

Executive summary

The pandemic has touched on every aspect of people's well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic is having far-reaching consequences for how we live, work and connect with one another, as well as for the economic, human, social and environmental systems that support well-being over time. Excess deaths in OECD countries averaged 16% between March 2020 and early May 2021, leading to a 7-month fall in OECD-average life expectancy in 2020 alone. Government support helped to sustain OECD average household income levels in 2020, and stemmed the tide of unemployment, even as average hours worked fell sharply, and nearly 1 in 3 people reported at least one financial difficulty. Data from 15 OECD countries suggest that over one-quarter of people were at risk of depression or anxiety in 2020. Confinement measures brought new challenges in terms of school closures, unpaid care work, and domestic violence. Some pressures on well-being eased in the earliest stages of the pandemic (e.g. carbon emissions fell, road deaths reduced, trust in government rallied, and gender-gaps in unpaid home and care work narrowed), but all now show strong signs of reverting back to business as usual. And as the pandemic has worn on, more people are feeling worn out. In early 2021, one-third of people reported feeling too tired after work to do necessary household chores, up from 22% in 2020. Feelings of loneliness, division and disconnection from society also grew between mid-2020 and the first half of 2021.

Experiences of the pandemic have varied widely depending on age, gender, race and ethnicity, as well as jobs, pay and skills

The crisis has hit people who were already struggling the hardest. Typically, disadvantage accumulates and intersects in ways not easy to see in the data we have, and this can understate how well-being challenges pile up for certain groups of people. In the case of age, older people have been much more likely to suffer severe outcomes or death due to COVID-19 infection, making reduced social contact an especially important precaution for them. At the same time, younger adults have experienced some of the largest declines in mental health, social connectedness and subjective well-being in 2020 and 2021, as well as facing job disruption and insecurity.

The relationship between well-being, race and ethnicity is complex – and a broader range of socio-economic factors, including living and working conditions as well as deep-seated forms of racism and discrimination, can help explain why different racial and ethnic communities have experienced divergent outcomes during COVID-19. In those OECD countries with data, COVID-19 mortality rates for some ethnic minority communities have been more than twice those of other groups, while ethnic minority workers have been more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic. Mental health deteriorated for almost all population groups on average in 2020, but gaps in mental health by race and ethnicity are also visible.

Average well-being outcomes also differed by gender, as well as across different household types, during the pandemic. Excess deaths have been higher for men than for women, yet women are more likely to experience long COVID, saw larger falls in mental health, and felt lonelier. At the same time, women have often been on the frontline of pandemic care, whether in their jobs or doing unpaid care work at home. Housing conditions and how we live together took on a new significance for well-being in the pandemic. Life satisfaction fell particularly for couples living with children during 2020, while single parents and those living alone were almost twice as likely to feel lonely, compared to the population as a whole.

Whether and where people work has affected their exposure to both COVID-19 and the wider impacts of the crisis. Teleworking helped to protect people and their jobs, particularly for the well-paid and highly-skilled, but was not an option for the majority of workers. Data from 11 OECD countries showed workers

in the bottom earnings quartile were twice as likely to stop working, and nearly half as likely to telework, compared to those in the top quartile. Losing work means losing more than your salary: unemployed people were more than twice as likely to feel lonely and to feel left out of society compared to the employed. At a time when 1 in 5 European OECD households are struggling to make ends meet, and 1 in 7 feel “likely” to lose their jobs within 3 months, new pressures on living costs are taking hold: OECD average house prices grew by almost 5% in 2020, and rental prices by nearly 2%, while energy costs are also on the rise.

Stocks of natural, human and social capital will need re-building after the crisis

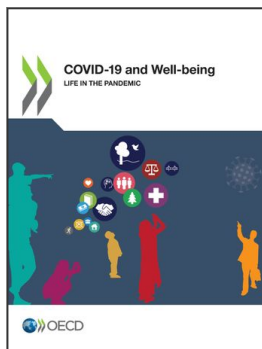
In addition to the impacts of the pandemic on children and young people, damage to stocks of natural, economic, human and social capital have long-run consequences for societal well-being. Building back better must mean addressing the climate and biodiversity crises that threaten future well-being, as well as building up human and social infrastructure. Labour market underutilisation in OECD countries reached 17% in 2020, and 13% of people aged 15-29 were not in employment, education or training (NEET), erasing gains made since the 2007-8 crisis. Pandemic strains meant more people accumulated future health risks such as weight gain and increased alcohol consumption. Trust (in people and in institutions) has been an important resilience factor, with higher trust contributing to COVID-19 containment. Nevertheless, some of the early gains in trust enjoyed by several governments have since been eroded. By early 2021, 1 in 3 people felt left out of their societies (up from 1 in 5 in mid-2020), and the majority of adults in 12 OECD countries felt that their country was “more divided now than before the coronavirus outbreak”. Youth and women continue to be under-represented in pandemic decision-making: by March 2021, women made up only 35% of COVID-19 task force members on average in 27 OECD countries.

Well-being outcomes are a moving target: frequent, timely data are essential

Throughout the first 15 months of the pandemic covered by this report, well-being outcomes have been a moving target, as both disease risk and restrictions shifted. The rush to meet new information needs, and the difficulty of data collection in a pandemic, posed new challenges for data quality. This has placed a premium on the high-quality, high-frequency, large-sample data collections that are typical of some economic indicators, but rare in the case of social, relational and environmental outcomes. Some national statistical offices in the OECD area responded with significant innovation, showcased throughout this report, ranging from high-frequency household ‘pulse’ surveys, to new internet-based surveys, and experimental time-use surveys. These innovations delivered important insights that could be further enhanced through improved international coordination and standardisation on methods.

Well-being evidence can help refocus, redesign, realign and reconnect policy

A return to business as usual would miss an important opportunity for governments to tackle several interconnected environmental, economic, social, and relational challenges which pre-date COVID-19. The wide-ranging effects of the crisis on well-being also call for a joined-up policy approach to recovery. Chapter 1 describes five illustrative policy channels that offer “triple wins”, through coordinated cross-government action that will raise both current and future well-being while also promoting opportunities for all. These channels include: a focus on sustainable, inclusive, high-quality jobs; broadening uptake of lifelong learning; raising well-being for disadvantaged children and young people; strengthening mental and physical health promotion and prevention; and strengthening public sector capacity on both well-being analysis and citizen engagement. The chapter also sets out how well-being evidence can support policy makers in *refocusing* policies and recovery packages towards the outcomes that matter most to people, in *redesigning* policy content from a more multidimensional perspective, *realigning* policy practice across government silos, and in *reconnecting* people with the public institutions that serve them.



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