



Understanding  
Society

# Beyond GDP

Using Understanding Society and the British Household  
Panel Survey to develop a picture of well-being



## What makes the nation happy? How satisfied are people in the UK compared to other countries? And how do we measure our well-being?

The Government firmly believes it's time to accept that there is more to life than money and that we should no longer be focusing on GDP but GWB – general well-being.

Developing better measures of well-being and progress is now a common international goal. The UK has a commitment to improving measures of well-being so that government policies can be more tailored to the things that matter.

This has created a platform for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to develop its Measuring National Well-being programme, with Understanding Society and British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) data used. The aim of the programme is to provide a fuller picture of well-being by looking at – among other things – people's mental well-being, income levels, how hard they find it to manage financially, what support people have from family and friends and how satisfied they are with their job, health and spare time.

### The project

The ONS are responsible for providing an accepted and trusted set of national statistics to help people understand and monitor well-being in adults aged over 16.

Understanding Society has contributed data across six of ten key domains:

- Personal well-being
- Our relationships
- Health
- What we do
- Where we live
- Personal finance

The other domains which provide contextual information are:

- the economy
- education and skills
- governance
- the natural environment

In all, data from Understanding Society has been used to answer nine key questions.

### Key findings

Here are some of the key findings from Understanding Society 2012/13 that relate to well-being.

- On a scale of 0 to 10 most people (over 70%) are happy and feel that their lives were worthwhile. The most common score is 8/10.
- In comparison with 2011/12 overall wellbeing improved whilst anxiety levels were down (-0.11%)
- For three questions, the number of people rating their well-being above 7/10 had increased as follows:
  - > Life satisfaction + 1.2%
  - > Life worthwhile + 0.7%
  - > Happy Yesterday + 0.5%
- The average score given for life satisfaction in the UK rose to nearly 7.3% as compared with 7.15% in 2011/12

### Other findings

- On average women have slightly higher life satisfaction and happiness but also higher levels of anxiety.
- The older population are happier and less anxious.
- White and Indian respondents are on average the most satisfied with their lives while the Black/African/Caribbean/Black British respondents are the least satisfied. The average life satisfaction rating for both the White and Indian groups is 7.5, compared to 6.9 for the Black/African/Caribbean/Black British group.
- The highest levels of well-being are found in people who are married/cohabiting and lowest in those who are divorced

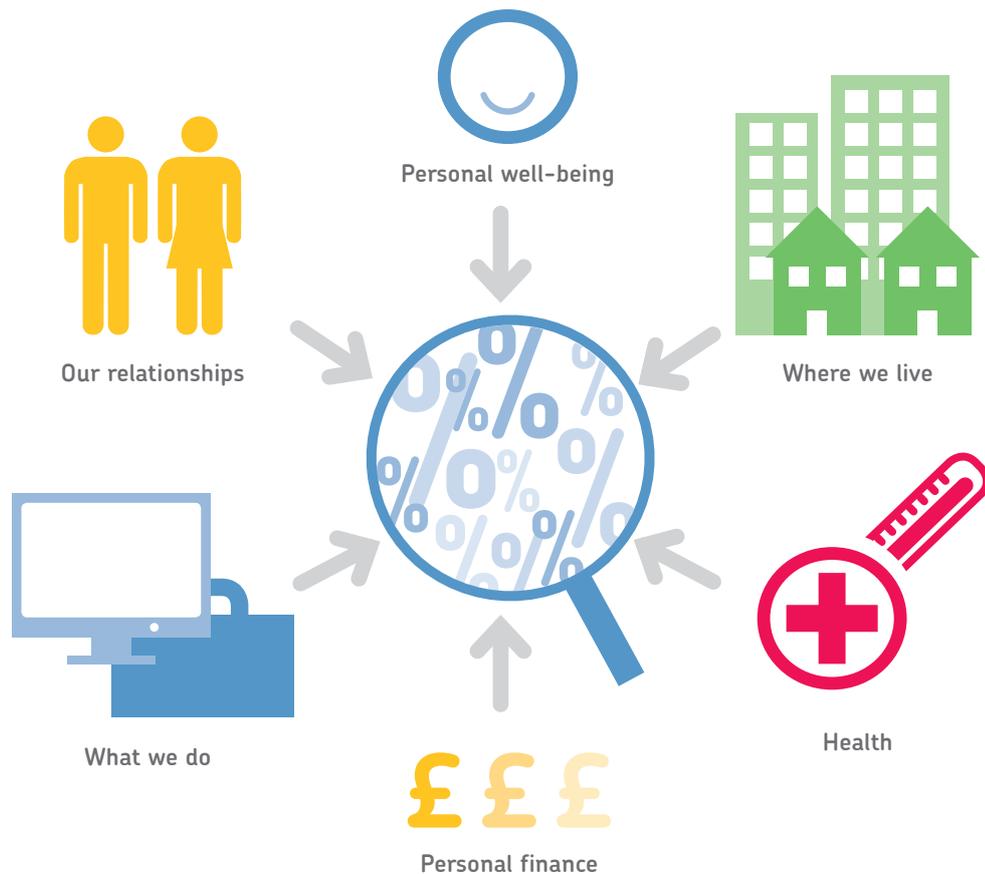
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***Well-being can't be measured by money or traded in markets. It's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture and, above all, the strength of our relationships. Improving our society's sense of well-being is, I believe, the central political challenge of our times.***

**David Cameron**

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## MONITORING WELL-BEING ACROSS 6 KEY DOMAINS



The ONS has been tasked with developing and publishing an accepted and trusted set of national statistics which help people understand and monitor well-being. Understanding Society has contributed data across five key domains.

although there is a small upward trend in well-being for those who are divorced.

- Life satisfaction remains stable in the UK in comparison with other wealthy countries and is high on average compared to many other countries. The UK ranked 10th for life satisfaction out of the 27 European Union countries, with an average rating of 7.3 out of 10 in 2011.

### How policy makers are using well-being data

There is considerable demand for personal well-being information to support policy and, although this is relatively new territory, the Government has already begun to use the data in this context.

Examples of how new well-being measures are influencing the way Government works:

- The Social Impacts Taskforce (SITF), made up of senior analysts from across government, has been working to make use of personal well-being data and share approaches and findings across government.
- The Cabinet Office has convened a cross-Whitehall steering group of senior policy makers

to encourage the consideration of well-being in policy.

- Personal well-being data is being used to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of policy interventions. The National Citizen Service pilot evaluated the personal well-being of young people before and after their participation in the service.

Increasingly, policy makers are drawing comparisons between different groups of the population (for example, different age groups or different ethnic groups) and between different areas within the UK (for example, countries and local authority districts). This helps target policy and resources at those with lower levels of well-being.

Findings to date suggest we need to continue to monitor the personal well-being gap between unemployed people and the rest of the population. By observing changes over time, we can notice whether the gap is widening and how, for example, recent increases in long-term unemployment in the UK are affecting the nation's well-being.

## Further information and outputs

*Statistical Bulletin: Personal Wellbeing in the UK 2010/13*, released by ONS on 30 July 2013.

*Prime Minister's speech on well-being*, 25 November 2010.

A particular aspect of well-being which should not be ignored is that of child well-being. Whilst a recent Unicef report (report card 11) suggested that levels of subjective well-being of children in the UK were improving, more recent work using Understanding Society data carried out by The Children's Society entitled *Good Childhood Report 2013* casts real doubt on the extent to which this is true; suggesting instead that children's happiness is in decline with teenagers experiencing particularly low levels of well-being.

Listen also to the podcast from report author Professor Jonathan Bradshaw from the University of York.

At the 2007 OECD World Forum a declaration was issued calling for the production of high-quality facts-based information that can be used by all of society to form a shared view of national well-being and its evolution over time. This was followed at the European level by the European Commission communication on Beyond GDP. The international well-being agenda also gained momentum following the landmark report in 2009 from the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.

For links to the above references, please visit [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/case-studies](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/case-studies)

If you would like a more detailed briefing on this research or to discuss how you can make use of Understanding Society in your research please email [info@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:info@understandingsociety.ac.uk)

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 Understanding Society – UK Household Longitudinal Study

This case study is part of a series aimed at potential users of Understanding Society data, including: policy makers, researchers and people in a position to influence social policy. If you are using data from Understanding Society and would like to profile your work, please email [info@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:info@understandingsociety.ac.uk)



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