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## The COVID-19 pandemic and life satisfaction in Canada

by John F. Helliwell, Grant Schellenberg and Jonathan Fonberg

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This article provides disaggregated data to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on specific groups. Visit the [Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Statistics Hub](#) for more analysis, including disaggregated data on labour, public safety, health and more.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented impacts on many key aspects of life, including health, social connections, mobility, employment and incomes. Life satisfaction provides the best available umbrella measure of the combined effects of these changes on the well-being of Canadians. Using population-representative samples from the 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) and the June 2020 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS) survey, this study compares the life satisfaction of Canadians before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is drawn from a longer research paper that presents more detailed results and discussion (Helliwell, Schellenberg and Fonberg).

Both the 2018 CCHS and the June 2020 CPSS survey asked respondents the following question:

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?

In 2018, average life satisfaction among Canadians was 8.09 on the 0-to-10 scale, while in June 2020, it was 6.71—a decline of 1.38 points. This is the lowest level of life satisfaction observed in Canada over the 2003-to-2020 period for which comparable data are available. This is a large change, about one-third of the difference between the highest and lowest national life satisfaction averages recorded in the *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell and Wang 2012, Figure 2.5), and it is similar to the 1.2-point decline in average life satisfaction observed in the United Kingdom (Fujiwara et al. 2020).

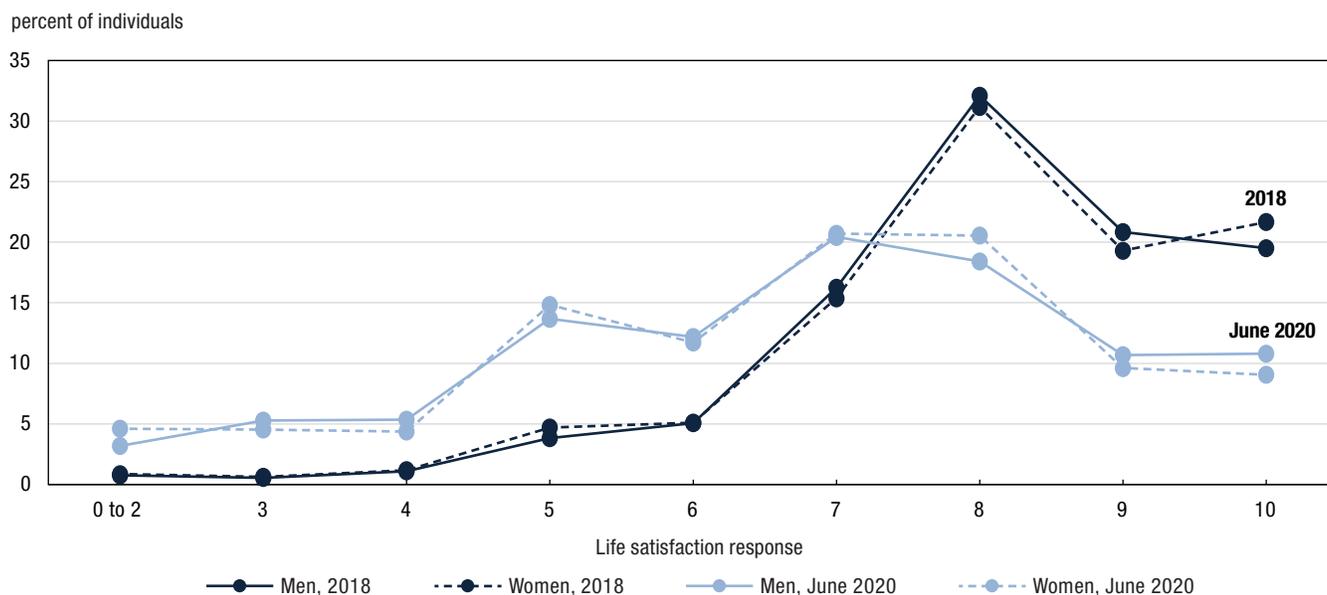
The distributions of Canadian life satisfaction responses in 2018 and June 2020 for men and women are shown in Chart 1. In June 2020, about 20% of Canadians rated their life satisfaction as 8 on the scale, down from the 32% who did so in 2018. More broadly, the share of Canadians rating their life satisfaction as 8 or above declined from 72% to 40% over this period, while the share rating their life satisfaction as 6 or below increased from 12% to 40%. This decline in life satisfaction was accompanied by a significant increase in the inequality of its distribution.<sup>1</sup>

1. In 2018, the standard deviation around average life satisfaction was 1.575 points; in June 2020, the standard deviation was 2.181 points.





**Chart 1**  
**Men's and women's ratings of how they feel about their life as a whole right now, response distributions, Canada, 2018 and June 2020**



**Sources:** Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey and June 2020 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series.

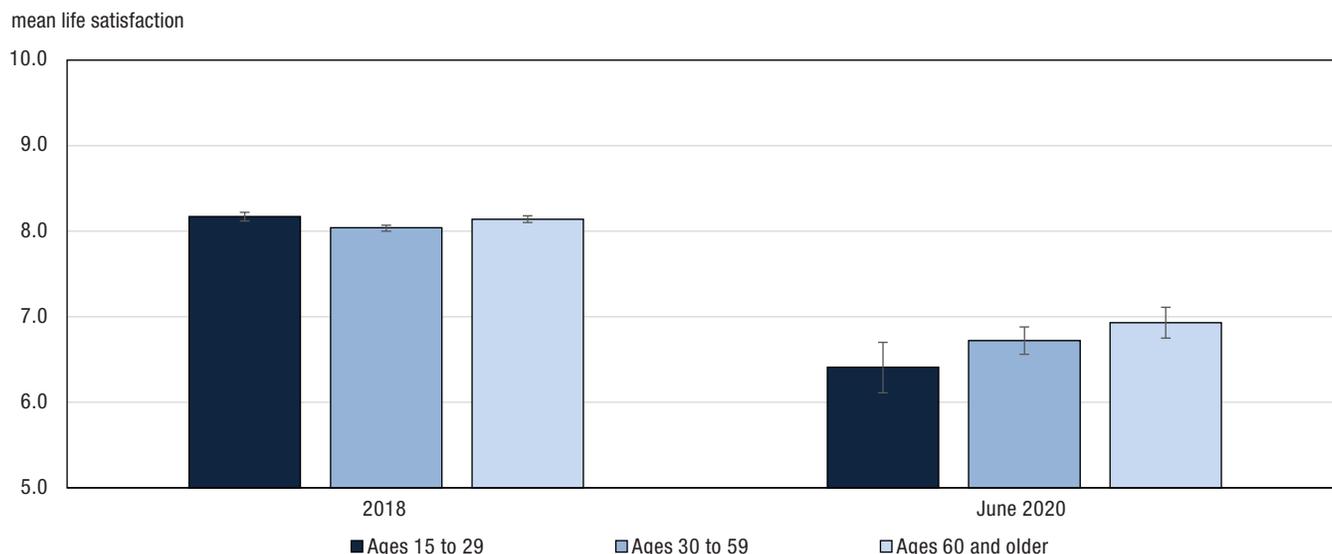
There was little difference in average life satisfaction reported by women and men, either prior to or during the pandemic. Average life satisfaction among women and men was virtually identical in 2018, at 8.09 and 8.10, respectively; in June 2020, the difference in average life satisfaction between them was still small (at 0.10) and statistically insignificant. Moreover, the equality of male and female life satisfaction responses held across the life satisfaction response scale, so that well-being inequality rose equally for both men and women. In addition, average life satisfaction of women and men did not differ significantly in any of the three age groups introduced below.

In contrast, the age distribution of life satisfaction changed substantially, with the largest decline for young Canadians and the smallest for seniors.<sup>2</sup> Between 2018 and June 2020, life satisfaction declined by 1.76 points among Canadians aged 15 to 29, by 1.32 points among those aged 30 to 59, and by 1.21 points among those aged 60 or older. As a result, the well-documented U-shape relationship between life satisfaction and age (Helliwell et al. 2019) that was observed in 2018 was no longer evident in June 2020. At that point, life satisfaction was lowest among youth and successively higher among Canadians in the middle and oldest age groups (Chart 2). Multivariate techniques confirm these results. Relatively large declines in life satisfaction among youth have also been observed in other countries (Imperial College London 2020).

2. Residents of collective dwellings, such as seniors' residences and long-term care facilities, are not included in either the CCHS or the CPSS. According to the 2016 Census, 6.8% of Canadians aged 65 or older lived in a nursing home or seniors' residence, with this proportion increasing to 30.0% among Canadians aged 85 or older.



**Chart 2**  
**Mean life satisfaction, by age group, Canada, 2018 and June 2020**



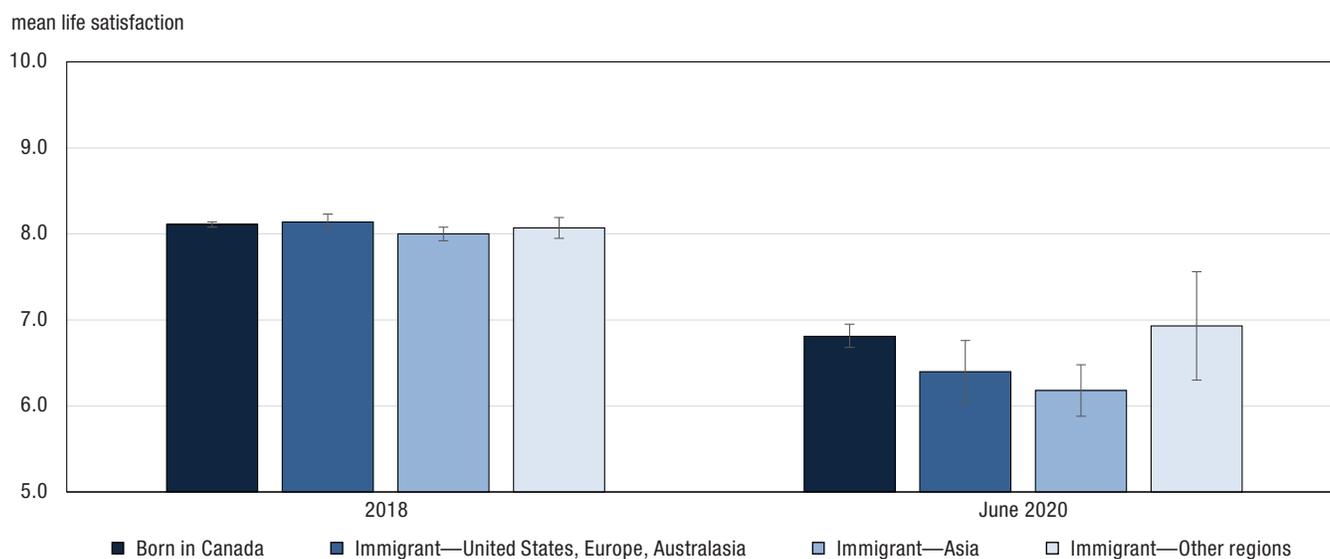
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey and June 2020 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series.

Immigrant status is another dimension across which differences in life satisfaction emerged. In 2018, average life satisfaction varied modestly between immigrants and individuals born in Canada, but by June 2020 larger differences were evident. Average life satisfaction declined by 1.82 points among immigrants from Asia and by 1.74 points among immigrants from the United States, Europe and Australasia. This was significantly more than the 1.30-point decline observed among Canadian-born individuals.

When employment status and regional unemployment rates are taken into account, the difference in life satisfaction between immigrants and the Canadian-born population narrowed somewhat, indicating that labour market experiences during the pandemic were a contributing factor. Social factors may also have played a role. For example, immigrants were more likely than the Canadian-born population to report fear of being the target of unwanted or intimidating behaviours during the pandemic because people judge them as putting others at risk. Such fears were expressed by 17% of people born in Canada and by 41% of immigrants from Asia. Across all CPSS survey respondents, life satisfaction was almost 0.80 points lower among individuals expressing such fears.



**Chart 3**  
**Mean life satisfaction, by immigrant status, Canada, 2018 and June 2020**



Sources: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey and June 2020 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series.

Life satisfaction was sharply lower in June 2020 than in 2018 in all parts of Canada, by amounts that varied across provinces and regions. The large confidence intervals around these estimates, mainly because of the relatively small size of the CPSS survey sample, make it premature to draw strong conclusions. Differences in life satisfaction across other demographic characteristics, including household composition, education, and urban or rural residence, did not change significantly during the pandemic from what they were prior to it.

Looking ahead, Statistics Canada is well positioned to monitor life satisfaction and document the factors that improve or diminish it through the pandemic and beyond. Data collection for the 2020 General Social Survey will occur from August to December 2020 online and by telephone, and other surveys that ask about life satisfaction will be conducted in late 2020 and early 2021.

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