



# Community Child and Youth Well-being Survey

**DATA BRIEF #1:**

**How happy are kids in Canada?**

**New insights from the UNICEF Canada community child and youth well-being survey**

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The UNICEF Canada Community Child and Youth Well-being Survey measures life under age 19 across the dimensions of life that matter for children and youth, aligned with the *Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being*. The Survey was developed for young people with young people, and is delivered by communities for communities. It was piloted in 2020 and ran in May to June 2021 in four demonstration communities, with more than 5,000 respondents ages 9 to 18. This development phase was led by a partnership of UNICEF Canada, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW), the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Medavie Health Foundation and community partners in four regions – Waterloo Region, Halton Region, Ottawa and the Tri-County Region of Nova Scotia. Children and youth in these communities were invited to participate in the survey, so the findings cannot be considered representative but can be used with confidence and with some caution in drawing conclusions. The Survey will be available early in 2022 for other communities that want to collect otherwise hard-to-find data to support their investments and actions to improve community life, for and with their youngest citizens. Monitoring the state of children and youth has never been more important, in the wake of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

This data brief is the first in a five-part series that presents selected findings from the 2021 Community Child and Youth Well-being Surveys in Waterloo Region, Halton Region, Ottawa and the Tri-County Region of Nova Scotia. While many findings are strikingly consistent across these communities and with national-level data measured in the UNICEF Canada Index of Child and Youth Well-being, there are instructive variations across the communities. Every community has some unique challenges, with young people reporting experiences and conditions that have no place in childhood. Every community has distinct areas of life where young people are doing well. What can we learn from them? We begin by looking at young people’s life satisfaction – a proxy for their overall well-being.

## MEASURING HAPPINESS

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that “children should grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”. When Canadian parents have been asked in international surveys what they want most for their children in life, they largely agree – happiness. Internationally, only French parents rated happiness as more important (86 per cent) than Canadian parents (78 per cent).<sup>1</sup> Along with parents’ feelings, the way young people feel about their own lives matters, because it affects and is affected by almost every aspect of their well-being.

Asking young people how they feel about their lives is a relatively new effort in data collection – extending beyond physical health and educational achievement that have long been a focus of adults. But substantial research is now focused on measuring broader, subjective assessments of well-being. Life satisfaction is a concept that doesn’t precisely measure “happiness” but is a good proxy. Life satisfaction measures the cognitive evaluations that young people make about their lives. In standard measures of life satisfaction used in the Community Child and Youth Well-being Survey, young people are asked to consider where they stand on an 11-point scale or ladder (from 0 to 10). The survey uses two similar scales: one called “Cantril’s Ladder” that is

used internationally in surveys of young people, and one that aligns with the scale used in Statistics Canada surveys of the general population. We start this “data brief” series to unpack the Survey with a focus on life satisfaction because it is an important take on young people’s overall well-being. What we are really asking is, *How is your life? Are you happy?* And shouldn’t childhood be the happiest and most carefree time of our lives?

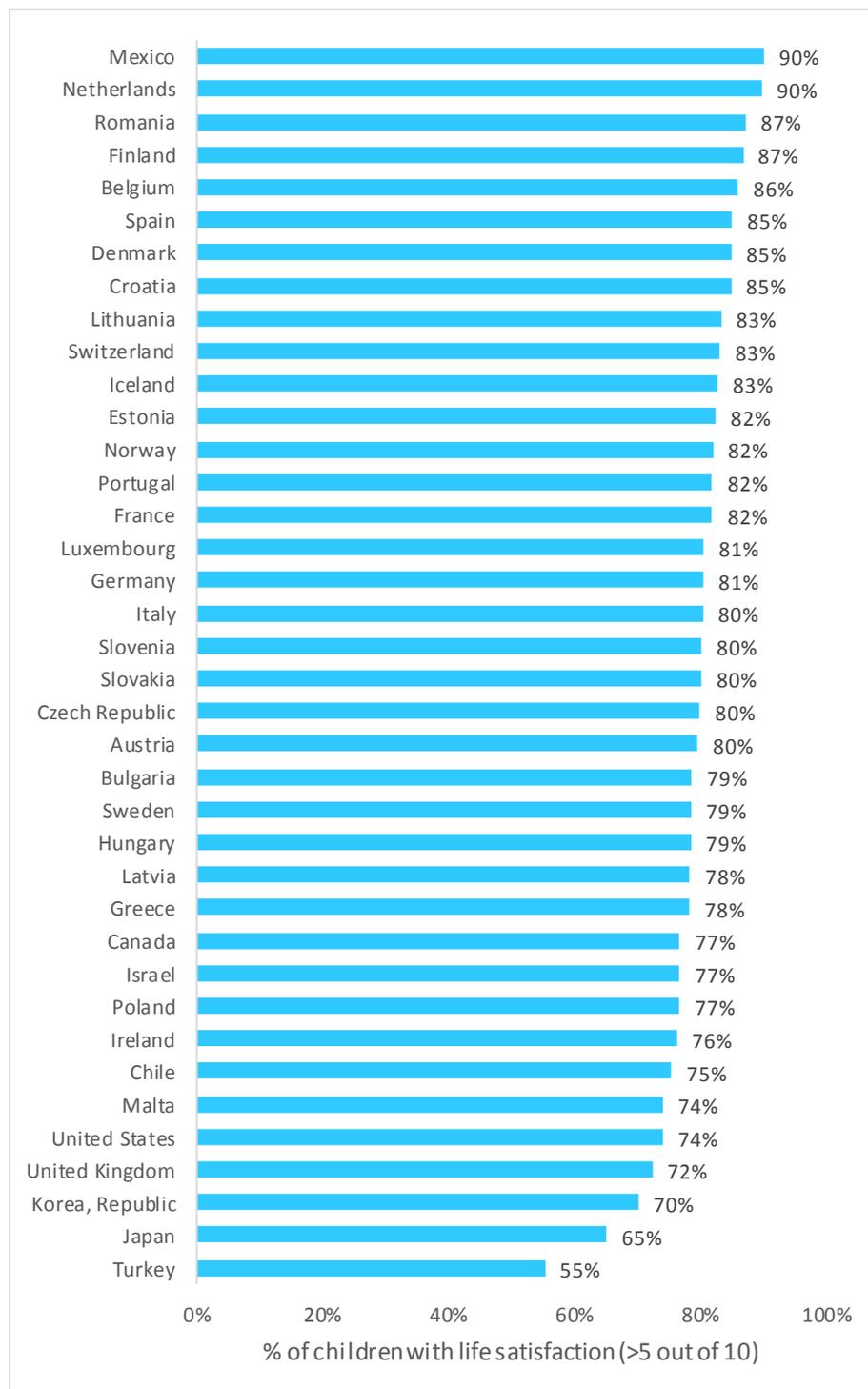
## UNHAPPY CHILDHOODS IN CANADA

Let’s start with a bird’s-eye view of how young people in Canada report life satisfaction. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being measures national averages of population-level, statistical data to reveal important patterns and trends and benchmark “normal” life as a child in Canada. In 2014, 81 per cent of young people (ages 11 to 15) reported at least a modest level of life satisfaction (6 or higher on the Cantril scale), but only 55 per cent reported a high level of satisfaction with life (8 or higher on the Cantril scale). Of those reporting a high level of satisfaction with life, a wide gender gap separated girls (50 per cent) and boys (60 per cent). For young people with a disability, the rate was 41 per cent. Life satisfaction in Canada is much lower among older children than younger.<sup>ii</sup> There is also a significant socioeconomic gap in Canada: for a girl age 15 from a family in the bottom income quintile, the mean score is 6.5 on the Cantril scale compared to 7.5 for a girl from a family in the top income quintile.<sup>iii</sup>

## KIDS IN CANADA ARE UNHAPPIER THAN THEIR PEERS IN RICH COUNTRIES

How does the overall life satisfaction of kids in Canada compare with their peers in other rich countries? For the past twenty years, UNICEF Report Cards have measured the state of children and youth under age 18 in wealthy countries to understand what is possible to achieve with the right investments and policies. Among these countries, Canada was the 17<sup>th</sup> richest in 2020, but ranked 30<sup>th</sup> out of 38 countries in young people’s overall well-being<sup>iv</sup>. UNICEF’s latest Report Card also found that 77 per cent of 15-year-olds reported at least moderate life satisfaction (6 or higher on the 11-point Cantril scale) in 2018, compared to 90 per cent in the highest-performing country (the Netherlands). This yielded Canada a rank of 28<sup>th</sup> out of 38 countries (see Figure 1). The rankings in life satisfaction mirror the overall rankings in child well-being, with Canada, the US and the UK behind many others, including top-performing countries like the Netherlands, Finland and Norway. In another study comparing 45 rich countries, Canada ranked 41<sup>st</sup> in the mean level of life satisfaction among young people.<sup>v</sup>

**Figure 1: Youth (age 15) in rich countries with at least a moderate level of life satisfaction**



Note: Percentage of children scoring higher than five on an 11-point scale (0 to 10) on Cantril's Ladder for satisfaction with life as a whole.

Source: PISA 2018 and HBSC 2017/18. Where data were available from both sources, the mean was taken for each country. Where data was only available from one source an adjustment based on average ratio of mean scores across the two surveys in the countries in the chart that had data in both surveys.

## THE LIFE SATISFACTION SLIDE

Even while Canada's national wealth has steadily climbed, we have experienced a generational fall in children's life satisfaction. The level of life satisfaction of children has decoupled from the level of national wealth. This has been called the "modernity paradox", a structural problem in Canada with children unhappier than ever in a time of unprecedented wealth. There has been a slide in Canada from 81 per cent of young people feeling at least a modest level of life satisfaction in 2014 to 77 per cent in 2018<sup>vi</sup>. Canada is among 13 out of 35 countries that have experienced a decrease in children's average life satisfaction since 2002.<sup>vii</sup> In fact, the life satisfaction gap between the top performing and the lagging countries is growing. During this time, the gender gap in life satisfaction in Canada has also grown. This slide and the widening gaps pre-dated COVID-19, but early indications suggest that the pandemic may accelerate these trends. At the general population level in Canada, Statistics Canada reported a decline in average life satisfaction from 2018 to June 2020, accompanied by a significant increase in the inequality of life satisfaction.<sup>viii</sup> The same report found a greater decline among youth aged 15 to 29 than for adults aged 30 to 59. The percentage of youth in this age group rating their life satisfaction as high (8 or higher) fell from 72 per cent in 2018 to a shocking 26 per cent in June 2020.

## LIFE SATISFACTION IS A CANARY IN THE COALMINE

Why, within conditions of rising affluence in Canada, has children's life satisfaction been falling? Growing evidence suggests that national patterns of children's life satisfaction are shaped by broad social, economic and environmental conditions, particularly policy failures to address wider income inequality. Young people in countries with higher income inequality are more likely to report lower satisfaction with life.<sup>ix</sup> Studies have observed a significant relationship between rising inequality and increasing loneliness, more difficult relationships and more interpersonal violence.<sup>x, xi</sup> The wider the level of income inequality, the greater likelihood a society will also experience higher rates of mental and physical health problems, including among children.<sup>xii</sup> The life satisfaction slide among children and youth in Canada may be the "canary in the coalmine" of rising national income inequality.

## VARIATIONS IN CHILDREN'S HAPPINESS WITHIN AND ACROSS SURVEY COMMUNITIES

Behind national average life satisfaction data are different levels of life satisfaction experienced by young people based on their gender, race, disability, socioeconomic conditions and where they live. Variations at the community level highlight the role of local conditions that influence well-being and the potential of local actions to improve children's life satisfaction.

The 2021 Community Child and Youth Well-being Survey measured variations in life satisfaction within and across four communities among respondents ages 9 to 18 (see Figure 2a and Figure 2b). Shifting away from international comparisons (using Cantril's Ladder of life satisfaction), the

findings now focus on the Survey's alternative life satisfaction scale so we can make comparisons with the adult population in Canada.

Mean life satisfaction among youth was similar across the communities, averaging just over 6 on the scale from 0 to 10, with a small range in mean scores from 6 to 7. (Using Cantril's Ladder, the mean for every community was 6.)

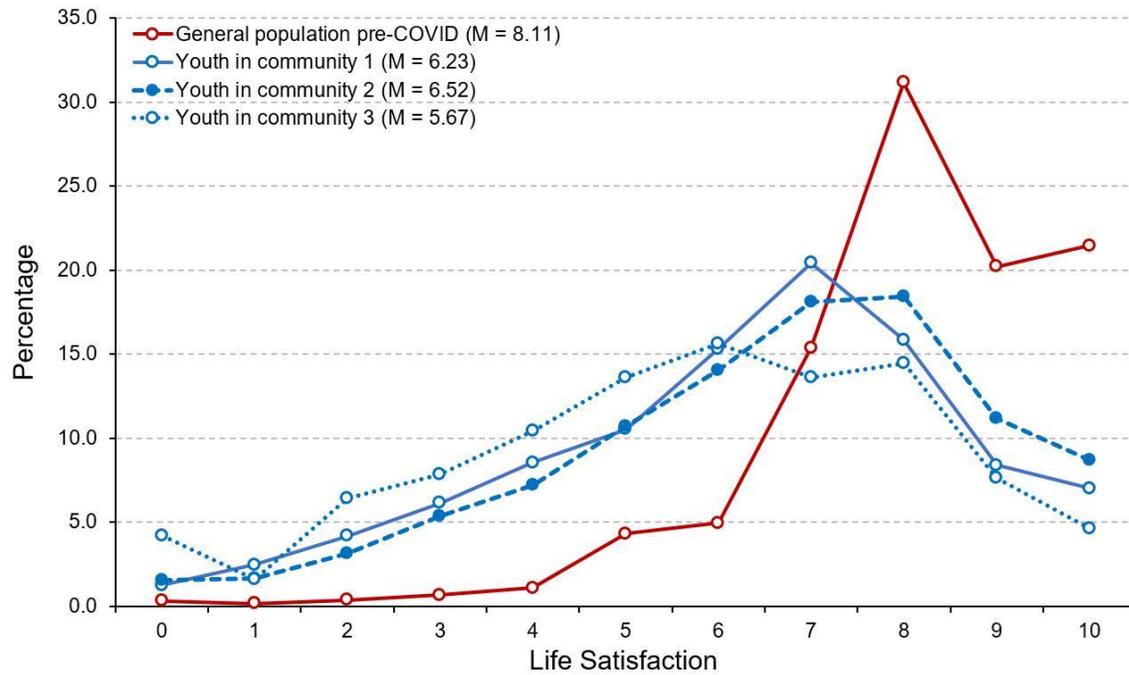
Two-thirds of young people (67 per cent) reported average to above average life satisfaction (6 or higher on the 11-point scale). This compares unfavourably to the national average of 98 per cent (for 12 to 17 year-olds) in 2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, one-third (33 per cent) of young respondents in the survey communities reported high life satisfaction (8 or higher on the 11-point scale). This is far below the national average of 84 per cent in 2018 (for 12 to 17 year-olds). There was some variation in rates of high life satisfaction between communities, ranging from 27 to 38 per cent.

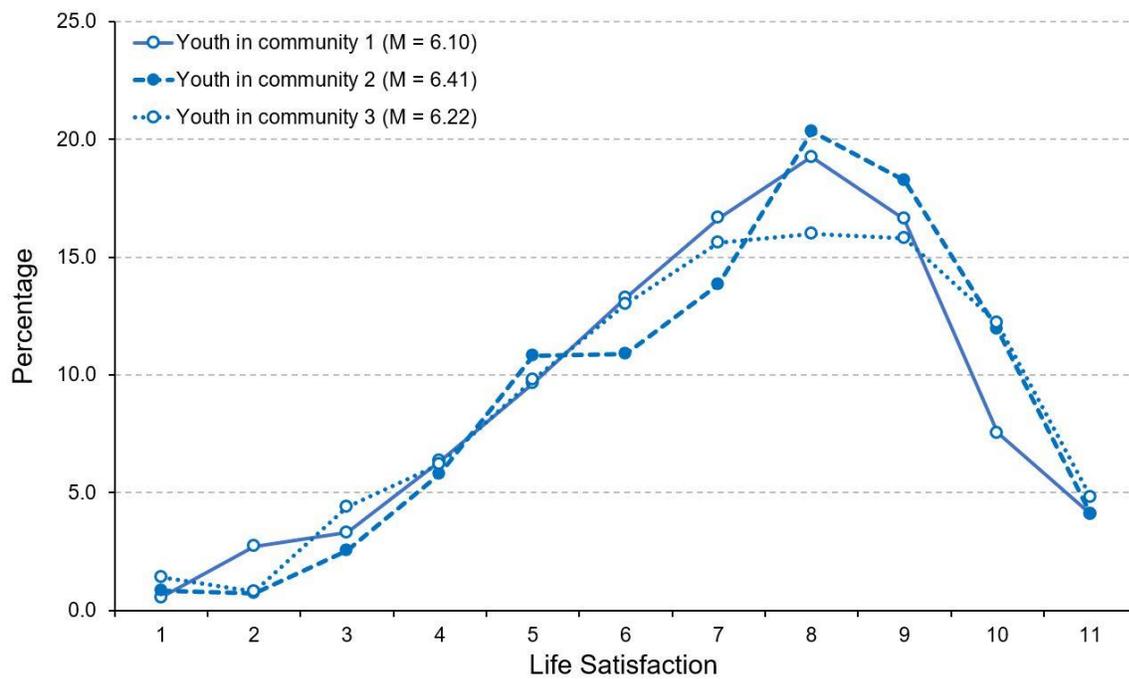
One-third (34 per cent) of young people in these communities reported below-average life satisfaction (5 or lower on the 11-point scale). There was a wider range across communities in rates of lower life satisfaction than in high life satisfaction, from 29 to 44 per cent. Low life satisfaction is an indication of potential difficulties in different areas of life. It is often associated with more bullying, weaker supportive relationship, less material security, more substance use and lower attachment to education, and is worth paying attention to. This points to an important opportunity to address lower life satisfaction, particularly where it is more prevalent.

Another way of looking at the dispersion of life satisfaction within communities, and the distribution of inequality in life satisfaction across communities, is the percentage of young people that fall within one point above and one point below the mean community rating on the 11-point life satisfaction scale. Across the communities, 45 per cent of young people overall fell within this range. In other words, close to half of young people tended to cluster close together, around the mean, in their ratings of life satisfaction. But there is some variation across the communities, from a higher clustering at 46 per cent in one community to more dispersion of life satisfaction in another community at 40 per cent. Not surprisingly, this community also had a lower mean life satisfaction rating, more young people reporting low life satisfaction and fewer young people reporting high life satisfaction. This reflects national patterns of life satisfaction, where lower average life satisfaction tends to come with more inequality in the distribution of life satisfaction.

**Figure 2a: Distribution of youth (ages 13-18) and general population life satisfaction within and between communities**



**Figure 2b: Distribution of youth (ages 13-18) life satisfaction within and between communities based on Cantril's Ladder**



There are patterns of age, disability and gendered differences in young people's life satisfaction within these communities, broadly consistent with Canada's national pattern. But one community broke the prevailing age pattern, with younger children (below age 12) significantly less satisfied with their lives and less likely to say they are living their best possible life right now than youth older than 12. In this community, youth who were born outside of Canada reported higher life satisfaction than those born in Canada. In some communities, there were neighbourhood variations in life satisfaction that were not apparent in others. In one community, the official language spoken was a distinctive factor in life satisfaction, emphasizing that local context matters when it comes to well-being.

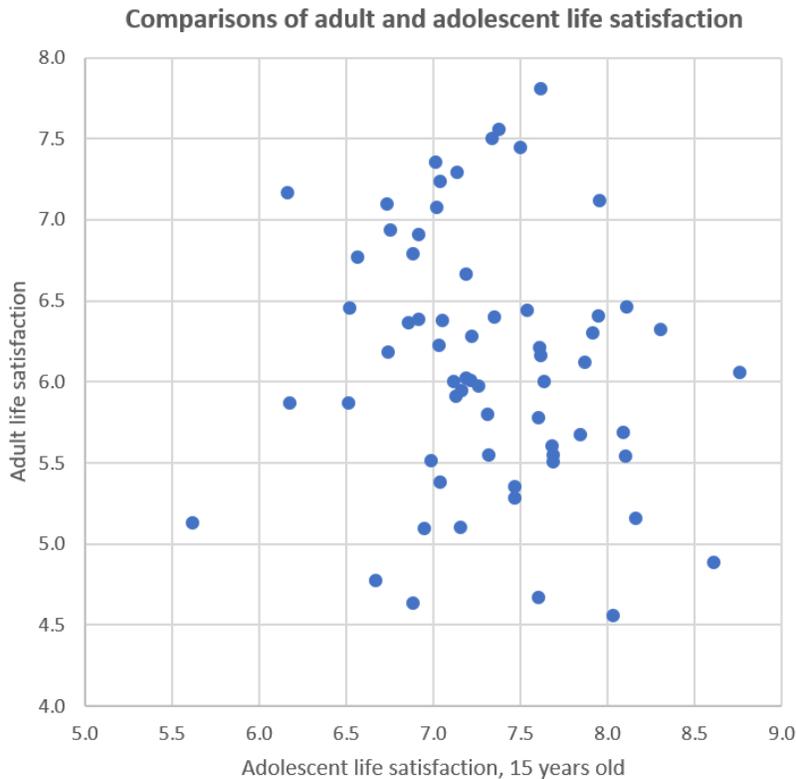
As the first to pilot the Community Child and Youth Well-being Survey in 2020, Waterloo Region was the only community to have two iterations of the Survey, which allowed them to measure change over time (roughly a one-year interval). Although comparisons must be made with caution, life satisfaction took a fall for both boys and girls and for all age groups – echoing other studies and polls that suggest the COVID-19 pandemic is wearing down their resilience and their sense of well-being.

## ARE KIDS UNHAPPIER THAN ADULTS?

Children experience life differently than adults do. In some indicators of well-being, such as poverty and food insecurity, children typically experience higher rates than adults. Children are also disproportionately affected by such deprivations compared to adults because there is a greater impact on developing minds and bodies, which can last a lifetime.

Globally, there is very little linkage between children's and adults' life satisfaction, as reported by UNICEF's Office of Research-Innocenti<sup>xiii</sup>. Figure 3 illustrates this using average life satisfaction scores for adults and for young people aged 15 years old in 64 countries with matching data. There are some countries – such as Costa Rica – that have high life satisfaction among both groups; and some countries – such as Turkey – that have low life satisfaction among both. But the UK has high adult life satisfaction (8th out of 64) and low adolescent life satisfaction (63rd out of 64). Albania has low adult life satisfaction but high adolescent life satisfaction.

**Figure 3: Patterns of youth (age 15) and adult life satisfaction vary across countries**

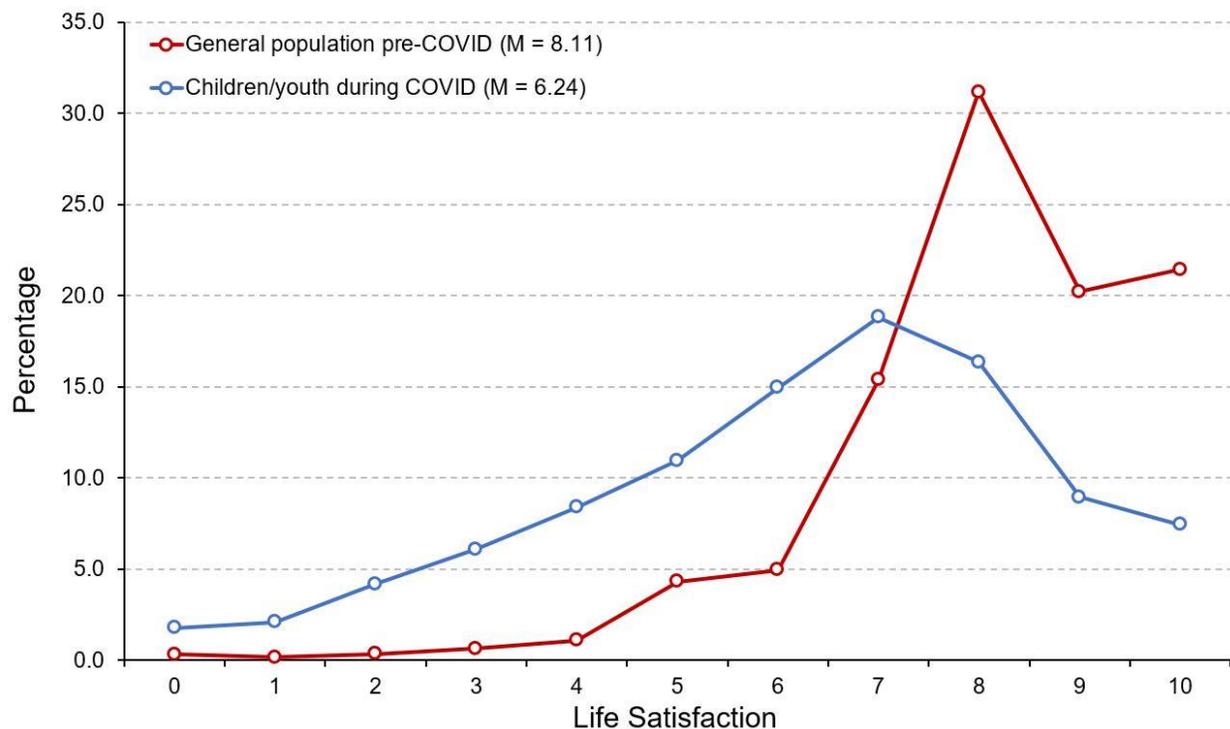


Sources: Adult life satisfaction taken from World Happiness Report 2020 which used the Gallup World Poll 2017 to 2019. Adolescent life satisfaction taken from the OECD's PISA Survey 2018 of adolescents aged 15 years old

Note: We use data from the Gallup World Survey, 2017 to 2019 (that featured in the World Happiness Report 2020) to match the timing of data collection with that of children's surveys.

Young people in Canada report a lower level of life satisfaction than adults do. This is a long-standing disparity that may have widened in the pandemic<sup>xiv</sup>. The mean life satisfaction of adults (based on the 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey of the general population) at 8 is almost two points higher than the mean life satisfaction of children and youth at 6 in the survey communities. The inequality in life satisfaction is also wider among young people (45 per cent within one scale-point of the community survey mean) than it is among adults (67 per cent within one scale-point of the mean) and there are far more young people than adults who report lower life satisfaction. This pattern is evident in Figure 2a and in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Wider dispersion of life satisfaction among young people than among adults in Canada**



## RAISING QUESTIONS

It is concerning that the life satisfaction of young people in Canada is lower than for adults, is lower than that of their peers in most other rich countries, is inequitable, and has been falling for years. These patterns have been amplified by the pandemic. They are also visible at the community level based on the 2021 Community Child and Youth Well-being Surveys. Across Canada, public and political outrage has erupted over children's falling math scores, even though they are among the highest in the rich world. In contrast, relative silence has greeted reports documenting how unhappy young people are.<sup>xv</sup> Until the pandemic, relatively little attention was given to why so many kids are so unhappy.

Two key conclusions and many questions arise from these comparisons:

First, the factors that contribute to children's life satisfaction are probably different than those for adults and we need to understand this better. For instance, one of the factors that has been linked with adult life satisfaction is the level of national income. It is fairly clear that this is not the case for children and youth. What are the community-level differences in these factors?

Second, we should measure our communities and our country based not only on adults' experiences and perceptions but also with a specific focus on the state of children and youth – a large population with different and inequitable levels of well-being.

The findings of the Community Child and Youth Well-being Survey provide communities with hard-to-find current data as a starting point for sense-making and action-planning. Key questions raised by these findings in relation to young people's life satisfaction include:

1. Why might communities have different rates of lower life satisfaction and differences in inequities in life satisfaction?
2. Which children and youth in a community have lower life satisfaction?
3. Why do young people overall have lower life satisfaction than adults?
4. How might the pandemic shape life satisfaction patterns and trends?
5. What can we learn from other communities?
6. What can we learn from children and youth in our community?

Just as this Survey has engaged young people from its inception, these questions are best answered by engaging them.

“The pandemic probably has been the hardest on me my anxiety definitely has gotten worse not being able to be with family and friends not being able to be around other people has been hard the online learning has also been extremely stressful very overwhelming”

**Youth survey respondent**

The next data briefs in this series will explore how young people's life satisfaction is related to their perceived material security, the nature of their relationships, their access to quality spaces and facilities in their communities, and how various groups of young people experience the eight dimensions of well-being differently. The purpose is to encourage community leaders across Canada to consider where their young people fall along the life satisfaction spectrum. UNICEF Canada's Community Child and Youth Well-being Survey data and insights can inform collaboration with young people to improve policies, services and conditions that equitably promote their well-being. What is clear from the results of the Survey to date is that each community has successes to share. They are needed now if we are to lighten the impacts of the pandemic on children and youth and give them back their right to a happy childhood.

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