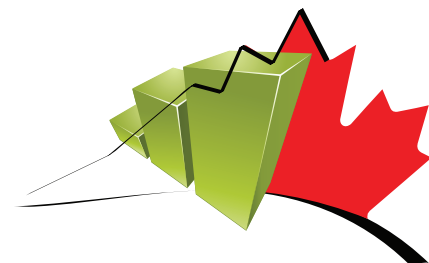


Youth life satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic in a cross-national comparison



by Golo Henseke, Ingrid Schoon, Christoph Schimmele, Rubab Arim,
Hans Dietrich, Aisling Murray, Emer Smyth and Véronique Dupéré

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Life satisfaction, which refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of their life overall (Hall, 2014), correlates with multiple dimensions of well-being (Kansky & Diener, 2017; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). Life satisfaction differs by individual characteristics such as age, income, education and employment (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018). Country-level conditions—e.g., levels of development, economic security and personal freedom—can also contribute to patterns in life satisfaction, regardless of individual characteristics (Clark et al., 2018).

One concern is whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had a more adverse impact on the life satisfaction of youth than on that of older people, and how this differed across countries. Life satisfaction generally follows a U-shaped age pattern over the life course (Blanchflower & Graham, 2021). People in their 20s and those in their 60s and 70s are, on average, more satisfied with their lives than those in midlife, although with substantial individual differences (Galambos et al., 2020). A recent study of the countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that younger people's life satisfaction declined from 2019 to 2020, while it improved for older people (OECD, 2021). But little is known about cross-national differences in the decline of youth life satisfaction during the pandemic.

Differences in policy responses to COVID-19 are a potential source of cross-national variation in life satisfaction among youth. Across Europe, policy interventions such as restrictions on social gatherings, school closures and stay-at-home mandates had a negative impact on the mental well-being of youth (Toffolutti et al., 2022), and this suggests that country-level differences in the implementation and duration of these policies are relevant to variations in life satisfaction. In addition, while Germany and the United Kingdom provided relatively strong protection for youth employment during the pandemic, Canada and Ireland experienced higher youth unemployment rates (Deng et al., 2022). This has further implications for cross-national variation.

This report compares life satisfaction in 2018 with that in 2020 and 2021, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of youth in Canada are compared with those of youth in Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom, as well as the average for the European Union (EU). Youth in these countries generally had high levels of life satisfaction before the pandemic, but its repercussions on the mental well-being and employment of youth may have eroded their life satisfaction (Deng et al., 2022; Schoon & Henseke, 2022). The experiences of youth are compared with those of older adults to assess whether the burden of the pandemic on life satisfaction was heavier for youth.

Life satisfaction before and during the COVID-19 pandemic¹

This study examines the changes in the proportion of youth (people aged 15 to 30 years) with low life satisfaction.² Before the pandemic, there was substantial cross-national variation in the proportion of youth who had low levels of life satisfaction. Proportionally fewer youth in Canada and Ireland had low life satisfaction in 2018 compared with those in the United Kingdom, those in Germany and the average for the EU. With the onset of the pandemic in 2020, there has been a deterioration in life satisfaction among youth in most, but not all, countries, increasing cross-national differences.

About 1.4% of Canadian youth had low life satisfaction in 2018. This increased to 2.4%^E in 2020, the first year of the pandemic (Table 1).³ In 2021, the proportion of youth with low life satisfaction (2.3%) was similar to that in the previous year. Despite the increase from 2018 to 2021, the proportion of Canadian youth with low life satisfaction was low compared with the youth in other countries over the entire period. In the United Kingdom, 6.1% of youth had low life satisfaction in 2018. This tripled to 18.6% by 2021. In Ireland, 25.4% of youth had low life satisfaction in 2021, a surge from 2.7% in 2018. In contrast, the proportion of German youth with low life satisfaction in 2021 (8.7%) was similar to that in 2018 (9.0%). Across countries, there is no evidence that life satisfaction among youth had recovered from the COVID-19 shock by 2021 (Table 1).

-
1. While insightful, the figures should be interpreted with caution. The COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts on data collection operations for the 2020 and 2021 Eurobarometer and the Canadian Community Health Survey.
 2. Data for Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom are from the Eurobarometer. In the Eurobarometer, respondents were asked: "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?" Low life satisfaction is defined as those who reported "Not very satisfied" or "Not at all satisfied." Data presented for Canada are from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) and representative of the population living in the 10 provinces. In the CCHS, respondents were asked: "Using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means 'Very dissatisfied' and 10 means 'Very satisfied,' how do you feel about your life as a whole right now?" Low life satisfaction is defined as scores of 0 to 4. The 0 to 4 cut-off has been previously used to compare low levels of life satisfaction across OECD countries (OECD, 2021).
 3. Figures identified with a superscript "E" should be used with caution.

Table 1
Low life satisfaction across countries, by year and age group

Country ¹ and age group	Year									Difference between 2018 and 2021
	2018			2020			2021			
	percent	95% Confidence intervals		percent	95% Confidence intervals		percent	95% Confidence intervals		
	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper		
Canada										
15 to 30 years	1.4	1.0	1.7	2.4 ^E	1.7	3.2	2.3	1.8	2.8	1.0 [§]
31 to 60 years	2.8	2.5	3.2	2.7	2.3	3.1	2.9	2.5	3.3	0.0
Difference between ages 15 to 30 and 31 to 60	-1.5 [§]	-2.0	-1.0	-0.3	-1.1	0.5	-0.6	-1.2	0.1	0.9
Germany										
15 to 30 years	9.0	7.5	10.5	7.5	5.0	9.9	8.7	6.9	10.5	-0.4
31 to 60 years	10.3	9.3	11.3	7.8	6.3	9.3	8.7	7.7	9.8	-1.6 [§]
Difference between ages 15 to 30 and 31 to 60	-1.3	-3.1	0.5	-0.4	-3.2	2.5	-0.1	-2.2	2.0	1.2
Ireland										
15 to 30 years	2.7	1.7	3.7	22.8	17.8	27.8	25.4	20.3	30.5	22.7 [§]
31 to 60 years	4.1	3.4	4.7	13.1	11.0	15.2	14.0	12.3	15.6	9.9 [§]
Difference between ages 15 to 30 and 31 to 60	-1.4 [§]	-2.6	-0.1	9.7 [§]	4.3	15.1	11.4 [§]	6.1	16.8	12.8 [§]
United Kingdom										
15 to 30 years	6.1	4.6	7.6	12.3	8.6	16.0	18.6	14.8	22.3	12.5 [§]
31 to 60 years	8.0	6.8	9.1	14.9	12.0	17.8	15.7	13.4	18.0	7.8 [§]
Difference between ages 15 to 30 and 31 to 60	-1.9 [§]	-3.8	0.0	-2.6	-7.3	2.0	2.9	-1.6	7.2	4.7
European Union (and the United Kingdom)										
15 to 30 years	11.4	10.9	12.0	11.5	10.5	12.5	16.3	15.4	17.2	4.9 [§]
31 to 60 years	17.0	16.6	17.4	16.6	15.9	17.4	18.5	18.0	19.1	1.5 [§]
Difference between ages 15 to 30 and 31 to 60	-5.6 [§]	-6.2	-4.9	-5.1 [§]	-6.4	-3.9	-2.2 [§]	-3.2	-1.2	3.3 [§]

^E use with caution.

[§] significantly different between age groups ($p < 0.05$).

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts on data collection operations for the 2020 and 2021 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) and the Eurobarometer. The impossibility of conducting in-person interviews and collection capacity issues resulted in a switch from face-to-face to online or telephone interviews and a significant decrease in response rates in 2020 and 2021 in almost all of the countries considered except Germany, which continued the computer-assisted personal interviewing with unchanged response rates between 2018 and 2020. As was done for previous CCHS and Eurobarometer cycles, survey weights were adjusted to minimize any potential bias that could arise from survey non-response; non-response adjustments and calibration using available auxiliary information were applied. Despite these rigorous adjustments and validations, the higher non-response increases the risk of a remaining bias and the magnitude with which such a bias could impact estimates produced using the survey data.

Notes: The 2020 Eurobarometer covered July, August and December with some fieldwork in September and November. The 2021 Eurobarometer covered February to April and June with some fieldwork in May and July. The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) is an annual survey that was adjusted during the pandemic to produce more timely estimates related to COVID-19. The analysis for 2021 is based on provisional CCHS data that cover periods between January 2021 and February 7, 2022 (excluding May 2021).

Sources: Eurobarometer 87.1 to 95.3 (Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom and EU [and the United Kingdom]) and the Canadian Community Health Survey, Statistics Canada (Canada).

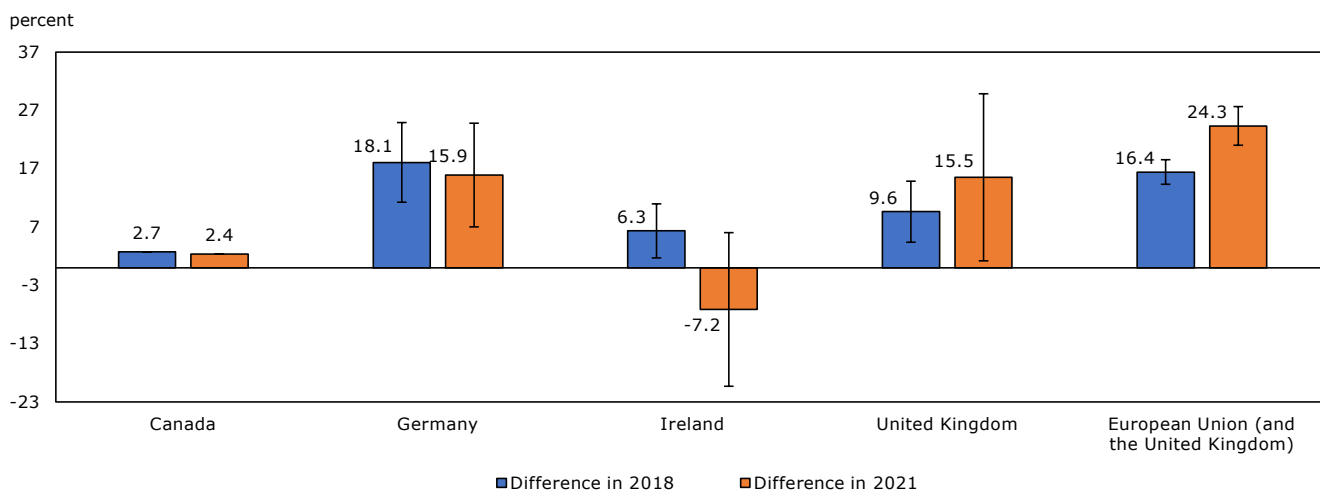
Have age patterns in life satisfaction changed?

In 2018, the proportion of Canadians aged 15 to 30 years with low life satisfaction (1.4%) was about half that of Canadians aged 31 to 60 years (2.8%). In 2021, the difference between these age groups was far smaller and not significant. The reduction in the gap between these age groups was attributable to the large increase in the proportion of youth with low life satisfaction from 2018 to 2021, as the proportion of older Canadians with low life satisfaction was stable over this period.⁴ Across the EU, including the United Kingdom, the gap in life satisfaction between youth and older people also decreased significantly between 2018 and 2021. This development was particularly striking in Ireland, where levels of low life satisfaction among people aged 15 to 30 years exceeded those of people aged 31 to 60 years by a large margin in 2021 (Table 1).

Spotlight on youth not in employment, education or training

Among youth, those not in employment, education or training (NEET) may have been particularly vulnerable to declines in life satisfaction (Jongbloed & Giret, 2021). Chart 1 provides preliminary evidence for what has happened to the inequality in life satisfaction between youth who were NEET and non-NEET over the pandemic.

Chart 1
Percentage point difference in low life satisfaction between youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) and non-NEET youth



Notes: The 2020 Eurobarometer covered July, August and December with some fieldwork in September and November. The 2021 Eurobarometer covered February to April and June with some fieldwork in May and July. The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) is an annual survey that was adjusted during the pandemic to produce more timely estimates related to COVID-19. The analysis for 2021 is based on provisional CCHS data that cover periods between January 2021 and February 7, 2022 (excluding May 2021).

Sources: Eurobarometer 87.1 to 95.3 (Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and EU [and the United Kingdom]) and the Canadian Community Health Survey, Statistics Canada (Canada).

4. Following OECD conventions (OECD, 2021), this study used a score of 4 or below (on a 0 to 10 scale) to measure low levels of life satisfaction. When a cut-off of 5 or below was applied, the age pattern was largely the same (data not shown).

Across most countries and times, youth who were NEET were worse off in terms of life satisfaction. However, there were notable differences in the level of inequality and trends. The difference in low life satisfaction between Canadian youth who were NEET and non-NEET was relatively stable between 2018 and 2021. In 2018, 3.7%^E of youth who were NEET were dissatisfied with their lives, compared with 1.0%^E of youth who were non-NEET. In 2021, the rate of low life satisfaction among youth who were NEET (4.3%^E) was similar to that in 2018, but there was an increase for youth who were non-NEET (2.0%).

In the European countries, the differences in low life satisfaction between youth who were NEET and non-NEET were generally starker. In Germany, the difference ranged between 16 and 18 percentage points. In the United Kingdom, it ranged from 10 to 16 percentage points. In the Irish sample, youth who were NEET were relatively more satisfied than youth who were non-NEET in 2021, but this change was not statistically significant. By contrast, in the EU, the inequality in life satisfaction between youth who were NEET and non-NEET increased between 2018 and 2021. In 2021, 37.6% of youth who were NEET and 13.3% of youth who were non-NEET across the EU expressed low levels of life satisfaction (data not shown).

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to explore differences in youth life satisfaction across and within countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite data limitations, this study provided new insights and a basis for future studies. A central finding was the flattening, or even the reversal, of the U-shaped age pattern in life satisfaction in some countries. Life satisfaction seems to have declined to a greater extent among youth aged 15 to 30 years than among people aged 31 to 60 years. This suggests that there were generalized vulnerabilities among youth to pandemic-related hardships. However, there were substantial cross-country differences in the changes in life satisfaction among youth. In Canada, reports of low life satisfaction were comparatively uncommon, with minor changes over 2020 and 2021, the pandemic years. This contrasts with patterns in Ireland and, to some extent, in the United Kingdom, where there were steep increases in the proportion of youth with low life satisfaction. Further reading (see below) illuminates some of the underlying mechanisms within the context of four countries and provides direction for future research.

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Authors

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