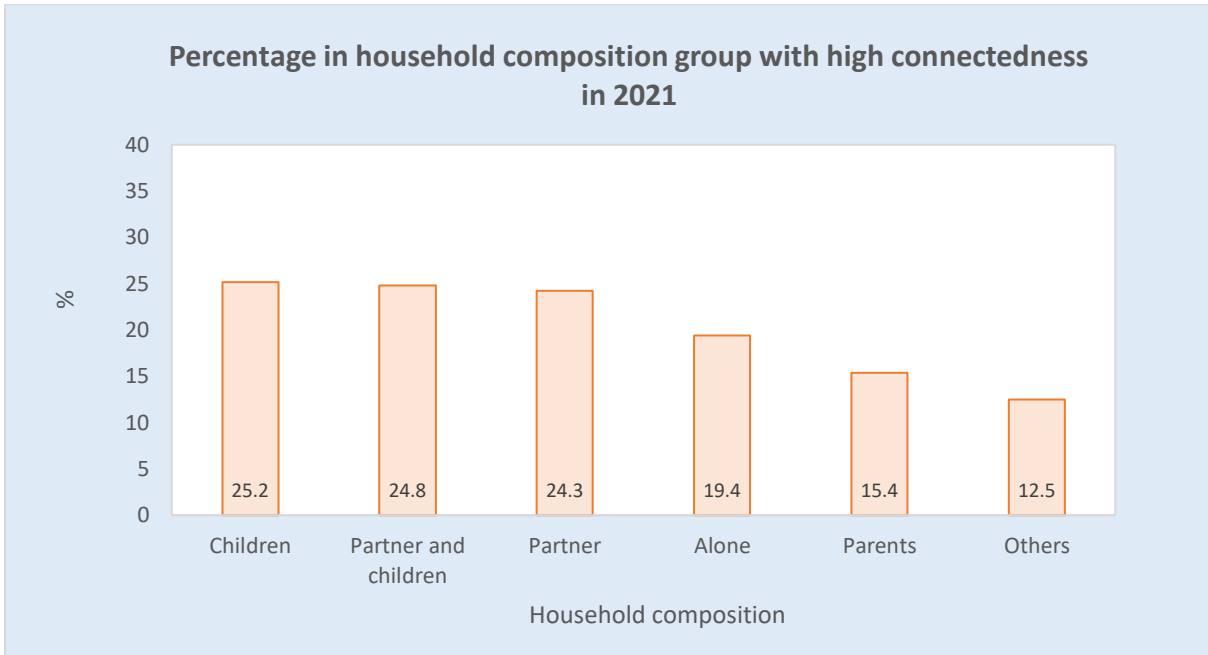


Figure 3-44 Percentage in each household composition group with high social connectedness in 2021

### 3.2.4.3 Social connectedness and PWI

PWI scores for those with greater social connectedness were meaningfully higher (11pp), compared to ‘others’ (Figure 3-45). Of note, those without high levels of social connectedness had PWI scores just below the normative range.

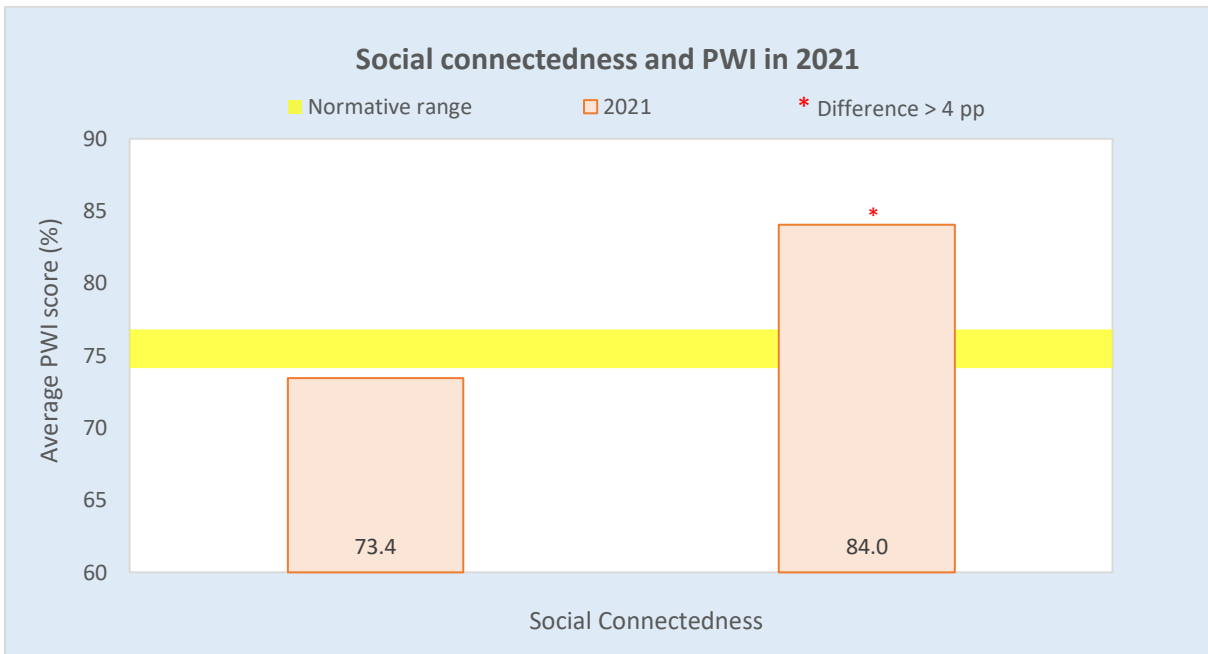


Figure 3-45 Social connectedness and PWI in 2021

### 3.2.5 Social connectedness and PWI domains

Across all domains, scores were meaningfully higher for those with high levels of social connectedness, compared to others (Figure 3-46). The most marked differences were seen for the Community Connectedness and the Relationships domains.

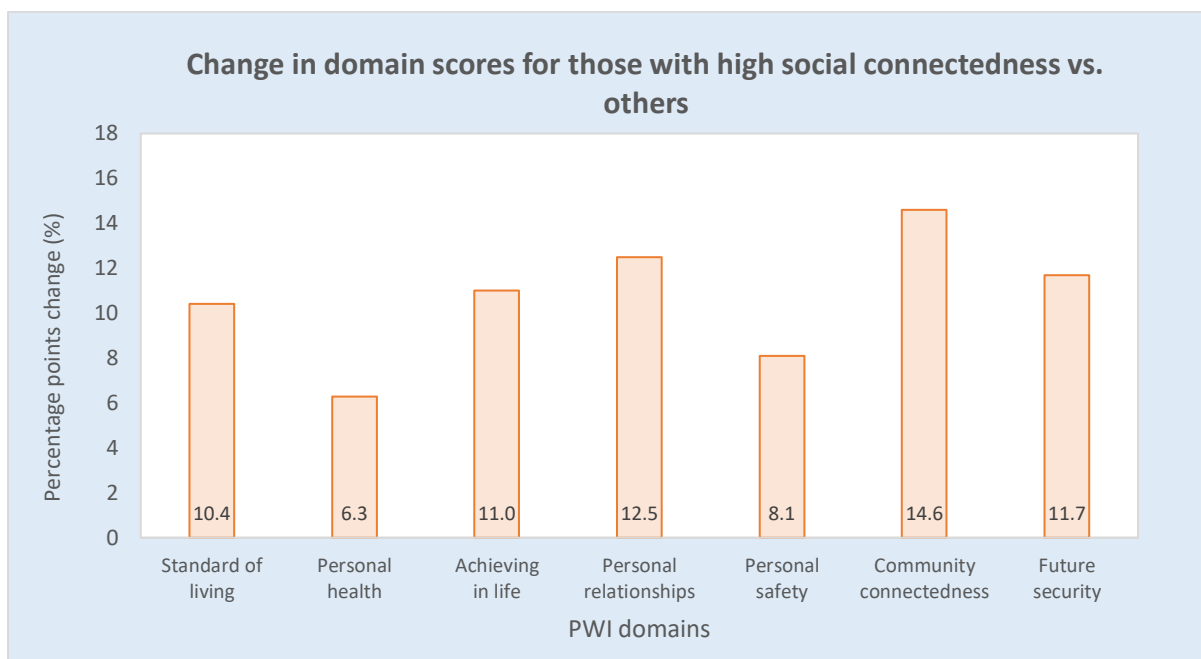


Figure 3-46 Change in PWI domain scores for those with high social connectedness vs. others

#### Research Question 6:

**Was the relationship between social connectedness and PWI different in 2021, 2020 and 2019?**

Across all years, those with high social connectedness had higher PWI score compared to others. In 2019 and 2021, scores for 'others' (i.e. those without high social connectedness) fell below the normative range, but for 2020 they were within the normative range (Figure 3-47).

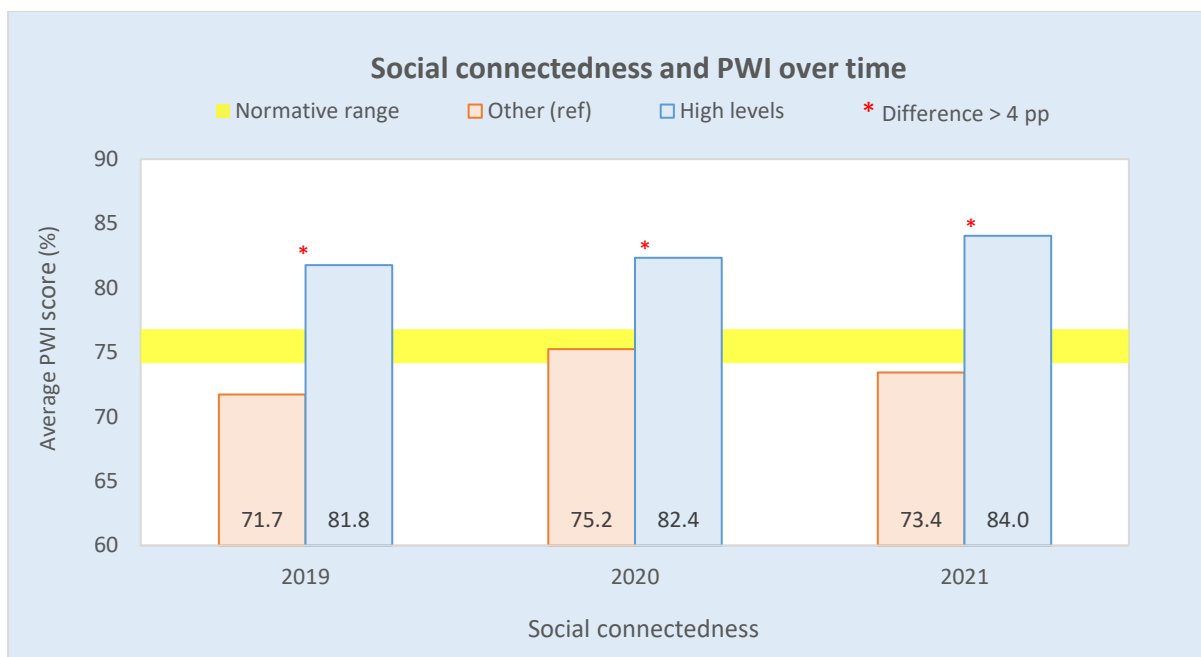


Figure 3-47 Social connectedness and PWI over time

### 3.2.6 Resilience

The resilience question was asked for the first time in 2021. Scores were similar in Victoria to the rest of the country (Table 3-5).

Table 3-5 Resilience in 2021

Resilience - Mean (SD)	
2021	
Australia	69.2 (21.7)
Victoria only	69.7 (17.3)

#### Research Question 7:

#### Was resilience related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?

To answer this question, we looked at those with 'high levels' (i.e.  $\geq 75^{\text{th}}$  percentile) of resilience compared to 'others' (i.e. reference group).

#### 3.2.6.1 Resilience in 2021

Participants aged under 25 years were least likely to report high resilience (Figure 3-48). The proportion of participants who reported high resilience increased with age.

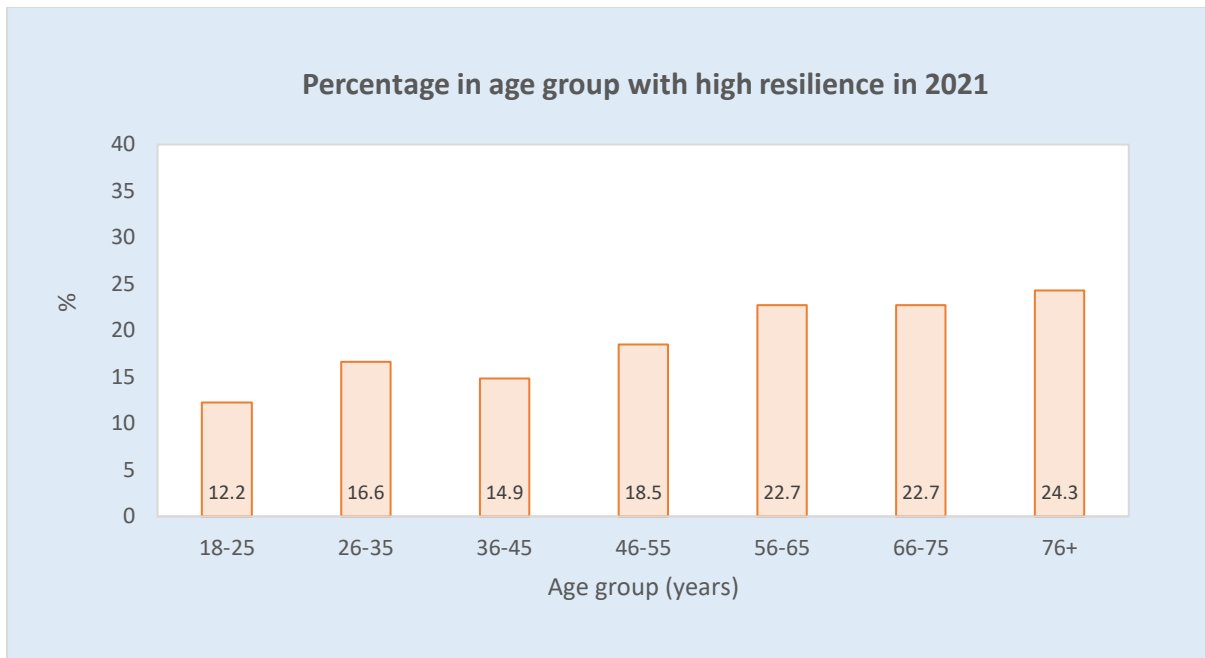


Figure 3-48 Percentage in each age group with high resilience in 2021

Participants who lived with their partner and children, partners only or children only were more likely to report high levels of resilience (Figure 3-49).

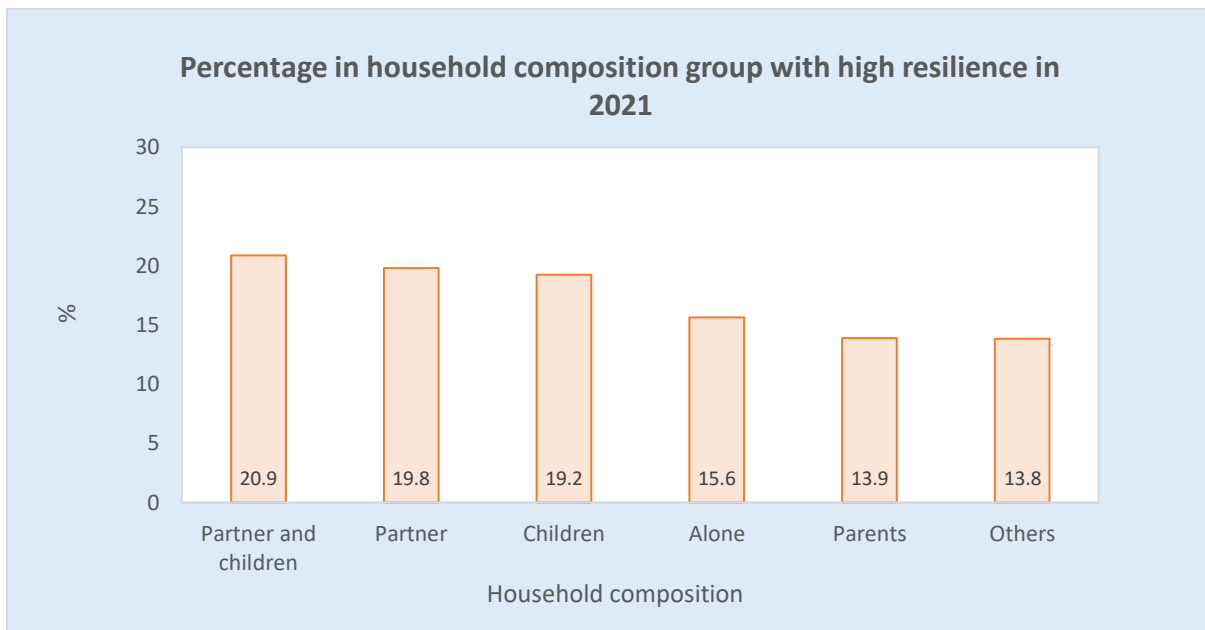


Figure 3-49 Percentage in each household composition group with high resilience in 2021

### 3.2.6.2 Resilience and PWI

Those with high levels of resilience had meaningfully higher PWI scores compared to others, which were above the normative range (Figure 3-50).

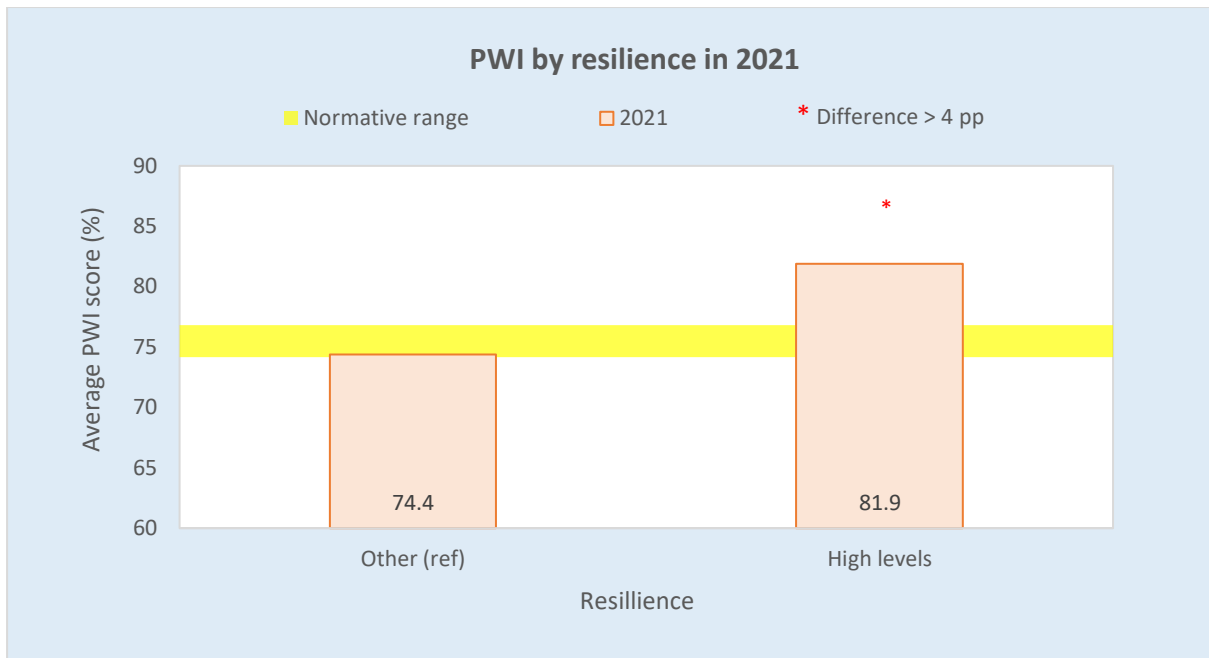


Figure 3-50 PWI scores and resilience in 2021

### 3.2.7 Resilience and PWI domains

Those with high levels of resilience, compared to others, had meaningful higher scores on all PWI domains (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The largest differences were seen for the Achieving in Life and the Personal Relationships domains.

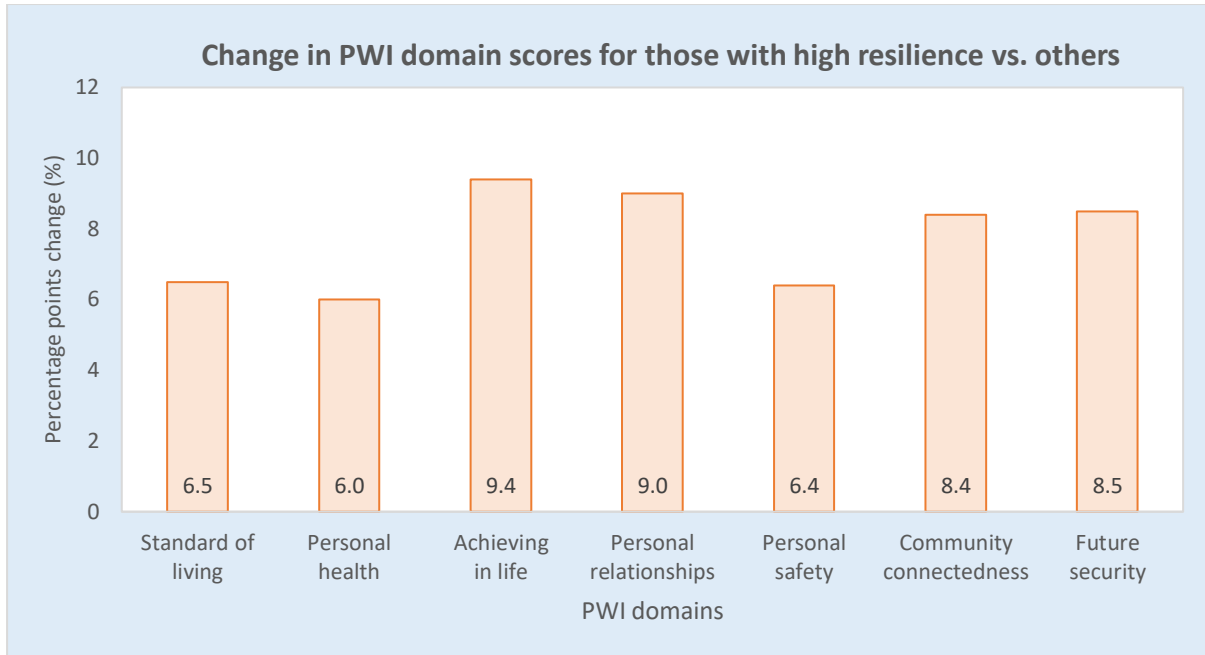


Figure 3-51 Change in PWI domain scores for those with high resilience

### 3.2.8 Sense of Achieving Index

#### 3.2.8.1 Sense of Achieving Index in 2021

The four questions measuring a sense of achieving were asked for the first time in 2021. Summary data are presented in Table 3-6.

A correlation coefficient and a principal components factor analysis established that these four items could be combined into a single index measure, with good scale reliability, called the “Sense of Achieving Index” (refer to Appendix section 5.6). The Sense of Achieving Index scores ranged from 0-100. Participants typically had a relatively high sense of achieving, although 10% of the sample reported a sense of achieving of 50 or less. Scores were similar in Victoria to the rest of the country.

Table 3-6 Sense of achieving in 2021

Sense of achieving individual items	Mean (SD)
I am satisfied with how I spend my time	71.6 (20.4)
The things that I do are worthwhile	76.0 (18.4)
My life is under control	75.3 (22.5)
I feel a sense of purpose in my life	76.0 (21.5)
Sense of Achieving index	
Australia 2021	74.8 (17.4)
Victoria only 2021	73.5 (17.9)

N's range from 1,953 – 1,964

The Sense of Achieving Index was most strongly related to the GLS (*correlation coefficient* ( $r$ ) = 0.65), PWI ( $r$  = 0.69) and satisfaction with Achieving in Life PWI domain, when examined across all the individual wellbeing domains ( $r$  = 0.68). The strength of the relationships between the Sense of Achieving Index and other individual wellbeing domains were small to moderate ( $r$  = 0.36 - 0.52) (see Appendix table 5.25).

**Research Question 8:**

**Is a sense of achieving related to subjective wellbeing in 2021?**

To answer this question, we looked at those with 'high levels' (i.e.  $\geq 75^{\text{th}}$  percentile) on the Sense of Achieving Index, compared to the rest of the sample ('others').

**3.2.8.2 Sense of Achieving Index in 2021**

The proportion of participants who reported a high scores on the Sense of Achieving Index was lowest in those aged 45 years and under (Figure 3-52). Participants aged 45 years and older were increasing likely to reporting a high scores on the Sense of Achieving Index.

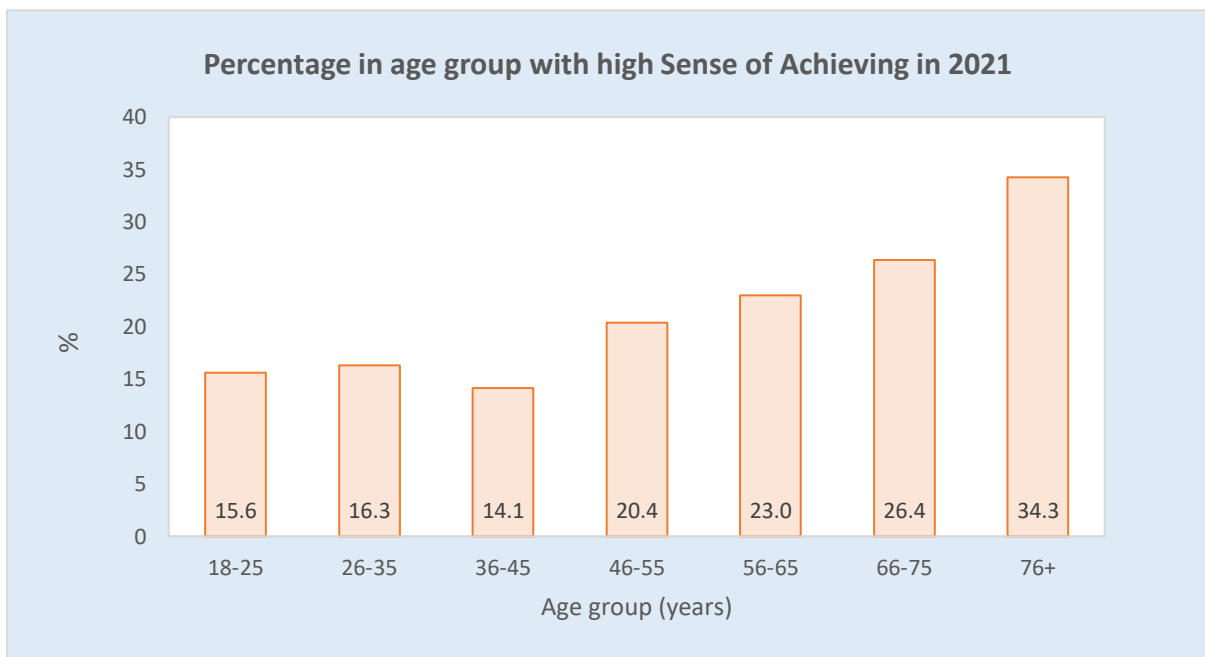


Figure 3-52 Percentage in each age group with high sense of achieving in 2021

Participants who lived with their partner only were most likely to report a high scores on the Sense of Achieving Index (Figure 3-53).



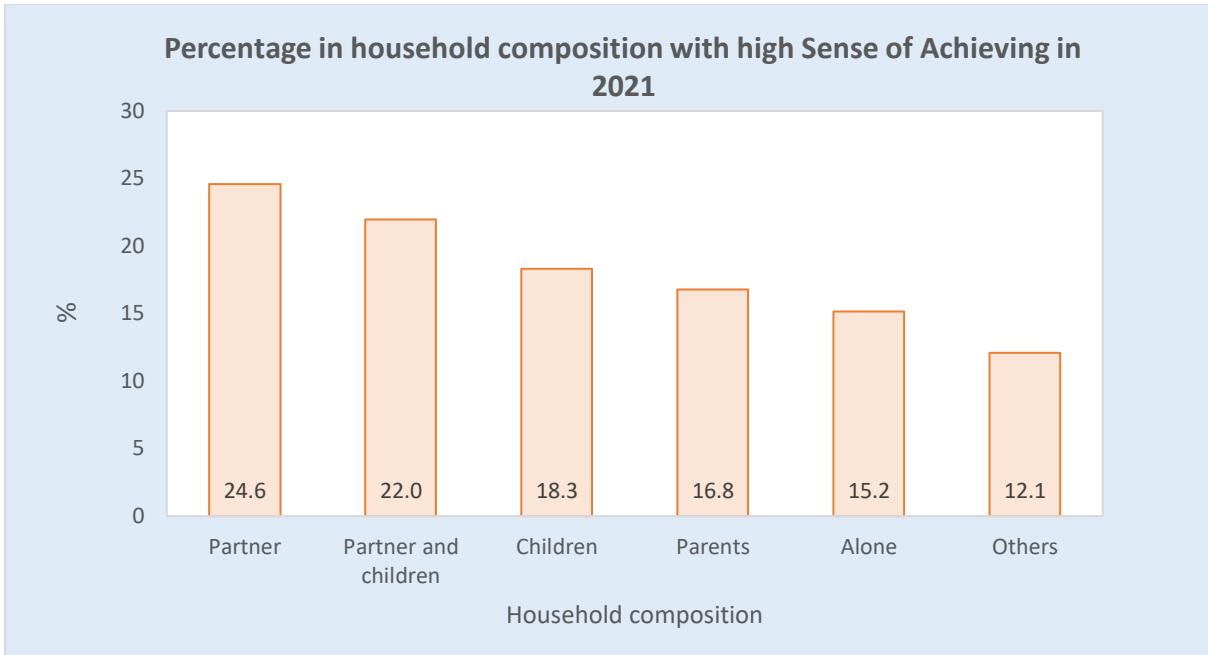


Figure 3-53 Percentage in each household composition group with high sense of achieving in 2021

### 3.2.8.3 Sense of Achieving Index and PWI

Those with high scores on the Sense of Achieving Index also had markedly higher PWI scores compared to 'others' (Figure 3-54). Of note, PWI scores were above the normative range for the high sense of achieving group, while for others they fell below the normative range.

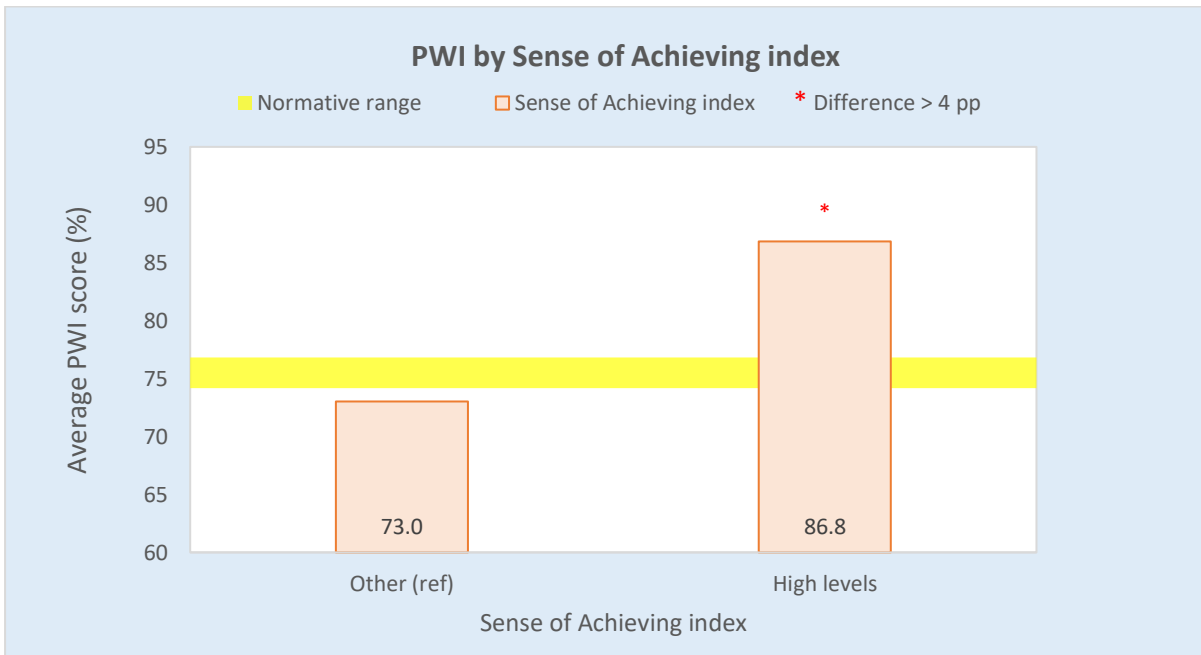


Figure 3-54 PWI scores by Sense of Achieving Index

### 3.2.8.4 Sense of Achieving Index and PWI domains

Those with high scores on the Sense of Achieving Index also had meaningfully higher scores on all PWI domains compared to others (Figure 3-55). The largest differences were seen for the Achieving in Life and the Personal Relationships domains.

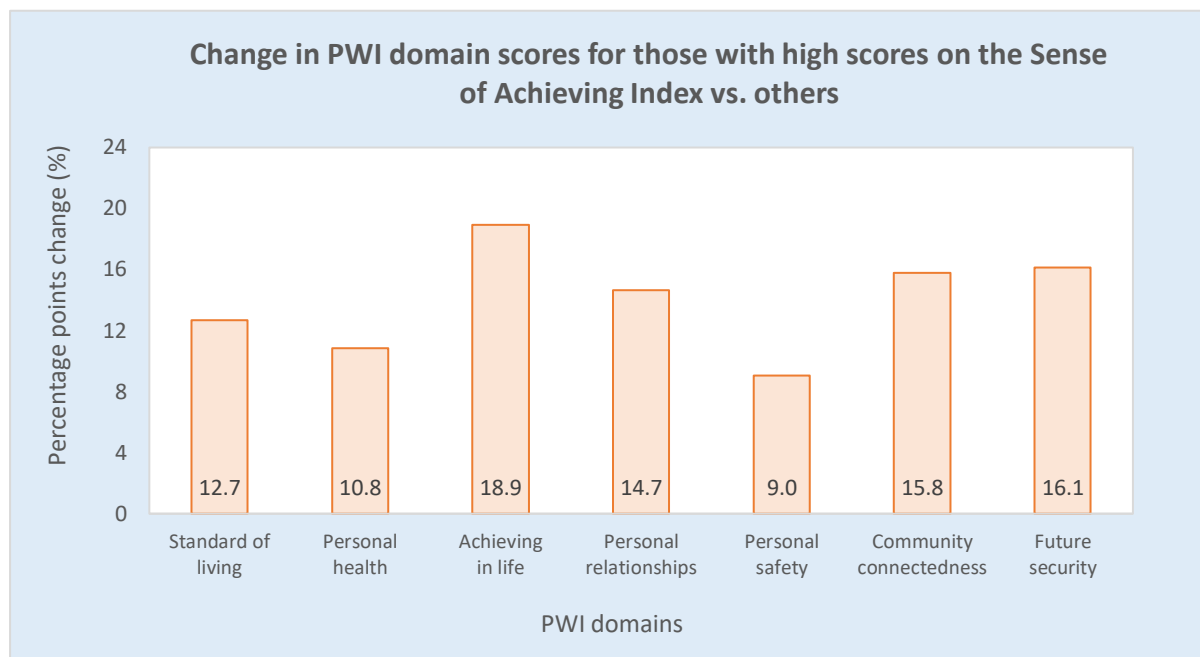


Figure 3-55 Change in PWI domain scores for those who score high on the Sense of Achieving Index

### 3.2.9 Relative strength of associations for different aspects of life and PWI in 2021

#### Research Question 9:

**Was there an aspect of life that was more strongly associated with PWI in 2021?**

As a final step, we were interested whether any one of the five aspects of life examined in 2021 had a stronger relationship with the PWI than others. The dichotomised variable (i.e. high levels) of income loss, mental distress (anxiety, stress and depression), Sense of Achieving Index, social connectedness and resilience were analysed in a single model with PWI. We also included background demographic factors in the model that we know have a moderate to large association with participant PWI scores. These included age group, household income, full time work status and marital status.

When all of these factors were examined together in the same model, three had meaningful associations with PWI (Figure 3-56). After taking all other factors into consideration, participants with high scores on the Sense of Achieving Index and social connectedness factors had PWI scores that were 10pp and 6 pp greater than those without high levels, respectively. On the other hand, those with elevated levels of depression had PWI scores that were 5pp lower than those without high levels. This final model highlights the importance of these life areas for subjective wellbeing, as measured by the PWI.

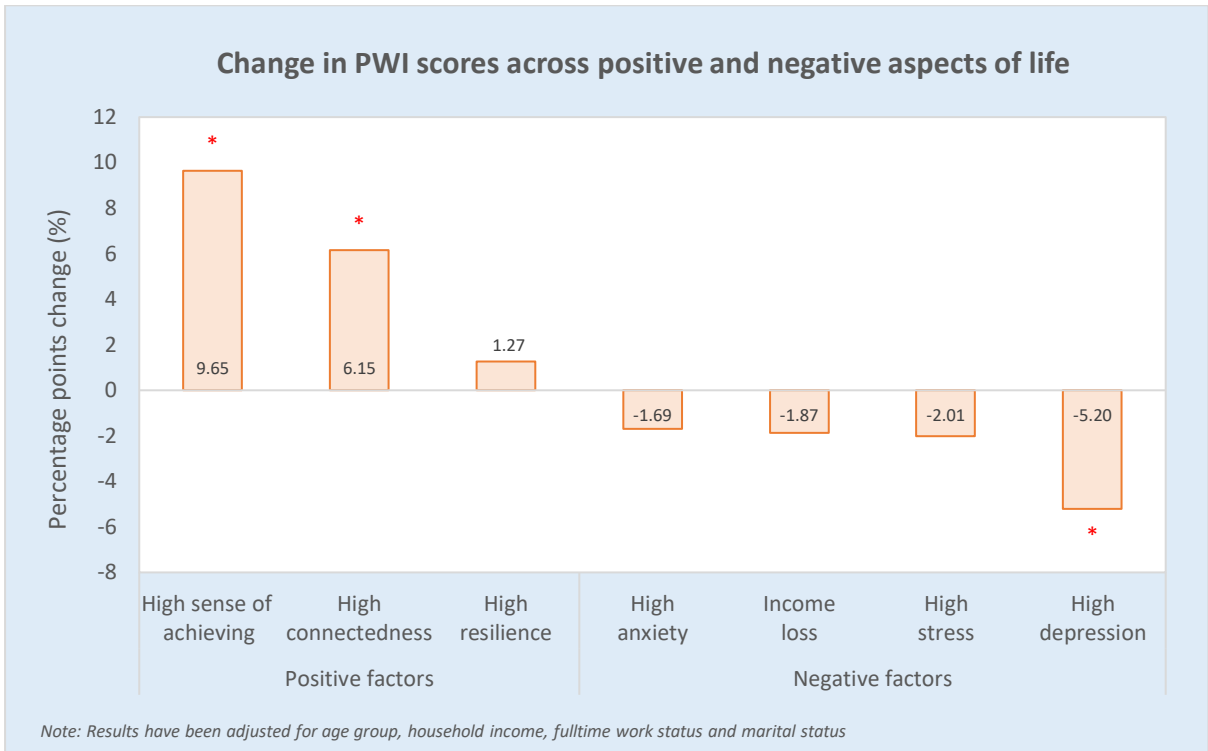


Figure 3-56 Change in PWI scores across positive and negative aspects of life

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## 4 CONCLUSION

### Subjective wellbeing during the pandemic

The 2021 Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey of 2,000 Australians was conducted between 20 May and 17 June 2021. At the start of this data collection phase there was no identified community transmission of COVID-19 in Australia. However, five days after data collection commenced, it was reported in the community in Victoria, triggering a lockdown, lasting throughout data collection in Victoria. It is also notable that a number of income support measures provided by the Australian Government in 2020 had also ended (e.g. JobKeeper wage subsidy and some social security measures) (Klapdor & Lotric, 2022). This context is important for considering people's subjective wellbeing in the second year of the pandemic.

Despite being over a year into the pandemic, Australians' subjective wellbeing at the population-level continued to fare well in 2021. The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) remained in the middle of the normative range and most PWI domains continued similar patterns to recent years. The exception to this was satisfaction with health, which fell from very high levels in 2020 to below the normative range in 2021, for the first time on record. This may reflect people's concern for their health as more infectious and deadly variants of the COVID-19 were emerging around the world. Equally, it may be a sign of the toll pandemic related changes were having on people's day-to-day lives (e.g. increased struggles working from home with young children, delays in elective surgery, isolation from relatives and/or increased levels of mental distress).

Interestingly, Global Life Satisfaction (GLS), which measures people's overall satisfaction with life, did not fare well in 2021, falling below the normative range. However, there has been a downward pattern in scores on this measure over the last five years. Thus, this doesn't appear unique to the pandemic but will be interesting to track in future surveys. In contrast, satisfaction with Global National Wellbeing (GNW), which measures people's overall satisfaction with life in Australia, rose during the pandemic.

Similarly, satisfaction with the National Wellbeing Index (NWI), rose during the pandemic from low scores in 2019, to above the normative range in 2020, remaining high in 2021. Across all NWI domains, satisfaction was within the middle or at the top of the normative range during the pandemic. Such high levels of satisfaction on the NWI likely reflect strong public approval at the time for the government's management of the pandemic. After all, at this time Australia had largely been spared from vast community transmission and COVID-19 deaths compared to much of the world. The slight, but noticeable, decline on scores from 2020 to 2021, may reflect emerging concerns about the national management of the pandemic (e.g. vaccine roll out and/or withdrawal of many of the social support measures). Equally, it could reflect the community tiring of Australia's strict rules to avoid widespread community transmission (e.g. lockdowns and restricted boarder policies).

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## How subjective wellbeing fared across demographic groups and life areas during the pandemic

### Socio-demographic groups

The varied impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across different socio-demographic groups has been well documented across the world and in Australia. For example, recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that people from lower socio-economic areas are three times more likely to die from COVID-19, compared to those from high socio-economic areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

This pattern follows the well-established social gradient of health, which we have also shown is consistently across subjective wellbeing over the past 21 years. For example, our data consistently show that those who are unemployed, have low household incomes or live in more non-traditional households (e.g. children only), typically report PWI scores below the normative range.

During the pandemic, we saw many of these patterns continue across socio-demographic groups. However, in 2020 there were some clear differences among certain groups compared to 2019 and 2021. For example, those with low incomes (i.e. <\$30k), who were unemployed, lived with children only (i.e. likely single parents), or had experienced a sad life event, had notably higher PWI scores in 2020, compared to 2019 and 2021. One possible explanation for this notable rise in PWI scores for these demographic groups, may be related to the COVID-19 social supports that were in place during data collection in 2020. These supports provided extra financial support that lifted many out of poverty (Tingle, 2021).

One group who seemed to fare unexpectedly well during the pandemic were full time retirees, who had notably higher PWI scores in 2020 and 2021 compared to 2019. This is unlikely to be due to better economic circumstances and will be an interest group to examine in our next survey (Horigian, Schmidt, & Feaster, 2021; Lee, Cadigan, & Rhew, 2020; Owens et al., 2022).

### Life areas

When we examined life areas by household composition and age, there were consistent patterns for certain groups. Young adults (i.e. <35 years of age), those living with other non-family members, with parents or alone reported more mental distress and income loss. On the other hand, these groups reported less resilience, social connectedness, and sense of achieving. This is consistent with other research showing that young adults have been hit hard by the pandemic (Kwong et al., 2021), with high rates of mental health service use, job loss and upheaval of their lives.

Pre-pandemic data were available for mental distress and social connectedness, which showed increases from pre-pandemic to pandemic times on these measures. This is consistent with data showing a rise in mental health service use during the pandemic. However, pre-pandemic data on mental distress were collected in 2013, thus the increase during the pandemic may also reflect a more general rise in mental distress overtime (Richter, Wall, Bruen, & Whittington, 2019).

All life areas were related to PWI scores. However, when they were considered together with key demographics, three factors stood out. High sense of achieving, social connectedness and depression were most strongly linked to PWI. It is interesting that these factors still stood out even after considering key demographic variables.

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In addition, when the relationship between each life area was compared with PWI over time, 2020 stood out as different. Those with high levels of stress, anxiety or income loss in 2021 had meaningfully lower PWI compared to 2020. Similarly, those without high levels of social connectedness in 2020 had higher PWI scores than those in 2019 and 2021. This once again points to something different in 2020 that managed to protect subjective wellbeing in groups that over the past 21 years have typically had low PWI.

### Future directions

A lot has changed since May-June 2021, with COVID-19 contributing to nearly 5,000 deaths (as of 22 February 2022) and the Omicron variant now prevalent across the community in all Australian states. Whether subjective wellbeing in Australia will remain as resilient in 2022 remains to be seen in our upcoming survey.

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