
Australians' subjective wellbeing in 2023: age, income and carer inequities



Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI) – Survey 40 Summary Report

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BACKGROUND

Deakin University, in partnership with Australian Unity, has been monitoring the Subjective Wellbeing of Australian adults (18+) for the past 22 years through the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI). This monitoring has been achieved through 40 cross-sectional national surveys, collectively involving over 75,000 Australians since the AUWI launched in 2001.

Each year, we chart the natural history of personal and national wellbeing in Australia. In addition, we examine how these measures vary by demographic groups and other groupings of interest. In the latest 2023 survey, data collection was conducted between 7 June and 27 June 2023 and the special interest areas included mental distress and carer wellbeing. The topic of carer wellbeing was chosen given the growing role that carers, unpaid and paid, play in our ageing population (Australian Government, 2023). With the number of people in Australia aged 65 and over expected to more than double over the next 40 years, demand for care is rising (Treasury, 2023). Understanding the wellbeing implications of these developments on informal and professional carers is paramount.

The Australian social and political landscape in the first half of 2023, leading up to the data collection period, was marked by several challenges. One of these was cost-of-living pressures driven largely by global supply chain problems due to geopolitical conflicts and economic recovery post-COVID-19 (Tsiaplias & Wang, 2023).

The rising costs of essential goods and services, including housing, energy, and groceries, put a significant strain on household budgets. Over half of Australians reported feeling financially stressed, or just making ends meet, in February 2023 (Botha et al., 2023). However, this stress is not felt evenly across generations. For example, in the financial year ending in June 2023, living costs increased by 6-7% for people who were retired, but almost 10% for employees, who are more likely to have a mortgage and a family to support (ABS, 2023; Hawkins, 2023).

A second major event in the first half of 2023 was the decision to allow Australians to vote on a national bill to change the constitution to include an Indigenous Voice to Parliament through a referendum (Butler, 2023). Although voting did not take place until later in the year after data collection, heated debate was already raging (Roy Morgan, 2023).

The international stage was no less tumultuous, with international tensions and the ongoing war in Russia-Ukraine continuing to dominate headlines (e.g., Borger & Belam, 2023). Climate change impacts were also front of mind as the Northern Hemisphere entered what would be the hottest summer on record (Denning, 2023) and, at the time of data collection, Canadian wildfires blanketed much of North America in smoke (Dickie, 2023).

Amid these international challenges, there were also positive domestic developments. The May national budget announced a cost-of-living relief package to boost welfare support and payments for many, including those accessing JobSeeker, Austudy, Youth Allowance, rent assistance and single parent payments (Middleton, 2023). Aged-care workers also received a 15% pay rise (The Hon Mark Butler MP, 2023) and there was a huge investment in early childhood education and care, increasing government rebates substantially for most households (ELAA, 2023). The Fair Work Commission also announced increases in the Federal minimum wage and award rates (Hutchens & Chalmers, 2023).

Additionally, in Australia and abroad, we saw a return to near normalcy after three years of grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. In early May 2023, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared an end to the global health emergency (UN News, 2023).

The following summary report presents the key results from the 40th survey of the AUWI and highlights how Australians were faring against this backdrop in June 2023. The full report can be accessed at: <https://www.acqol.com.au/publications>

KEY RESULTS

A total of 2,011 Australians aged between 18 and 97 years (mean 48, SD 18; 49% female) from across the country (sampled to be geographically representative) took part in the 40th survey, which was completed by phone.

Note: Click on charts to interact or download

Australians' personal wellbeing in 2023

Satisfaction with life as a whole

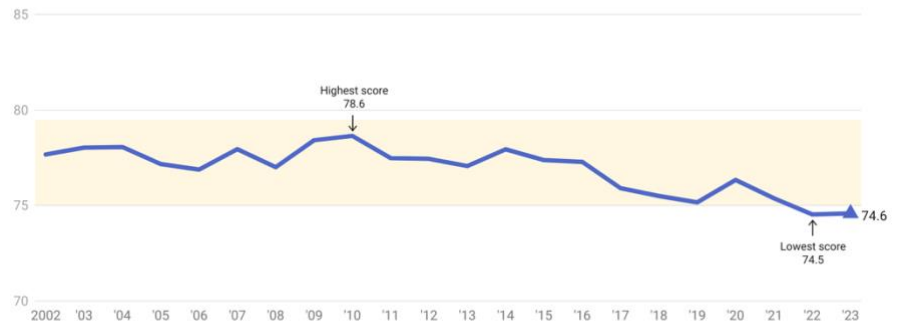
Australians' overall satisfaction level remained below the normal population range, close to the lowest score on record in 2022.

The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)

PWI scores remained within the normal range in 2023, with little change across most domains. Notably, Achieving in Life and the Health domains had small rises that saw them bounce back into their normal ranges, while Community Connectedness rose substantially.

Australians' satisfaction with life as a whole over time

Average satisfaction with 'life as a whole', 2002-2023.



The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100). The yellow bar indicates the range in which 95% of average scores have fallen since 2001. Chart: Deakin University • Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Australians' personal wellbeing over time

Average scores for the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) and each of its seven domains, 2002-2023.



The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100).

Chart: Deakin University • Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Although the changes across most PWI domains were modest, the downward pattern seen across all domains since 2020 appears to have been disrupted in 2023. As usual, average PWI scores remained below normal levels for certain socio-demographic groups, for example, those on household incomes \$30,000 and under or those who are unemployed. But there were also groups who dropped below normal levels in 2023 who typically score within the normal range, including Australians who were: on

household incomes between \$31,000 and \$100,000; 26-35 years old; living with their parents; occupied in full-time home duties; or living in Tasmania.

When we compared personal wellbeing of socio-demographic groups to the previous year, people on a household income of \$30,000 or under and semi-retired people had notably higher average PWI scores in 2023. On the other hand, people from Tasmania had notably lower average scores in 2023 compared to 2022.

Age and income inequities

In a notable pattern that emerged in 2022, all age groups 55 years and under, and all household groups with incomes \$100,000 and under, had average PWI scores below or at the very bottom of the normal population level. This suggests changing age and income inequities on the PWI compared to years prior.

To further understand what was driving this, we examined how the three Golden Triangle of Happiness domains (i.e., Standard of Living, Personal Relationships and Achieving in Life) differed between these age and income groups. Every year, these three domains are found to be the most important in predicting overall satisfaction with 'life as a whole', thus they are often dubbed the 'key to happiness'. Australians aged 55 years and under were notably less satisfied with their Standard of Living than those 56 years and over.

Personal wellbeing by age

Average scores for the Personal Wellbeing Index and satisfaction with 'standard of living', 2023.

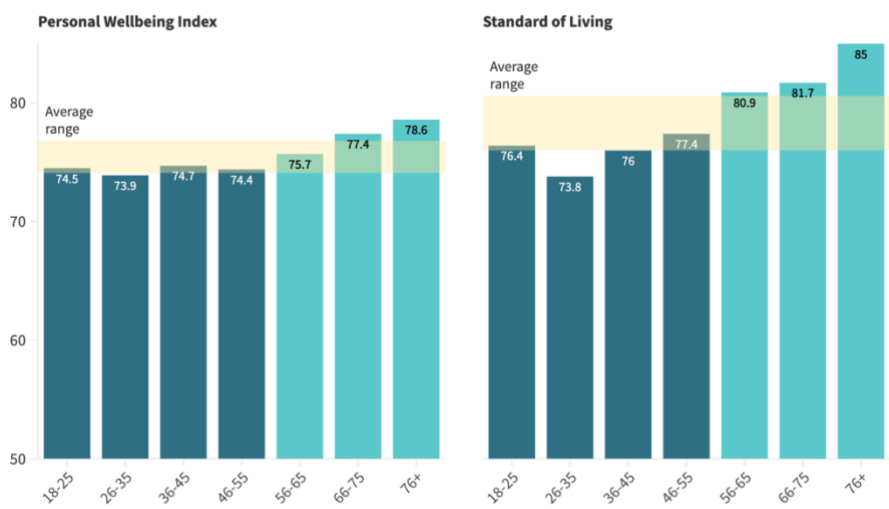


Chart: Deakin University, Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100). The yellow bars indicate the range in which 95% of average scores have fallen since 2001.

Personal wellbeing by income

Average scores for the Personal Wellbeing Index and satisfaction with 'standard of living', 2023.

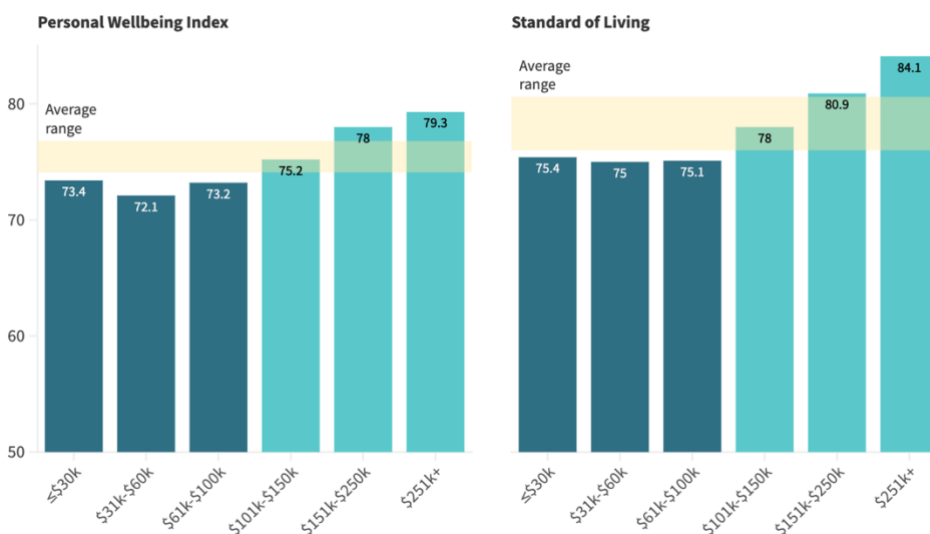


Chart: Deakin University, Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100). The yellow bars indicate the range in which 95% of average scores have fallen since 2001.

Similarly, Australians in households with a gross annual income of \$100,000 and under were notably less satisfied with their Standard of Living compared to those in households \$101,000 and over. This pattern was also observed for Achieving in Life.

Australians' national wellbeing in 2023

Satisfaction with life in Australia

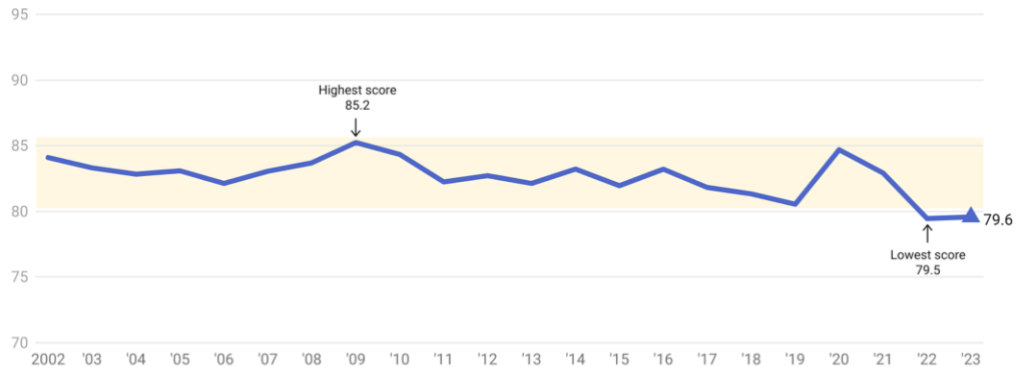
Australians' overall satisfaction with the nation remained below the normal range, close to the record low measured in 2022.

The National Wellbeing Index (NWI)

NWI scores remained at the bottom of the normal range, with average levels of satisfaction for five of the six domains relatively similar to 2022 levels. The exception was satisfaction with the 'Economic Situation in Australia', which declined sharply to its lowest score on record.

Australians' satisfaction with life in Australia over time

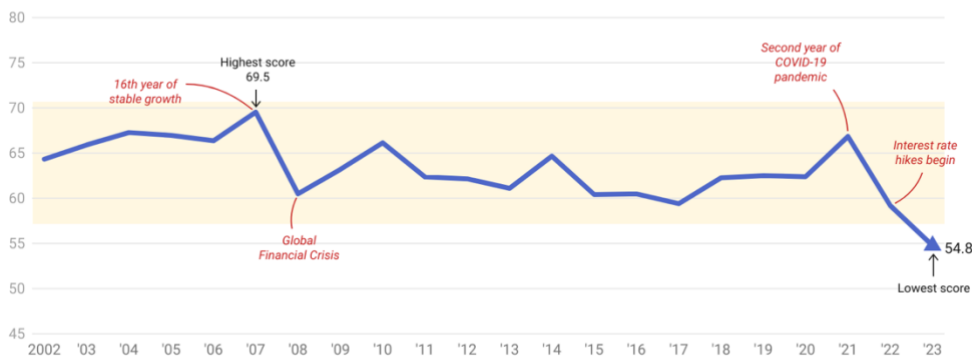
Average satisfaction with 'life in Australia', 2002-2023.



The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100). The yellow bar indicates the range in which 95% of average scores have fallen since 2001. Chart: Deakin University • Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Australians' satisfaction with the economic situation over time

Average satisfaction with the 'economic situation in Australia', 2002-2023.



The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100). The yellow bar indicates the range in which 95% of average scores have fallen since 2001. Chart: Deakin University • Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

The decline in Australians' satisfaction with the 'Economic Situation in Australia', was particularly notable when compared to scores from other periods of economic instability, such as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008 and the relative high in 2020 during the first year of the pandemic.

Carers wellbeing in 2023

We asked respondents whether they provided unpaid care to someone due to their ongoing illness, disability or old age to examine the wellbeing of *informal carers*. All respondents were also asked if they provided care as part of any paid work they do, to capture *professional carers*. Over 1 in 4 respondents (27%) held a caring role in their personal and/or professional lives and 63% of these identified as female. Of these, 69% were informal carers (i.e., provided unpaid care; 59% female), 21% were professional carers (i.e., provided care through paid work; 69% female), and 9% were both (80% female).

Carers' personal wellbeing

We compared the wellbeing of the three types of carers (i.e., informal carers, professional carers, both) and non-carers. Informal carers stood out, showing a pattern of lower levels of personal wellbeing and higher mental distress compared to other groups. However, not all informal carers fared the same. Those with more time intensive caring commitments (20+ hours per week) had notably lower PWI levels compared to non-carers and those with informal caring commitments of less than 20 hours (next page).

Personal wellbeing of informal carers

Average scores for the Personal Wellbeing Index by weekly hours spent caring vs. non-carers, 2023.



The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100). The yellow bars indicate the range in which 95% of average scores have fallen since 2001.
 Chart: Deakin University • Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

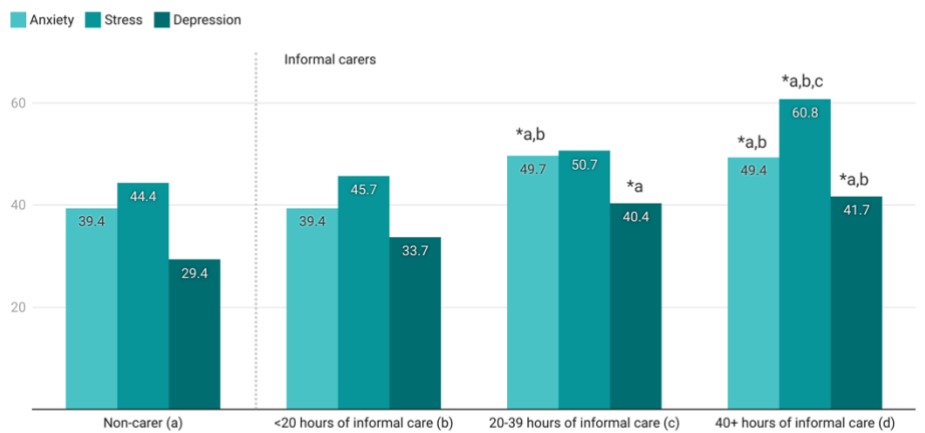
Mental distress

A similar pattern was seen across feelings of mental distress. Informal carers with commitments of less than 20 hours per week reported similar levels of mental distress to non-carers.

Those with more time intensive caring commitments (20+ hours per week) reported higher feelings of mental distress compared to non-carers and informal carers with lighter caring loads (less than 20 hours per week). As informal care time commitments reached 40+ hours, feeling of stress increased substantially compared to commitments of 20-39 hours.

Mental distress of informal carers

Average feelings of anxiety, stress and depression by weekly hours spent caring vs. non-carers, 2023.



*Letters indicate a meaningful difference (i.e., 0.3 standard deviations or 8 percentage points) between groups. The Y axis shows strength of feelings (out of 100).
 Chart: Deakin University • Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Satisfaction with access to supports

Informal carers (i.e., providing unpaid care) were far less satisfied with their ‘access to training’, ‘psychological support’ and ‘ability to connect with other carers’ compared to professional carers.

Carers' satisfaction with access to supports

Average satisfaction with access to carer supports by informal vs. professional carers, 2023.



The Y axis shows strength of satisfaction (out of 100).
 Chart: Deakin University • Source: Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

CONCLUSION

Australians' wellbeing in 2023

Australians' satisfaction 'with life as a whole' in 2023 remained below normal levels, while Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) scores remained within the normal range. Most PWI domains showed small signals of improvement from the downward pattern observed on all domains since 2020.

The rise in satisfaction with 'Community Connectedness' was substantial and may reflect a boost in connections within communities as life returned to near normalcy after the COVID-19 pandemic health emergency. Satisfaction with 'Standard of Living' didn't change in 2023. This is hardly surprising given the cost-of-living pressures that many Australians continue to face.

When we compared average PWI scores for socio-demographic groups to the previous year, people on a household income of \$30,000 or less and semi-retired people had notably higher PWI scores in 2023 compared to 2022. The boost in semi-retirees' wellbeing could be due to interest rate rises increasing savings and superannuation balances (Janda & Chalmers, 2023) and a return to normal life post pandemic. However, the boost in wellbeing for those with low household incomes was unexpected.

One possible explanation could be the Federal Budget cost-of-living relief package announcements just weeks before data collection. Even though many of the policy announcements came into effect after data collection, they may have led to boosts in wellbeing. Interestingly, a similar boost was seen in this group in 2020, when many pandemic government supports were in place. Nonetheless, this group remained below normal population levels of personal wellbeing.

Clear age and income divides were apparent in personal wellbeing. This divide was also evident last year and suggests changing inequities in wellbeing. Notably lower PWI scores were observed in those aged 55 years or under compared to older age groups, and those with household incomes of \$100,000 or under compared to higher income households. Age and income divides were particularly apparent for satisfaction with 'Standard of Living'. This fits with recent data showing increasing savings and spending in older age groups and less spending and more debt in younger age groups (Janda & Chalmers, 2023).

These age and income divides were less apparent for national wellbeing. Australians' satisfaction with 'life in Australia' and scores on the National Wellbeing Index (NWI) remained low. For the NWI, the small decline in 2023 was largely driven by a sharp fall in satisfaction with the 'Economic Situation in Australia'. Average scores in this domain dropped to a record low, well beneath levels recorded during the Global Financial Crisis of 2008.

Carers' wellbeing in 2023

As our population rapidly ages, so does demand for informal and formal care. Over one in four respondents reported holding some form of caring role and were more likely to be female. Of these, over two-thirds were informal carers.

Informal care can take on many forms – from supporting a neighbour a few hours a week, to providing round the clock care to a family member. Informal carers with lighter caring loads (less than 20 hours per week) showed little difference in wellbeing and mental distress compared with non-carers. On the other hand, informal carers providing unpaid care for over 20 hours per week, and especially those caring for 40+ hours per week, had lower personal wellbeing and higher mental distress than non-carers – highlighting they are doing it tough.

Informal carers also felt far less satisfied with their access to carer training and skills courses, psychological support and ability to connect with other carers compared to professional carers. Increasing access to carer specific supports may boost wellbeing and improve mental distress in informal carers.

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